

*Praying the Scriptures*  
*All-Access Pass ~ A Series on Prayer*  
*Psalm 119:169-176, Phil. 1:3-11*  
*March 8, 2009*

Last week, we began a 5-week series on the subject of prayer. The series is called *All-Access Pass*, because, as we saw last week, we have an all-access pass into God's presence through the blood of Jesus. We have a memory verse for the series – Hebrews 4:16 – which you can find on your message notes insert. Last week, we learned the first phrase: Let us then approach the throne of grace... For this week we add: with confidence... We can approach God, draw near to God – confident of His love for us, boldly coming into His presence – and say anything. We can speak freely to God about anything and everything on our minds. That's what prayer is: A free and open, honest conversation with God. But to say that prayer is conversation with God means that prayer is more than just me telling God what I think He needs to know. To say that prayer is a conversation implies that when we pray, we speak to God AND God speaks to us. Sometimes we forget that second part: God speaks to *us*. While it is true that we do have authorization for free access to God – freedom to say anything to God – we must also remember that prayer involves listening to God as much as it involves speaking to God.

Now – show of hands – how many of you are better at talking to God than listening to God? Unfortunately, for many of us, prayer is much more of a monologue than a dialogue, a conversation. In his book, *Hearing God*, Henry Blackaby says this: “What God has to say to us is infinitely more important than what we have to say to Him, yet we generally monopolize the conversation.”<sup>1</sup> How can we know what God has to say to us? We talk about listening to God, but how do you do that? I mean, what am I listening for? Will I hear a voice? Is hearing God like a feeling in your gut? A twinge in your conscience? And how can I know I've actually heard *God* speak and not just the voice of my own thoughts, will, and desires?

Maybe you've asked some of those same questions. If you want to learn to recognize God's voice, you must listen to the Scripture. I don't mean just *read* the Scripture. Of course, you should and must do that. But I'm talking about *listening* to God – really *hearing* God's will for you, receiving God's guidance for your life, understanding how God wants to correct you and teach you. In order to do that, you must listen to God's Word in the Scripture. Scripture is the primary way God speaks to us. That's why it's called the *Word* of God. And it's not just a general word – a word spoken by the prophets centuries ago or words of Jesus spoken to the whole world. The Bible also contains the specific, personal Word of God *for you*. The Bible is not only God's word to the world – it is God's Word to you.

And so, I want to speak with you today about praying the Scriptures. What does that mean? Simply this: Speaking the words of Scripture as our words to God AND listening to the Scriptures as God's Word to us. Using the words of Scripture as the basis for your personal prayer to God, and hearing God speak to you by listening to the words of Scripture. We can learn a lot about prayer by studying the prayers found in Scripture. Listen to what the apostle Paul wrote to the church at Philippi: Phil. 1:3-11. [leave up]

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<sup>1</sup> Henry Blackaby, *Hearing God*, p. 113

Now, it's wonderful to study this prayer. But you can also use these words of Scripture – Paul's prayer – as your own prayer. You can do this on your own any time, but one of the 'next steps' we've suggested to you for this series is to make a Prayer Covenant with one or two other people. When you make a Prayer Covenant, you and another person agree to pray a certain passage of Scripture for the other for a certain period of time, maybe 30 days, or the season of Lent. We have suggested two passages for you to pray: Eph. 3:16-19 or Col. 1:9-11. If I were to pray this prayer from Philippians 1 for my husband, Paul, for example, it might sound something like this:

“This is my prayer for Paul, O Lord: That His love for You and Your people would overflow more and more, and that he would have more knowledge and deeper insight into the things of God. I pray that You would help Him to discern what is best, God, to know what really matters to You, so that his life would be pure and blameless in Your sight. And I pray that his life would be fruitful, Lord, that he would live in righteousness, developing the righteous character of Jesus. And God, I pray that it would all be for Your glory.”

See how that works? I encourage you to find one or two others and make a Prayer Covenant and practice praying one of these powerful prayers for the rest of this season of Lent. The Book of Psalms has been called the prayer book of Israel. We can certainly learn a lot about prayer from how the psalmists prayed: desperately honest, often gut-wrenching prayers to God. But the psalms can also provide language and inspiration for *our own* prayers.

I was reading Psalm 25 this week as I spent time with God. The Bible I use most is the NIV, but this day I had picked up another translation, the NLT. In that translation, the first verse of the psalm says this: “O LORD, I give my life to You.” That verse really made me stop and think. Wow, I thought, can I really pray that and mean it? “I give my life to You”? Do I really give my whole life to God? What would that look like, to really give my life to God? All of it. To hold nothing back from God – “to deny Him nothing,” as Mother Theresa put it. So I began to pray, “God, help me to give all my life to You. Help me to *want* to give all my life to you. All of it, Lord, not just the religious parts or the pretty parts.

