

Pray the Bible

Session #2: Why Pray the Bible with Kevin P. Halloran

When I think of the value of praying the Bible, I think about superfoods. While the term "superfood" may be more of a marketing term than a scientific one, the simple idea rings true. A superfood is a food that is rich in nutrients beneficial to our health. When you eat a superfood like blueberries, broccoli, salmon, or kale, you get more nutrients and more benefits than eating a non-superfood.

In this session, I will share how praying the Bible will bring you many more benefits than simply closing your eyes and trying to pray out of the resources of your own mind and heart. And the good news is that the Bible tastes better than kale! As Psalm 19:10 says, it is sweeter than honey.

And after seeing why praying the Bible is so spiritually powerful and practically useful, I will share a few ways you can pray the Bible immediately.

Eight Reasons to Pray the Bible

The first reason to pray the Bible is that it is a practice we see in the Bible.

Here are a few examples:

- In the Old Testament, while Jonah prayed in the belly of the great fish in Jonah chapter 2, he quoted from numerous Psalms.
- In Daniel 9, the prophet Daniel responded to the book of Jeremiah.
- Mary's song of praise in Luke 1, the Magnificat, has been called a mosaic of Old Testament quotations, drawing largely from Hannah's song in 1 Samuel.
- Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ prayed the Psalms on the cross, quoting from Psalm 22 when He said "*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*" and Psalm 31 when He said "Into your hand I commit my spirit." Since Psalm 22 is close to Psalm 31, some have even speculated that Jesus prayed Psalms 22 through 31 on the cross.
- In Acts chapter 4, the apostles launched a prayer with the words of Psalm 2 when facing opposition from the authorities.

As you can see, praying the Bible is not a new invention, but one that generations of God's people have practiced.

The second reason to pray the Bible is that it helps us have a conversation with God.

In my research into why we struggle to pray, one of the top answers was "I don't know *what* to pray." Many people feel stuck repeating a handful of prayer requests and as a result, give up on prayer before they really begin.

But praying the Bible answers that. God starts the conversation by speaking to us through His Word. Praying the Bible is simply responding to the conversation that God our Father has already started.

This is a great practical relief for me! I don't need to wait until I'm especially inspired or sharp to approach God in prayer. I just open the Bible, read what God says in His Word, and respond. It's that simple.

The third reason to pray the Bible is that the Bible builds our faith.

The Bible is adamant, true prayer requires true faith. Hebrews 11:6 says, "*without faith it is impossible to please [God].*" This clearly applies to prayer. Without faith, it is impossible to please God in prayer.

That's what James writes in his epistle. James shares a glorious truth, "*If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him*" (James 1:5). What a wonderful promise. God will give wisdom to you **generously** if you ask for it—100% of the time.

Then he adds, "*But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways*" (James 1:6–7).

It is clear that we need to pray with faith. And how does faith come? The Apostle Paul writes that "*faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ*" (Romans 10:17). Hearing comes through the Word. And when we pray the Bible, God's Word generates faith in us, and thus stokes the fires of prayer.

Pray the Bible because it builds our faith.

The fourth reason to pray the Bible is that the power of God's Word changes us and strengthens our prayers.

The Word of God is powerful to bring change. Hebrews 4:12 says,

"The word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart."

The Bible will discern our thoughts and the intentions of our hearts. It will reveal to us what is not right and help us live (and pray) in the way that God wants. This is vitally important, because left to our own devices, our prayers and priorities in prayer are often self-centered, weak, foolish, born from angst and a lack of understanding. But according to Psalm 19, the Word of God revives our souls, makes wise the simple, rejoices the heart, enlightens our eyes.

As we are changed by God's Word, our prayers are strengthened as well. This makes total sense because God said in Isaiah 55:9,

"For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts."

If God's thoughts are as far above the earth as the heavens, praying based on God's thoughts will level up our prayers.

I have found in times of great anxiety, when I don't know what to do or what to pray, that meditating on Scripture and bringing it to God in prayer untangles great emotional knots that I couldn't untie on my own. My words so often fail me, make my anxiety worse, or get me into trouble, but God's Word will never fail me.

