

PRAYING THE SCRIPTURES

John 15v7

As a young pastor I was once asked by a new believer to teach him how to pray. I hardly knew what to say. No one had ever taught me how to pray and my own prayer life was nothing to write home about. If I am ever asked this question today I answer by sharing how to pray the Scriptures. This has proved a greater help to me in my devotional life than anything else.

Prayer and God's Word go together. There are plenty of examples of this in the Bible itself. But my starting point is some words of Jesus in John 15v7: *"If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you"*. Jesus makes the connection here between His own teaching (literally "rhema, "sayings") and prayer. Andrew Murray has a wonderful chapter on this text in his classic book 'With Christ in the School of Prayer', first published back in 1885. (Chapter 22: 'The Word and Prayer.') Just this one comment of Murray's gives us plenty of food for thought; he writes *"My willingness to accept His words will determine the power my words have with Him."*

We can have no doubt that we are praying in the will of God when we pray God's Word back to Him. We know you have the mind of Christ when it is His own words we are using. You might even say this is one way in which Christ prays through us. So we can pray with faith.

Over the next two Sundays I want to explore this in a practical way. So, how do we go about praying the scriptures?

1. You can pray the Scriptures while meditating on a text.

Biblical meditation has been the subject of our studies recently. Praying the Scriptures turns this meditation back to God and involves being open to the Holy Spirit's promptings as we pray. Richard Foster writes: *"Meditation is the necessary prelude to intercession... In times of meditation there may come a rise of the heart, a compulsion to intercede, an assurance of rightness, a flow in the Spirit. This inner "yes" is the divine authorization for you to pray for the personal situation."* ('Celebration of Discipline.')

Madame Jeanne Guyon: (1648-1717) spent twenty five years in confinement, including many years in the Bastille, for her beliefs. Her devotional literature influenced many in later centuries including John Wesley, Hudson Taylor and Watchman Nee. Praying the Scriptures was one of her themes.

"Praying the Scripture' is a unique way of dealing with the Scripture; it involves both reading and prayer. Turn to the Scripture; choose some passage that is simple and fairly practical. Next, come to the Lord. Come quietly and humbly. There, before him, read a small portion of the passage of Scripture you have opened to. Be careful as you read. Take in fully, gently, and carefully what you are reading. Taste it and digest it as you read. In the past it may have been your habit, while reading, to move very

quickly from one verse of Scripture to another until you have read the whole passage. Perhaps you were seeking the main point of the passage.

But in coming to the Lord by means of “praying the Scriptures” you do not read quickly; you read very slowly. You do not move from one passage to another, not until you have sensed the very heart of what you read. You may then want to take that portion of Scripture that has touched you and turn it into prayer. ‘Praying the Scripture’ is not judged by how much you read but the way you read. If you read quickly, it will benefit you little. You will be like a bee that merely skims the surface of a flower. Instead, in this new way of reading with prayer, you become as the bee who penetrates into the depths of the flower. You plunge deeply within to remove the deepest nectar... Plunge into the very depths of the words you read until revelation, like a sweet aroma, breaks out upon you. I am quite sure that if you will follow this course, little by little you will come to experience a very rich prayer that flows from your inward being.” (‘Experiencing the Depths of Jesus Christ’)

Here is a simple example. Earlier this week I spent some time in Luke 10v38-42, where Jesus and His disciples drop in on Martha and Mary at their home in Bethany; I lingered especially on v39 concerning Mary, *“who sat at the Lord’s feet, listening to what He said.”* While doing so I found myself praying in these ways:

- Expressing thanks that this is what Jesus wants from me more than frenzied activity – for me to spend unhurried time with Him.
- Asking forgiveness for often being too busy to spend time with Him.
- Telling Him that His presence is what I need above all - because I need to receive before I can give out.
- Expressing my openness to anything He might want to say to me. Like Mary, I’m sitting at His feet - listening.

None of this is mystical or particularly profound; but it is intensely personal. When you turn meditation into prayer you are deepening your intimacy with the Lord.

So, praying the Scriptures is a dimension of biblical meditation. But there are other routes which lead you into praying the Scriptures, especially turning to texts which lend themselves to prayer.

2. You can pray the Scriptures using the Psalms.

The Psalms are ideal for this because they are directed God-ward. Jesus used the Psalms. On the cross He prayed directly from Psalm 22v1 and 31v5. *“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”* and *“Into your hands I commit my spirit.”*

Another example is in Acts 4v24-26. Peter and John report back to the other disciples after being hauled before the Sanhedrin following the miraculous healing of a lame man in Jerusalem. *“When they heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God. “Sovereign Lord, you made the heaven and the earth and the sea, and everything in them. You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David: “Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain?”* Here they were using the words of Psalm 2 as they prayed.

