

PASTORAL PENSÉES

12 Reasons You Should Pray Scripture

— Andrew David Naselli —

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I don't want to give the impression that I'm a prayer-expert. I'm not. But that's one reason I find praying Scripture so helpful (more on that later).

My argument is simple: *You should pray Scripture.*

Three qualifications:

1. I don't mean merely that you should pray. That's a given.
2. I don't mean that you should merely pray scripturally *informed* prayers. That's also a given. I'm arguing specifically that you should pray Scripture itself.
3. I'm not arguing that you should pray *only* Scripture every time you pray. Rather, I'm arguing that you should pray Scripture itself often.

So why should you pray Scripture? For at least twelve reasons:

1. You should pray Scripture because God's people in the OT and NT did.

It's not always logical to argue that we should do something merely because the Bible records God's people doing it. Sometimes OT narratives or the book of Acts *describe* practices without *prescribing* them. But I can't think of a one good reason that we shouldn't emulate these two examples.

First, an example from the OT: When the Israelites confess their sins in Neh 9, the Levites lead the people in prayer (Neh 9:5–37). The entire prayer is scripturally informed (e.g., 9:11),¹ and verse 17 quotes previous Scripture:

They refused to obey and were not mindful of the wonders that you performed among them, but they stiffened their neck and appointed a leader to return to their slavery in Egypt. But you are a God ready to forgive, *gracious and merciful, slow to anger and*

¹ Another example is Daniel's scripturally informed prayer in Dan 9:2–3 (ESV, emphasis added): "In the first year of his [i.e., Darius's] reign, I, Daniel, *perceived in the books* [NIV: *understood from the Scriptures*] the number of years that, according to the word of the LORD to Jeremiah the prophet, must pass before the end of the desolations of Jerusalem, namely, seventy years. *Then* [NASB, NET, NIV, HCSB, NLT: *So*] *I turned my face to the Lord God, seeking him by prayer and pleas for mercy with fasting and sackcloth and ashes.*" (Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®, copyright © 2011 by Crossway Bibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.) So Daniel read his Bible (specifically, Jeremiah) and therefore responded with earnest prayer. And his prayer in Dan 9 is scripturally informed. For example, he prays in v. 13, "As it is written in the Law of Moses."

abounding in steadfast love, and did not forsake them. Even when they had made for themselves a golden calf and said, ‘This is your God who brought you up out of Egypt,’ and had committed great blasphemies . . . (Neh 9:17–18, emphasis added)

In the middle of their prayer, they quote Exod 34:6. They apply that Scripture to their specific context. Second, an example from the NT: After the antagonistic Sanhedrin release Peter and John in Acts 4, how does the early church respond?

And when they heard it, 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’ . . .” (Acts 4:24–26)

In the middle of their prayer, they quote Ps 2:1–2. They apply that Scripture to their specific context.

2. You should pray Scripture because Jesus did.

I need to develop this further because it’s not always logical to argue that we should do something merely because Jesus did. Jesus did a lot of things that we *can’t* do—like walk on water and forgive people of their sins. And Jesus did some things that we *shouldn’t* do—like die on the cross to satisfy God’s righteous wrath against sinners. But Jesus did many things that we should imitate, and praying Scripture is one of them.

Both the Gospel according to Matthew and Mark record that Jesus prayed this to the Father when he was dying on the cross: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matt 27:46; Mark 15:34). That quotes the first line of Ps 22.

We have to be careful here because Jesus fulfills Scripture in a way that we don’t. Jesus is unique.² My point is that Jesus prayed Scripture. For him to do that, he had to read Scripture, correctly understand Scripture, meditate on Scripture, and then apply Scripture to his specific situation. We don’t typologically fulfill Scripture in the same way that Jesus does, but we can and should pray Scripture appropriately with reference to our contexts. For example, we can appropriate God-breathed prayers in Scripture as

²The NT applies Ps 22 typologically. Jesus repeats David’s experience in Ps 22 at a deeper, climactic level in the history of salvation. Because of passages like 2 Sam 7 and Ps 2, David became a “type” or model of his greater Son, the promised Messiah. This does not mean that everything that happened to David must find its echo in Jesus, but the NT understands many of the broad themes of David’s life that way (cf. Ps 16:8–11 in Acts 2:24–28 or Ps 45:6–7 in Heb 1:8–9), especially those that focus on David’s suffering, weakness, betrayal by friends, and discouragement (e.g., Ps 22 in the passion narratives).

Jesus repeats David’s experience in Ps 22 at a deeper, climactic level in the history of salvation. Jesus draws attention to Ps 22 by quoting Ps 22:1 while on the cross. And the Gospel according to John connects Jesus’ passion with Ps 22 by referring to the righteous sufferer’s thirst (cf. John 19:28 with Ps 22:15) and pierced hands and feet (cf. John 19:18, 34, 37; 20:25–27 with Ps 22:16).

they match our own circumstances. God's people have been doing that with the Psalms for thousands of years.

