

Praying the Bible

Introduction

In our church tradition, one of the things we value is freedom in our worship. We do not believe that prayers must be presented in a certain form, from week to week in our worship, or at home daily in our prayer closet. We do not have a prayer liturgy or book or approved forms of prayer. And that freedom in the face of God is a good thing. But, in our freedom we have often gotten sloppy. We many of us do not take prayer seriously and do not give much thought to what we say. As a result, our prayers are often weak and we feel it. We know prayer is important, but in our experience, we feel so powerless. And that leads to prayerlessness.

What can we do? We can turn to the God's word and use his promises, teaching, and illustrations, as the language of our prayers. Consider Psalm 19.

*[1] The heavens declare the glory of God,
and the sky above proclaims his handiwork.*

*[2] Day to day pours out speech,
and night to night reveals knowledge.*

*[3] There is no speech, nor are there words,
whose voice is not heard.*

*[4] Their voice goes out through all the earth,
and their words to the end of the world.*

In them he has set a tent for the sun,

*[5] which comes out like a bridegroom leaving his chamber,
and, like a strong man, runs its course with joy.*

*[6] Its rising is from the end of the heavens,
and its circuit to the end of them,
and there is nothing hidden from its heat.*

*[7] The law of the LORD is perfect,
reviving the soul;*

*the testimony of the LORD is sure,
making wise the simple;*

*[8] the precepts of the LORD are right,
rejoicing the heart;*

*the commandment of the LORD is pure,
enlightening the eyes;*

*[9] the fear of the LORD is clean,
enduring forever;*

*the rules of the LORD are true,
and righteous altogether.*

*[10] More to be desired are they than gold,
even much fine gold;
sweeter also than honey
and drippings of the honeycomb.*

*[11] Moreover, by them is your servant warned;
in keeping them there is great reward.*

*[12] Who can discern his errors?
Declare me innocent from hidden faults.*

*[13] Keep back your servant also from presumptuous sins;
let them not have dominion over me!*

*Then I shall be blameless,
and innocent of great transgression (Psalm 19)*

This is one of the great passages on God's word. If we had read the first 6 verses we would have seen how God's glory is revealed in creation, and then in vv. 7-11, David extols the wonders of God's Word, and shows how God is glorified and how humanity is blessed through it. And then, in light of these things, David becomes reflective and meditative, probably of his own heart. By the conclusion of the psalm, David ends us in prayer to God.

David prays that he would be kept from the power of sin (v. 13), and in v. 14, David prays, "O Lord ... Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight." Now, he has just spent five verses describing and extolling the glories of God's word. When he comes to his request in verses 13-15, how do you think he expects God to answer that prayer?

Do you think David expects God to snap his fingers and instantly protect David from any sin the rest of his life? Of course not! David is praying for God to let that magnificent and glorious Scripture he has just praised have its work in his life, shaping his character so that he can have victory over sin.

When it comes to the words onto his lips and meditations in his heart, do you think David expects God to zap something into existence that he finds acceptable and put them there? Of course not! David expects that God will transform him from the inside out as David himself read, thinks about, and absorbs the truth of God's word into his life. And so, in allowing God to shape his character through his word, what comes from his lips and his heart will be acceptable to God.

This is the pattern we see, not just here, but over and over again in the Scriptures. Our ways of thinking and living being transformed by the power of God's word. The same should be true when it comes to our prayer lives. If we truly believe as David tells us that the word of God is perfect, sure, right, pure, clean, and true; more to be desired than gold and sweeter than drippings of the honeycomb, then we should make it a central part of our prayer lives. Because the closer we tune our hearts to the heart of God as revealed in the Scriptures, the more effective our prayers will be in reaching in him.

The Pattern for Praying the Bible

What I mean here is that within the Bible, we see the pattern of people praying the Scriptures. Now, we cannot look at every example, but I have picked four.

Jonah's Example. You will recall the story unique story of Jonah, the reluctant prophet. God called him to preach repentance and salvation to the Ninevites. But Jonah knew the wickedness of the Ninevites and didn't want them to be saved. He tried to flee, but was eventually caught up in a storm at sea and tossed in the drink. God used a large fish to swallow him up and save him, spit out back on land, and Jonah did what he was told. After preaching to Ninevah he went up and waited for their destruction. But they repented and were spared.

And then this is what the Scripture tells us: "But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry. And he prayed to the Lord and said, 'O Lord, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster'" (Jonah 4:1-2).

