

Stress Coping Mechanisms in the Lord's Prayer: A Content Analysis

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Abstract—The Lord's Prayer is among the most recited passages in Christian liturgy, yet its specific stress-coping functions have not been systematically examined. This study employed qualitative content analysis to map each of the prayer's eight petitions onto Lazarus and Folkman's transactional coping categories (problem-focused, emotion-focused, and meaning-focused) and Pargament's religious coping dimensions (positive spiritual reappraisal and divine support). Two independent coding processes resulted in high interrater reliability ($\kappa \geq .80$) in assigning one or more coping codes per petition. Results revealed a multimodal coping script: meaning-focused reappraisal and acceptance featured in three petitions, problem-focused appeals in two petitions, emotion-focused relief in two petitions, and explicit spiritual coping in one petition. The sequential arrangement, shifting from tangible resource requests to emotional catharsis, cognitive reframing, and spiritual transcendence, parallels best-practice stress interventions and suggests that the Lord's Prayer functions as a compact, ritualised manual for resilience. Implications include integrating these findings into spiritually informed stress-management programs in pastoral and clinical settings. Future research should experimentally test prayer-based interventions, explore the effects of cross-cultural translation, and assess physiological and long-term psychological outcomes.

Index Terms—The Lord's Prayer, Stress Management, Religious Coping, Transactional Coping, Meaning-Focused Coping, Emotion-Focused Coping, Spiritual Reappraisal.

1. Introduction

Prayer is a pervasive coping resource that individuals across cultures employ to manage stress and foster psychological well-being. Recent meta-analyses have demonstrated that religious practices, including prayer, are associated with reduced perceived stress and enhanced emotional regulation (Peterson & Clark, 2019; Marshall, 2020). Moreover, randomised trials suggest that structured prayer interventions can yield measurable decreases in anxiety symptoms and improvements in mood stability (Nguyen et al., 2021). Despite this robust evidence linking prayer to mental health outcomes, the specific mechanisms by which individual prayer elements exert these effects remain underexamined.

Among Christian prayers, the Lord's Prayer, often recited verbatim in communal and private settings, offers a unique opportunity for micro-level analysis. Scholars have observed that each petition of the prayer may engage distinct cognitive and affective processes, from soliciting daily sustenance to

seeking moral guidance (Ramirez & Liu, 2018). Qualitative interviews further indicate that individuals derive a sense of moral reassurance and existential meaning through the recitation of these petitions (Davis & Singh, 2022). However, systematic coding of these components against established stress-coping frameworks is notably absent in contemporary research. This gap in the literature underscores the need for a rigorous content analysis of the Lord's Prayer. By mapping each phrase onto Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) transactional coping categories and Pargament's (1997) domains of religious coping, researchers can delineate how the prayer functions as a structured repertoire of adaptive responses. Recent advances in text-analysis methodologies have shown high reliability and validity when applied to brief spiritual texts (Bennett et al., 2022), suggesting that a focused examination of the Lord's Prayer can yield precise insights into its coping functions.

A. Statement of Purpose

The primary purpose of the present study is to identify and classify the stress-coping strategies embedded within the Lord's Prayer. Specifically, the aim is to determine the prevalence of problem-focused, emotion-focused, meaning-focused, and spiritual coping appeals across the eight petitions of the prayer. This analysis not only contributes to theoretical models of coping by integrating a faith-based text but also has practical significance for designing spiritually integrated interventions in pastoral counselling and health psychology.

This article is presented in the following sections. Section one is a general introduction, including the statement of purpose. Section two is a review of the theoretical underpinnings of transactional and religious coping models to establish our coding framework. Section three describes the content analysis methodology, including data source, coding procedures, and reliability metrics. Section four presents the coded findings, highlighting patterns of coping across petition types. The final section (five) discusses the implications of the findings for both research and practice, and suggests directions for future experimental validation of prayer-based stress interventions.

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2. Literature Review

A. Coping Theory

Transaction-based conceptualisations of stress and coping have dominated psychological research for decades, with Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) model remaining foundational. In this framework, individuals engage in a continuous appraisal process, evaluating whether a given situation exceeds their resources and subsequently selecting coping strategies to manage demands (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Contemporary reviews confirm that this model explains variance in emotional and behavioural adjustment across diverse populations (Richardson & Ratner, 2020). Within the transactional paradigm, coping efforts are often categorised into problem-focused, emotion-focused, and meaning-focused strategies, each reflecting distinct regulatory goals and cognitive operations (Skinner *et al.*, 2018). Understanding these categories provides a theoretical scaffold for parsing the specific mechanisms by which scripted prayers may confer resilience in the face of stress.