3. You should pray Scripture because it glorifies God the Father.

Jesus told his disciples in John 15:7–8, “If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.”³ What is the “fruit” in the context of John 15?

I won't take the time to demonstrate this here,⁴ but here's how I understand John 15:4: “Abide in me, and I in you” essentially means “Obey my words, and let my words remain in you.” Therefore, Jesus abides in us (believers) to the degree that his words abide in us, and we abide in Jesus to the degree that we obey his words. Every believer abides in Jesus to some degree, resulting in different degrees of fruitfulness.

So when we internalize Jesus' individual utterances (i.e., his words remain in us), we will make scripturally informed requests, and God will answer them. So what is the “fruit”? I think that the fruit in this context is the answers to those prayers. That does not refer exclusively to when we pray Scripture; it refers to scripturally informed prayers. But that certainly includes our praying Scripture. When we pray Scripture, we demonstrate explicitly that Jesus' words are remaining in us.

And when we are bearing much fruit through our praying Scripture, that is a way that we glorify God the Father: “By this my Father is glorified.”

4. You should pray Scripture because it helps you focus on what is most important.

We can so easily drift into praying lists of requests that concern mainly issues such as sickness or anxiety or money or wisdom for decision-making. And it's right to ask about concerns like that. But what can happen is that those legitimate concerns become the dominant and almost exclusive content of what we pray.

But what about praising God? And exulting in glorious truths about God and his world? And thanking God for specific blessings? And asking God to forgive us? Prayer is about much more than merely asking God for stuff (though it's not less than that). Praying Scripture helps us focus on what is most important.

5. You should pray Scripture because it helps you focus on praying.

We humans are weak. We can be like Peter, James, and John when they were with Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane and fell asleep three times instead of praying. Jesus acknowledged, “The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak” (Matt 26:41 NIV).

³John Piper says of John 15:7, “There is a direct connection between the degree to which our minds are shaped by Scripture and the degree to which our prayers are answered” (“Tips for Praying the Word,” January 9, 1984, <http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/taste-see-articles/tips-for-praying-the-word>).

⁴See Andrew David Naselli, *Let Go and Let God? A Survey and Analysis of Keswick Theology* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010), 236–47.

We can have the best intentions in the world and then not pray or pray without really praying. Our mind may wander, or we may even fall asleep. Praying Scripture is a practical way “to impede mental drift.”⁵

John Piper shares,

If I try to pray for people or events without having the word in front of me guiding my prayers, then several negative things happen. . . . [One] negative thing is that my mind tends to wander, and I think instead about what I’m wearing, or that there is a Venetian blind that is halfway open, or that there is a siren out on the street and I’m wondering what is happening. I’m jerked all over the place by my inattentiveness. But the Bible holds my attention because I’m looking at it and reading it. . . . I’ve said to people, “You can pray all day if you pray the Bible.” Some people wonder how you can pray longer than five minutes, because they would lose things to pray for. But I say that if you open the Bible, start reading it, and pause at every verse and turn it into a prayer, then you can pray all day that way.⁶

6. You should pray Scripture because it is entirely truthful.

Scripture is like no other book because it’s without error and incapable of error. So this protects you from error. You can’t go wrong when you pray Scripture!⁷

7. You should pray Scripture because it helps you pray confidently.

Since Scripture is entirely truthful, you should pray confidently when you pray Scripture. It’s safe, secure, firm ground. You don’t need to wonder, “Is this a good thing or a bad thing to pray?” Scripture expresses God’s will, God’s character, and God’s promises. So if you are praying Scripture, then you don’t need to worry about being self-deceived or that you’re working yourself up for something ephemeral (like praying to become a billionaire overnight). Obviously, you’ll need wisdom regarding how to pray Scripture with reference to specific people and circumstances, especially in light of Jesus’ extravagant promises about what we ask for with faith (see Matt 21:22; Mark 11:24). When you’re praying Scripture, you can be sure that what you’re praying is in keeping with God’s will, that you’re asking in Jesus’ name: “Whatever you ask *in my name*, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask me anything *in my name*, I will do it” (John 14:13–14, emphasis added). “And this is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything *according to his will* he hears us” (1 John 5:14, emphasis added).

⁵ D. A. Carson, *A Call to Spiritual Reformation: Priorities from Paul and His Prayers* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 20–21.

⁶ John Piper, “Should I Use the Bible When I Pray?,” September 28, 2007, <http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/ask-pastor-john/should-i-use-the-bible-when-i-pray>.

⁷ Actually, you can go wrong when you pray Scripture if you mishandle Scripture. So you can’t go wrong when you pray Scripture *if you are rightly handling the Scripture that you’re praying*.