Now, how why did Jonah describe God the way he did? Because he knew his Old Testament. In Exodus 34, God gave Moses just the slightest glimpse of his glory, and we are told, "*The Lord passed before him and proclaimed, 'The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation.'*" Jonah used the language of Scripture in his prayer to God.

Mary's Example. What about Mary, Jesus' mother? When she is told about God choosing her to bring Jesus into the world, she cannot help but begin a joyful prayer or praise and adoration. Where do you think she received the words she used in her prayer? Do you remember Hannah? The barren Israelite who poured out her soul to God in prayer, begging for son and received one? When Mary received the news of her miraculous conception, she drew on the same prayer of praise uttered by Hannah as she was blessed with a son.

Mary begins with praise, as does Hannah and brings in the same themes as the holiness and might of the Lord, his willingness to bless the humble and lowly, and his faithfulness to Israel. Furthermore, what does derive from Hannah's prayer can be traced back almost word for word to the Psalms. Mary used the language of Scripture in his prayer to God.

The Early Christians' Example. In Acts, the early began facing persecution, and yet the Gospel continues to go forth. And we are told on one occasion in Acts 4, "*they lifted their voices together to God and said, 'Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them, who through the mouth of our father David, your servant, said by the Holy Spirit, 'Why did the Gentiles rage, and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth set*

themselves, and the rulers were gathered together, against the Lord and against his Anointed”— for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place. And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness.”

Their prayer is centered around the prayer of David found in Psalm 2. They take up the language found there and see it being fulfilled in Christ and so now their ministry through and for him.

Jesus’ Example. Finally, we see our supreme example in all things using the language of Scripture in prayer. As he hung dying on the cross, he calls out to God and how does he do it? He prays the Psalms.

In Matthew 27:46 he calls, *“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”* quoting Psalm 22:1. And in Luke 23:46, he prays, *“Father, into your hands, I commit my spirit,”* quoting from Psalm 31:5. When he was at his weakest, mind groggy from blood loss, emotionally spent, he prayed the Psalms. He drew on the very words of God to call to God and express the deep feelings within him.

We could go on and on, looking at several examples. But I think you see the point. The godly saints in the Bible are the ones who set the example for us. And the example set is one of praying the Scriptures. Sometimes simply using the themes and language of Scripture and other times quoting verbatim from God’s word to speak to him. This then is the pattern for powerful prayer. That we not ignore the promises and experiences given to us from God in his word, but take up those things and make them the prayers of our heart to God. That we pray powerfully by praying the Scriptures.

The Value of Praying the Bible

This is sort of an extended application section of the message. Here we want to see how praying the Scriptures makes our prayers so powerful. We want to see the inherent value in taking the words of the Bible and using them in our prayers.

It will keep us in the Word. One of the things many Christians struggle with is keeping interest in reading the Bible. We have plans and journals and apps, yet we still have to fight to maintain a consistent reading schedule. But this is about than habits and plans—it’s about the desires of our heart. We lack the desire for God and his Word that we should have.

But if we tie together prayer and Bible reading, then we will be not only establish a habit, but cultivate a greater desire for both. As we read from the Scriptures, letting it drive our prayer, the book comes more alive to us. As we then see fruit of those prayers being answered, our faith is encouraged and we desire to more of God as he becomes more real in our lives. Praying the Scriptures will help to keep us in the Scriptures.

It will make our prayers more effective. Many of pray and wonder will God answer my prayer? Am I praying for something in his will, something he desires to answers? Consider that no prayers more accurately reflect the will of God than those which use the language God himself puts into our mouths. No request is surer to be granted than that which expresses what God himself has promised to fulfill; than that which pleads for that which God already commands. Pray the promises of Scripture.

Does God command that we be wise (well, we spent 15 weeks in Proverbs seeing that the answer is yes!). So pray the promise of James 1: *"If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him."* Pray the promise of 1 John 1:9, *"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."* Claim the promise of John 3:16 in prayer: *"whoever believes in Christ will not perish."* Plead that God's people will be holy as God himself is holy (1 Peter 1:16). Plead that God's people will love another and bear one another's burdens (Gal 6:2). Pray for those things that we know to be God's will for us and your prayers will be effective.

Jesus says in Matthew 7, *"which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!"* Praying the Scriptures will make your prayers more effective because you are asking for the very thing God has promised to give.

It will make our prayers more comforting. It is one thing to pray, 'Lord, please be with me through this day,' and quite another to pray Heb 13:7, saying, "Lord, remember your promise 'I will never leave you nor forsake you.'" Do you sense the difference?

