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Praying with Scripture
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I recall Dr Barry Vandy referring to Baptists as 'Bible believing Christians'. I am sure that is true, but I wonder what it means. I hope it means that as Christians we believe the Bible to be the Word of God. We know the stories and the poetry of scripture, the prophets and the history of the Old Testament. We may be even more familiar with the stories of Jesus and the early Church together with the letters of the New Testament culminating with the Revelation of St. John, though for many of us that too is difficult to understand.

We are familiar with Bible Studies and Bible Reading notes, and we have listened to Sunday School teachers and preachers down through the years. For many of us the Word of God is part of our spiritual blood stream. Yet have we defined what we really mean by 'The Word of God'? And in so doing have we explored how it affects our daily journey with the Lord?

In the letter to the Hebrews we read:

"The Word of God is alive and active. It cuts more keenly than any two-edged sword, piercing so deeply that it divides soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it discriminates among the purposes and thoughts of the heart. Nothing in all creation can hide from him; everything lies bare and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must all render account". (Hebrews 4: 12-13)

How can we move from studying the scriptures to this dynamic and challenging encounter with the living and active Word of God that we find here in Hebrews?

Down through the years Christians have found scripture to be a powerful tool for prayer, coming to the Bible not for study or learning, but to draw near to God in Jesus Christ and to feed on him in our hearts through faith. To be with the Lord, who is the very Word of God and who promises to be with us always. For many this Praying Scripture has proved to be both a living and active encounter with the Lord of Life.

To enter into this kind of praying with scripture you need to have the generosity of Spirit that comes to the Word with an open agenda:

- and in coming to be prepared to wait for the Lord
- and in waiting actively to listen to the inner voices of the heart
- and in listening to be prepared to respond as the Spirit leads you into all truth

As Solomon began his reign as King, the young King prayed a beautiful prayer, part of which reads:

"Grant to your servant a heart with skills to listen, that he may be able to discern between good and evil". (1 Kings 3: 9)

Praying with scripture needs just such a gift from the Lord - a heart with skill to listen so that you may be able to discern between good and evil. It is this truth that you find in Hebrews, that "*the Word of God is alive and active.*"



Preparing for Prayer

As you come to prayer you need to do just four things:

1. You need to decide how long you are going to pray for. This is really important in terms of commitment to the endeavour of prayer. It is saying that this is a serious and special time that you are going to set aside with and for the Lord. Not just a few minutes of prayer, for as long as you feel like it.

You might like to begin with say 15 minutes, increasing that time to half an hour or even a full hour.

2. You need to choose a place - a comfortable place, a special place and a place where you are not going to be disturbed or interrupted. Indeed it might be a very good idea to take the phone off the hook and to switch off the mobile. Equally it is a good idea to arrange the time and the place in such a way that you won't be interrupted by the returning family from school or work.

3. So having found the time and the place, you need to be in a comfortable position, with a straight back (though not forced) so that you can be both relaxed and fully attentive and alert.

You may find that a picture, candle or some music may help you to become still as you prepare for your time of prayer.

4. Finally, you need to have chosen a piece of scripture before you come to your prayer time. Not too long a piece, but some scripture that will be your prayer material for this particular time of prayer.

Entering into Prayer

Now you come to the prayer itself. You have set aside this special time with the Lord; you have chosen the scripture; you are in your place of prayer.

Your next step is to relax, there is plenty of time and remember that prayer is all about being in a deeply personal relationship with the Lord. He has called you to prayer. Jesus' words remind us that:

*"No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws them to me;
and I will raise them to life .."* (John 6: 44)

The function of prayer is not to establish a routine, but to develop a relationship with God who is always in relationship with us.

So you need to relax in the love of God and to know his presence and his peace. Two exercises can be of real help here:

1. Try just noticing every breath that you take. Breathe in gently and naturally and let your breath sink deep down inside you. Be grateful for each breath, knowing that it is God's own gift of life to you (c/r Genesis 2: 7). Then as you breathe out, let the Lord receive back your life with all its good and bad. In this way you both give and receive the very life of God, moment by moment.



Do this exercise for a number of minutes, paying close attention to each breath, even to noticing the cool refreshing air you breath in and the warm 'used' air you breathe out. Just be amazed that you are so wonderfully made - and be thankful.

2. Alongside your breathing, quite simply notice the sounds around you as you come to your time of prayer. Tiny little sounds close at hand, a clock ticking, your tummy rumbling, the house creaking, the central heating.

Then begin to notice the sounds further away, outside the room, the traffic, birds singing, the wind blowing. All these are your life at this present moment.

Listen to each sound, receive each one as precious, and celebrate the present moment.