One writer has suggested that, “The best how-to for prayer is “Be still and know that I am God.”<sup>2</sup> That's Psalm 46:10, a wonderful verse to pray: “Lord, help me to be still. Still in my spirit, still in my mind, still in my body. And in my stillness, Lord, let me know that You are God. That You are in control. That You are King. That You are *my* God and *my* King.” You can do this with almost any part of Scripture. Try praying a favorite verse, like Romans 8:28, for example, or Psalm 23:1. Try praying a word or phrase that strikes you as you read, especially the attributes of God. Last week's Taize: Psalm 77:13: Your ways, O God, are holy. “That means *all* Your ways are holy, God, even when I don't understand them or think they're anything *but* holy. Help me, Lord, to see all you do, all your ways, as holy.”

Another way to pray the Scripture is to take a verse that resonates with you and use it in the four kinds of prayer sometimes represented by the ACTS acronym. ACTS stands for: Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, Supplication. Select a phrase or verse and then find something in the

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<sup>2</sup> Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith*, p. 61.

phrase or verse for which to praise God, something you need to confess, something for which to thank God, and finally a request for yourself or others.

For example, let's take the phrase: "Nothing is impossible with God," found in Luke 1:37. Praying this verse using the ACTS pattern might sound like this: "O God, I praise you for your mighty power which makes nothing impossible with You. Even that which seems impossible to me is possible with You. But I confess, Lord, that I do not always believe this. I often act as if my challenges are impossible for you to handle. I often behave as if what seems out of control in my life is out of *Your* control, too. I thank you, Lord, that You are able to do even what seems impossible to the most brilliant person on earth. Now, Lord, I ask You to do the impossible for my friend, John. You know the cancer has returned, Lord, and it seems that healing is impossible. But I ask you, Lord, to show your mighty power by doing the impossible for John, so that You might be glorified."

Using the ACTS pattern is a way to help keep our prayer balanced, so that we spend more time praising and thanking God and confessing our sins to Him, rather than just asking for stuff all the time. See, there is more to reading the Bible than just reading the words. You may read through the Bible in a year, but if you do it to fulfill a daily obligation, to check it off on a Bible reading chart, you have missed the point. If you do it just to say you've done it, you have missed the point. If you do it to learn facts about the Bible, or even facts about God, you have missed the point. The purpose and goal of reading the Bible is ultimately this: *knowing God. Hearing God speak to you.* And so we must train ourselves to do more than merely read the words of the Scripture. We must train ourselves never to walk away from Scripture without responding to it in some way. Whenever we read the Bible, we must invite God to speak to us *personally* through His Word. To speak into our personal situation and circumstance. But we must also be determined to respond to what we hear when God does speak to us.

When you do think you've heard God speak to you, please remember this: Anything we believe we've heard from God must always be checked against the truth of God's Word. God will not contradict Himself when He speaks to you. If what you believe you've heard from God does not line up with the clear consensus of Scripture, you may have heard wrong. Continue to seek God's wisdom and to hear God's voice through His Word before you take action. Because "The Spirit of God reveals the will of God through the Word of God."<sup>3</sup>

When you read the Bible as a means of prayer, read it *expecting* that God will address you with a direct and personal message. As you read and reflect on the Scripture, ask, "God, what are You saying to me just now?" Then be still and listen. That's easy to say, but hard to do isn't it? Praying the Scriptures requires time and stillness, two things that most of us find in quite short supply. You may need to get up 15 minutes earlier. You may need to close the door of your office or go sit in your car or your local BrewHaHa at lunch time with your Bible.

This I know: You will have to decide you want to hear from God. You will not magically wake up tomorrow with an extra 15 or 30 minutes you can spend praying the Scriptures. You will have to decide that hearing from the God of the universe is a priority for you.

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<sup>3</sup> Blackaby, p. 137.

Our granddaughter, Kayleigh, was born and lives in South Carolina. She's naahn years old now. Even though neither of her parents are from the South, she has grown up around people who have Southern accents. So she has one. Her little Southern accent is so precious! She is not conscious of having an accent, of course. She just imitates what she hears. South Carolina has rubbed off on her. I grew up outside of Philadelphia. My parents were both from the Philly area. Now, I don't think I have an accent, but some people say I do. In fact, Paul says that when I'm around my mother and sister for even just a short time, I start to sound like them. I am not conscious of this. But unconsciously, I imitate what I hear. My mother and my sister rub off on me.

When one of my best friends call me, all she says is, "It's me." And I recognize her voice, because I have been hearing her speak for years. Sometimes I find myself saying things *she* would say in certain situations. Over the years, she has rubbed off on me. We tend to pick up ideas and behaviors and even accents from those we hang around with. It's like that with God. The more time we spend listening to Him, the more easily we recognize His voice when He speaks to us. And the more you listen to God speak to you through His Word, the more you will begin to say things God would say in certain situations. The more you listen to God speak to you through the Scripture, the more the words of the Bible sink into your heart and mind until they almost seem like your own. God rubs off on you.

Praying the Scriptures is the best way to listen to God. The more we soak up the sound of God's voice, the more we begin to imitate God. God rubs off on us. And we begin to look and sound more like Jesus.