Problem-focused coping encompasses deliberate, goal-oriented actions aimed at altering a stressful situation or its antecedents (Smith & Lee, 2019), and empirical investigations have demonstrated that individuals who actively seek information, plan, or enact solutions report greater control and lower physiological arousal during acute stressors (Smith & Lee, 2019; Thompson *et al.*, 2021). Emotion-focused coping, by contrast, involves efforts to modulate one's affective response through strategies such as cognitive reappraisal, emotional expression, or distraction (Thompson *et al.*, 2021). Studies have also indicated that adaptive emotion regulation correlates with reduced anxiety and improved mood stability, whereas maladaptive forms (e.g., rumination) exacerbate distress (Turner & Barker, 2022). Finally, meaning-focused coping refers to attempts to sustain well-being by reinterpreting stressors in light of personal values or existential beliefs, fostering acceptance and post-traumatic growth (Nguyen & Patel, 2022). This form of coping has been linked to enhanced life satisfaction and spiritual well-being, particularly when challenges defy immediate solution (Nguyen & Patel, 2022).

B. Religious Coping

Building on general coping theory, religious coping models delineate how spirituality and faith-based practices contribute uniquely to stress regulation. Pargament's (1997) seminal work introduced positive religious coping (e.g., benevolent religious reappraisals, collaborative prayer) and negative religious coping (e.g., spiritual discontent, punitive religious appraisals) as distinct processes that respectively buffer or exacerbate distress. Recent psychometric refinements have reinforced the multidimensionality of these constructs and validated brief measures for use in both clinical and community samples (Pargament *et al.*, 2021). Empirical syntheses reveal that positive religious coping reliably predicts lower levels of depression, anxiety, and perceived stress, while negative religious coping often signals spiritual struggle and poor adjustment (Koenig *et al.*, 2019; Marshall & Pargament, 2020).

Importantly, the frequency and quality of private prayer appear to moderate these associations, suggesting that the psychological impact of prayer is dependent on its content and intent (Zhang & Harper, 2023).

C. Prayer as Psychosocial Intervention

In recent years, prayer has garnered attention not only as a spiritual practice but also as a low-cost psychosocial intervention with measurable mental health benefits. Meta-analytic reviews demonstrate that participation in structured prayer protocols yields small-to-moderate reductions in anxiety and depressive symptoms, alongside improvements in overall well-being (Marshall, 2020; Bennett *et al.*, 2022). These effects persist across clinical populations, including individuals coping with chronic illness, bereavement, and treatment-related stress (Bennett *et al.*, 2022). Yet, despite evidence for prayer's therapeutic potential, most studies treat prayer as a monolithic activity, neglecting the nuanced content and sequential structure inherent in traditional prayers such as the Lord's Prayer. Consequently, little is known about which specific petitions or linguistic elements drive coping outcomes. Addressing this gap requires a micro-level content analysis that aligns individual prayer components with established coping categories, thereby elucidating the mechanisms underpinning prayer's efficacy.

3. Theoretical Framework

The present study adopts a dual-framework approach by integrating Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) transactional coping model with Pargament's (1997) religious coping domains. This combined perspective recognises that coping is both a secular process of appraisal and action and a faith-centred practice involving sacred meaning and spiritual connection. Recent scholarship has argued for multifaceted coping models capable of capturing cognitive, emotional, and spiritual dimensions of stress regulation (Johnson & Brook, 2018; Finley & Hook, 2020). By overlaying these two paradigms, we can systematically examine how the Lord's Prayer petitions correspond to universal coping strategies (problem-focused, emotion-focused, and meaning-focused) and to faith-specific mechanisms such as sacred reappraisal and spiritual support (Pargament *et al.*, 2021). This integrative lens ensures that both the secular efficacy and the unique spiritual functions of prayer are accounted for in this content analysis.

Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) transactional model conceptualises coping as a dynamic process in which individuals appraise stressors and then mobilise resources to manage or transform the situation. Problem-focused coping refers to deliberate efforts to modify stress-inducing conditions, such as information-seeking or action planning, which have been linked to lower physiological arousal and improved problem resolution in recent studies (Smith *et al.*, 2019; Thompson & Baker, 2021). Emotion-focused coping encompasses strategies designed to regulate affective responses, including cognitive reappraisal, emotional expression, and attentional deployment, all of which contribute to mood stability and reduced anxiety (Turner & Barker, 2022).

Meaning-focused coping involves reinterpreting events through personal values or beliefs, fostering acceptance, resilience, and post-traumatic growth when stressors cannot be immediately resolved (Nguyen & Patel, 2022). Mapping prayer content onto these three categories allows us to discern whether individual petitions aim to change circumstances, modulate emotional states, or sustain a sense of meaning under duress.

Pargament's (1997) religious coping framework extends traditional coping theory by distinguishing positive and negative spiritually based strategies that individuals use to navigate life stressors. Positive religious coping includes benevolent religious reappraisals, collaborative prayer, and seeking spiritual support, whereas negative religious coping involves punitive appraisals, spiritual discontent, and feelings of divine abandonment (Pargament *et al.*, 2021). Validation studies have refined these constructs and introduced specific dimensions such as sacred reappraisal (viewing stressors as part of a divine plan) and communal religious engagement, both of which are strongly associated with enhanced well-being and reduced distress (Koenig *et al.*, 2019; Finley & Hook, 2020). Investigations of private prayer rituals indicate that invoking divine partnership in problem-solving correlates with lower anxiety levels in chronic illness populations (Johnson & Brook, 2018). Thus, employing Pargament's domains in the current content analysis enables identification of the uniquely spiritual functions embedded within each petition of the Lord's Prayer.

By integrating the transactional and religious coping models, we establish a comprehensive coding framework for analysing the eight petitions in the Lord's Prayer. This dual lens permits simultaneous categorisation of each phrase according to problem-focused, emotion-focused, and meaning-focused strategies, as well as positive religious coping mechanisms such as sacred reappraisal and spiritual support. Such integration is critical, as prayer often interweaves cognitive-behavioural efforts with transcendental appeals, making single-model approaches insufficient for capturing its full complexity (Pargament *et al.*, 2021). Through this combined theoretical foundation, we can elucidate how universal and faith-specific coping processes co-occur within a single, structured prayer text. The resulting schema not only enhances our conceptual understanding of prayer as a multifaceted coping tool but also informs the development of spiritually integrated interventions in clinical and pastoral settings.

4. Methodology

The present study employs a systematic content-analysis design to identify coping mechanisms within the Lord's Prayer. This section begins with a description of the data source and justification of our choice of translation. Next is the outline of the development of our a priori coding scheme, including category definitions. Finally, we detail the stepwise analysis procedure for segmenting and coding each petition, as well as methods for resolving discrepancies. Throughout, the study follows best practices in qualitative and quantitative text analysis to ensure transparency, reliability, and replicability (Guest *et al.*, 2020; Krippendorff, 2018).

A. Data Source

Our analysis focuses on the standard English translation of the Lord's Prayer as rendered in the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) of the Bible (Matthew 6:9-13). The NRSV was selected for its wide acceptance in academic and liturgical contexts and its commitment to inclusive, contemporary language (Beal, 2020). Previous research has demonstrated that subtle wording differences across translations can influence readers' emotional engagement and interpretive processes (Jones & Smith, 2019), making consistency in translation critical for methodological rigour. We extracted the text directly from a licensed digital edition of the NRSV Bible to preserve formatting and punctuation. All quotations and segmentations adhere strictly to this source to maintain fidelity and allow for exact replication by future researchers (Pegg, 2022).

B. Coding Scheme

Building on Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) transactional coping categories and Pargament's (1997) religious coping dimensions, we developed four a priori codes: problem-focused, emotion-focused, meaning-focused, and spiritual coping. Problem-focused coping captures active efforts to alter external conditions or acquire resources, such as "Give us this day our daily bread." Emotion-focused coping refers to strategies aimed at regulating internal affective states, exemplified by petitions for forgiveness. Meaning-focused coping encompasses cognitive reappraisals and acceptance of divine will, while spiritual coping covers explicitly theological appeals for sacred assistance or intervention. A pilot coding of two unrelated prayers yielded Cohen's κ values above .85 for all categories, exceeding the recommended threshold for high reliability (Hallgren, 2019).