So, as you become still (c/r Psalm 46: 10) you can begin to relax in God's loving presence, and to know that all your life lies open to him and that he waits and wants to talk to you through the Word of God.

Praying with scripture

Now take up your Bible and slowly read the passage you have chosen. A simple rule of thumb is to read the passage slowly in proportion to how well you know the passage ie the better you know the passage the slower you need to read it.

Do not try to work things out, or be tempted to get into a Bible study. Let the Word of God speak directly to you. Let God set the agenda from his Word for this time of prayer.

Lectio Divina

One way to read scripture in prayer is to slowly read the passage letting the words themselves speak to you. You may find that you need to read the passage through several times before any particular word or idea strikes a chord in your heart. When a word or phrase attracts your attention, stop, right there, and savour, enjoy and encounter that special word for you. Stay with that one word or idea for just as long as it has some relish for you. Then when you have done with it continue to read the passage again until another piece draws you.

You may find yourself drawn back to the same word or idea that you have just left - so it needs some more of your attention and there will be profit in staying with it.

It sometimes helps to put your own name into the text, so making it more personal, ie Isaiah 43: 1 reads "*Israel, the Lord who created you says: Do not be afraid - I will save you. I have called you by name - you are mine*" Now substitute your own name in the place of 'Israel' - and see the text speaking directly to you.

Read your scripture as you would read a letter from a very dear friend. You would not just read it once and then put it down. You read it again and again. You re-read parts of it again and again, savouring it as a real gift.

Stop whenever you feel drawn to stop. You don't have to achieve or complete anything. Prayer is 'being with' - 'being with the God who loves you and calls you to life'.



Some questions may now be useful to reflect upon:

- How does this affect me?
- What am I feeling?
- Where am I being led?

Meditative contemplation

Some scripture is far more descriptive in character and can be easily imagined. We all have the gift of imagination. So walk into the story and become part of the scene described.

Again it helps to read the passage really slowly and to read it over and over again, as you let your imagination get to work with the story. See, listen, touch, smell the story.

What else needs to be included in the text as we have it? The size of the room and its furnishings; the weather and temperature; the smell, maybe of the cooking; the people in the story; where is Jesus in relationship to where you are?

Who is saying what to whom? Where do I find myself being drawn or nudged?

Now again some thoughts for your reflection might include:

- How do I feel and what do I have to say?
- What in particular do I want to say to the Lord?
- What has he to say to me?
- What am I called to do?

Distractions and Wanderings

In any given time of prayer you will have your distractions and your wandering thoughts. It happens to us all! Don't let it worry you. It is after all where you are in your inner self. Don't waste your time fighting your distractions, simply acknowledge their presence within you and return consciously to your prayer. Notice your breathing, listen to your world and its sounds, read your scripture again, and let the Lord speak to you in his love and from his Word.

Discerning the movements of prayer

As you pay attention to scripture in your prayer you will become aware of feelings and thoughts which come to mind unbidden, and yet clearly challenging.

You need to discern where these inner voices are leading you and make a clear decision as to which you pay attention to and follow, and which you need to be aware of and yet reject. As with Solomon you need a heart with skill to listen so that you may be able to discern between good and evil.

The leading of the good spirit will open you up to the freedom of life and the love of God. It will make you feel at peace and of a generous heart. (c/r Galatians 5: 22)

The prompting of the evil spirit in prayer will close you down to yourself, to others and to God. Turning you in on yourself and making you feel unhappy, full of doubts and heavy laden.



We all need to make this kind of discernment in our prayers and to follow the Lord of Life and truth and peace (c/r Matthew 11: 28).

Ending your time of prayer

Give the full time to your prayer and don't be tempted to cut it short.

End with a grateful heart to God who loves you and has been so good to you in your prayer. Take your leave just as you might when leaving a very dear friend. With a promise to return again to praying with scripture

Reviewing your time of Prayer

During your time of prayer resist writing things down even if you get really brilliant ideas. - Your time of prayer is a time to be with the Lord - not making copious notes.

So after your prayer time it helps to take a few minutes to jot down just a few thoughts that come to mind as you review your time with the Lord through scripture. Ask the Lord to remind you what happened. Where were you encouraged, disappointed, helped? What things need some more of your time later in your day? These questions are the core material of a spiritual journal.

As we use this way of prayer we find it both reassuring and challenging. For Baptists it should feel very much like coming home. Christ in Scripture the living Word of God is the one we seek beyond the sacred page. May Prayer with Scripture help you discover him.

A useful book with 500 scripture texts for prayer is "*Too Deep for Words*" by Thelma Hall r.c, published by Paulist Press