

Special Section: Praying For People

Speaking God's Language

How Scripture can add power to your prayers

By Joni Eareckson Tada

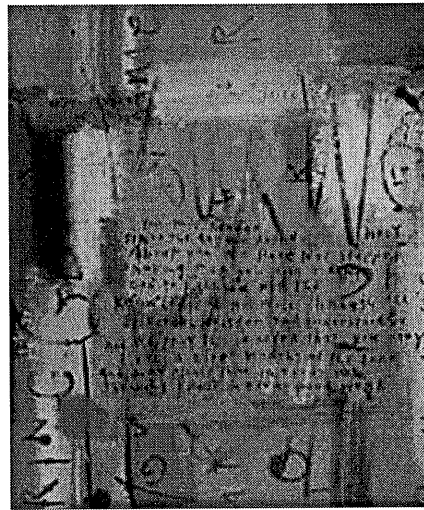


Illustration by Randall Slaughter

The large window at Baltimore-Washington International Airport framed a gray afternoon. Our flight was late, and the seats in the waiting area were full. Judy and Bunny stood beside me to pray—something we often do before and after flights.

I was down about a number of things, including the news that we lacked funds to launch an outreach to disabled children in several Eastern European orphanages. Reading the sadness in my eyes, Bunny reached for my hands and Judy's. After praise and thanksgiving, she prayed in a soft voice laced with confidence: "Lord, send forth the corn and the wine and the oil. Send forth the early rains . . . the late rains . . . and produce a wonderful crop of blessings." I recognized the strains of Joel 2:19: "The Lord will reply to them: 'I am sending you grain, new wine and oil, enough to satisfy you fully.'"

Just as Bunny was repeating the part about corn, oil, and wine, I sensed the presence of a fourth person who edged between Judy and me. Then a fifth person crowded in with us, and together the newcomers punctuated my friend's prayer with "amens."

When we finished, we hardly had time to exchange names with our unexpected prayer partners—a married couple. Before rushing to catch their flight, the husband folded a \$100 bill into Bunny's hand. Bunny waved the bill in the air like a flag of victory. "Yea, even while I was speaking in prayer, the angel came with the answer!"

"Joni," she continued as she tucked the bill in my coat pocket, "this is the firstfruits of what

God will supply!”

She was right. And it didn't surprise me. When Bunny prays, things happen. I've learned, through years of interceding with her, that Bunny's prayers have power with God.

God's Accent

I believe that Bunny's effectiveness in prayer is, at least in part, because she has learned to pray in the language of the Father. Bunny even responds using God's language: Her “yea, even while I was speaking in prayer” was a paraphrase of Daniel 9:21.

I have learned to follow Bunny's lead and season my prayers with the Word of God. It's a way of talking to God in His language—speaking His dialect, using His vernacular, employing His idioms. (I've often teased Bunny that I hear God's accent when she prays.)

If praying “in the name of Jesus” comes as naturally as breathing, we need to pray “in the Word” just as naturally. The Bible underscores that there are two things God honors above all else: His name and His Word. “For you have exalted above all things your name and your word,” wrote David in Psalm 138:2. Prayer spiced with God's Word is prayer exalted.

This is not a matter simply of divine vocabulary. It's a matter of power. When we bring God's Word directly into our praying, we are bringing God's power into our praying. Hebrews 4:12 declares, “For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword.” God's Word is living, and so it infuses our prayers with life and vitality. God's Word is also active, injecting energy and power into our prayer. Listen to how God described His words to Jeremiah: “Is not my word like fire . . . and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?” (Jeremiah 23:29). Scripture gives muscle and might to our prayers.

Your Prayer Book

I'm convinced God enjoys it when we consciously employ His Word in our prayers. It shows Him the importance we attach to our requests. It demonstrates we have thought through our petitions and praises and lined them up against the plumb line of Scripture. It underscores to Him the high regard and appreciation we attach to His Word and demonstrates that we sincerely seek His heart in the matter for which we pray. Using God's Word in prayer—Scripture praying, as it is sometimes called—gives a divine familiarity to our words, earmarking us as servants who possess a working knowledge of the most powerful prayer book ever written: the Bible.

