

1

GOD'S WORD TO US

How to Pray with the Bible

REJECTED, a thirteen-year-old sobbed into her sleeping bag at summer camp. The start of a teen romantic comedy? Perhaps, but that episode marked the first time I sensed God's voice through his Word.

When we arrived at the camp, we were bowled over by the ratio of boys to girls—just us four girls to twenty guys. We scoped out the guys and giggled over which was the cutest while we canoed in the crystal-clear lakes, cooked over a campfire, swatted mosquitoes, and sang worship songs under the stars.

Text

In the guy department, I kept hoping I'd be chosen, but while each of my three friends paired off, I remained alone.

On the last night, I looked from one friend to the next, each of whom was holding hands or standing arm in arm with their guys around the campfire.

Then one of the nonattached guys sneered at me. He pointed to an overweight boy and then to me (I was not thin) and said, “Oh, why don’t *you two* get together?”

Mortified, I ran back to my tent, scurried into my sleeping bag, and released my sobs, feeling undesirable and worthless. Our camp counselor came and tried to comfort me, but I pretended to be asleep. A few minutes later, she left.

When at last the week was over and I was back at home, I tried to forget my feelings of rejection. I put on a brave face and pushed my hurt into a corner, not wanting to share it with my parents or friends. Or with God.

But to my surprise I received a letter from my camp counselor, who said how concerned she had been for me. The verses she quoted from Philippians pierced through my hardened exterior:

I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy . . . being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus. . . .

And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you 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.¹

I ran down to my room, found my Bible, and looked for Philippians, reading the whole passage more than once. For the first time I felt as if God was speaking to me through the Scriptures. The words sailed off the page and landed in my heart, penetrating the places of hurt and rejection. I started to believe that the Lord had started a good work in me and that he wouldn't leave me. That I'd grow in wisdom and insights and would bear fruit. With the pages blurry through my tears, I pondered the promises in Paul's letter and began to make them my own.

That camp counselor was a conduit of God's grace, pointing me to his words of transforming love. I had begun the exhilarating journey of meeting God as I prayed and read his Word.

The Knowable God

God always makes himself known to us, and a primary way he reveals himself is through his Word. When we pray with the Bible, God infuses the experience with his Spirit. As with my memorable encounter after camp, God comforts us through what we read. Sometimes he corrects us or convicts us; often he teaches us as he imparts his wisdom.

The Bible's story of God and his people is one of intimacy and communication. It started when God spoke to Adam

and Eve directly in the Garden as he delighted in them and instructed them. When sin marred the relationship between him and his people, he called them back to himself, speaking to the Israelites through the prophets by the inspiration of the Spirit. Later, God the Father sent Jesus the Son to be “the Word [who] was with God, and . . . was God.”² God then sent us the Holy Spirit to dwell with us and in us as he comforts and teaches us. The unreachable, unknowable God reaches down and makes himself known.

God, as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, has also given us the Bible, limiting his words to a level we can understand. Thus, the church fathers spoke of the Bible as the “abbreviated word.”³ God our Creator meets us with grace and love in a form we can grasp. Jesus the Word fills the pages of Scripture with his acts of grace and redemption. And just as the Holy Spirit breathed the Scripture itself into life, so the Spirit breathes life into us as we read it.

As we pray with the Bible, we welcome God’s Word to come and live in us. One of the Puritans, William Law (1686–1761), illustrated this when he said that Scripture “should only be read in an attitude of prayer, trusting to the inward working of the Holy Spirit to make [its truth] a living reality within us.”⁴

For many Christians, the first and most common way of engaging with God’s Word is with their intellect. This is good—vibrant and strong Bible study is important to sustain a vital faith. But this shouldn’t be our only way of reading the Bible. We might think of Martin Luther

(1483–1546) as one who studied the Bible deeply, which he did. But he was also steeped in a prayerful reading of it. He said, “You should meditate . . . not only in your heart, but also externally . . . reading and rereading [the words of Scripture] with diligent attention and reflection, so that you may see what the Holy Spirit means by them.”⁵ Perhaps Luther drew on his experience as a monk in making this observation, for in the monasteries they spoke Scripture aloud as they prayed.

Take and Eat

“Don’t swallow it in a big lump!” That was the warning of the beloved French abbot Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153), who delighted in a slow, deliberate reading of the Bible. He said that if we eat too quickly, without careful chewing, we’ll be cheated of the delicious flavor of the Bible, which is sweetened by the spice of the Holy Spirit.⁶

This sense of eating the Scriptures—chewing on them, swallowing them, and feeding on them—comes through in the Old Testament. The prophets Ezekiel and Jeremiah ate God’s Word and delighted in it. Ezekiel said, “It tasted as sweet as honey in my mouth.”⁷ For Jeremiah, God’s words were his “joy and [his] heart’s delight.”⁸ The image of eating underscores the importance of bringing God’s Word deeply inside ourselves. We can chew and meditate on it, receiving its nourishment as it feeds us from the sweetness of God’s love.

