

Tips on Praying the Psalms and Other Prayers in the Bible

God not only commands us to pray but also teaches us to pray by giving us examples of prayer in his word. Thus, the book of Psalms and other prayers in the Bible have always played a central role in shaping the prayers of God's people. However, praying from these biblical prayers can be difficult because they were written very long ago for an ancient cultural context that is quite different from the modern world. This short article provides tips on bridging the gap between the past and the present in order to pray the prayers of the Bible in a way that meaningfully expresses and forms our communion with God.

1. Praying with the text

One way to pray from prayers in the Bible is to pray with the text by speaking them word-for-word directly to God. Many biblical prayers, or large portions of them, can function as our own expression without paraphrasing them to make adjustments or applications to modern circumstances. This is easiest when the text addresses God directly in the second person. For example, Psalm 13, Psalm 25, and the Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6:9-13) are prayers that have the form of a direct response to God in the conversation of prayer, and we can pray these words verbatim as our own without any adjustment or paraphrase at all.

When you pray biblical texts in this direct way, you may find it helpful to try these methods:

- Read through the biblical prayer first for understanding.
- Pray the text slowly, repeatedly, and with focused attention, lingering over the words to let them sink in and become truly your own.
- Try praying the text aloud, either reading it yourself or listening to it read to you. Hearing audible words and physically speaking the words can help focus our attention.

2. Paraphrasing to pray from the text

Another way to allow biblical prayers to guide our personal prayer is to use their language and ideas as a springboard for our own thoughts and expression to the Lord.

One simple technique for applying a biblical prayer in a personal way is changing pronouns from the third person to second person (to address God) and to first person (to apply statements to oneself or articulate them yourself). For example, we can adjust the pronouns in Psalm 95:1-8 to turn it into a very personalized expression:

- 1 Oh come, let me sing to you, Lord;
let me make a joyful noise to you, the rock of my salvation!
- 2 Let me come into your presence with thanksgiving;

let me make a joyful noise to you with songs of praise!
3 For you, Lord, are a great God, and a great King above all gods.
4 In your hand are the depths of the earth;
the heights of the mountains are yours also.
5 The sea is yours, for you made it,
and your hands formed the dry land.
6 Oh come, let me worship and bow down;
let me kneel before you, Lord, my Maker!
7 For you are my God,
and I am one of the people of your pasture,
and a sheep of your hand.
Today, as I hear your voice,
8 do not let me harden my heart.

To use a biblical prayer for another person, you can substitute someone's name into the text. For example, we could apply the Lord's Prayer or Ephesians 3:16-19 specifically to an individual by putting their name into the prayer:

Our Father in heaven, please enable Melissa to hallow/honor your name.
May your kingdom come and your will be done in Melissa's life as it is in heaven.
Give her today her daily bread
and forgive her debts, and may she forgive her debtors.
Lead her not into temptation, but deliver her from the evil one.

Lord, according to the riches of your glory, please grant David to be strengthened with power through your Spirit in his inner being, so that Christ may dwell in David's heart through faith—that he, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that David may be filled with all the fullness of God.

We can also use biblical prayers as a source of ideas that we express more freely in our own language. For example, Psalm 146 might make us think of our church's ministry to refugees or people who are suffering in poverty. Psalm 67 or 96 might lead us to pray specifically for our church's missionary service in other parts of the world.

Many biblical prayers in the Old Testament refer to aspects of the history of the nation of Israel and Israel's particular forms of worship and leadership. Therefore, it can be difficult for modern readers to know how those references can guide their prayers, since the coming of Jesus greatly expanded the people of God beyond Israel and 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 can remind us that Jesus is:

- 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.

Some biblical prayers 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 biblical prayers 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.

- All peoples/nations worshipping Yahweh: Psalm 67, 96
- Salvation of many kinds of people and the whole creation: Psalm 145, 146

For further examples and instruction about employing the psalms, see T. M. Moore, *God's Prayer Program: Passionately Using the Psalms in Prayer* (Christian Focus, 2005). Pastor Moore has been praying through the entire book of Psalms every month for over 30 years, and this short book contains a wealth of very practical tips on how the psalms can guide our prayer.