PRAYING THE SCRIPTURES
This pamphlet was produced by The Upper Room®.

If you would like to learn more about the resources that The Upper Room® offers, visit us at:

www.upperroom.org

This resource is made possible by your generous support of The World Service Fund of The United Methodist Church, individual giving, and through the sale of books, magazines, and other products.
INTRODUCTION

A longtime member of a well-established Protestant church recounted a turning point in her spiritual life: She discovered that the Bible could be prayed as well as read. She had read, studied, and reflected on the Bible for many years, yet the notion of “praying the scriptures” seemed quite foreign when a friend first suggested it. Nonetheless, as soon as she began to practice praying the scriptures, it made complete sense. For the first time in her adult life, the Bible truly came alive. She experienced the Word of God as “living and active” (Heb. 4:12), a means through which God searched, invited, challenged, and comforted her. It seemed so natural that she felt as if she had spiritually “come home.”

To pray the scriptures means to allow the words of the sacred text to form our prayer—either directly or indirectly. Prayer entails heart-to-heart communication with God that moves in both directions. God speaks, we listen and respond; we speak, God listens and responds.

To pray the scriptures requires first of all that we approach the Word in a spirit of prayer. We acknowledge that we are seeking the living, active presence of God in and through God’s Word. We bring ourselves consciously into the divine presence and affirm the reality of this presence even if we cannot feel it. Whatever we read and reflect on in the Word is part of our ongoing dialogue with God.

LECTIO DIVINA

From this basic stance, we may take any number of approaches to praying the scriptures. One of the most central and ancient practices of Christian prayer is called lectio divina, or spiritual reading. In lectio divina, we begin by reading and savoring a short passage of scripture. Our inner posture is one of a listening heart filled with an unhurried expectation that God has a message to convey especially
suited to our condition and circumstance. We read and ruminate with the ears of our heart open, alert to connections the Spirit may reveal between the passage and our life situation. We ask, “What are you saying to me today, Lord? What am I to hear in this story, parable, prophecy?” Listening in this way requires an attitude of patient receptivity in which we let go of our own agendas and open ourselves to God’s shaping purpose.

Once we have heard a word that we know is meant for our ears, we are naturally drawn to prayer. From listening we move to speaking—perhaps in anguish, confession, or sorrow; perhaps in joy, praise, thanksgiving, or adoration; perhaps in anger, confusion, or hurt; perhaps in quiet confidence, trust, or surrender. Finally, after pouring out our heart to God, we come to rest simply and deeply in that wonderful, loving presence of God. Reading, reflecting, responding, and resting—this is the basic rhythm of lectio divina, a venerable and often-used approach to scripture.

Perhaps an example will help to bring this rhythm alive in your imagination. Recently I read in Second Kings about the origins of the people called Samaritans. Samaria once belonged to the ancient kingdom of Israel. When the king of Assyria invaded, taking Israelites captive to his own land, he forcibly repopulated Samaria with people from surrounding regions who decided to worship “the god of the land.” The passage reads, “They worshiped the LORD, but also served their own gods, after the manner of the nations from among whom they had been carried away” (2 Kings 17:33). I hadn’t read this book in a long time, and I found myself fascinated by the history. It would make for interesting Bible study, I thought, or a good sermon. Then suddenly I heard in my mind’s ear a shocking indictment: “You are a Samaritan.” Recalling that I was reading for the purpose of prayer, I asked, “Are you really saying that I’m like this, God?” The answer was there in my own heart: Yes, you worship God but also the gods of this land—success, prosperity, “the American Dream.” This was clearly a very uncomfortable word that God had addressed personally to me. It prompted
me to reflect on all the ways I do, in fact, give my heart and allegiance to the idols of my culture. Recognition of that reality propelled me into prayers of confession and repentance, then prayer for the strength of will to desire God above all else. Finally, I had to confess my guilt to God and rest in the assurance of God’s mercy. The whole cycle took perhaps ten or fifteen minutes.

**THE IGNATIAN METHOD**

*Lectio divina* is but one way to pray the scriptures. We can also pray the Bible by using our God-given imagination by means of an ancient method referred to as Ignatian. This approach invites us to enter the narrative, picturing the situation, and identifying with characters that populate the drama. This may eventually lead us to dialogue beyond what is given in the text, a dialogue that becomes part of our prayer. Some passages of scripture are better suited to this process than others. The Gospels are especially rich in stories that easily engage our imagination as a way to enter into prayer.