Again, it is one thing to pray, "As we begin our prayer, we thank for allowing us to bring these petitions to you." And it is quite another to pray Matthew 7, "We come at your invitation, O Christ, for you have promised, 'Ask, and you shall receive; seek, and you shall find; knock, and it shall be opened to you.' And so we come asking, seeking, and knocking."

In the midst of a tragedy, would you take more comfort from praying, or hearing someone else pray for you, "Lord we know that you have a plan." Or, thinking of Matthew 10, Ephesians 1, and Romans 8, you might pray: "O Lord, you have numbered the hairs of our heads. You are working all things according to the council of your will. Not even a sparrow may fall from a tree apart from you. You cause all things to work together for good for those who love you, and are called according to our purpose."

Do you see how much more comforting that kind of a prayer is? It is more comforting because it is based on the comfort God himself gives his people in the very language he uses to comfort them.

It will return proportion to our prayers. Very often, we fall into well-worn ruts in our prayer lives. It happens to all of us, particularly when we say grace over our food. We pray for the same things in the same way, and usually when we come to God we are long on petitions, asking God for all sorts of things, yet short on things like adoration, confession, and thanksgiving—things we are commanded to do before God. But if we look to the Scriptures as our prayer guide, these things will be evened out. We will see the numerous expressions of praise and adoration of God and his mighty acts, as well as the appropriateness of confessing our sins to him, and thanking him for all that he has blessed us with.

Likewise, it will also help move us away from self-centered prayer. Have you ever been told how to see if someone is self-centered or not? Listen to them talk and count how many times they use the word 'I.'

In your prayers, how often do you stay focused on yourself and your needs or wants? When we look to the Bible, we see that much of it encourages us to pray for others. Praying the Scriptures will help return proportion to our prayers.

It will help teach us Biblical priorities in our prayers. When you pray for someone, do you ever get past the physical needs? Those are not bad things to pray for, but they are hardly the most important. Someone can be well-fed and have good health and still be a weak, immature Christian or even go to hell. But if we seek to pray the Scriptures, we will regain a sense of biblical priority in our prayers.

Consider praying the Beatitudes for someone: "Father, grant that John would recognize his poverty of spirit. Let him mourn for his sins and not be indifferent or unconcerned for his own soul. Work a meekness into his heart. Grant him to be hungry and thirsty for righteousness. Give him the heart of a peacemaker and a reconciler. Make him pure and keep him pure, O Lord. And if you will for him to be persecuted, give him grace to count it all joy and to remember that his reward is great in heaven." Now, that's a prayer! Praying the Scriptures will help teach us Biblical priorities in our prayers.

It will help protect us from sin. If we are actively seeking to incorporate the language of Scripture in our prayers, it means we will be thinking about the word of Scripture more often and more deeply. Such Biblical thinking will begin to engrave our minds with biblical patterns of thought that can help immunize us from the enticing folly of the world's view of life. It will be more difficult for us to be led astray, because our thinking and feeling will have been shaped by the life-changing truth of God's word. Praying the Scriptures will help protect us from sin.

The Practice of Praying the Bible

So, what does this look like practically? How do you go about praying the Scriptures. Here's a couple of common ways.

Praying texts. This is simply praying over any given text. The point here is to take up the intention and words of the passage and turn them back into the words of a prayer to God. This means having a basic grasp of the meaning of the passage. Then ask simple questions like

- What can I praise or thank God for being, doing, or giving?
- What can I confess as sin?
- What sin can I seek God's help in avoiding?
- What spiritual change can I ask him to form in me?
- What spiritual resources can I for him to give me or someone else?

The easiest way to get started with this would probably be to follow the example of Derek Prime (a pastor in Scotland). He would take a key thought out of his morning devotional reading, and pray it for himself and everyone on his prayer list of the day.¹

Praying prayers. Another way to pray the Bible is to find actual prayers in the Bible and pray them as your own. The easiest way to begin is by looking at the prayers Paul prayed for the church. For example, you might turn to Ephesians 3 and read:

"For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, ¹⁵from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, ¹⁶that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, ¹⁷so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, ¹⁸may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, ¹⁹and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. ²⁰Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, ²¹to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen" (3:14-21).

So, you would begin by meditating on the passage, making sure you understand what Paul is actually praying for. Then, either for yourself and someone else, you could simply pray those very words back to God, even substituting a person's name in the prayer:

"I ask, you, God to fill Warren with the knowledge of your will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding. And I pray this in order that he may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please Him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work she does, being strengthened with all power, so that he may have great endurance and patience, and joyfully give thanks to you, his Father" (Col 1:9-12).

