



P R A Y I N G

T H E

B I B L E

D O N A L D S . W H I T N E Y

3

Method

Psalms: they are designed to be prayed.

Gordon Wenham

Now we're going to see what praying through a psalm looks like. Let's use the twenty-third psalm as an example. And let's say that, as is probably true in real life, you read your Bible first. Perhaps you read in Matthew, or in Hebrews, and then you turn to prayer. You decide to pray through a psalm, and you choose Psalm 23. You read the first verse — "The LORD is my shepherd" — and you pray something like this:

Lord, I thank You that You are my shepherd. You're a good shepherd. You have shepherded me all my life. And, great Shepherd, please shepherd my family today: guard them from the ways of the world; guide them into the ways of God. Lead them not into temptation; deliver them from evil. O great Shepherd, I pray for my children; cause them to be Your sheep. May they love You as their shepherd, as I do. And, Lord, please shepherd me in the decision that's before me about my future. Do I make that move, that change, or not? I also pray for our under-shepherds at the church. Please shepherd them as they shepherd us.

And you continue praying anything else that comes to mind as you consider the words, "The LORD is my shepherd." Then when nothing else

comes to mind, you go to the next line: “I shall not want.” And perhaps you pray:

Lord, I thank You that I’ve never really been in want. I haven’t missed too many meals. All that I am and all that I have has come from You. But I know it pleases You that I bring my desires to You, so would You provide the finances that we need for those bills, for school, for that car?

Maybe you know someone who is in want, and you pray for God’s provision for him or her. Or you remember some of our persecuted brothers and sisters around the world, and you pray for their concerns.

After you’ve finished, you look at the next verse. “He makes me lie down in green pastures” (v.2a). And, frankly, when you read the words “lie down,” maybe what comes to mind is simply, “Lord, I would be grateful if You would make it possible for me to lie down and take a nap today.”¹

Possibly the term “green pastures” makes you think of the feeding of God’s flock in the green pastures of His Word, and it prompts you to pray for a Bible teaching ministry you lead, or for a teacher or pastor who feeds you with the Word of God. When was the last time you did that? Maybe you have never done that, but praying through this psalm caused you to do so.

Next you read, “He leads me beside still waters” (V. 2b). And maybe you begin to plead,

¹ Although this verse has absolutely nothing to do with taking naps, shortly I will defend from Scripture the validity of *praying* virtually anything that comes to mind *while reading* the Scripture and distinguish this from *interpreting* Scripture, which must always be done rightly.

Yes, Lord, do lead me in that direction I have to make about my future. I want to do what You want. O Lord, but I don't know what that is. Please lead me into Your will in this matter. And lead me beside *still* waters in this. Please quiet the anxious waters in my soul about this situation. Let me experience Your peace. May the turbulence in my heart be stilled by trust in You and Your sovereignty over all things and over all people

Following that, you read these words from verse 3. "He restores my soul." That prompts you to pray along the lines of:

My Shepherd, I come to You so spiritually dry today. Please restore my soul; restore to me the joy of Your salvation. And I pray You will restore the soul of that person from work/school/down the street with whom I'm hoping to share the gospel. Please restore his soul from darkness to light, from death to life.

You can continue praying in this way until either (1) you run out of time, or (2) you run out of psalm. And if you run out of psalm before you run out of time, you simply turn the page and go to another psalm. By so doing, you never run out of anything to say, and, best of all, *you never again say the same old things about the same old things.*

So basically what you are doing is taking words that originated in the heart and mind of God and circulating them through your heart and mind back to God. By this means His words become the wings of your prayers.

More About the Method

Open the Bible, start reading it, and pause at every verse and turn it into a prayer.

John Piper

To pray the Bible, you simply go through the passage line by line, talking to God about whatever comes to mind as you read the text. See how easy that is? Anyone can do that.

If you don't understand the meaning of a verse, go on to the next verse. If the meaning of that one is perfectly clear but nothing comes to mind to pray about, go on to the next verse. Just speak to the Lord about everything that occurs to you as you slowly read His Word. You do this even if — and this page of the book is potentially the one most likely to be misunderstood — even if what comes to mind has nothing to do with the text.

Now, let me defend that biblically. What does that text of Scripture tell us to pray about? Everything, right? The Bible tells us that in Philippians 4:6: “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.” Everything is something we may pray about. Every person, every object, every issue, every circumstance, every fear, every situation — everything, in the universe is something we may bring before God. So every thought that enters your mind as you are reading a passage of Scripture — even if

that thought has nothing to do with the text before you at the moment — is something you may bring to God.

Interpreting the Bible versus Praying the Bible

I want to make a crucial distinction between what I wrote in the previous paragraph and interpreting the Bible accurately, a process formally known as “hermeneutics.” Correctly handling the Word of God does not permit making the text say what we want. To understand the Bible accurately — which is essential for right belief and living, for truthful sharing with others, and for authoritative teaching and preaching — we must do whatever is necessary to discover (or “exegete”) the single, God-inspired meaning of every verse before us. The text of the Bible means what God inspired it to mean, not “what it means to me.”