Read, for example, a story such as the tax collector and the Pharisee (see Luke 18:9-14). Picture the two men in the Temple, the Pharisee standing proudly up front, grateful not to be like the man behind him. Imagine what it is like to be in the shoes of someone who represents such high standards of righteousness according to Israelite law, who sees his life as a model of religious conduct for others. Have you ever felt like this? If so, in what kinds of situations or with what sorts of people? Then step into the shoes of the tax collector, the hated “tool of Rome.” Imagine how many times you have skimmed a hefty sum for yourself from the taxes you have collected from fellow Jews for the Roman occupiers. What emotions are you experiencing—the misery of being an outcast in your own community, the self-loathing that comes from betraying your people and your integrity, the despair at your weakness of character, your desperate hope for mercy from God? With which of these two characters do you most
identify? What do you have to say to God about your own experience in relation to these two characters? **Do you see how the story and your personal engagement with it lead you into prayer?**

*This approach to praying the scriptures is rich and fruitful for people who can readily exercise their God-given imagination.* Perhaps you can imagine yourself as Peter, looking at the awesome catch of fish, feeling the power of the One standing before you whose eyes you dare not even look into (see Luke 5:1-11). Does this speak to your experience before God? Or perhaps you identify strongly with Martha as your sister sits idly listening to Jesus while you, in an anxious dither, rush to complete meal preparations. Do you hear Jesus’ words to you as rebuke or invitation? What are you really longing for in your own heart (see Luke 10:38-42)? Maybe you are in the boat with the disciples facing a sudden and terrifying storm. You sense that the boundaries of your vision and power are limited by your fear. How do Jesus' words affect your spirit as you imagine being part of this story? What storms are you facing in your life just now? Does identification with the story make your prayer more concrete? **Is God speaking a word to you through this passage** (see Mark 4:35-41)? Or picture yourself as the woman who suffered from an issue of blood for twelve years, as you shyly thread your way through the crowd to touch the edge of Jesus' clothing. Or as Jairus, desperate for Jesus to come quickly before your daughter dies, watching Jesus turn around to find out who touched him, taking precious time to deal with the needs of someone else before he comes with you to your home (see Mark 5:21-43). Where do you connect with these powerful stories? **What insight into yourself, into God, into your relationships comes through praying the Gospels in this way?** It can be especially helpful to write down the basic outline of your imaginative encounter with the text, your insights, and any dialogue with story characters or with God that naturally occur as part of your prayer.
THE PRAYERS AND SONGS OF SCRIPTURE

There are other ways to pray scripture as well. **The Bible gives us categories for prayer, expands our language for prayer, and tutors us in speaking to God** as we hear God speak to us through the Word. The Bible contains prayers and canticles (songs) that give us words to pray and praise. Many, such as the Lord’s Prayer, the Magnificat, and the Canticle of Simeon, have become part of the common prayer of church liturgy. Yet any of these may also give voice to the joys, yearnings, and struggles of our personal lives. We truly pray the Lord’s Prayer when we take each phrase and make it our own, finding its truth reflected in our beliefs, needs, fears, and aspirations. Mary’s Magnificat can become our own song of exultation, hope, and trust. There are times when we recognize with her that “the Mighty One has done great things for me” (Luke 1:49). We may know from experience what it means to be lifted up from lowliness, or we may see the emptiness of those who seem powerful and self-satisfied. Thus, we know that the truths spoken in Mary’s words are universal precisely because they are so personal.

Sometimes **we can personalize a passage of scripture by placing our own name in it.** Some passages from the books of the Prophets lend themselves to becoming personal prayers as we make ourselves the recipients of God’s Word. Take, for example, God’s invitation to the abundant life in Isaiah. Insert your name in the blanks to get a feel for how to pray scripture this way:

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{Come, } \text{______ who is thirsty,} \\
&\text{come to the waters;} \\
&\text{and } \text{______ who has no money,} \\
&\text{come, buy and eat!} \\
&\text{______}, \text{why spend money on what is not bread,} \\
&\text{and your labor on what does not satisfy?} \\
&\text{Listen, listen to me, } \text{______, and eat what is good . . .} \\
&\text{hear me, that your soul may live.} \\
&\text{I will make an everlasting covenant with you, } \text{______.} \\
\end{align*}
\]

(Isaiah 55:1-3, adapted)
Here you allow yourself to receive personally the promises (or the judgments) of God and to respond from the heart. Try this with Isaiah 43:1-7; Jeremiah 1:4-8; or 18:1-6.

PRAYING THE BOOK OF PSALMS

The words of scripture can also become words through which we address God directly. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the book of Psalms. The book of Psalms has been called “the prayer book of the Bible” in both the Jewish and Christian traditions. It is a collection of sung prayers that has been used in corporate liturgy from the time of ancient Israel up to the present. Because the psalms range so widely in emotional expression, from the heights of adoration and praise to the depths of vengeful curses against the enemy, they have special pertinence to our prayer life. They teach us to hide nothing from God but to bring all that is real into the only relationship that can bless the best and heal the worst in us. Surely this is why German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer summoned the earthy wit of Martin Luther when he declared, “Whoever has begun to pray the Psalter seriously and regularly will soon give a vacation to other little devotional prayers and say: ‘Ah, there is not the juice, the strength, the passion, the fire which I find in the Psalter’(Luther)” (Psalms: The Prayer Book of the Bible [Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1970], 25).