There are different kinds of psalms, so choose appropriately. You will find psalms of praise to God as creator, protector and Lord of history. You will find psalms of lament - the largest category, psalms of trust and psalms of thanks - both individual and corporate thanks. There are Psalms for every situation and condition.

For example, if you are aware of sin in your life Psalm 51 can be turned into a personal prayer of repentance. *“Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are proved right when you speak and justified when you judge.”* (Psalm 51v1-4)

If you find yourself longing to know God better, then make Psalm 63 your own. *“O God, you are my God, earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you, my body longs for you, in a dry and weary land where there is no water.”* If you have experienced God’s help in a crisis what about adapting Psalm 40? *“I waited patiently for (you) LORD; (you) turned to me and heard my cry. (You) lifted me out of the slimy pit, out of the mud and mire; he set my feet on a rock and gave me a firm place to stand.”*

3. You can pray the Scriptures using Bible prayers

It shouldn’t surprise us that scriptural prayers lend themselves to being prayed. Even Biblical characters did this. Nehemiah’s prayer in exile (Nehemiah 1v5-11) picks up expressions from Moses’ prayers in Ex.32v11 & Deut 9v29 and Solomon’s prayer at the dedication of the Jerusalem temple found in 1 Kings 8v29, 48.

There are so many great prayers in the Bible you can use. Some are very short, others longer. For example: Jacob’s prayer in Genesis 32v26: *“I will not let you go unless you bless me.”*

We can pray David’s prayer in 1 Chronicles 29v10-13. *“David praised the LORD in the presence of the whole assembly, saying, “Praise be to you, O LORD, God of our father Israel, from everlasting to everlasting. Yours, O LORD, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the majesty and the splendour, for everything in heaven and earth is yours. Yours, O LORD, is the kingdom; you are exalted as head over all. Wealth and honour come from you; you are the ruler of all things. In your hands are strength and power to exalt and give strength to all. Now, our God, we give you thanks, and praise your glorious name.”*

A prayer of the prophet Habakkuk’s is a good one to use when you are longing for more demonstrations of God’s miraculous power: *“LORD, I have heard of your fame; I stand in awe of your deeds, O LORD. Renew them in our day, in our time make them known; in wrath remember mercy.”* (Habakkuk 3v2)

Then there is the urgent, simple prayer of a penitent man, mentioned by Jesus in Luke 18v13: *“God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”*

4. You can pray the Scriptures by using the Lord's Prayer

In Luke 11v1-4 we read: *"One day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples." He said to them, "When you pray, say: "Father, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us. And lead us not into temptation.' "*

This prayer seems to be designed as a pattern for prayer rather than something to recite. Terry Virgo's *'Praying the Lord's Prayer'* (Word. 1987) is based on this premise. He writes: *"We might have expected Jesus to respond to the disciples' request by emphasizing the importance of inner attitudes to prayer or the help of the Holy Spirit. Instead, he provided them with a prayer framework which we have come to know as 'the Lord's Prayer'. ... Battle-hardened apostles who had seen the amazing impact of Jesus' ministry and knew about his prayer life asked him earnestly to teach them to pray. He answered them by giving them this formula.*

"The outline he gave us was meant to consist of a number of headings on which we build our prayers. God knows how prone our minds are to going off at tangents when we pray. If we want to establish sustained, disciplined and regular prayer, we need help. Jesus offers us that help by providing us with the answer –not a 'principle of prayer' nor an 'endless list of things we've got to pray about', but a structure – a structure that most of us probably know off by heart."

So, we can break the prayer down into eight parts and develop each personally:

- ⌘ Our Father, in heaven
- ⌘ Hallowed be Your Name
- ⌘ Your Kingdom come
- ⌘ Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven
- ⌘ Give us today our daily bread
- ⌘ Forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors
- ⌘ Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from the evil one.
- ⌘ For Yours is the Kingdom, the power and the glory for ever. *(This addition is from David's great doxology in 1 Chronicles 29)*

5. You can pray the Scriptures using Bible promises.

"If I am to have faith when I pray, I must find some promise in the Word of God on which to rest my faith" (R.A.Torrey. 'How to Pray') When we pray the promises of God back to Him we can say – *"God, You made this promise, and I know You keep Your promises. "*

Sometimes these might be prophetic promises. Nehemiah prayed Jeremiah's great prophetic words about Israel's return from exile. (Neh. 1v 5-11; Jeremiah 29v1-14).