As we eat God’s Word, it makes itself at home within us,

as we see in Paul's letter to the Colossians: We "let the word of Christ dwell in [us] richly."⁹ In the Greek this means that God's Word comes and stays in us.¹⁰ First we welcome the Word as a visitor to our dwelling—that is, to our minds and hearts. Then we keep on extending the invitation until the houseguest becomes a permanent resident inside us.

As we dwell in the Word and it lives in us, it comes alive within us, as the writer to the Hebrews said: "The word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart."¹¹ We can experience those uncanny moments of coming across a passage and feeling the words burn into our hearts. God can comfort us when we're hurting as we read a line of the Psalms; he can convict us with his teaching from the Sermon on the Mount. As you read the Scriptures, pause before you delve into them and ask God to speak to you. He loves to respond when we seek him.

When we consider the charge to take and eat, we can ponder a striking image that church father Origen (c. 184–c. 253) used: "His flesh and blood . . . are the divine Scriptures, eating which, we have Christ; the words becoming his bones, the flesh becoming the meaning from the text . . . and the blood being faith in the gospel of the new covenant."¹²

If you're comfortable doing so, sit with those images of sinew and text for a few minutes, asking God to bring them to life in your mind's eye so that you can grasp in a new way the relationship between Christ and the Scriptures.

Prayer Practices

Following are some ways to pray with the Bible, all of which I've employed during various seasons of my life. As one who enjoys writing, I tend to focus on the practices that involve creating a Scripture poem or putting the text into my own words. You, of course, may resonate with the Bible differently.

Moments of Grace

At times in our journey of faith, we might be tempted to play “Bible roulette,” where we open the Bible randomly to find a specific passage meant for us in that moment. But this practice doesn't always have the hoped-for results. When I prepared a talk about praying with the Bible, I decided to open the Bible and see what I landed on. Jeremiah 6:5 made me take pause: “So arise, let us attack at night and destroy her fortresses!”

Yet Francis of Assisi (1181–1226) found his life's calling through a seemingly random act of God. He went over to a prayer book and asked God to guide him. He let the book fall open, and there found his vocation to spend his life for the poor.¹³ The early Franciscans followed Francis in this practice, opening the Bible three times when they sought God's guidance.¹⁴

My dad tells the story of how he and my mom wanted a Scripture passage for each of us children. They prayed and then opened their Bible, and the verses they found for each of us have over the years proven apt. For example, for the

child who went through a period of rebellion, they received, “Parents, never drive your children to resentment but bring them up with correction and advice inspired by the Lord.”¹⁵ For another child, about whom they prayed for direction and guidance: “Let us never slacken in doing good; for if we do not give up, we shall have our harvest in due time.”¹⁶

I remember a time of deep grief when I opened the Bible in desperation, begging God to speak to me through it. I was nineteen, and I’d just heard the shattering news that one of my closest friends died in a car accident. Plagued with worry about whether she was in heaven, I flipped through my Bible, asking God to show me something—anything—that would help me in my sorrow and confusion. I was amazed to land on this: “The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God. For who knows a person’s thoughts except their own spirit within them? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God.”¹⁷ I read and reread the line from the apostle Paul to the church at Corinth, the words bringing immediate relief. I realized as I digested them that I didn’t need to be asking these ultimate questions—I’d never know what went on in Sue’s heart and mind. Only she did, and the Spirit of God.

Moments of grace such as these can feel powerful, and undoubtedly God delights in speaking to his children by whatever means we are most open to at a particular moment. But as we mature in our faith, we find that we don’t need to search through the Bible randomly. Nor do we view it as a medicine chest, picking out a certain verse in Scripture

as a cure for a particular ailment. God wants us to enjoy a relationship of trust with him, where we come to know him intimately through conversation and spending time together. As we seek him and his direction, listening for his leading and obeying him when we sense the way forward, we grow in confidence and in union with him.

I'm not suggesting you play Bible roulette, but perhaps God would delight to impart to you something from his Word; maybe he's waiting for you to take the time to listen and seek him out. Why not spend a few moments resting in God's presence, a Bible open in your lap, or a Bible app open on your phone? Ask God through his Spirit to bring to mind something from his Word just for you, for right now. A well-loved phrase from one of the New Testament letters might pop into your head, or maybe a refrain from a song or hymn based on a passage from the Bible, or even the chapter and verse reference of a Scripture text itself. Wait and receive, and then spend some time weighing how the text applies to your life and whether you've heard from God.

A version of this exercise—one that might appeal especially to extroverts—is to ask God to reveal a passage from the Bible through one of your conversations today. Our Western culture has been soaked in Scripture throughout the centuries, with so many well-known phrases becoming part of common parlance that we might not even be aware of them. Be open and notice God's Spirit at work through the words you speak and hear.