If you've ever wondered how this happens, I think 2 Corinthians 10:3–5 has the answer:

*For though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy **arguments** and every lofty **opinion** raised against the **knowledge** of God, and take every **thought** captive to obey Christ.*

Paul is saying here that when we fight a spiritual battle, we need to fight with spiritual weapons. The battle is over arguments, opinions, and thoughts.

This battle is largely of the mind. And if the battle takes place in the mind, dealing with thoughts and arguments and lofty opinions, what better way do we have to flush out bad thoughts and instill good thoughts than filling our minds with God's perfect thoughts and pleading His help? That's what praying the Bible is.

(As we talk about a spiritual battle, it's worth mentioning that the armor of God passage in Ephesians 6 ends mentioning the offensive weapon of the Word of God, which is the sword of the Spirit, *and* powerful weapon of prayer.)

So when you face intense stress, pressure, or even persecution, do you want to be left to your own devices in prayer? Neglecting the Word of God in prayer might be just like running into battle without a weapon.

The fifth reason to pray the Bible is that it will increase our confidence that God hears our prayers.

We know that the Word of God reveals the will of God. The apostle John shows us what happens as we pray according to God's will:

"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)

God hears us when we pray according to His will. This gives us confidence to pray! We know God will hear us. We know God will answer us. There is no such thing as unanswered prayer for a child of God.

This doesn't mean, however, that God will answer us in exactly the way we want Him to; no. It doesn't mean that we will ever even know how God will answer, or even that He has answered us.

We can trust that God will answer our prayers in His way and His perfect timing. His answers may be "yes", "no", or "wait", but we can be confident that God is hearing us and will work according to His will. Think about it this way. When we pray in response to the Bible, we pray for what is near and dear to God's heart. We pray what God wants us to pray. We pray prayers that God loves to answer.

When we respond to the Bible's words and ask God for greater faith to believe what we read, confess the sin that His Word exposed, or intercede for a loved one based on His truth, this is exactly what God wants us to be praying for, and thus, we can pray in confident joy that God is going to work in His way and His timing through our prayers.

The sixth reason to pray the Bible is because it serves as guardrails for our motives.

James the apostle wrote to the church on wrong motives in prayer, "*You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions*" (James 4:3). This means praying with sinful motives can render our prayers ineffective.

But praying the Bible will serve as guardrails for us to keep us from veering off into the ditch of bad motives. We can trust the wisdom of Scripture and pray in freedom and confidence.

Yes, our hearts may still lead us to ask God for things from a heart with tainted motives. Or we may misuse or misinterpret a portion of Scripture and pray for something we shouldn't. But I'm convinced that compared to praying whatever is on our minds, the practice of reading the Bible and responding in prayer will anchor us in God's Word and keep our motives from drifting too far from the mind and heart of God.

The seventh reason to pray the Bible is that it helps our prayers be well-rounded.

2 Timothy 3:16–17 describes the utility and sufficiency of God's Word for all of life:

"All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work."

As we pray through God's Word, we will be taught, reproved, corrected, trained in righteousness, and equipped for every good work.

Think of it this way. There are so many attributes of God to adore, so many types of sin we need to fight, so many truths about our world that we need to believe. We can't realistically think of everything God wants us to pray on our own.

Imagine you have a chronic illness that has produced great suffering for you. The good and natural prayer is, "God, take away this illness!" But praying only that over the weeks, months, and years, would get any of us tired and discouraged if we haven't received the answer we were looking for.

But as we read and pray the Bible over a long period of time, we come across many wonderful truths about suffering we can take to God in prayer.

You read Psalm 119:71: "*It is good for me that I was afflicted, that I might learn your statutes.*" So you pray, "Father, I'm not in a place yet where I can pray this with the Psalmist, but I pray you would teach me your statutes and cause them to be my great delight in this trial. I want to be able to say 'it is good that I was afflicted'."

Later you read James 1:12, "*Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life,*" and you pray, "God, help me remain steadfast under trial, and help me remember that you bless the man who remains steadfast when things get tough."

