



BROADCAST TALKS

Praying the Bible

by Don Whitney



C·S· LEWIS INSTITUTE

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BROADCAST TALKS presents ideas to cultivate Christ-like thinking and living. Each issue features a transcription of a talk presented at an event of the C.S. Lewis Institute.



Tonight and tomorrow we're going to talk about the two most important personal spiritual disciplines: (1) the intake of God's Word and (2) prayer. We're going to begin with prayer. It is my observation that there is almost a universal problem in prayer, and it looks like this: when we pray, we 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 about a thousand times, how do you feel about saying them again? Bored! We can be talking to the most fascinating Person in the universe about the most important things in our lives and still be bored to death. Not because we don't love God or that we don't love who or what we're praying about.

Bored with Your Prayer Life?

I would contend that if you're indwelt by the Holy Spirit, the problem in prayer in this regard isn't *you* but rather your *method*. Now I made that very important caveat: I said, *if you're indwelt by the Holy Spirit*. My personal belief is that the biggest problem in evangelical churches is the church member who *doesn't* have the Holy Spirit, the unconverted church member. But anyone indwelt by the Holy Spirit needs to realize that two people live in your body. You do, of course, and another Person, a Person of the triune Godhead. The Person of the Holy Spirit indwells your body.

And when the Holy Spirit indwells any flesh-and-blood creature, He brings His holy nature with Him. Just as when you entered those doors this evening you brought your human nature with you. You take it with you wherever you go. And so the Holy Spirit brings His holy nature with Him wherever *He* goes, and when He indwells any flesh-and-blood creature, His holy nature causes you to have new, holy hungers you didn't have before. You hunger for the holy Word of God that you used to find boring or irrelevant. You hunger for fellowship with God's people. You can't imagine life apart from others in whom the Holy Spirit dwells, because so much of the Spirit's ministry to you is through *them*. You long to live in a body without sin anymore. And you long to live with a holy mind no longer attracted to temptation ever again. And one of the things the Holy Spirit does in all those in whom He dwells, both Romans and Galatians tell us, is that He causes us to cry out, *Abba Father!* We have this new heavenward orientation, this new Fatherward orientation, when we're indwelled with the Holy Spirit. In other words, all those indwelled by the Holy Spirit really want to pray. And yet while that impulse is pressing against one side of our souls, so to speak, colliding with that is our experience. And our experience says, *I believe in prayer. I want to pray. I try to pray, but frankly, when I pray, it's boring. But I guess it's just me. There's something wrong with me. I'm just a second-rate Christian. I believe in prayer. I want to pray, but when I pray, five to seven minutes feels like an eternity. My mind is wandering half the time. I'll suddenly come to myself and say, Now wait a minute. Where was I? I hadn't been thinking about God for the past several minutes.*

And we come back to that mental script in our heads that we have repeated so many times, but because we *have* repeated it so many times, our minds are almost immediately distracted in another direction.

Like I say, five to seven minutes feels like an eternity. We feel like failures and say, *No matter what I do, no matter what I try, that's the*

way it is. We go to conferences on prayer, read books on prayer, hear sermons on prayer, go back to prayer remotivated, revitalized, but basically it's saying the same old things about the same old things but with just a little more oomph behind it for a while. And pretty soon that evaporates away and we realize, *Here I am again, just like I was before. Now feeling guiltier than ever, because I'd gone back to prayer so recommitted this time! And yet here I am again. I guess it's just me. There's something wrong with me.*

I believe that's an almost universal experience.

