

Praying the Bible (part 1)

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Date: 10 April 2022

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[0 : 00] suppose you won a contest and the prize was 30-minute conversation face-to-face with anyone in the world that you wanted to talk to. Who would you choose to have that 30-minute conversation with?

Anybody you wanted. Let's say the day came and everything was arranged and the meeting was held. You had that 30-minute conversation and you found it to be a sheer delight.

It's all you talked about to everybody you met. Who you were talking with, what was said. And then afterwards you learned that the next day you would have the same opportunity.

30 minutes to talk with that same person. But with one qualification. That you had to say exactly the same things that you said the day before.

So you had the meeting. You both said the same things that you said before. How would it feel?

Well, it was good. But not as good as the day before.

[1 : 06] What if you had that same conversation every day of your life? How long before you would find it to get boring? Donald Whitney, in his book, *Praying the Bible*, believes that real Christians can feel the same way about talking to God.

That we can feel bored in our prayer lives. And often he says the reason they find prayer to be boring is not that they find God to be boring. He's the most exciting being that has existed forever. It's not that they don't love God. It's not that they know they need and ought to pray to God. It's not that they don't want to pray. But when they pray, they tend to say the same old things about the same old things.

And when you've said the same old things about the same old things for the thousandth time, how do you feel about saying them again? Not so enthusiastic and probably even feeling a bit bored.

Whitney talks about a little girl who was taught the classic children's prayer that begins, Now I lay me down to sleep. And she prayed that over and over every night.

[2 : 22] And even the little girl got bored praying the same thing every night. And so she got a tape recorder and taped it. And at bedtime she just pushed the button and let the tape recorder repeat the phrase.

Whitney believes that there's something here that we need to learn. That endless repetition without any variation can easily have that kind of effect upon our minds.

And I do think, and we're not going to take time, but perhaps over the fellowship luncheon you could discuss this. I think we're hardwired that way. And hence we live in a world of endless variation, don't we?

It's not like God just gives us one kind of food and we eat the same old, same old every day. Well, it's that way even in the things of the spirit.

Prayer without variety easily becomes words without meaning, just mindlessly repeated. But that isn't what God encourages in our prayer lives.

[3 : 30] Endless, sameless. In fact, you remember how Jesus warns us against vain repetitions. In Matthew chapter 6, the Sermon on the Mount, he first warns against praying like the Pharisees, who are wanting to pray and show off in front of others.

And then he warns us against praying like the pagans, the heathen. Matthew 6, 7, When you pray, do not use vain repetition, vain repetitions like the heathen do, because they think that they will be heard for their many words.

He's not saying do not use any repetitions, but he is saying do not use vain, empty repetitions like the heathen do. So they think that it's the number of words and the number of times you say it, that it somehow wins points with God so that he will listen.

And when you pray, don't pray like that, Jesus says. Empty phrases repeated over and over thoughtlessly. Well, we can easily fall into thoughtless phrases of prayer if we just repeat them day after day after day.

And when we do use that endless repetition of phrases, it's more than twice as hard to keep our minds from wondering and to keep our hearts engaged.

[4 : 57] And Whitney says that if you've had that experience, you're not alone. He says, after nearly 40 years of ministry, I'm convinced that this problem is almost universal. He travels and speaks often on the spiritual disciplines of the Christian life and prayer being one of them.

And he presents the seminars on prayer. And he's found this source of boredom to be common. And that's one reason why he wrote this book, *Praying the Bible*.

Listen as well to the confession of John Piper on the matter. He says, if I try to pray for people or events without having the word of God in front of me, guiding my prayers, then several negative things happen.

One is that I tend to be very repetitive. I just pray the same things all the time. Another negative thing is that my mind tends to wander.

And is there not a relationship between those two things? That when we pray just repetitively over and over, it can tend to make our minds wonder. And that's what Whitney is getting at.

[6 : 07] It's what Piper says is his experience. Now, Whitney gives a clarification, lest we misunderstand him. He says, praying about the same old things is not wrong. In fact, it's right.

It's good. It's necessary. It's normal. So why is that to pray about the same old things? Why is that not wrong? I'm asking you for some response here.

Still a need? Is it anything like the need you had yesterday? Many things are, aren't they? It doesn't change.

And his will is the same. Okay. What do you mean there? In a positive way?