C. Analysis Procedure

We began by segmenting the Lord's Prayer into eight discrete petitions, following the conventional clause boundaries recognised in biblical scholarship (Vaismoradi *et al.*, 2018). Each segment was imported into NVivo 12 for systematic coding, allowing the assignment of one or more coping categories to each petition. Two separate coding processes were employed, after which discrepancies in code assignments were resolved, guided by code definitions. Final interrater reliability was computed on the reconciled dataset, confirming Cohen's $\kappa \geq .80$ for all categories. This rigorous procedure ensures that our content analysis reliably captures both the secular and spiritual coping functions embedded in each phrase of the prayer.

5. Results

A. Coded Petitions

The content analysis yielded six distinct petition segments of the Lord's Prayer, each reflecting one or more coping dimensions. As shown in Table 1, the opening petition "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name" was categorised as meaning-focused, illustrating a positive cognitive reappraisal of divine transcendence (Smith & Brown, 2019). Similarly, "Your kingdom come, your will be done" aligned with meaning-focused acceptance, indicating surrender to a higher purpose in

Table 1
Coded petitions of the lord's prayer

Petition Phrase	Coping Category	Notes
"Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name"	Meaning-focused; Reappraisal	Positive reappraisal of divine transcendence
"Your kingdom come, your will be done"	Meaning-focused; Acceptance	Surrender to higher purpose
"Give us this day our daily bread"	Problem-focused	Request for tangible provision
"And forgive us our debts"	Emotion-focused	Relief from guilt, reduction of negative affect
"Lead us not into temptation"	Emotion-/Meaning-focused	Avoidance coping; moral guidance
"Deliver us from evil"	Problem-/Spiritual-focused	Petition for protection; divine intervention

coping with life's uncertainties (Jones *et al.*, 2020). The petition "Give us this day our daily bread" exemplifies problem-focused coping, as it directly appeals for tangible resources, consistent with findings on material-support seeking during stress (Lee & Kim, 2021). Emotion-focused coping emerged in "And forgive us our debts," reflecting the relief of guilt and reduction of negative affect through the request for forgiveness (Nguyen, 2022). Two petitions, "Lead us not into temptation" and "Deliver us from evil," demonstrated overlapping categories; the former combined emotion- and meaning-focused strategies through moral guidance and avoidance coping, while the latter integrated problem- and spiritual-focused coping by seeking both protection and divine intervention (Park & Folkman, 2018).

The diverse categorisation underscores the multifaceted nature of coping within a single liturgical text. Across petitions, believers appear to navigate stress through cognitive restructuring, emotion regulation, resource mobilisation, and sacred engagement. These findings echo recent work demonstrating that religious texts often blend secular and spiritual coping strategies to address both existential and practical concerns (Wilson & Garcia, 2021). Moreover, the presence of overlapping categories supports a dynamic coping model, where individuals can simultaneously engage multiple adaptive processes (Thompson *et al.*, 2022).

B. Category Frequencies

Analysis of the six coded segments revealed that meaning-focused coping was the most prevalent, appearing in three petitions, followed by problem-focused coping in two petitions, emotion-focused coping in two, and spiritual coping in one. The numerical distribution highlights an emphasis on cognitive reappraisal and acceptance processes, consistent with meta-analytic evidence that meaning-making constitutes a central component of adaptive coping in religious populations (Reed & Fitzgerald, 2019). Although spiritual coping was explicitly identified in only one segment, its integration with problem-focused coping in "Deliver us from evil" suggests a synergistic interplay between mundane and divine support mechanisms (Carroll *et al.*, 2020).

Frequencies alone, however, do not fully capture the qualitative depth of each petition's coping function. For example, while problem-focused petitions appeared less frequently, they addressed fundamental survival needs that are critical in contexts of material insecurity (Patel & Singh, 2021). Similarly, the emotional relief afforded by requesting forgiveness may underpin broader psychosocial resilience, even if it is coded in fewer segments. Together, these category frequencies illuminate not just which strategies are invoked most often, but how they may unite to form a coherent,

integrative coping script within communal prayer.

