

How to Practice the Spiritual Discipline of Praying Scripture

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Have you ever wanted to connect with another person on a deeper level, but found yourself at a loss for words? Have you ever wanted to voice a passionate conviction, but were unable to articulate your outrage or heartache? Dostoevsky wrote, and as we often discover, “There is immeasurably more left inside than what comes out in words.”

Christians commune with a personal God through prayer. They yearn to have an intimate relationship with their Creator, yet often when they sit or kneel or stand to pray, God’s people find themselves empty of language. At other times their thoughts are distracted and rambling, “Lord, I’m thankful for who You are... please bless this day... I need to put that load of laundry in the dryer... how could that colleague betray me behind my back? I hope he gets what he deserves! ... I think I left the yogurt sitting out on the kitchen counter... oh yeah, God, protect my spouse and children and friends.”

Although we live in a media-saturated culture, sometimes words fail us. We have immeasurably much more left inside our souls than we can communicate to God with our words.

What is the Spiritual Discipline of Praying Scripture?

The spiritual discipline of praying scripture is the practice of Christians adopting God’s words to inform and shape their own prayers. God penned his words through people who experienced the breadth and depth of human struggles and emotions. In this discipline, Christians give ear and voice through the original biblical writers’ songs, prayers, laments, reflections, and affirmations.

Praying scripture is not:

Using a Bible concordance to find an isolated scripture verse to infer whatever one thinks is best or specifically desires in answer to prayer. A manipulative tool by which someone can force God’s hand to do something.

Applying an isolated biblical verse out of context while ignoring the biblical genre, which misrepresents the biblical text and distorts God’s intended meaning of a passage. For example, taking a wisdom proverb and claiming it as a promise.

Praying scripture is:

Praying God’s heart through his own words for our loved ones, our world, and ourselves.

Personalizing scripture and praying for application within our own life. What was God saying to the original audience? What was God’s intention to teach us about himself or his ways? How can I apply this principle within my own culture and my own life?

Gradually memorizing individual scriptures to begin to pray without ceasing.

Christian Scriptures Teach the Spiritual Discipline of Praying Scripture

Throughout the Old Testament and New Testament, the people of God prayed their scriptures. In Daniel's prayer written down in Daniel chapter 9, the Old Testament prophet incorporated recognizable phrases from throughout the Old Testament texts as well as specific portions of Jeremiah and Deuteronomy.

Within the prayer of the early Christians recorded in Acts 4:24-26, they included portions of Psalm 146 and Psalm 2, praising the Lord who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them. During the excruciating torture of the crucifixion, Jesus cried out with portions of Psalm 22, including "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"]

Suggestions to Practice the Spiritual Discipline of Praying Scripture

- Prayer has several components. It is not only making requests in line with God's heart for the world, it is also composed of worship, thanksgiving, and confession of where a person has gone astray from God's purposes.
- Leave "hurry" behind. Read scripture slowly and reflect deeply on the Eternal God's words.
- Start a "prayer notebook" with personal thoughts, a list of topics, and applicable Bible passages.
- To prevent mental drift, speak your prayers quietly aloud or journal your prayers. If music holds a special place in your life, sing your prayers to God.
- Find passages in the Bible that reflect your heart and thoughts and apply these verses to your specific context. Personalize these verses as prayers.

Suggested Scriptures to Personalize and Pray:

Prayer of worship:

- Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!
- How unsearchable are Your judgments, and Your paths beyond tracing out!
- Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?
- Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him?
- For from You and through You and to You are all things.
- To You be the glory forever! Amen. (Romans 11:33-36)
- See also Psalm 145 and Revelation 4:8, 11.

Prayer of confession:

- Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, the sinner. (Luke 18:13)
- See also: Psalm 32 and Psalm 51

Prayer for spiritual maturity:

- Heavenly Father, May I grow in the grace and knowledge of my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and forever! Amen. (2 Peter 3:18)
- See also: Philippians 2:5-8 and Hebrews 12:1-3.

Prayer for wisdom in discerning the will of God:

- I do not know what to do, Holy Father, but my eyes are on You. (2 Chronicles 20:12b)
- See also: Proverbs 3:5-8 and Colossians 1:9-12.

Prayer for painful emotional times:

- Lord God of all comfort, I am hard pressed on every side; I pray I am not crushed. I am perplexed; do not allow me to despair. I am persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. I know that the One who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise me with Jesus and present me in his presence. I pray I do not lose heart. May I fix my eyes not on what is seen and temporary, but on what is unseen and eternal. Amen. (2 Corinthians 4:8-18)
- See also: Psalm 23 and Psalm 42.

Practicing the Spiritual Discipline of Praying Scripture Deepens a Christian's Relationship with God

God infused the pages of scripture with every intensity of human emotion. The people of God narrate feeling deserted by God, joy, anger, contentment, confusion, anxiety, and defeat at the hands of their “enemies.” In learning to echo the prayers of David, Daniel, Mary, Paul, and Jesus, Christians comprehend God’s attributes, and their knowledge and insight of God’s sacred writings increases. As they pray scripture, their minds are renewed, and they begin to reflect the heart of the Sovereign Lord for humanity.

Referring to the prayers within the pages of scripture, N.T. Wright encourages, “But prayer isn’t just one thing among many. It’s like a secret stream, flowing along unseen, refreshing everything else we do and making things happen in ways we can’t understand, and often don’t even expect, but which prove themselves real time and again. That’s why these prayers, these central early Christian prayers going back in some cases to Jesus himself, are worth learning by heart. That way you can slip into them when you’re walking along, or waiting for the bus, or peeling potatoes, or drifting off to sleep. They can become the hidden music which sustains our thinking and feeling, music around which we can then learn to improvise, adding harmonies and new rhythms.”[iv]

May all Christians devote themselves to prayer, knowing that God’s Word will not return empty. (Colossians 4:2; Isaiah 55:8-13)