Saints in Scripture practiced this type of praying. The prophet Habakkuk appealed to God on the basis of His Word during a time of deep national distress: The ruthless Babylonian army was poised to sweep across the country like water from a ruptured dam. Yes, the prophet agreed with the Lord that Judah was deserving of His judgment. But how could God use a people even more evil than they as His rod of discipline? Habakkuk quoted snippets of psalms and proverbs as he spoke with God: “Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrong. Why then do you tolerate the treacherous? Why are you silent while the wicked swallow up those more righteous than themselves?” (Habakkuk 1:13).

David pleaded with God in prayer based on what he knew to be true about the Lord from Scripture: “Remember, O Lord, your great mercy and love, for they are from of old . . . According to your love remember me, for you are good, O Lord” (Psalm 25:6–7).

Does it sound cheeky to remind God of His character and His promises? Does it seem presumptuous? Perhaps, if you are unfamiliar with the prayer habits of saints such as Habakkuk and David. Nevertheless, the Lord would have us claim His love, plead His holiness, remind Him of His goodness, recount His longsuffering, present to Him His steadfastness, and pray in

His power. In Isaiah 1:18, God invites us: “Come now, let us reason together.” He encourages our discourse.

Word-woven Prayers

Often I attend prayer meetings where various requests for healing, finances, safety in travel, or job promotions are divvied out. Naturally, we desire prayer for such things. But a closer look at God’s Word would reveal deeper and more divinely inspired ways to pray for friends and family.

Is there a cancer? Yes, prayer for healing is in order, but so is prayer for the robust blessings of Psalm 119:140: “Your promises have been thoroughly tested, and your servant loves them.” How rich to pray, “Lord, this cancer is testing Your promises in the life of my friend who is ill, but You are faithful to every promise You’ve made to her. May Your servant love Your promises through this time of testing.”

Is there a need for finances? Yes, prayer for needed money is in order, but so is prayer for the rewards of Proverbs 15:17: “Better a meal of vegetables where there is love than a fattened calf with hatred.” How invigorating to pray, “Lord, financial blessing isn’t the focus; Your Word says that love should be. May we learn to live on little if it means leaning harder on You, as well as each other.”

When I pray for disabled children I know, I intercede with Matthew 19:14 in mind: “Jesus said, ‘Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.’” In Matthew 19:15 we’re given a picture of Jesus tenderly placing His hand on each child. “Lord Jesus,” I’ll say, “Your heart went out to children when You walked on earth. I can picture You tousling their hair, bouncing them on Your knee, and laying Your hands on their heads to bestow a blessing. If Your heart went out this way to the boys and girls who could walk up to You, how much more must Your heart overflow toward little Jeanette with spina bifida or Benjamin who has cerebral palsy? Today, may they feel Your hand of blessing on their heads.”

Often it’s good to quote an entire passage, substituting a person’s name for the pronoun in the passage. Col. 1:9–12 is a good example of scripture to pray this way: “I ask God to fill Susan with the knowledge of His will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding. And I pray this in order that Susan may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please Him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work she does, being strengthened with all power, so that she may have great endurance and patience, and joyfully give thanks to the Father.”

Remember, God’s Word is alive, active, and powerful. Prayers laced with the Word of God not only bring about fundamental changes in people and situations, but such prayers keep us in touch with God’s priorities. Weaving God’s Word into our prayers brings His purposes to the forefront of every request.

Language Lessons

My friend Bunny is a good instructor on how to pray using Scripture. She would suggest that, first, we must read long portions of God’s Word, not necessarily as Bible study, but to seek insights that might be applied to petitions or praises. Next, we should meditate on those portions that reveal a particular truth to be applied in prayer. Evaluate how the passage might translate into a specific petition, asking yourself, Does this verse prompt me to pray for someone with such a need? Is it possible to use some of the words of this scripture as I pray? Third, form a personal prayer, enriched by the passage you’ve chosen.