When we come to the Bible on all other occasions I can think of, our primary purpose is to understand and apply it. So let’s say we are doing Bible study. *Primarily* we are putting in the mental effort (and perhaps physical effort too, if we are using other reference tools) to understand what the text before us says and means. *Secondarily* we are praying, “Lord,” we might ask from time to time, “what does this mean?” or occasionally pray, “How do I apply this?”

As I said, that’s our mind-set, more or less, on almost all occasions when we come to the Bible, whether it’s a deeper level of Bible study or simply the daily reading of one or more chapters of Scripture.

But that’s not what we’re doing here.

With what I'm advocating, our *primary* activity is prayer, not Bible intake. Bible reading is *secondary* in this process. Our focus is on God through prayer; our glance is at the Bible. And we turn Godward and pray about every matter that occurs to us as we read. Do you see the distinction?

Let me use a ridiculous illustration to make the point. Suppose you are praying through Psalm 130, and you come to verse 3: "If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand?" And when you see the verb "mark," your friend Mark comes to mind. What should you do? Pray for Mark! You know that verse is not about Mark, but it's certainly not wrong to pray for Mark just because he popped into your head as you were reading Psalm 130:3.

Here's a more realistic illustration. Let's return to a verse from which we prayed a few moments ago, Psalm 23:3: "He restores my soul." I said that one of the things this verse might prompt you to pray for is the salvation of a person with whom you are trying to share the gospel, to pray that God would restore that person's soul from darkness to light, from death to life. If I were to *preach* on Psalm 23 and say, "This verse is about evangelism; about God restoring the souls of those in spiritual darkness," I would be sinning. That verse is not about evangelism, and I know it. It's about a believer's soul being restored to the joy of God's salvation. Were I to declare to others that God's Word here means one thing when I know it means another would be, at best, to misuse the text. We never have the right to claim that the Bible says something it does not.

But if, while you are *praying* through Psalm 23:3, your non-Christian friend comes to mind, and you use the language of this verse to say, "Lord,

restore my friend's soul; restore him from darkness to light, from death to life," that's fine. This isn't reading something into the text; it's merely using the language of the text to speak to God about what has come into your mind.

So, again, simply turn every thought Godward as you read the passage. At some points you will pray exactly what the text is about, as when you pray, "Lord, restore my soul to the joy of Your salvation." At other times you will use biblical language to pray thoughts unrelated to the text that come to you while reading the text, as in, "Lord, restore my non-Christian friend's soul from death to life."

Confidence in the Word and the Spirit

I have enough confidence in the Word and the Spirit of God to believe that if people will pray in this way, in the long run their prayers will be far more biblical than if they just make up their own prayers. That's what people usually do: make up their own prayers. What's the result? We tend to say the same old things about the same old things. And without the Scripture to shape our prayers, we are far more likely to pray in unbiblical ways than if we pray the thoughts that occur to us as we read the Scripture. So while it's true that people may use this method and pray about things that are not found in the text, I contend that will happen much less if people will pray while reading the text. By this means, the Spirit of God will use the Word of God to help the people of God pray increasingly according to the will of God.

I think it's important enough to say it again; regardless of how far from the true meaning of the text people's minds and therefore their prayers may

wander, I have enough confidence in the Word and the Spirit of God to believe that if people will pray in this way, in the long run their prayers will be far more biblical than if they just make up their own prayers. Moreover, is there any better way for people to learn the true meaning of the text — if they are alone with the Holy Spirit and the Bible — than to pray over the text? The godly nineteenth-century Scottish pastor Robert Murray M'Cheyne affirmed this when he said, "*Turn the Bible into prayer.... This is the best way of knowing the meaning of the Bible, and of learning to pray.*"²

In reality, I think that most of the time people will pray fairly close to the true meaning of the text, for if they don't understand a verse while praying through a passage, they'll probably move on to the next verse that they do understand. I've given these illustrations not to excuse someone's laziness in handling the text but rather to show that even in the case where a person prays about a matter far removed from the proper interpretation of the text, it's acceptable to speak to God about such matters. People should feel free to pray about whatever comes to mind as they read through a passage of Scripture.

A Simple Method

That's it. If you are praying through a psalm, you simply read that psalm line by line, talking to God about whatever thoughts are prompted by the inspired words you read. If your mind wanders from the subject of the text, take those wandering thoughts Godward, then return to the text. If you come to a verse you don't understand, just skip it and go to the next

² Andrew A. Bonar, *Memoir and Remains of Robert Murray M'Cheyne* (1844; rep. Edinburgh; Banner of Truth, 1978), 50, emphasis original.

verse. If you don't understand that one, move on. If you do understand it but nothing comes to mind to pray about, go to the next verse. If sinful thoughts enter in, pray about them and go on. You may read twenty or thirty verses in that psalm, and yet on a given day only five or six things come to mind. No problem. Nothing says you have to pray over every verse. Nothing says you have to finish the psalm.