The problem is not, however, that we pray *about* the same old things. In fact, I would contend that to pray *about* the same old things is normal. If I were to ask you to spread out around this beautiful building and pray for ten minutes and gave you no instructions, and we came back together and I asked you to tell us about it, I'm pretty sure most everyone here would have prayed basically about the same six things. (1) You'd pray about your family, in some broad, general sense or another. (2) You'd pray about your future, some decision that's before you. Should you make that move or not? That job change or not? (3) You'd pray about your finances, God's provision for those bills, for that car, for school. (4) You'd pray about your work. Students would pray about their schoolwork. It's normal that whatever you do with most of your waking hours during the week, something related to that would come to mind. (5) You'd pray about your church, your ministry, or some Christian concern that you have, maybe someone you're trying to share the gospel with at work or down the street. (6) And then the current crisis would certainly come up. Statistically, I'm told that each of us goes through a pretty significant life crisis on the average of every six months or so. If that's true, I'm about ten years ahead! I don't know about you. But it can be a good thing or a bad thing. It could be a birth or a death, two things our family has gone through, both of which in the past twelve months. It can be a job change you want or one you don't want. But

it's on the order of magnitude such that when you go to pray, it's one of the first things that pops into your head. You don't need any prayer list to remind you to pray about *these* things.

If these six things dominate your prayer life, cheer up. You're normal. Because if you're going to pray about your life, this is your life, isn't it? If you don't think so, how much of your life has no connection whatsoever to your family, your future, your finances, your work or schoolwork, church, ministry, Christian concerns, and current crisis. That's your life, right? And, thankfully, these things don't change *dramatically* very often. So put it all together. If you're going to pray about your life, and these six things *are* your life, and these six things don't change dramatically very often, that means you're going to pray about the same old things most of the time. That's not a problem, that's normal. The problem is that we tend to *say* the same old things about the same old things. And that's boring. When prayer is boring, we don't feel like praying, do we? And when you don't feel like praying, you know what you tend *not* to do? You tend not to pray. So what's the solution?

A Simple Solution

I would contend that a solution must be fundamentally simple. Why? Anything God expects of all His people — invites all His people to do, regardless of the many differences among them in terms of age, IQ, Christian advantages (such as access to good churches, opportunities for Christian books), and so forth — if we're all to do the same thing, it must be fundamentally simple. Do you see that? It must be doable by *you*. If you are born again, if you're indwelt by the Holy Spirit, it must be doable for *you* — to have a meaningful, satisfying prayer life. So what is the simple, permanent, biblical solution to this almost-universal problem? Well, here it is:



When you pray, pray the Bible. It's not the job of any Bible teacher to come up with something new or clever. Rather, we are to deliver truth once for all, delivered to the saints. Most of us have seen something like this before, when we've been reading the letters of Paul and come across the embedded prayers of Paul, such as at the end of Ephesians 1 or Ephesians 3. We typically hear that we should pray those prayers today. And we should. My argument is that we can pray the whole letter of Ephesians, not just the prayers in Ephesians. I think the best place in Scripture from which to do this is the book of Psalms.

With that background, turn with me to the famous Twenty-third Psalm and let me illustrate what it would be like to do what I am suggesting. Let's say you've already had your time in the Word, and now you're going to pray. And you say you're going to pray a psalm, and you choose Psalm 23. You read the first line — *The LORD is my shepherd* — and you pray something like this:

Lord, I thank You that You are my shepherd. You are a good shepherd, and You've shepherded me all my life. But, O great Shepherd, would You shepherd my family today? Guide them into the ways of God, guard them from the ways of the world, lead them not into temptation, deliver them from evil. And I pray You'll make my family Your sheep too. May they love You as their shepherd as I love You as my shepherd. And, Lord, would You shepherd me in this decision about my future? Do I make that job change or not? Do I make that move or not? Shepherd me, Lord, into Your path. And I pray for our under-shepherds at the church. Please shepherd them as they shepherd us.

Then, when nothing else comes to mind, you go to the next line: *I shall not want*. You might pray:

Lord, I thank You. I've never really been in want. I haven't missed many meals. All that I am, all that I have is from

You, and yet I know it pleases You that I bring my desires to You. So would You provide the finances that we need for those bills, that car, the school?

Or you know someone who *is* in want. Perhaps you think about persecuted brothers and sisters around the world, and you pray for them. Then, when nothing else comes to mind, you continue: *He makes me lie down in green pastures.* And frankly, what comes to mind is *Lord, I pray that somehow You will enable me to lie down and take a nap.*

Or the idea of the green pastures reminds you of the feeding of God's flock in the green pastures of His Word, and so you think of a Bible-teaching ministry you have, feeding God's flock in the green pastures of His Word, or someone who feeds *your* soul there. When was the last time you prayed for a Bible-study teacher or for your path? And for those of you who just had hermeneutical red flags come up on that, hang on, we're coming back, okay?