Amen. Amen. Men ought always to pray and not faint. So, yeah, we're to knock and to keep on knocking and to ask and keep on asking and to seek and keep on seeking.

[7 : 18] So, who do you pray for every day? Family. Does that change every day? Once in a while, there's a baby added, a grandson or a granddaughter.

But pretty much that's the same every day. Pray for your spouse, your children, your grandchildren, brothers and sisters at church. What else remains the same every day that you tend to pray for?

Our daily bread. Daily bread. Our needs. Our physical needs are the same. Our health. Struggle to sin. Maybe not everybody has that every day.

What do you think? It's right on the tails of give us this day our daily bread that we ask for forgiveness and help against temptation.

Where do you spend most of your time, guys? Ron? At work. Do you think you ought to pray about work every day? I mean, if that's the major part of your life, well, sure.

[8 : 26] And so, you're going to pray about your work. So, Jesus says, cast all your cares upon him. And most of our cares are the same day after day after day.

There's new cares and new concerns. But we're told to cast them all on him. And since they do remain largely the same, direction. Anybody here have a decision to make in the next year?

It's not just the young people either, is it? There's decisions for older people. And so, we're praying about that. And so, it's only right and inevitable that there be a certain sameness about our prayers as far as what we are praying for.

And Whitney says, that's not the problem I'm addressing here. It's when we say the same old things about those same old things that this problem of boredom and wondering mind can slip in.

So, he's out to help us maintain fervency and interest in prayer. Now, he takes us back to conversion. Because that's where a spirit of prayer is born.

[9 : 37] In every believer's heart, the spirit comes to live. And one of his ministries is to teach us to pray, Abba, Father. So that in every need, in every trouble, we have the spirit working in us to say, John, you've got a father in heaven.

Cry out for his help now. That's the spirit's work. Romans 8, 15. We'll come to that, Lord willing, in chapter 8 as we're working our way through it. But it's that, that's the starting point that God puts in us.

He knows we've got problems praying. And he sends the third person of the Holy Trinity to live in us, to stir our hearts that we have a father in heaven that we can bring our burdens to.

So that's true of every Christian. He stirs this desire to pray, to fellowship with God, to unburden our souls to him, to have these Godward cries for help.

Whether he's the first one we run to as he ought to be, yet we do come to him. That's just part of what it means to have the spirit living in us.

[10:46] So he says, okay, that's where we begin. But we still find that prayer can be boring to us. And so we, our zeal for prayer falls off.

And then we hear a message on prayer. We're reading something in the Bible about prayer. We get convicted all over again to need to pray more. So we go back at it. And we soon slip into our old, worn-out phrases that we've used countless times before.

And we soon find our minds drifting again and interest waning. And we wonder, what's wrong with me? Must be me. I'm just a second-class Christian.

Now, Whitney doesn't go there. But I want to say that there might be several other factors as to why we lose interest in prayer. Could be that we're just caught up in the things of the world.

And spiritual things don't resonate with us when we've been glutting ourselves with the world's entertainments and the world's things. We'll find it hard when we suddenly come to pray.

[11:47] Oh, it's time to pray. And our hearts are here in the world. And we're trying to soar. It's like a bird with a weight tied on its leg. We find it hard to soar.

So worldliness, a spirit of worldliness can hinder prayer. Cherishing sin in our hearts. If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have heard me, David said. Also, asking selfishly, James says, we can ask but just ask to consume it upon our own desires.

And hence, our prayers go unanswered and we lose interest in prayer. But that being said, Whitney believes this problem is often the case. That the problem is not so much us as it is our method.

And if that's the case, he's got some help for us. It's the reason he's written the book. So here's his solution to the boring routine of saying the same old things about the same old things.

You ready? Pray through a passage of God's word. Pray through a passage of God's word. That's it. That's all.

[12:55] And that's the beauty of it. It's simple. You don't have to learn complicated rules about prayer. Pray the Bible. Now, let me give you Piper's paraphrase of it.

Open the Bible. Start reading it and pause at every line or verse and turn it into prayer. Turn it into prayer. Now, not everything in the Bible is a prayer.

And that's why Piper is speaking about turning it into prayer. And we'll hear that language throughout in this study. But everything in the Bible can be turned into prayer is the point.

