

Biblical Models of Prayer: Psalms & the Lord's Prayer

Where should we turn first to practice the skill of praying from Scripture? While we can pray from any biblical text, the best places to begin are prayers in the Bible that God provides to us as models to guide our prayer.

I. Psalms

(1) Why should we use the Psalms and other biblical prayers as a guide for our prayers?

- God has given us divinely-inspired and thus divinely-authorized prayers to put words into our hearts and mouths to show us very specifically how he wants us to pray.

Note: The category of psalms can include other biblical prayers, many of which are clearly psalm-like, e.g., Exodus 15:1-18; 1 Samuel 2:1-10; Luke 1:46-55; 1:68-79; songs in the book of Revelation. And we can learn to use other biblical prayers in a manner like the Psalms, e.g., Ephesians 1:3-23; Philippians 2:5-11.

- Psalms were the prayerbook from which Jesus learned to pray as the perfect human being. See examples in his appeal to Ps. 110 (Matt. 21:42), singing a hymn at Last Supper (probably Ps. 118), Ps. 22 (on the cross).
- Psalms are the church's prayer book. The titles to the psalms and the use of the psalms in the story of the people of God tell us that the psalms are given to be the corporate hymn book and prayer book for the church.¹ Historically, Christian churches have used the Psalms as the primary foundations of practices of corporate and personal worship.
- Psalms help good theology inform and direct our prayer by expressing a wide range of themes about God, including his character, his acts of creation and salvation in history, his revelation, and the depths of his relationship with us.
- Psalms help good theology inform and direct our prayer by expressing a wide range of themes about human life, including a broad spectrum of human emotions and life circumstances along with prayers appropriate to all of human experience with God (praise/thanks, confession of sin, lament with cries of distress; petitions for God's help).

"[The Book of Psalms] is like a picture, in which you see yourself portrayed, and seeing, may understand and consequently form yourself upon the pattern given. . . You find depicted in it all the movements of your soul, all its changes, its ups and downs, its failures and recoveries. Moreover, whatever your particular need or trouble, from this same book you can select a form of words to fit it, so that you do not merely hear and then pass on, but learn the way to remedy your ill." (Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria, 4th c., "Letter to Marcellinus")

¹ King David wrote almost half the book (73 psalms), and other Psalms were written by Levites appointed by King David as chief musicians, e.g., Asaph, Heman, Jeduthun, Ethan, sons of Korah. David revolutionized Israel's worship by introducing choirs and corporate singing of Psalms with instruments (1 Chron. 15:16-24; 16:4-7, 41-42; 23:5; 25:1-7).

(2) How can we pray from the Psalms?

- Principles for understanding Psalms

- If possible, identify the historical context and setting of a Psalm if that is evident from the text or the heading. (For example, see the circumstance that led to Psalm 51.)
- Try to see the structure of the Psalm. How do the different stanzas relate to each other? Are there repeated words or images?
- What are the functions of the Psalm, i.e., what is the purpose and goal of what the Psalm is communicating? The primary functions of the Psalms are the following, and sometimes more than one function occurs within the same Psalm. See how many you can identify in a particular Psalm.

Lamenting evil, pain, and suffering	Celebrating kingship (fulfilled in Christ)
Praising and thanking God	Recounting Israel's history
Celebrating God's law/word	Calling God's people to faithfulness
Celebrating God's wisdom	Strengthening trust in God
Calling for judgment on injustice	
- Note how the text or themes of the Psalm are used in other parts of Scripture (if applicable; a study Bible with cross-references and/or notes will help).

- Principles for praying personal prayers from the Psalms

Some Psalms can seem hard to use because they speak of experiences or expressions that we do not understand or that we do not know very directly from our personal experience. We can turn these into prayers for others, showing empathy in solidarity with others who do have these experiences. For example, depression and severe despair (Psalm 88), persecution (Psalm 10; 94), innocence and righteousness in some difficult situation (Psalm 26).

Some Psalms enlarge our focus far beyond our personal experience to see God's work in the larger world. These texts can lead us to pray for God's saving work around the world among peoples far away from us, e.g., all peoples/nations worshipping Yahweh (Psalm 67, 96), the salvation of many kinds of people and the whole creation (Psalm 145, 146).

Many Psalms refer to aspects of the history of the nation of Israel and Israel's particular forms of worship and leadership. It can be difficult for modern readers to know how those references can guide their prayers, since the coming of Jesus greatly has changed many of the forms of worship and life for the church. The solution is to translate these Old Testament concepts and forms by substituting aspects of the Christian church that are most similar.

