

February, 1999 Praying the Scriptures

When I started thinking about this Newes Letter and announcing the publication of *Praying the Scriptures*, I realized that I have not said anything in previous newsletters about praying the Scriptures except that I was writing a book on the topic. My thinking has been so taken up with discernment that virtually all my “personal reflections” have related in some form to my work in discernment. So it seemed appropriate to say something about praying the Scriptures here. However, I am reluctant to simply regurgitate a portion of the book. Instead I have chosen to reflect a little more generally on our relationship with Scripture and to show you how praying the Scriptures fits into this larger picture of relationship with God mediated through the Scriptures.

I remember a season during my adolescence when I found myself reading the gospel of Matthew with greater interest than ever before. My parents had taken me to church and I had attended Sunday School, but for some reason upon the encouragement of the pastor, I actually set aside some time to read the Bible. I still have that Bible, all marked up with orange crayon where I highlighted those passages that attracted me. I was greatly impressed at the teachings of Jesus, especially the sermon on the mount. In spite of all the interest and attraction, however, I found myself often confused about the meaning of the passages I read. They were profound teachings, but I was not sure how they were to be understood today and especially what relationship they had for my life. A few months later I asked Jesus to become my friend. This was a life-changing request, for Jesus indeed became my friend--for a while, my only real friend. Two things were central to my experience of God in the early months of my born again experience. First, I found, in prayer, a conversational relationship with my best friend. Second, the Scriptures came alive for me. From the very start these two aspects of my relationship with God were never totally separated and they have never been since.

At the same time, I was (and still am) an academic type. From my earliest Christian experience I was drawn to the investigation of problem passages, theological issues, and current events. And while I often have been guilty of a pharisaic arrogance about my understanding of Scripture, when I have been at my best I have pursued the study of the Bible aggressively as a means of knowing the heart of my Friend and Savior. Thus, when at my best, I find that there a great deal of overlap between academic and devotional approaches to the Bible, between “Bible study” and “praying the Scriptures.” Since I have found this wholehearted pursuit of God in the Scriptures to be such a source of life, I thought I would share a few thoughts on the subject here.

The first point to remember is that relationship with God involves mutual communication. We reveal ourselves to God and God reveals himself to us. Scripture serves to facilitate communication in both directions.

We reveal ourselves to God. We speak; we open our thoughts and our feelings. We voice our

concerns, our intentions, and our joys. Sometimes there is the self-revelation of simply “being with.” This self-revelation to an invisible Deity is not always easy. It is hard to put words, thoughts, or even feelings to our prayers. It is hard to find true self-expression in prayer. Prayer is further complicated in that we are revealing ourselves to *God*. It is one thing to tell a buddy about a concern or a problem. It is another thing to open oneself before the Almighty God. What forms are appropriate when addressing God?

It is here that the wholehearted pursuit of God through Scripture comes into play. For example, the more “devotional” uses of Scripture can help to bring voice to our deepest prayers. The prayers recorded in the Scriptures themselves bring to God a full range of emotional expression. Joy before the Lord, quiet meditation, thanksgiving, fear, anger and more all are modeled for us in Biblical prayers and psalms. In *Praying the Scriptures* I have included an index of the book of Psalms by emotion: Psalms to pray when you feel _____. The stories of the Bible also can help give voice to our self-revelation to God. A story, even a Biblical story, is written such that the reader can identify with the characters involved. By imaginatively immersing ourselves in a Biblical story we can join with the feelings of the characters and find new expression for our own response to God. I, being small, can identify with the character of Zaccheus. Sometimes I express my own gratitude for Jesus’ personal attention to me by reflecting upon this story, allowing Zaccheus’ thankful generosity become my own. The scenes of worship can likewise serve as models of and encouragements to our own worship of God. Many passages: historical, prophetic, poetic, can help us to “name” our own experiences and bring them to God. Thus by slow reading, by meditation on a few words, by joining thought, imagination, and feeling in devotional times with the Scriptures, we can find forms and feelings with which to express ourselves to God.