If you only prayed, "God, take away this illness!" you would most likely miss many refreshing answers to prayer that God wants to provide, answers that would strengthen and refocus you in your trial.

I love how A.W. Tozer put it, "Nothing less than a whole Bible can make a whole Christian." And, over time, as we engage all of God's Word and allow it to shape our hearts, our attitudes, and our prayers, God **will** make us whole Christians and conform us to the image of our Savior.

The eighth reason to pray the Bible is that it helps us focus by giving us structure.

This last point is very practical. One of our biggest struggles in prayer is staying focused.

But praying the Bible helps us focus by giving us structure—we have the path of Scripture to follow in prayer. We know the steps right in front of us (it's the next verse or passage), and we take them. And when distractions take us off the path, we just get back on it and pick up where we left off.

We don't need to believe the lie that interrupted prayers don't count. Not at all. You know this from life, when you're distracted while talking to a friend or loved one, you can usually pick right back up where you left off.

The beauty of reading the Bible and praying as you go is that you have so much fodder for prayers. You may find that learning to pray the Bible means you can literally spend all day meditating on Scripture and bringing it back to God in prayer.

Practical Methods to Pray the Bible

Now we've seen eight reasons why praying the Bible is so profitable. Much more can be said, but hopefully this proves to you the power of praying the Bible and encourages you to add this spiritual discipline superfood to your devotional routine.

A natural question probably came up: *What does all of this mean in practice?* In the rest of this session and in the next two we will see a few methods to pray the Bible and portions of Scripture that are especially useful.

The first method to pray the Bible is freestyle. Or to put it another way, just like freestyle swimming, there are no hard and fast rules for praying the Bible.

Yes, we always want to interpret Scripture well. But don't let a lack of confidence in the way you read the Bible intimidate you. You may misinterpret it or make mistakes. But as we saw when we talked about motives, we can trust the practice of praying the Bible to keep us anchored far closer to God's heart than if we are left to our own devices.

As we pray the Bible, it's helpful to consider the overarching ideas of a passage, because they will usually harmonize smaller ideas and cause us to pray about something of greater importance. That's especially true for certain genres of the Bible like narratives and prophecy.

I often don't need any technique for praying the Bible but will respond naturally in prayer to what I read. You may find it beneficial to rewrite truths from a verse or passage in your own words and prayerfully meditate on them before God.

There are many ways you can engage with the Bible and bring it to God in prayer. If you want additional structure in praying the Bible, I recommend the next way to pray the Bible.

The second method is the Three R's.

The first step is find a part of the Bible to pray. Whether you read a single verse, an entire book of the Bible, or something in between, ponder how God wants to communicate

- a characteristic of Himself to behold
- a truth to believe
- a sin to fight
- a command to obey
- an example to learn from

Once you have read a passage and have a truth in your mind, you are ready to pray the three R's.

The first R: Rejoice. When the passage you are reading reveals something about God, His character, or the truth of His universe, rejoice in it! We can rejoice in any passage of Scripture, because God and His gospel are that good!

The second R: Repent. How does the passage show you that you have fallen short of God's standard? Confess your sins—and acknowledge His glorious grace, which invites you to confess and to receive His cleansing.

The third R: Request. In what areas do you need to ask God's help, for yourself or for others, so that they can better obey what the passage teaches? Bring your requests before our Sovereign King.

Let's practice with the three R's, rejoice, repent, and request. I'll share an example based on Jesus' words from Matthew 5:44.

"Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."

How might you rejoice? When I read that verse, I pray something like, "I praise You, God, that in this world filled with hatred, You are not a God who wants me to hate anyone, even my enemy. Thank You that You want this world filled with love. I praise You that Jesus died for me when I was His enemy and that I see Your love for me as I look at the cross."

How might you repent? "Father, so often I fall short of Your command to love my enemies. So often I *do* hate my enemies and complain more about them than I pray for them. Please forgive me for my lack of love and for letting my flesh and emotions lead to anger or hatred instead of fervent prayer."