I was teaching this method at a church in Santa Rosa, California, and gave the people an opportunity to try praying through a passage of Scripture. One woman prayed for twenty-five minutes and never got past "The LORD is my shepherd." For nearly half an hour she talked to the Lord about those five words. Do you think that in heaven the Lord was saying, in a huff, "You didn't finish the psalm!"? No, I think He was delighted that she found so much delight in Him as her shepherd that she could talk to Him for twenty-five minutes about that, regardless of whether she prayed through the rest of the psalm. At other times, though — and this is probably more common — you will go through many verses and only a few matters will come to mind. Fine; just keep turning the page.

Imprecatory Psalms

You'll come to those sections known as the "imprecatory psalms," those passages where the psalmist calls for God's judgment upon his enemies — people also presumed to be God's enemies. But how do you pray through a psalm when it contains verses like these:

Blessed shall he be who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rock!

(Ps. 137:9)

O God, break the teeth in their mouths!

(Ps. 58:6)

Let them be like the snail that dissolves into slime.

(Ps. 58:8)

Well, maybe there's someone at work for whom you are tempted momentarily to pray such things, but it's difficult to do with a pure motive, isn't it? While, I believe those sections of Scripture are inspired as fully as John 3:16 and any other part of the Bible, I don't think we should pray verses like these with specific people in mind. To do that would be hard to reconcile with Jesus's command in Matthew 5:44-45, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven."

I do think we can put specific sins in those passages, praying that God will smash their teeth as they tempt to devour our souls. I sometimes pray angrily that all the enemies of God born in my sinful heart will be destroyed as thoroughly as these imprecatory psalms describe. I also believe we can

pray these imprecations against national sins, as I sometimes do, for example, against abortion and racism. Ultimately, as we view the Scriptures Christocentrically, we can put such psalms in the mouth of Jesus. Someday he is going to do far worse than just break the teeth in the mouth of his lifelong, unrepentant enemies. Essentially we can pray these psalms in such a way that reflects the attitude, “Lord, I am on your side and against all your enemies, I want your justice and righteousness to win the final victory over sin and rebellion against you.”

But let’s say that one day next week as you are praying through a psalm, you come to one of these sections. You might think, “That Whitney guy in the book of *Praying the Bible* said we could pray through these kinds of psalms, but I don’t remember what he said.” That’s okay. Maybe you’ll pray, “Lord, what does this mean?” or “Please show me how I can pray from this passage.” Perhaps you’ll move past the entire section and go to the next verse that gives you clear direction in prayer. Any of this is fine. That’s why this method is so simple, and anyone can do it.

Some of the Benefits

It’s not only easy to *begin* praying with this method; this method makes it easy to *continue* in prayer. The basic spirituality course I teach in seminary is called “Personal Spiritual Disciplines.” On the first day of class I announce that once during the semester, each student is to spend four consecutive hours alone with God. When I say this, the concern I read on many faces tells me that they are thinking, *What am I going to do for four hours?* But after I teach them how to meditate on Scripture and how to pray through a passage of Scripture, most of them spend the entire four

hours alternating between those two activities, sometimes writing their meditations or prayers in a journal. What's so encouraging is that nearly all the students spend more than four hours on the assignment — not because they have to but because they are enjoying it so much that they don't want to stop. Many of them walk while praying through a psalm, and if they reach the end of the psalm but want to keep walking and praying, they simply turn the page and continue praying.

Praying the Bible in this way is so practical because it expands or contracts to accommodate however much or how little time you have for prayer. So it works if you have four hours, like those students, and yet it works if you have just four minutes. If you have only four minutes, you won't get very far in the text, but you can still pray the Bible. Conversely, if you have four hours for prayer, you just keep turning the page. No matter how long you pray, you never run out of things to pray when you pray the Bible.

Even better is the fact that when you pray through a passage of Scripture, you don't pray empty, repetitive phrases. Talk to God about the words you read in the Bible, and you'll never again pray the same old things about the same old things. That alone is worth the time you've invested in reading this book, isn't it?

But it gets even better than that, because the words you use when you pray the Bible are not just fresh, new phrases you haven't used in prayer before, as energizing as that is. Praying from the Word of God means your prayers include *inspired* words. As Joni Eareckson Tada explains:

I have learned to ... 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.... 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.³

There is a supernatural quality to the words of Scripture that you pray. Jesus said, "The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life" (John 6:63). When you pray the Bible, you aren't just praying ordinary words; you are praying words of the spirit and life.

³ Joni Eareckson Tada, *Speaking God's Language: Using the Word of God in Your Prayers* (Torrance, CA: Rose, 2012).