Here are some substitutions for some of the most common ancient terms and concepts in Old Testament prayers:

Old Testament reference	Closest New Testament equivalent
Israel, Zion, or Jerusalem (when these refer to the people/nation of Israel)	The church of Jesus Christ
Temple, sanctuary, house of God, courts of God, Zion, Jerusalem (when these refer to worship)	The church's public worship
Sacrifices	The church's acts of worship, such as prayer, music, offerings, the reading and preaching of Scripture, the sacraments
Priests	Pastors
Kings or judges	Either pastors and elders in a church context, or rulers of the state in a national context
Enemies	Persecutors of the church, Satan/demons, sin and death

Another lens through which to see the psalms is the person and work of Jesus Christ. Think about how biblical prayers reveal something about Christ. We can use these texts to offer praise and thanks for what Christ has done for us, and pray that God would enable us to imitate Christ and be conformed to his image as we follow him. For example, some Old Testament texts foreshadow aspects of Jesus' identity and mission as our Savior.

- His ministry as our Good Shepherd: Psalm 23 (see John 10)
- His death: Psalm 22 (see Jesus' quote from cross: Matt. 27:46)
- His resurrection: Psalm 16 (see Acts 2:25-28)
- His kingship: Psalm 2 (see Rev. 2:27; 12:5, 19:15); Psalm 110 (see Luke 20:41-44; Acts 2:34-35).
- His coming as judge and deliverer: Psalm 98 (see Rev. 19-21)

In addition to the unique ministry of Jesus as a divine person, biblical prayers also reveal to us something about the humanity of Jesus. All biblical prayers that speak of human emotions and experiences can remind us that Jesus became truly and fully human to enter our experience in solidarity with us:

- Biblical prayers expressing worship remind us that Jesus is the perfect worshipper who prays for us and in us.
- Biblical prayers expressing human struggle and raw emotions remind us that Jesus knows firsthand our temptations, sufferings, sorrows, fears, hopes, and longings.
- Biblical prayers expressing confession and lament for sin remind us that Jesus has taken the consequences of our guilt upon himself at the cross, even though he himself was without sin.
- Biblical prayers expressing faith, hope, love, and obedience remind us that Jesus lived the perfect human life on our behalf.

II. The Lord's Prayer

Jesus gave the Lord's Prayer (Matt. 6:9-13; Luke 11:1-4) as a model and template to teach his followers how to pray. The introduction and six petitions can be a structure to organize and guide our prayers. (Note: Each of these six petitions can be a matter of praise/thanks, confessing sin, lamenting the world's suffering and brokenness, and asking God to act.)

- "Our Father in heaven,"
 - Remember that prayer is talking with our perfectly loving and wise heavenly Father. God wants our prayer to flow from the trust, freedom, and love of a perfect Father-child relationship.
 - Our prayer is never merely individual (not just "my Father") but also always communal. We pray in union with Christ together with the whole church.

- "hallowed be your name."
 - "Hallowed" means "honored." God's "name" refers to everything about him.
 - Prayer guide: Pray about God's supreme glory (i.e., his greatness, goodness, and beauty).

- "Your kingdom come,"
 - God's "kingdom" refers to everything that God is doing to save the world from sin and death through Jesus and to renew and glorify the world so that it expresses the glory of his rule as King.
 - Prayer guide: Pray about God's bringing every part of our life (and all human life at every level) under the wisdom, power, and loving kingship of Christ.

- "your will be done on earth as it is in heaven."
 - Prayer guide: Pray about God bringing my will (i.e., my desires, priorities, and choices) and everyone's will into alignment with God's perfect will and purpose for us.

- "Give us this day our daily bread,"
 - "Daily bread" refers to our needs, the most essential necessities of life.
 - Prayer guide: Pray about God's providing our essential needs to fulfill his purposes for our personal lives, and pray about God's providing the needs of others (and ways that we might be God's means and instruments of answering our own prayers for others).

- "and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors."
 - Prayer guide: Pray about our personal sin with confession and repentance, seeking God's forgiveness, and pray about forgiving others who have sinned against us as freely and generously as God forgives us in Christ.

- "And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil (or the evil one)."
 - "Temptation" here means "trial, testing." It is a request for God to protect and deliver us from sin. "Evil" in Greek mostly likely refers to Satan ("the evil one").
 - Prayer guide: Pray about God protecting and delivering us from sin and the evil influences of Satan and the corruptions of the world.