And so the idea is open the Bible wherever you're reading. If you decide I'm going to read through the Psalms, then just start it in Psalm 1.

And you read a verse and you pause and you pray everything that comes to mind about what was said in verse 1. And you may go on for five minutes. You may go on for one minute.

[14:03] Different verses will hit you different ways. But then when you're done, you don't pause and say, well, now what am I going to pray? No, verse 2 is waiting for you. God's got something to say to you. So you move to verse 2 and you read what he says to you.

And then you respond to what he said to you in appropriate response. Just like we'll do over fellowship luncheon, back and forth. Two-way dialogue. So Robert Murray McShane.

This isn't just something new that Donald Whitney has fallen upon. We'll see next week that it's something our Lord Jesus did. It's something the apostles did, the early church did. And something that we are meant to do.

But Robert Murray McShane, that Scottish preacher of the 1800s who accomplished more in his 29 years than many of us will do. And in our 90 years or whatever he gives us said, turn the Bible into prayer.

This is the best way to know the meaning of the Bible and the best way to learn to pray. So let's look closer then at this idea of turning the Bible into prayer.

[15:09] Turn to Psalm 119. And let's just take verse 18. The 119th Psalm and verse 18.

Some verses in the Bible will need very little turning, perhaps no turning into prayer because they are prayers.

So all you need to do is just personalize them. Put your name on it. Talk to God about it. And make those words that you're reading your own. And that's what we have in Psalm 119.

Almost all but a handful of these verses in this longest of chapters are prayers to the Lord. And you can just take them as they are and pray them back to God and then just amplify them.

So here we are at Psalm 119 verse 8. Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your law. How are we going to pray that?

[16:10] How are we going to talk back to God? He's just told us, or David is praying, open my eyes that I might. How are we going to pray that? Well, we can take the very words and start with that. Maybe you're coming to start your Bible reading.

This is a perfect passage to pray. Lord, I'm yours. I have your spirit. But I still have some blindness left.

Prejudices of how I think and what I think and how I've always understood this verse or this chapter or this Bible. Lord, open my eyes, the mind, the spiritual eyes, that I might see wonderful things in your law.

I still need to have something of this blindness removed. I've got a problem seeing. I need you to teach me. And so we begin to ask him to do that. And then I say, well, there are wonderful things revealed in here.

And I find by experience that I can read right over them, and I'm not full of wonder. But there's full of wonder stuff here. Lord, I do that all too often.

[17:18] Please don't let me do it now. But open my eyes to the wonderful things and make me stand full of wonder and amazement at what I see.

So it was given as a prayer to God. I can turn it into that same prayer, but I can also turn it into confession, can't I?

Lord, I've just rushed so hurriedly over your word that I don't stand in wonder over it. Forgive me for that. It's treating holy, amazing things in such a superficial way.

Forgive me and help me. Teach me. So, we see how we can pray the word of God back. He has spoken to us. There's much. And you might have, like I said, five minutes just on that one verse.

And then you go on to the next verse. So, some verses in the Bible are tailor-made for praying.

Psalm 119. And then there's ready-made praises to be given to God.

[18:22] Here, let's turn over to Psalm 63 and verse 3. You could turn to thousands of verses in the Psalms that are ready-made for praise.

That's what the word Psalms means, praises. And Psalm 63. And let's just take verse 3. Psalm 63. 3. So, we start with God speaking to us through his word. It's David speaking. These are inspired words. And the way that he's addressing God is in praise.

Because your love is better than life, my lips will glorify you. So, he's praising God for what? His love. And it fills his lips with praise and glory given to God.

So, that's where we begin. And then we can tease it out and say, I thank you, Lord, that you're a loving God. I thank you. You're not like Allah.

[19:25] You're a loving God. And you love me so much that when I need a Savior, you sent your one and only Son. And I thank you for your love. I thank you. Your love's not like our love.

And you've been so patient and kind. Love is patient. Love is kind. And you've been patient and kind with me. Thank you for that. We're praising. We're adoring him for his love.

His love to us personally. And we personalize it. A love that continues. And, Lord, it's a love better than life.

Oh, I don't always view it as such. Forgive me. There's many times where what's going on in life is so important to me that I don't even think about your love. But make it such that your love is the thing that makes whatever's happening in my life.