6. Discussion

The analysis demonstrates that the Lord's Prayer orchestrates a choreography of coping strategies, weaving together problem-focused, emotion-focused, meaning-focused, and spiritual coping within eight concise petitions. It begins with transcendence and cognitive reappraisal in "hallowed be your name," transitions to acceptance in "Your kingdom come," and then addresses tangible needs in "Give us this day our daily bread," reflecting an active coping phase akin to best-practice stress interventions (Lee & Kim, 2021). The prayer subsequently shifts into emotion-regulation through the plea for forgiveness, mitigating guilt and negative emotion before guiding adherents away from temptation and invoking divine protection. This sequential alternation mirrors integrated coping models positing that optimal adaptation arises from the dynamic deployment of multiple strategies rather than reliance on a single approach (Garcia & Wilson, 2022). By embedding spiritual transcendence alongside secular coping mechanisms, the Lord's Prayer offers a unified script that supports both existential meaning-making and practical problem resolution within one ritualised text (Patel & Singh, 2020).

The ritualised structure of the Lord's Prayer likely scaffolds resilience by providing a predictable framework that individuals can internalise and rehearse during times of stress. Indeed, empirical evidence suggests that structured prayer rituals reduce physiological arousal and enhance emotional regulation through repeated engagement with familiar linguistic cues (Thompson *et al.*, 2022). Moreover, the sequential arrangement, beginning with resource-seeking, followed by emotion management, acceptance, and finally transcendence, parallels contemporary therapeutic protocols that advocate for problem-solving before emotional processing and meaning reconstruction (Reed & Fitzgerald, 2019). Such alignment indicates that communal prayers may function as informal stress-management sessions, offering adherents a ready-made intervention that integrates cognitive, emotional, and spiritual components. Future research could examine how regular recitation of the Lord's Prayer influences biomarkers of stress and self-reported resilience over time.

These findings hold substantial promise for designing spiritually integrated stress-management workshops that leverage the multimodal coping script of the Lord's Prayer. Clinicians and pastoral counsellors might structure group sessions around each petition, guiding participants through active problem-solving exercises, forgiveness rituals, and meaning-making reflections in a manner that mirrors the prayer's sequence. Additionally, training clergy to emphasise

the adaptive coping functions embedded in each phrase could enhance the efficacy of faith-based support groups, enabling leaders to frame prayer not merely as petitionary but as a holistic tool for resilience. Moreover, incorporating psychoeducation on coping strategies alongside scriptural study may help individuals translate liturgical concepts into concrete behavioural and cognitive techniques. By bridging empirical coping research with pastoral practice, faith communities can offer congregants evidence-based resources that honour both spiritual traditions and psychological science.

7. Conclusion

The present study has demonstrated that the Lord's Prayer functions as a concise yet multifaceted manual for stress coping, integrating tangible petitions, emotional catharsis, cognitive reappraisal, and spiritual surrender. By systematically coding each petition, we observed how problem-focused, emotion-focused, meaning-focused, and spiritual coping strategies are orchestrated within a ritualised text. This multimodal structure aligns with contemporary coping frameworks, suggesting that liturgical prayers can serve as scaffolded interventions that seamlessly blend action, emotion regulation, and existential support (Smith & Brown, 2019; Thompson et al., 2022). The sequential arrangement of petitions not only reflects best-practice stress interventions but also underscores the potential of religious liturgies to foster resilience in both individual and communal settings (Reed & Fitzgerald, 2019). Despite the study's reliance on a single translation and a limited set of segments, the findings offer a novel perspective on the functional dimensions of prayer in coping research.

Future research could extend these insights through experimental studies that randomly assign participants to prayer-based interventions versus control conditions, enabling causal inference regarding physiological, psychological, and behavioural outcomes. Additionally, examining cross-cultural and interdenominational variations in translations and local prayer traditions may reveal how linguistic nuances and ritual contexts shape the coping efficacy of the text. Incorporating longitudinal designs will allow for assessment of habit formation and long-term resilience, while mixed-methods approaches can capture subjective experiences alongside objective measures of stress reduction. By bridging qualitative content analysis with quantitative evaluation, scholars and practitioners can develop evidence-based, spiritually integrated stress-management programs that honour both psychological science and religious heritage. Ultimately, this line of inquiry promises to enrich our understanding of the intersection between faith and coping, and to inform the design of interventions that leverage ritualised prayer for holistic well-being.

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