For what might you request? "Father, would you grant me the compassion I lack for my enemies. Father, when I see my enemies in person or different enemies on the news or on social media doing great evil, help me remember this passage and love them by praying for their salvation. Lord, I pray that today You would draw many persecutors to faith and even to gospel ministry like You did the apostle Paul."

I hope that example showed you the simplicity and the power of the 3-Rs. One practical way to make the Three-R method part of your habits is to write the three words on a sticky note and put it in your Bible as a reminder. That simple idea could revolutionize your private and public prayer life.

The next method is different from praying in direct response to the Bible, but offers a biblical shape we can give to our prayers. The way is the Lord's Prayer. Last session unpacked the meaning of this masterclass taught by the Lord Jesus, and now we will look at three ways we can use it for prayer.

The first way to pray the Lord's Prayer is *verbatim*: just pray the words back to God.

Many disregard the warning of Jesus about vain repetitions in prayer when they pray the Lord's Prayer. They use it mindlessly like a magic phrase that has power in and of itself. We shouldn't pray this prayer that way. But just because many use this prayer in an empty way doesn't mean it isn't full of meaning and benefit for us. They are the very words the Lord Jesus taught His disciples to pray.

I encourage you to pray the Lord's Prayer verbatim randomly throughout your day as you think about God and prayer. It might be something you can pray at meals or before bed or with your family. Pray it in faith and savor each word. God can and will shape your heart in the experience of praying the Lord's Prayer verbatim, an experience that takes only about twenty seconds.

The second way to pray the Lord's Prayer is to use it as a *general template* for prayer. One time Martin Luther's barber asked him for practical advice on prayer. In response, Luther wrote the short book called *A Simple Way to Pray*. In that book Luther recommended using the Lord's Prayer as a template, going petition by petition, filling in specific praises and requests as you go.

Starting with "Hallowed be Your name," you might praise God for His character, His glory displayed in creation, and His work in your life, and in your church. You can stay on this petition for as long as you want or until you can't think of anything else to pray for, and then move to the next—repeating the process until you finish the prayer.

Praying our way through each petition of the Lord's Prayer like this gives us a well-rounded and focused session of praying.

I've found this method to be a helpful way of focusing my mind for prayer and even reengaging it when my prayer time gets interrupted: *If I just left off with "Your will be done" when I was interrupted, I can easily get back on track and pray "Give us this day our daily bread"!*

I also recommend a *specific approach* to praying the Lord's Prayer that focuses on one person or situation at a time. I've found this method helpful for everyday matters and spiritual battles.

Here's an example. Say you have a coworker who has been talking bad about you to your boss and fellow coworkers, and people are starting to turn on you at work. Pray like this:

- Father, help me **glorify Your name** in this trial with my annoying coworker in every thought, word, and deed.
- Would **Your Kingdom come** in the life of this man—grant him faith and repentance unto salvation, and would You help me live obediently under Your kingly rule as I persevere in this trial.
- Lord, You know how I want to be vindicated and how I don't want to lose credibility at work, but would **Your will be done** in this situation. I submit to You.
- Please **give me the daily wisdom**, patience, self-control, love, and the words to say in this situation.
- Please **forgive me** for the bitterness and anger that have welled up in me because of my coworker's sin against me, and **help me forgive him** as You have forgiven me.
- **Lead me not into the temptation** of wanting revenge, or growing angrier, and **deliver me from evil** people and the attacks of the enemy who wants me to dishonor You with my actions.

I've found this method so refreshing because I don't naturally pray against sin growing in my heart when others sin against me. But that's the beauty of having our prayers shaped by the Lord's Prayer—it helps us prioritize what God wants us to pray.

If you find yourself in a difficult situation, pray the Lord's prayer specifically for that situation. If you're looking for a way to pray for a loved one, pray the Lord's Prayer specifically over many facets of their life.

There is a simple beauty in praying the Lord's Prayer, because, as I've said, this is how Jesus taught His disciples to pray, and it is so useful for us in just about any situation we may encounter.

I hope this session has helped you see the many benefits of praying the Bible and has equipped you to do so yourself. The next two sessions will help you see two powerful portions of the Bible we can use for prayer. Join us next time for session three of Pray the Bible.

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