

Praying God's Word

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Have you ever thought about what an amazing blessing it is to be able to approach the throne of God, the creator and sustainer of this universe, and know He listens to and answers our prayers? Prayer is not just a blessing we enjoy, but is also a matter of faith. After concluding His teaching on being persistent in prayer, Jesus says, "Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on earth?" (Luke 18:8). People of faith are people of prayer! One aspect of faith in prayer we see in the Bible is praying God's word.

When Nehemiah went to God in prayer concerning Jerusalem, he incorporated God's words in his prayer. The Jews had been carried into Babylonian captivity because of their rebellion against God. Some were allowed to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the city and start life anew. One day Nehemiah's brother returned from visiting Jerusalem and Nehemiah quickly sought news of its condition. When he learns the city is still in ruins and the people are in distress and had become a reproach, he is overcome by grief. Nehemiah then prays to God praising Him, confessing their unfaithfulness, and pleading for restoration. In the middle of his prayer Nehemiah says, "Remember the word that you commanded your servant Moses, saying, 'If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the peoples, but if you return to me and keep my commandments and do them, though you are dispersed be under the farthest skies, I will gather them from there and bring them to the place that I have chosen, to make my name dwell there'" (Nehemiah 1:8-9). Nehemiah is praying God's word back to God! He is recounting a twofold promise God made just before they entered Canaan. (See Deuteronomy 28:58, 64; 30:1-5).

Initially finding such words in a prayer seems strange. Did Nehemiah pray God would remember His words because God had forgotten them? Does He feel God had failed to follow through with His word? Certainly neither option is correct. God had previously spoken of these promises saying, "...then I will remember My covenant with Jacob, and I will remember My covenant with Isaac and My covenant with Abraham, and I will remember the land... But I will for their sake remember the covenant with their forefathers, whom I brought out of the land of Egypt in the sight of the nations, that I might be their God: I am the LORD" (Leviticus 26:42, 45). God is not speaking of remembering them because He had forgotten, but bringing them to fulfillment. When Nehemiah calls on God to remember these promises, it is an expression of his faith. He is recognizing their state as being a result of their, not God's, unfaithfulness. Nehemiah is embracing God's promise for return and renewal, calling upon God for the fulfillment of this promise. His prayer focused him on God's faithfulness, strengthened his faith, and gave him hope for the future.

Jonah also quoted scriptures in his prayers to God. Due to his rebellion, God sent a great storm upon the sea where Jonah was sailing. At his urging the sailors threw him into the sea. Suddenly, the water did calm, but the seas of fear and hopelessness were raged around him. The second chapter of Jonah records a compilation of at least two of his prayers. (See Jonah 2:1-9). His words are either direct quotations from Psalms or are very close. David writes, "The pangs of death surrounded me, and the floods of ungodliness made me afraid. The sorrows of Sheol surrounded me; the snares of death confronted me. In my distress I called upon the LORD, and cried out to my God; He heard my voice from His temple, and my cry came before Him, even to His ears" (Psalm 18:4-6). Psalm 42:7 says, "Deep calls unto deep at the noise of Your waterfalls; all Your waves and billows have gone over me." With each of Jonah's statements you can find a very similar verse in Psalms.

Why would Jonah quote from Psalms as he is drowning in the sea and while in a fish's belly? It should not be assumed that because Jonah uses the words of other men he is not praying from his heart. Certainly no one would question the sincerity of one who cries to God under such circumstances as Jonah! He evidently knew the scriptures well and they were always before him. We typically think of the Psalms as songs; but, from an early age Jews quoted Psalms daily and used them in their prayers. It makes sense that as he is experiencing such a difficult time these words would come to mind. He likely prays God's word because he could find no better words to express what was on his heart!

While dying on the cross Jesus used two passages from Psalms to address His Father. Just before the earth went dark, Jesus cried out quoting from Psalm 22, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46). Then before He died, Jesus quoted from Psalm 31 saying, "Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit" (Luke 23:46). A person's last words are very important, so the selection of these would not have been a trivial thing. Since these are "Messianic Psalms," Jesus was making one final appeal to show them He is the Anointed One. Jesus would not have spoken these just because the Messiah was supposed to say them, but because they actually described His circumstances and feelings. Psalm 22 describes not only the physical, but also the emotional suffering Jesus faced at the hands of his adversaries. It pictures the suffering Jesus experienced on the cross from His perspective. In Psalm 31 David cries to God expressing trust in Him despite his circumstances. David was surrounded by wicked conspiracies, friends deserted him, and one very close to him (likely Absalom) turned against him. When he says, "Into your hand I commit my spirit" (vs. 5) he is turning the situation over to God in total trust. This is exactly what Jesus faced, so by quoting David's words to His Father, He is expressing the same trust.

Praying God's word may sound different at first, but it carries great power. Sometimes we may relate well to a statement in scripture or it expresses our feelings better than we can. Romans 8:26 says, "...the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words." This speaks of something the Spirit does apart from word; however, in the Bible we have inspired groanings we can use in our prayers. Psalms is certainly a great place to go when we are looking for words to express our innermost feelings to the Lord. The early Christians did this as they were facing Jewish persecution (Acts 4:23-31). Many Psalms contain very beautiful words of praise to God that could be utilized in our prayers. Psalms of confession, such as Psalm 51, could be used when one is seeking forgiveness from God. Other psalms are cries for help that could be prayed when one is sick or suffering physical hardships. Some are pleas for mercy and deliverance from David's adversaries which could be helpful if one is facing persecution. Regardless of whether it is joy or grief, fear or security, praise or doubt, there are many Psalms we can use to express our feelings.

Praying God's promises is a great way to express our faith! Praying God's word focuses us back on what God has done for us, His promises, and His awesome nature. It recognizes His faithfulness, strengthens our faith, and returns praise to Him. Hebrews 11:13-14 says, "These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off were assured of them, embraced them and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. For those who say such things declare plainly that they seek a homeland." Faith places confidence in God's promises, counts them as reality, holds them close to the heart, and openly confesses them. When God's promises are written on our hearts, they will be heard not only in our every day speech, but also in our prayers. If one is sick, he may pray God's promise that the prayers of the righteous are powerful (James 5:16). If facing temptation, he may pray God's promise of a way of escape and his ability to overcome it (1 Corinthians 10:13). If one is suffering physical hardships, he may pray God's promise to take care of all of our needs (Matthew 6:33). If feeling rejected or alone, he may pray God's promise to never leave him or forsake him (Hebrews 13:5). Praying God's word is not a matter of vain repetition or feeling God has forgotten... Praying God's word is a matter of faith!