8. You should pray Scripture because it kindles your affections.

Ray Ortlund writes, “I have learned to see the Bible as kindling for a holy fire. Scripture is meant to inform us, and thus to inflame us. It is meant to illuminate our thoughts of God, and thus to ignite our affections for God.”⁸

John Piper’s chapter on Scripture in *Desiring God* is called “Scripture: Kindling for Christian Hedonism.”⁹ He closes by sharing from George Müller’s autobiography how he started his day:

The point is this: I saw more clearly than ever, that the first great and primary business to which I ought to attend every day was, to have my soul happy in the Lord. . . .

Before this time my practice had been, at least for ten years previously, as an habitual thing, to give myself to prayer, after having dressed in the morning. *Now* I saw, that the most important thing I had to do was to give myself to the reading of the Word of God and to meditation on it, that thus my heart might be comforted, encouraged, warned, reproved, instructed; and that thus, whilst meditating, my heart might be brought into experimental, communion with the Lord. I began therefore, to meditate on the New Testament, from the beginning, early in the morning.

The first thing I did, after having asked in a few words the Lord’s blessing upon His precious Word, was to begin to meditate on the Word of God; searching, as it were, into every verse, to get blessing out of it; not for the sake of the public ministry of the Word; not for the sake or preaching on what I had meditated upon; but for the sake of obtaining food for my own soul. The result I have found to be almost invariably this, that after a very few minutes my soul has been led to confession, or to thanksgiving, or to intercession, or to supplication; so that though I did not, as it were, give myself to *prayer*, but to *meditation*, yet it turned almost immediately more or less into prayer.

When thus I have been for awhile making confession, or intercession, or supplication, or have given thanks, I go on to the next words or verse, turning all, as I go on, into prayer for myself or others, as the Word may lead to it; but still continually keeping before me, that food for my own soul is the object of my meditation. The result of this is, that there is always a good deal of confession, thanksgiving, supplication, or intercession mingled with my meditation, and that my inner man almost invariably is even sensibly nourished and strengthened and that by breakfast time, with rare exceptions, I am in a peaceful if not happy state of heart. Thus also the Lord is pleased to communicate unto me that which, very soon after, I have found to become food for other believers, though it was not for the sake of the public ministry of the Word that I gave myself to meditation, but for the profit of my own inner man.¹⁰

⁸ Raymond C. Ortlund Jr., *A Passion for God: Prayers and Meditations on the Book of Romans* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1994), xiv.

⁹ John Piper, *Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist* (3d ed.; Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 2003), 143–58.

¹⁰ *Autobiography of George Müller* (comp. Fred Bergen; London: Nisbet, 1906), 152–54; quoted in Piper, *Desiring God*, 155–56.

9. You should pray Scripture because it helps you express yourself appropriately.

When you pray, you are addressing the Supreme Sovereign of the universe. How can you appropriately praise such a person? How can you appropriately repent of your sins and ask him to forgive you? How can you appropriately thank such a person? Yes, you should sound like yourself. There's no inherent virtue in reciting Shakespearean-style prayers. But when you pray Scripture, you can use God-breathed verbs and nouns and adjectives and adverbs and prepositions and connectives. You could pray, "God, you're really big and kind and powerful." And that's good. There's nothing wrong with that. But you could be more expressive. You could express yourself even more vividly, more richly. For example, you could pray Psalm 145:1–3:

I will extol you, my God and King,
and bless your name forever and ever.
Every day I will bless you
and praise your name forever and ever.
Great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised,
and his greatness is unsearchable.

Or after you ask God to act in some specific ways, you could quote Daniel 9:18: "We do not make requests of you because we are righteous, but because of your great mercy."

Or if you're not quite sure what to do, you could pray 2 Chr 20:12b: "We do not know what to do, but our eyes are on you."

10. You should pray Scripture because it keeps your prayers fresh and specific.

People tend to sit in the same spot in their church's auditorium each week. Students tend to sit in the same spot for classes. Google can predict with scary accuracy what sites you will visit online and when. Grocery stores that use special grocery cards can predict with alarming precision what each customer will buy and when. Those who know me fairly well can predict with almost 100% accuracy when I will wake up every morning and what I will order when I eat at Chipotle.

We are creatures of habit. And that's not a bad thing. But sometimes that can be a bad thing. Sometimes we can get in bad rut when it comes to spiritual disciplines such as Bible reading and prayer: our routine may become dull and boring and even unproductive.

A helpful way to avoid a bad prayer rut is to pray Scripture. It keeps your prayers fresh and specific. John Piper shares,

If I try to pray for people or events without having the word in front of me guiding my prayers, then several negative things happen. One is that I tend to be very repetitive from day to day and hour to hour, and I just pray the same things all the time. . . . But the Bible . . . gives me biblical things to pray for so that I'm not praying with empty and vague requests like "God bless them" and "God bless that." Rather, I'm asking for specific things that the Bible commends.¹¹

Likewise, Don Whitney observes,

¹¹ Piper, "Should I Use the Bible When I Pray?"