¹ Derek Prime, *On Being a Pastor* (Chicago: Moody).

You can do this from just about any prayer (especially the Psalms). But remember to pray in Jesus name—that is, remember you are a new covenant believer and edit the prayer when it's necessary.

Praying themes. This is praying over the big themes of a large section of Scripture. For example, you may pray about the love like this:

Father, I can love because you first loved me. I can love you, the Lord my God, with all my heart, soul, mind, and strength. I can love my neighbor as myself. I can love my enemies and pray for those who persecute me. I can obey Christ's new commandment to love other disciples just as I have been loved by Jesus. For the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. Help me, to be the loving person you have called me to be.

Another example might be that of Martin Luther. In his book, *A Simple Way to Pray*, Luther helped his barber learn to pray. Specifically, he taught him to pray through the Lord's Prayer, using each phrase as a part of an outline for specific thanksgivings, confessions, and requests.

Conclusion

I want to end with an extended quote from an article by Joni Eareckson Tada.²

The large window at Baltimore-Washington International Airport framed a gray afternoon. Our flight was late, and the seats in the waiting area were full. Judy and Bunny stood beside me to pray—something we often do before and after flights.

I was down about a number of things, including the news that we lacked funds to launch an outreach to disabled children in several Eastern European orphanages. Reading the sadness in my eyes, Bunny reached for my hands and Judy's. After praise and thanksgiving, she prayed in a soft voice laced with confidence: "Lord, send forth the corn and the wine and the oil. Send forth the early rains . . . the late rains . . . and produce a wonderful crop of blessings." I recognized the strains of Joel 2:19: "The Lord will reply to them: 'I am sending you grain, new wine and oil, enough to satisfy you fully.'"

Just as Bunny was repeating the part about corn, oil, and wine, I sensed the presence of a fourth person who edged between Judy and me. Then a fifth person crowded in with us, and together the newcomers punctuated my friend's prayer with "amens."

When we finished, we hardly had time to exchange names with our unexpected prayer partners—a married couple. Before rushing to catch their flight, the husband folded a \$100

² Joni Eareckson Tada, "Speaking God's Language: How Scripture can add power to your prayers." Accessed at http://www.redeemer.com/connect/prayer/prayer_tada_article.html

bill into Bunny's hand. Bunny waved the bill in the air like a flag of victory. "Yea, even while I was speaking in prayer, the angel came with the answer!"

"Joni," she continued as she tucked the bill in my coat pocket, "this is the firstfruits of what God will supply!"

She was right. And it didn't surprise me. When Bunny prays, things happen. I've learned, through years of interceding with her, that Bunny's prayers have power with God.

God's Accent

I believe that Bunny's effectiveness in prayer is, at least in part, because she has learned to pray in the language of the Father. Bunny even responds using God's language: Her "yea, even while I was speaking in prayer" was a paraphrase of Dan. 9:21.

I have learned to follow Bunny's lead and season my prayers with the Word of God. It's a way of talking to God in His language—speaking His dialect, using His vernacular, employing His idioms. (I've often teased Bunny that I hear God's accent when she prays.)

If praying "in the name of Jesus" comes as naturally as breathing, we need to pray "in the Word" just as naturally. The Bible underscores that there are two things God honors above all else: His name and His Word. "For you have exalted above all things your name and your word," wrote David in Ps. 138:2. Prayer spiced with God's Word is prayer exalted.

This is not a matter simply of divine vocabulary. It's a matter of power. When we bring God's Word directly into our praying, we are bringing God's power into our praying. Hebrews 4:12 declares, "For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword." God's Word is living, and so it infuses our prayers with life and vitality. God's Word is also active, injecting energy and power into our prayer. Listen to how God described His words to Jeremiah: "Is not my word like fire . . . and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?" (Jer. 23:29). Scripture gives muscle and might to our prayers.

Your Prayer Book

I'm convinced God enjoys it when we consciously employ His Word in our prayers. It shows Him the importance we attach to our requests. It demonstrates we have thought through our petitions and praises and lined them up against the plumb line of Scripture. It underscores to Him the high regard and appreciation we attach to His Word and demonstrates that we sincerely seek His heart in the matter for which we pray. Using God's Word in prayer—Scripture praying, as it is sometimes called—gives a divine familiarity to our words, earmarking us as servants who possess a working knowledge of the most powerful prayer book ever written: the Bible.

Some good sourcebooks for this is Matthew Henry's *A Method for Prayer* and Tim Kerr's *Take Words With You*. These will give you some ideas of how to think about the Bible in terms of praying it.