Formal Bible study, however, is an equally valuable asset for shaping our own expression to God. The study of God’s character through regular Bible reading, through memory, or through topical studies show us how to think of God, how to come to God, how to open ourselves to God in prayer. Just as the knowledge of a friend helps us to know how to communicate with him or her, so our study of God in the Scriptures enables us to come to God as God truly is. As we examine the attributes of God: holy, good, just, loving, and so on, we begin to understand how God ordinarily responds to those who come to the merciful Lord. As we explore the works of God: in history, through Christ, and by the Spirit, we see aspects of God’s action towards his people that shapes our expectations of relationship with God. These Scripture-shaped expectations, in turn, suggest to us a tone which we bring to prayer, a sense of approach, or even at times the very words of our prayers. In these kinds of ways our own communication to God can be enriched by times of Bible study.

God also reveals himself to us. Just as we communicate ourselves to God in the relationship of the Christian life, so God is open to us. God reveals his heart, mind, concerns, and joys. Our Lord does this in a variety of ways: through the created order which reflects the character of the Creator, through the works of God throughout history, through the intimate ministry of the breath of God, the Holy Spirit, and supremely through the person and work of Christ. These

forms of God's communication can be experienced as we approach God through the Scriptures. I will give a few examples.

Some of my most significant turning points in my relationship with God have followed times of intense study of the Scriptures. I was confused, I was unsure, I did not know where to go, and I really needed to find out what God "had to say" about something. Personal studies of the life of prayer, economic concerns, the ways of the Spirit, sexuality, and what I call "the big four" (sin, sickness, suffering, Satan) have all changed my life. I looked up words, I checked reference materials, I simply read through the Bible looking for passages on the topic. I always took notes. Interestingly enough, however, when I was done studying it was not "the answers" that changed me so much as a certain sense of what I call God's "heart" for the issue, a sense that could not have come apart from the diligent study of the text of Scripture.

Through the careful exploration of the Bible, reading deeply and widely, the ways and works of God are revealed to us ever clearer. Our superficial acceptance of the world view of contemporary culture is challenged as we are confronted with the thoughts of the Sovereign Lord. Our sense of right and wrong are adjusted as God communicates through the Scriptures His own ideas about right and wrong. Our ministry for others is also formed as we seek to examine the heart of the Reconciler for others. I cannot recommend the study of the Bible enough. By plunging our minds into the texts of the Scriptures we find not only our minds, but our hearts and lives, enlightened by the God who becomes open to us.

Whereas the methods of formal study tend to terminate in a *general* sense of God's heart, more devotional methods bring to us a sense of the heart of God for the *specific* details of our lives and prayers. Have you ever read slowly through a passage and a single verse seemed to jump out of the page at you. It was as if God underlined the passage and said "This passage is for you right now." Through meditative reading we may have a deep sense that a particular passage or even a phrase especially expresses God's thoughts for you or another. You can soak in these thoughts of God by allowing that verse or phrase run through your mind again and again--"I will never leave you nor forsake you, Lord, you will never leave me or forsake me." Through prayerful approaches to the texts of Scripture our intuition notices similarities between life and text that detailed analysis passes by. We draw parallels and Aha! The presence or guidance of God is revealed. Likewise, through the devotional practices of self-examination and radical obedience, we discover something of God's character by conforming our lives to God's own.

I think that we best foster relationship with God by means of a wholehearted and wholeheaded immersion in the texts of the Scriptures. Not that study of or meditation on the Scriptures are the only means of grace, of course. But the intentional blending of devotional and academic approaches to the Bible will help keep us from error, bring us to a fuller understanding of the text, and empower us to love the Lord with all our heart, mind, and strength. I have compiled many of the devotional approaches to Scripture in the context of structuring a devotional time around particular passages in my *Praying the Scriptures*. I encourage you to buy a concordance

and use it, to read the text Scriptures carefully, to study the Bible, mining the riches of God's heart that can only come through patient effort. But as you do, be sure and take the time to identify with a story, to say a phrase or two long enough to let it soak in, to read slowly comparing your life with the passage, and to wait for the revelation of God that can only come through praying the Scriptures.

May God the Father bless you with the riches in Christ Jesus through the work of the Holy Spirit.