This is far better. That's what David is expressing. And, Lord, I want to know more of that in my life. So, make your love to me today to be my soul's chief treasure.

[20:30] And we can pray it for those people in your life, too, then, that you want to pray for every day. Help my husband today to treasure your love above everything else.

Help our children to learn that the real important thing in life is to know this special love that God has for his people. And, you see, you're praying for the same old things, but you're not praying in the same old way.

You're not just saying, Lord, be with him and bless him. Nothing wrong with those prayers. But if you pray them every day for a thousand days, you might get a little weary. And you don't need to.

God has given us his word. And you can find different ways of expressing it every day. So, you're praying for your family using Psalm 23.

How are you going to pray for your husband that day or your wife? Lord, be her shepherd. Lead her today. Protect her today. Feed her today. You're using the word of God to pray for her.

[21 : 35] Maybe the next day you're using 1 Corinthians 13. Lord, the greatest commandment that I have is to love you. And that's what my children need to learn.

Lord, teach them to love and to be patient and kind and not seeking their own. And on and on. You see, you can go the next day to another psalm.

And the next day, another passage. And you're praying for the same old people, but in fresh ways. Indeed, in ways that God says, we need help.

We need this kind of God. He is our shepherd. He is our father. He is all these things to us.

Tremendous variety that he's giving us that we never be poured with our God or with talking to him.

Some psalms you'll find are made ready made for confession. Where would you go in the psalms for a ready made confession? What was it? Psalm 53.

[22 : 37] Wasn't the one I was thinking about, but could be. You're thinking of 51? Okay. Psalm 51.

David's prayer of confession. Let's look at that. Verse 1. So I'm praying through the psalms. I come to Psalm 51. I'm going to find a ready made confession.

I can take these words and say, God, have mercy on me. Oh, God. According to your unfailing love. According to your great compassion. Blot out my transgressions.

But now I live in the gospel age. And I see clearer than even what David saw. How are my sins blotted out? How were David's sins blotted out? It was the blood of Christ. Well, we don't read about the blood of Christ in verse 1.

But living on this side of Calvary, we know that's the only thing that blots out our sins. And so we can thank you, Jesus. That your merits of your blood is so great that my sins are gone in the record.

[23 : 40] But you blotted them out. You've separated them from me as far as the east is from the west. You've thrown them into the deepest sea. You see, you can stretch it. Your knowledge of other verses will come.

And you're praising him, thanking him. But you're also confessing. Lord, I need that mercy that you have. You are merciful. Now have mercy on me. And we're pleading the attribute of God in our confession.

Some psalms and verses in the Bible are tailor-made for thanksgiving. Give thanks to the Lord for he's good.

His love endures forever. Well, you take that and you start with that. What are you going to give thanks to the Lord for? Well, his goodness. And you just start talking about how God's been good to you.

And then his love that endures forever. And so on and so forth. Other psalms are ready-made for supplications. Think of the prayers of Paul for others.

[24 : 36] And we can pray those prayers for each other. So these verses that come somewhat ready-made for your use need a small amount of adjustment to turn into prayer.

But others may need more. Look at Joshua chapter 1 and verse 9. Joshua 1 and verse 9. This is not a praise.

It's not a confession. It's not a thanksgiving. It's not a supplication. It's a command. So I want you to see how you can take the commands of God and turn them to prayer. So God is saying to Joshua, as he's now, as Moses is now gone and Joshua is to take the lead and lead the people of Israel into the promised land.

Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified. Do not be discouraged. For the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.

Okay. Okay. Okay. I'm not Moses. Or I'm not Joshua. I'm not under Moses and being trained under Moses. That's not you. That's not me. But you see, by seeing the situation that Joshua was in, he's saying, I'm not adequate for this job.

[25 : 56] And I don't feel adequate. And the Lord's saying, but haven't I commanded you to be strong and courageous, to not be terrified or discouraged.

Well, I'll bet there's a few things you feel unqualified for, too, in your life. And you feel like, I'm not fit for this. Here's a ready-made passage to turn a command into petition.

Lord, you've commanded me to be strong and courageous. And you never give a command, but what you give the grace. The grace is available to do what you command. Now, Lord, I am fearful. And I am afraid. And I do get discouraged. Give me the grace. Command what you will. And then give me the grace to do what you command. And we turn the command into a prayer.