Personalize Scripture

After her beloved dog died, Susan received a visit from her lifelong friend Cheryl, who came to support her as she grieved her sweet canine companion. Susan had prayed for years that Cheryl would come to know Jesus, but Susan had always hesitated to talk about her faith with her. But when they went for a walk in memory of their furry friend, Susan felt moved several times to personalize Scripture, speaking it out to her friend: “For God so loved Cheryl, that he gave his only begotten Son . . .”¹⁸

Susan later felt God was at work when she read that day’s devotional from *Our Daily Bread*, which was an article I’d written titled “Called by Name.” I wrote of how Mary Magdalene’s attention was arrested when Jesus spoke her name at his tomb, and how God similarly calls us by name.¹⁹ Susan delighted to give Cheryl the article, pointing out how the topic fit so well with their conversation on the walk. She told Cheryl that God cared not only for the big things in her life but also for the little things, because he knew her and called her by name. Susan found her experience of personalizing Scripture for her friend profound and moving, and Cheryl felt that God cared for her.

I, too, have used the act of personalizing Scripture. After a breakup, I needed a practice that wouldn’t overwhelm me but would penetrate to the tender places within. I began writing out some of what Jesus said in the gospel stories, adding my name again and again so that the words would move from my head to my heart: “Amy, ask and it will be given to you;

seek and you will find; knock and the door will open.”²⁰ Or, “When you exalt yourself, Amy, you will be humbled, but when you humble yourself, you will be exalted.”²¹ Or, “Amy, my peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Amy, do not let your heart be troubled and do not be afraid.”²² Seeing my name in these familiar words helped me realize that God could intend them for me.

I recommend this simple practice, which can have profound results. Wonder where to start? Here are some suggestions, and yes, a few of them cut to the heart:

- Matthew 6:25-34 (Don't worry)
- Matthew 18:6-9 (Causing others to stumble)
- Mark 7:17-23 (That which defiles)
- Mark 13:32-37 (Keeping watch)
- Luke 6:20-26 (Blessings and woes)
- Luke 13:22-30 (The narrow door)
- John 14:15-21 (The promised Holy Spirit)
- John 17:20-26 (Jesus' prayer for us)

Write Bible-Inspired Prayers

I like to give myself permission to put the Bible into my own words. As I write, I ask God to slow me down and help me engage with the meaning. I seek the Holy Spirit to highlight words or phrases that especially resonate with that moment in my life.

One example is Paul's prayer from Ephesians 1:17-19:

I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people, and his incomparably great power for us who believe.

We can recast this prayer, while retaining much of the language from our English version:

Glorious God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, I ask that you would give me your Spirit of wisdom and revelation that I might know you better. Open the eyes of my heart and enlighten me, that I might know the hope to which you have called me—the riches of your glorious inheritance and your incomparably great power. Amen.

Just a few changes—turning Paul’s words into the first-person singular (or plural)—make the prayer feel like it’s our own.

Writing out passages of Scripture can move us naturally to pray about concerns in our lives. Here’s how I engaged with Jeremiah 46:27 some years ago, first typing out the words of Scripture to let them sink into my heart:

I will surely save you out of a distant place,
your descendants from the land of their exile.
Jacob will again have peace and security,
and no one will make him afraid.

From this passage, I wrote a prayer that reflected my own journey:

Lord, you will certainly save us out of a distant place. Today even after nearly eight years, England feels like a distant place. Celebrating my son's second birthday, not with my family of origin, but here in this distant land. You said to the Israelites long ago that you would save them from the land of exile. Well, their descendants, that is. And no one would make them afraid. Save me, Lord, and make me not afraid. Give me peace and security, I pray.²³

Select a passage to engage with; for example, if you're reading through a book of the Bible, take the next section you're reading. Put it into your own words, as a prayer of intercession, a cry of the heart, or a prose rendering. You may wish to pray through the content and apply it to your life or to something you're concerned about in the world.

Pen a Scripture Poem

Madame Guyon (1648–1717) wrote, “If you read [Scripture] quickly, it will benefit you little. You will be like a bee that

merely skims the surface of a flower.”²⁴ Writing down the Scriptures as a prose poem slows down our reading so that we can, in Guyon’s words, “plunge deeply within to remove its deepest nectar.”²⁵

For many years, I’ve taken the bit of the Bible I’m pondering that day and turned it into a Scripture poem. This practice helps me consider the words and their meaning slowly and meditatively. Through this stripping-down process, I turn the ideas over in my head and my heart.

Here’s an example from when Jesus taught his disciples and the crowds, adapted from Luke 6:37-38:

*Judge not
and you won’t be judged.
Condemn not
and you won’t be condemned.
Forgive
and you’ll be forgiven.
Give
and you’ll receive.*

*Into your lap
will be poured
a good measure—
pressed down,
shaken together,
and running over.*

*With the measure you use,
it'll be measured to you.*

Writing the words of Scripture in this condensed form helps us get to the heart of the passage. The process of winnowing the words, shaving them down to the few needed to convey the meaning, helps us grasp their wisdom at a deeper level. And it's fun.



As we pray God's words to us in the Bible, we find Jesus the Word meeting us and the Holy Spirit guiding, comforting, and convicting us. Praying with the Bible provides a foundation for our lives as we follow God, receiving and extending his love. We can enjoy many ways to pray with and through the Bible, including an ancient practice we'll explore next.