Whether in distress, trust, anger, or delight, we find that the words of the psalms accompany us into God’s presence. The Lord becomes my shepherd as well as the shepherd of all those who trust in him (see Psalm 23). It is I who sit down by the rivers of Babylon, lamenting my experience of exile with all who know such anguish (see Psalm 137). God is searching my heart in Psalm 139, assuring me that there is no place I can go where God’s Spirit is not. Psalm 131 leads me into the peace of resting in the divine embrace like a small child with my mother. I am the poor and needy one who cries out for preservation (see Psalm 86), the one who has transgressed and needs mercy (see Psalm 51). It is I who
stand looking in awe at the heavens, marveling that humans like me should count for anything in God’s sight (see Psalm 8). The psalms give us words to glorify, confess, hope, ask, and even curse. In so doing, they give us permission to share our whole being with God.

Sometimes the psalms give us words for intercession as well. The psalm I pray may not fit my experience but may very well reflect the experience of another person or group. Recently, praying Psalm 107 led me into intercession for many people.

TRUST THE SPIRIT TO GUIDE YOU

There are, then, many ways to pray the scriptures. To practice any particular way, however, we need to set aside some time each day to listen and respond to God’s Word. Even ten to fifteen minutes daily may be sufficient, although if you combine praying scripture with journaling, you will likely need twenty-five to thirty minutes. Seek a regular place for prayer as well, a place that can be free from distracting noise and interruption. Take a few moments to settle peacefully into God’s presence and pray for the guidance of the Spirit. Let your body be a partner in prayer; find a comfortable posture that will keep you alert but relaxed. Then simply trust the Spirit to guide you into prayer as your listening, your reflection, and your response are shaped by the Word of God. Be patient with your practice. In time, rich blessings will attend you!

From The Meeting God Bible: Growing in Intimacy with God through Scripture, “Praying the Scriptures,” an article by Marjorie Thompson. Used with permission by Upper Room Books. All rights reserved. © 2015 The Upper Room. Marjorie Thompson is a retreat leader, teacher, and writer in the area of Christian spiritual formation.
THE UPPER ROOM RECOMMENDS THESE RESOURCES TO FURTHER YOUR STUDY AND PRACTICE OF PRAYING THE SCRIPTURES:

**Finding Your Voice in the Psalms: An Invitation to Honest Prayer**
by Elizabeth Canham

Discover the beauty and power of the Psalms, and learn how to pray about every situation in your life. As you explore seven themes in the Psalms, Canham guides you to write your own psalm to express your feelings to God.

#1195  $12.00

**The God We Can Know: Exploring the “I Am” Sayings of Jesus**
by Rob Fuquay

One by one, Jesus’ “I Am” statements grab our imagination, reveal his identity and mission, and connect us to the God of Moses, who spoke the first “I am.” This seven-week study gives us insightful ways to experience Jesus and point us to a God who wants to be known. The DVD, filmed in the Holy Land, allows us to travel with Rob Fuquay and actually see the places where Jesus stood while disclosing his identity, and in what context he spoke each “I Am.”

#1338  Book $9.99
#1362  DVD with Group Guides  $39.99

www.theGodwecanknow.com
**Interruptions: A 40-Day Journey with Jesus**

by Jacob Armstrong

In this 40-day devotional book, Jacob Armstrong looks at how Jesus responded to interruptions and to how we might consider interruptions as rich opportunities for prayer and spiritual growth.

#1347  $9.99

**The Meeting God Bible: Growing in Intimacy with God through Scripture**

If you hunger for greater depth in your relationship with God, *The Meeting God Bible* is a feast for the imagination, emotions, and intellect—leading to a clearer understanding of God’s call to you in scripture.

On each page you’ll find an Entry Point reflection based on spiritual disciplines practiced by Christians throughout the centuries. More than 1,500 Entry Points tap into the vital heart of scripture through . . .

- *Lectio divina* or a two-way conversation with God
- *Ignatian* reading, which engages all the senses
- Franciscan reading, which calls on the creative arts
- Fivefold Question, which prompts consideration of the passage’s effect on daily living
- Quotations from respected historic and contemporary Christians, which illuminate the power of scripture

New Revised Standard Version

#9980  $23.90
The Upper Room daily devotional guide

Join with millions of Christians around the world who read and pray together. Each day offers a one-page meditation written by an ordinary person recounting God’s presence in his or her life. Each day’s entry includes a Bible reading, a short meditation, and prayer. It is perfect guide for personal devotion, small group reflections, and outreach ministries. Available in print, email, online, and as a digital magazine and app. The devotional is also available in large print and in Spanish. The Upper Room is translated and distributed in 35 languages and in 100 countries. Our global Christian fellowship is where the world meets to pray.

For personal subscriptions or bulk orders shipped to a church, call 1-800-972-0433 or go online www.upperroom.org.

For these and other resources designed to nurture the spiritual life, visit The Upper Room bookstore online at bookstore.upperroom.org or call 1-800-972-0433 for more information or to order.