Maybe your mind begins to wander at this point. Maybe there's a distraction, a car makes a noise outside, your phone dings, whatever. Your mind is distracted, but now you've got something to come back to. The next verse: *He leads me beside still waters.*

Lord, lead me in this decision about my future. I want to do what You want me to do, Lord, I'm just not sure what it is. Lead me, and lead me beside still waters. Quiet the waters in my soul about this decision. Quite the waters in our home about this.

When nothing else comes to mind, you go on: *He restores my soul. Lord, you might pray, I come to You so spiritually dry today. Please restore to me the joy of Your salvation.*

And on and on you'd go through this passage until either you run out of time or you run out of psalm. And if you run out of psalm before you run out of time, you know what you do? You turn the



page. You never run out of anything to say. But more important, let's circle back to where we started. Now that prayer is unlike any prayer you have ever prayed in your life!

Pray the Bible, and you never again say the same old things about the same old things. You don't need any notes. You don't need to remember anything. You just go through it line by line, talking to God about what comes to mind. See how easy that is? Anybody can do that. And you never again say the same old things about the same old things. Anybody can do that, the one who knows the Bible best, the one who knows the Bible least. The most spiritually mature, the least spiritually mature. A six-year-old who can read can do that. And you really can't mess it up.

Now the central idea — and here's where I'm going to say a potentially misunderstood thing, so listen carefully: You simply go through it line by line, talking to God about whatever comes to mind, even if what comes to mind has nothing to do with the text. Let me defend this *from* the text of Scripture. It's very important to me, because one of the most important classes we offer at the seminary is on hermeneutics, interpreting the Scriptures correctly. We never have the right to read something into the Bible. Our job is to dig out what God has put in. You see this issue most often in a Bible study group when you go around, What does this verse mean to *you*? And what does it mean to *you*? And to *you*? Well, frankly, it doesn't matter what it means to you. What matters is what God has said. Our job is to dig it out. You've heard the word *exegesis* before. It's to understand, what does God say and what does the passage mean. And then we apply it to our lives individually.

And you can get that wrong. In just about every other kind of coming to the Bible — reading for understanding, interpreting it for other people, getting ready to teach or preach it — our first priority is, *What does it say? What does it mean?* We have no right to read anything into that. But that's not what we're doing here. With what

I'm advocating, our primary activity is prayer. And I'm suggesting that we pray what comes to mind as we're going through the text, even if what comes to mind has nothing to do with the text. Let me use an illustration that's pushing the extreme to make the point.

Suppose you're in the psalm that says, *O Lord, if you should mark our iniquities, who could stand?* And your friend Mark comes to mind. What should you do? Pray for Mark. You know that verse isn't about Mark; it was written four thousand years before Mark was born! Besides, your friend Mark is a noun, and this is a verb. Pray for Mark!

Now I have enough confidence in the Word and in the Spirit of God that if we pray that way, our prayers are going to be far more conformed to Scripture than they ever would be making up our own prayers. And that's what people tend to do, right? I guarantee you that if we make up our own prayers, we're going to pray amiss.

But when people pray the Bible, their prayers are shaped with the very *words* of Scripture and over time are shaped more and more by the theology of Scripture. More and more, their prayers conform to the Scriptures. Oh how I wish I'd learned to pray like that when I was little rather than just picking up and repeating phrases I heard from other people.

So that's why anybody can do this — anyone who knows the Bible best, anyone who knows the Bible least, the one who's most mature, the one who is least mature.

If you had stopped on the way here to eat supper and you led someone to Christ and brought that person here tonight and this is that person's first time ever to step foot in a church building and the first time ever to read one verse of Scripture — that person can do this tonight! *The Lord is my shepherd. Lord, help me as I grow as a Christian. Shepherd me as I grow as a Christian.*

They got it, right? And what are they going to do when they come to the many verses they don't understand? They're going to skip right

over them, but they can do this! They're going to skip over more verses than you, but they can do this!