On other occasions we may turn to more general promises. I recall a day of particular crisis in our family when I set aside a day to pray and fast. I wrote out a list of Jesus' promises about prayer and prayed them back to Him. Words like *"If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be*

given you". (John 15v.7) "Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete." (John 16v24)

Hudson Taylor (1832-1904) set out from Liverpool to take the gospel to China in a boat called the 'Dumfries' in September 1853. Within days a mighty storm almost plunged it on the rocks of Carnavon Bay. The ship was drifting and the captain helpless when Taylor took hold of a great Biblical promise "Call on me in the day of trouble; I will deliver the, and thou shalt glorify me". (Psalm 50v15) In his journal Taylor says: "very earnestly I pleaded the promise". At the moment of gravest danger the captain cleared the rocks by just two ships length and then the wind suddenly veered two points in their favour. They were able to clear the Bay and continue their voyage. (Dr. & Mrs. H. Taylor: 'The Growth of a Soul'. CIM. 1911)

6. You can pray the Scriptures using great Bible truths.

For example, one of the great themes of Dr. Neil T. Anderson's books is taking hold of Biblical statements which affirm who we are in Christ. In 'Steps to Freedom in Christ' he lists texts which underline our acceptance in Christ and our security in Christ. They are wonderful scriptures to use in your praying – to establish yourself in the truth and battle through times when you are under assault.

In Christ I am accepted:

- John 1v12: I am God's child
- John 15v15: I am Christ's friend
- Romans 5v1: I have been justified
- 1 Corinthians 6v17: I am united with the Lord and I am one spirit with Him.
- 1 Corinthians 6v20: I have been bought with a price. I belong to God.
- Ephesians 1v1: I am a saint.
- Ephesians 1v5: I have been adopted as God's child.
- Ephesians 2v18: I have direct access to God through the Holy Spirit.
- Colossians 1v14: I have been redeemed and forgiven of all my sins
- Colossians 2v10: I am complete in Christ

In Christ I am secure:

- Romans 8v1,2: I am free from condemnation
- Rom. 8v28: I know all things work together for good for those who love God
- Romans 8v35-39: I cannot be separated from the love of God.
- 2 Corinthians 1v21,22: I have been established, anointed & sealed by God.
- Colossians 3v3: I am hidden with Christ in God.
- Philippians 1v6: I am confident that the good work God has begun in me will be perfected
- Philippians 3v20: I am a citizen of heaven.
- 2 Timothy 1v7: I have not been given a spirit of fear, but of power, love and a sound mind.
- Hebrews 4v16: I can find grace and mercy to help in time of need
- 1 John 5v18: I am born of God and the evil one cannot touch me.

There are so many great Bible truths we can use in this way.

7. You can pray Scriptures the Spirit brings to your attention.

It is amazing how your Bible reading often turns out to contain just what you need when you most need it. No – not a coincidence – it's what the Holy Spirit loves to arrange! James Fraser was a pioneer missionary among the Lisu tribes of China. On one occasion, a biblical promise proved the key to spiritual breakthrough in a strategic village near the Burmese border. When, at first, the villages rejected the gospel, Fraser in bitter disappointment found a place to pray and read his Bible. As he read 2 Chronicles 20 he was deeply stirred by the words of Jahaziel (v15f) *"This is what the LORD says to you: `Do not be afraid or discouraged because of this vast army. For the battle is not yours, but God's. Tomorrow march down against them."* He spent the next hours in *"fighting prayer"* and the following morning he retraced his steps to the village where eleven families said they wanted to turn to Christ; the next day he did the same and twelve families put their faith in Jesus. (E.F. Crossman 'Mountain Rain': OMF Books. 1982)

Today is Palm Sunday and this week is Passion week. If you are using Bible reading notes they will almost certainly direct you to the Gospel accounts of Jesus' last week in Jerusalem including the last Supper, His agony in the garden of Gethsemane, His arrest and trial, His torture and His death. By next Sunday you will be reading the great accounts of Christ's resurrection. Don't be surprised then if, during this week, what you read will be just right for you. You will hear God's speaking to this week and there will be texts you will find yourself turning back into prayer.

At other times, quite apart from your Bible reading, a text may pop into your mind. You may not have read it for ages. You haven't given it a thought for a long time. Yet there it is! This is one of many ways the Spirit helps us in praying. Romans 8v26 says: *"The Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for..."* The Spirit "helps" us – especially to know *what* to pray.

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George Muller wrote that for years he struggled to get going in prayer. Then he discovered praying the scriptures, and this became his regular practice. He realized that his priority must be getting his soul *"happy in the Lord"*, and he could do this by meditating on Bible verses. He called this *"soul food"* which nourished and strengthened his inner man. Then he turned it to prayer.

John Wilthew. March 2008