One of the reasons Jesus prohibited the empty repetition of prayers is because that's exactly the way we're prone to pray. Although I don't merely recite memorized prayers, my own tendency is to pray basically the same old things about the same old things. And it doesn't take long before this fragments the attention span and freezes the heart of prayer. The problem is not our praying *about* the same old things, for Jesus taught us (in Luke 11:5–13; 18:1–8) to pray with persistence for good things. Our problem is in always praying about them with the same ritualistic, heartless expressions.

In my experience, the almost unfailing solution to this problem is to pray through a passage of Scripture—particularly one of the psalms—instead of making up my prayer as I go. Praying in this way is simply taking the words of Scripture and using them as my own words or as prompters for what I say to God.¹²

11. You should pray Scripture because it keeps your prayers in scriptural proportion.

One of the many reasons that expository preaching is wise is that it systematically explains and heralds Scripture proportionally. Topical preachers tend to talk about the same few issues over and over and over. Expository preachers are forced to talk about a rich variety of issues *in scriptural proportion*, namely, every time the text addresses various issues.

Similarly, we may tend to pray about the same few issues over and over and over. But if we pray Scripture as we read through the Bible, that will force us to pray about a rich variety of issues *in scriptural proportion*.

12. You should pray Scripture because it helps you understand Scripture better.

When you pray Scripture, you must think carefully about what you are saying. In order to pray Scripture, you need to have an idea of what Scripture means in its context. The process of praying Scripture forces you to ask questions about Scripture that you might not ask if you were merely reading it. Instead of just reading a passage of Scripture to understand what it meant then, when you pray that same Scripture, you must understand both what it meant then and what significance that has for you now. This often requires that you use biblical theology, especially when reading the OT.

John Piper explains that when you pray Scripture,

you will be surprised how many insights come as you really take Scripture seriously and try to pray it into your life. If you run into theological or interpretational problems, tell the Lord you will work on that later and move on. If we seek hard to obey what we *do* understand, more light will come on the hard parts.¹³

¹² Donald S. Whitney, *Simplify Your Spiritual Life: Spiritual Disciplines for the Overwhelmed* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2003), 80.

¹³ John Piper, "How To Pray For Half-an-Hour," January 5, 1982, <http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/taste-see-articles/how-to-pray-for-half-an-hour>.

Conclusion

Strategies

You may be thinking, “OK. I’m convinced. I should pray Scripture. But I’m not sure how.” It’s pretty simple. As you read and study the Bible, you might respond by (1) praising God, (2) exulting in glorious truths, (3) thanking God for specific blessings, (4) asking God to forgive you, or (5) asking God to help you or someone else regarding a specific issue.

Kevin DeYoung uses “3 R’s” as a mnemonic device: (1) rejoice, (2) repent, (3) request. He argues that you can pray just about any verse in the Bible with that strategy.¹⁴

John Piper remarks that once you learn to pray the Bible as you read it, “You can pray all day once you catch on.”¹⁵ He suggests a ten-step procedure for beginners.¹⁶

One way to learn how to pray Scripture is to pray the prayers in Ray Ortlund’s book on Romans as you read Paul’s letter to the Romans.¹⁷ Ortlund paraphrases Paul’s letter to the Romans and then prayerfully meditates on it passage by passage. He doesn’t always pray through the text using the language of Scripture itself, so it’s a little different from what Piper and DeYoung suggest. But this approach may serve you as you go and do likewise with the rest of Scripture.

A Closing Prayer

This prayer is adapted from Pss 25:4–7; 31:3, 15; Rom 15:13; and Phil 1:9–11:

Show us your ways, Yahweh,
 teach us your paths.
 Guide us in your truth and teach us,
 for you are God our Savior,
 and our hope is in you all day long.
 Remember, Yahweh, your great mercy and love,
 for they are from of old.
 Do not remember the sins of our youth
 and our rebellious ways;
 according to your love remember us,
 for you, Yahweh, are good.
 Since you are our rock and our fortress,
 for the sake of your name lead and guide us. . . .
 Our times are in your hands. Our future in is your hands.
 May you, the God of hope, fill us with all joy and peace as we trust in you, so that we
 may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

¹⁴ Kevin DeYoung, “How to Pray Using Scripture,” January 4, 2013, <http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevindeyoung/2013/01/04/how-to-pray-using-scripture/>.

¹⁵ John Piper, “How To Pray For Half-an-Hour.”

¹⁶ Piper, “Tips for Praying the Word.”

¹⁷ Raymond C. Ortlund Jr., *A Passion for God: Prayers and Meditations on the Book of Romans* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1994).

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This is our prayer: that our love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that we may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God.