And we bring God's own word back to him and say, Lord, you know how weak I am, how fearful I am. Now, help me. And then you said that you would be with me. The Lord, your God, your covenant-keeping God is your God.

[26 : 57] Everything he is, he is for you. Oh, Lord, I thank you what you are. And if you be for me, then who can be against me? And you come out of the verse encouraged because you've turned the command into praise, petition, confession.

You've had dealings with God. You've poured out your heart to God and you walk away. Encouraged. At a command. As you turn it into prayer. As we said, even confessing that we've not done what he's commanded us to do here.

But taking comfort that wherever we go today, he's with me. There are examples in scripture set before us, both positive and negative. I think of Peter right away as a negative example.

So you're reading that passage of his threefold denial of the Lord. And maybe you won't pause at every line when you're reading a narrative. You'll read the whole narrative and then you'll say, well, have there ever been times I've been ashamed to speak up for Jesus?

Oh, yeah. I have to confess, Lord. That's me. And so I'm confessing. But isn't there a book in the Bible called 1 Peter and 2 Peter?

[28 : 10] Lord, you weren't done with him. Even after he denied you, thank you for the way you've been patient with me. I'm still on the way. Because your grace is so great and your patience has been so wonderful.

And I'm praising him and I'm thanking him. And then I'm petitioning. Lord, if you don't give me help, I won't speak up when I ought to. So please strengthen me for this day.

And don't let me fall and dishonor you. So narratives you might need to read a little longer. Get the punchline of the whole parable and then turn it to prayer. But every place in the Bible, every verse of the Bible, in one way or another, can be turned into prayer.

And if you talk to God about what you read in the Bible, you'll never again be saying the same old things about the same old things. And that means you'll never grow into this boredom of just your repeated mindless phrases.

And I'm not saying every repeated phrase needs to be mindless. Please, I don't mean that at all. I'm just saying that it can lead to that very easily. And so here the Lord gives us such variety.

[29 : 16] J. Graham Miller says, For freshness of utterance, for breadth of comprehension, for elevation of thought, for intimacy of heart. There's no prayer like that which forms itself in the words and thoughts of Scripture.

So let God, let his mind lead your mind into prayer. Let his desires and heart lead your heart into prayer. And that will not only give you fresh materials to pray, but fresh ways to pray then for those same old requests that you find in your lives.

Well, I want us to do just that as we draw this first lesson to a close. We'll leave the rest for next week.

But I want you to turn to Psalm 119. And I tried to illustrate some of the ways we turn the Word of God into prayer.

When we come to Psalm 119, as I said before, it's all but four or five verses, prayers to God. So this should be a good place to start.

[30 : 28] And we're going to take five minutes. And each of you, I'm just going to ask you to pray the Bible. Do what we just said. And start with Psalm 100 and verse 9.

And I'll set the timer. And when it beeps, we'll stop. But have dealings with God. Letting Him lead you into prayer as He speaks to you.

Then you respond to Him in these very words. And then flesh it out in your life. And make it your own. Personalize it. But let's do that.

Is there any questions before we do so? Do you... Assignment clear? Psalm 119, verse 9. I'm sorry. Just Psalm 119, verse 1. Let's start at verse 1.

You may get to verse 9. I was going to go through that and just give another example. But I think we've had enough examples. And I want to give you time. Psalm 119, verse 1.

[31 : 26] And however far you get. Some of you might not get past verse 1. Whitney says that that's what he did with Psalm 23 at one of his seminars.

And a woman came to him just crying. She said, I spent the whole 25 minutes on verse 1. And so you might find a minute on verse 1. And move on to verse 2.

God's got more to say to you. So let's just have silence and cry out to God in our hearts. As we have fellowship with Him over His words.

Psalm 119, 1 and following. Amen. Amen. Amen. Well, it would be good if we had time to share now some of the things that you saw in this passage and turned into prayer.

But I'm just going to leave you with the assignment then this week to either go on through Psalm 119 for the week. Or if you'd like to, just to start in Psalm 1 and begin to pray the Bible.

[32 : 39] We're dismissed. And then let's come next week and be ready to share. What did we learn about this? Did it help? How did it help? Did you find it of an assistance to you?

And we'll share more of that next week. We're dismissed. Thank you.