Suppose your brother is feeling as if life is over since his wife died. One morning you're reading Phil. 1:6: "He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus." *Aha! you reason. This is just what my brother needs.* So you pray, "Lord, I cling to this passage on behalf of my brother. Help him to see the good work You want to accomplish in his life through his heartache. Carry him to completion, Lord Jesus. I know You'll be faithful to this promise in Phil. 1:6, and although my brother may be too depressed to ask, I hold You to Your Word."

As you center your prayers on God's Word, its power and life become not only a part of those for whom you pray but also a part of you. Focus on quoting God's mercies in prayer as David did, and you will become more merciful. Plead with Him for His wisdom, quoting Proverbs 4, and wisdom will be yours. Center your requests upon His holiness, and you will grow in holiness.

An Enlargement of His Promises

E. M. Bounds was known for his extraordinary prayer life. He once testified,

The Word of God is the fulcrum upon which the lever of prayer is placed, and by which things are mightily moved. God has committed Himself, His purpose, and His promise to prayer. His Word becomes the basis, the inspiration of our praying, and there are circumstances under which by importunate prayer, we may obtain an . . . enlargement of His promises.

Bunny would say, "Amen!" I would, too. I will never forget the time I received an "enlargement of His promises" from praying Scripture. It was in the early '80s, not long after the honeymoon was over for two newlyweds: Ken and me. I learned that my new husband preferred to spend Monday nights in front of the TV with chips, salsa, and the NFL rather than being my hands to write out my Bible study for me. *Horrors, I thought, he's not a man of the Word!*

I was itching to change my husband, but my nagging and scolding only made things worse. Feeling like a martyr, I sought help in God's Word and stumbled across these words in Phil. 2:3-4:

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.

Yikes, that's me, I thought. I've wanted Ken to change for selfish reasons—so that he'll meet my expectations. And to be honest, I don't consider him "better than myself." I feel I'm the one in the right. I feel I've got it spiritually together, not him.

I was convicted. These verses catapulted me into a major prayer advance for Ken. I sincerely wanted to follow God's Word and have humility of mind, as well as to regard Ken better than me. How could I look out for his interests? I feverishly flipped through Scripture until I found the perfect passage to pray for my husband.

Who may ascend the hill of the Lord? Who may stand in his holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not lift up his soul to an idol or swear by what is false. He will receive blessing from the Lord and vindication from God his Savior. Such is the generation of those who seek him, who seek your face, O God of Jacob. Selah. Lift up your heads, O you gates; be lifted up, you ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in. Who is this King of glory? The Lord strong and mighty, the Lord mighty in battle.

I'd spend evenings in our bedroom, praying, "Lord, You want Ken to stand in Your holy place, to have clean hands and a pure heart. May You cause him to lift up his soul to You and receive Your blessing. May he seek Your face. Lift up the gates of Ken's heart that You, the King of glory, might come in! Lord, say to him, 'I, the King of glory, will come in and rule your life. I, the Lord, strong and mighty.'"

I can't tell you how many times I prayed this way. But now, years later, it's clear that Christ sits on the throne of my husband's heart. (He's in the process of memorizing the entire Sermon on the Mount; I didn't put him up to it, really!) Something else is clear: Ken still loves Monday Night Football. What has changed is that so do I! And I've found other "hands" to help me write out my Bible studies on other evenings.

I began praying Psalm 24 over my husband believing that God would change him, but God did much more. He changed me. It was, as E. M. Bounds would say, "an enlargement of His promises." I'm convinced we are still feeling the repercussions of that Scripture prayer. That's because it was based on Psalm 24 and was alive, active, and powerful, bringing about fundamental changes in me where it counted most. And in my husband, too.

The Bible is our prayer book, and we'd be remiss to neglect its riches. It holds the key to finding God's will when we pray, providing balance and meaning. Great themes abound—God's holiness, wisdom, faithfulness, sovereignty, love, and mercy—all of which beautify our praises, adorn our intercessions, embroider our petitions, and give weight and significance to every supplication.

Most of all, using the Word of God in prayer is about as close as we can get to the Living Word, the Lord Jesus. If we're going to pray in His name, it makes sense to speak in His language.



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