So it's that simple. You go through it line by line, talking to God about whatever comes to mind. And if you don't understand a verse, fine. Skip it. Go to the next verse. If you understand the next verse perfectly, but it just doesn't prompt anything to pray about, fine. Go on to the next verse. There's nothing that says you have to pray over every verse. There's nothing that says you have to finish the psalm.

Folks, you really can't mess it up. You really can't do it wrong. And, once again, I have enough confidence in the Word and in the Spirit that, if people would pray that way, their prayers would conform far more to Scripture because, again, what does the text tell us to pray about? What does the Bible tell us to pray about? Everything, right? So everything that comes to mind is something we ought to pray about anyway, right? Now, that doesn't mean we can't use the words of Scripture to pray them selfishly. Sure, there's no foolproof method like that. But that's why I can say that no matter what comes to mind, talk to God about it, because we're to pray about everything. And I believe that what will come to mind most of the time is going to be something closely related to the text. That's going to happen more often than not. And the more you do it, the more your prayer is going to reflect what is in the text. It's so simple. Anybody can do this.

[Note: Here Dr. Whitney recommended an approach for systematically praying a psalm each and every day. It involves quickly scanning five specific psalms and picking the one that best leads you to prayer on that occasion. For a guide to selecting the five psalms for each day of the month, go to the "Five Psalms" app which is available for free for both iOS and Android platforms.]

I'm emphasizing the psalms — they are so ideal for this — because it's the only book of the Bible inspired for the very purpose of being

reflected to God. All sixty-six books are equally inspired, but only the psalms were inspired by God for the very purpose of being reflected to God. Unlike any other book of the Bible, He inspired the psalms for us to get the psalms back to Him in *worship*. They are songs *from* God to be sung *to* God. It's as though God said:

I want you to praise Me. Not because I'm an egomaniac, but you will praise most what you love most. You love football more than anything, you'll praise that more than anything. You love your grandchildren more than anything, you'll praise them more than anything. If you love Me more than anything, you'll praise Me more than anything. We always praise most what we love most.

There's nothing in all the universe more worthy of praise than I, says the Lord. And I want you to praise Me because I love you. If you praise anything more than Me, ultimately it's dissatisfying to you and leads to your destruction. So I want you to praise Me because it's good for you. And you will praise most what you love most. I want you to praise Me, but you don't know how to praise Me. I'm invisible to you. You know nothing about Me unless I reveal it to you. So I want you to praise Me, and if you have my Spirit, you'll want to praise Me, but you don't know how to praise Me, so here, sing these songs. This is true praise. This praise I accept.

So, unlike any other book of the Bible, God gave us the psalms for the express purpose of our giving the psalms back to God. For that reason, I think the psalms are the best place in Scripture from which to pray the Scriptures. I almost never go anywhere else but the psalms to do this. Martin Luther said that the psalms are like a little Bible. Every doctrine in the Bible is in the psalms, either in the bud or in the flower, but they're all there. Someone

else has said that there is a psalm for every sigh of the soul. You'll never go through anything in your life without finding the root emotion of it somewhere in the book of Psalms. We have not only the miracle of the inspiration of 150 psalms, but also the miracle of the preservation of 150 psalms for four thousand years. And God has done so in part because it represents the entire range of the human experience. And that's why, if you'll quickly scan five psalms, it is uncanny how one of them will put into expression what's looking for expression in your heart. You didn't even know it though until you'd read it. And when you did, your heart resonated with that, and that was exactly what was looking for expression in your heart.

Again, what's the big point? Pray the Bible and you never again say the same old things about the same old things. You just go through it line by line, talking about whatever comes to mind, and it's going to be fresh, and it's going to be different, in some sense, every single day.

[Videos of the complete version of this talk and the other sessions from the Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life Seminar with Dr. Donald Whitney will be made available on the C.S. Lewis Institute website, cslewisinstitute.org. Additional information about the topic of this talk is included in Donald Whitney's book *Praying the Bible* (Crossway, 2015).]

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