

# PRAYING WITH SCRIPTURE

## BACKGROUND READING



Very few things are a greater aid to prayer than reading Scripture. When read in a devout and meditative fashion, the reading of Scripture is itself a prayer. Scripture is the inspired Word of God written down by human authors. The Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Truth, moved the human authors to write those things that are necessary for us to know for our salvation, and therefore Scripture is without error—it is revelation from God, and makes God present among us. Most particularly, when we meditate on the Gospels, we get to know Jesus in a special way.

### Reading Scripture

One way to pray with Scripture is to go to a quiet place, select a short passage or verse, and read it slowly and deliberately. Read it more than once. Ask yourself: What does this Scripture passage say to me? How can I apply it to my own life? If you are reading from the Gospels, ask yourself: What does this Scripture passage tell me about Jesus? How should Jesus' words change how I live my life? Some people, maybe you among them, have had the experience of reading Scripture and sensing that God is speaking

directly to them, telling them exactly what they need to hear in light of whatever is going on in their life at the moment. Sometimes this gives us encouragement, other times it might awaken our conscience. The author of Hebrews put it this way: “Indeed, the word of God is living and effective, sharper than any two-edged sword, penetrating even between soul and spirit, joints and marrow, and able to discern reflections and thoughts of the heart” (Hebrews 4:12).

We can read Scripture over and over and seem to always get something new. Or, in a different vein, sometimes we can read a Bible verse twice, three times, even 100 times without getting anything new out of it, and yet on that 101st time, we suddenly understand it in a whole new way. If we think of the author of a typical book, we can assume he knows about his subject area. But his knowledge is limited to his topic; he can only guess as to what his readers want or need to hear. But the author of Scripture, God Himself, is omniscient, or all-knowing. When we read His Word in the Bible we are having a new encounter every time, even if we are reading the same verse for the 20th time! St. Paul exclaims in his

Epistle to the Romans, “Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God!” (Romans 11:33a). Some translations use the word “inexhaustible” here.

## The Psalms

Another place to go to Scripture for prayer is the book of Psalms found in the Old Testament. The psalms are a collection of prayers in Scripture, which makes them prayers that are simultaneously the inspired Word of God. The word “psalms” means praises, and these were praises that were sung by the people of Israel. The psalms were mainly authored by King David. Not only was he famous for slaying Goliath, but he was a poet and a “man after [God’s] own heart” (1 Samuel 13:14). God promised David that from his line the Messiah would be born, and Jesus was a direct descendent of King David.

There are 150 psalms, in which we find both personal prayer and prayer for the community. The psalms celebrate how God saved the people of Israel, and look forward to the future promises made by God to His people. The *Catechism* explains that “though a given psalm may reflect an event of the past, it still possesses such direct simplicity that it can be prayed in truth by men of all times and conditions” (CCC 2588). Jesus Himself prayed the psalms, and through His life and saving acts fulfilled all of their promises. Therefore, “the Psalms remain essential to the prayer of the Church” (CCC 2586), and we pray a psalm at every Mass. This psalm reading occurs after the first reading, which is usually taken from the Old Testament. It is sung, if that is possible; otherwise it is prayed with a refrain spoken by the congregation.

## The Liturgy of the Hours

The psalms are also an integral part of the Liturgy of the Hours (sometimes called the Divine Office), which is known as the prayer of the Church. The tradition of praying the Hours came from communities setting aside times for prayer as part of the routine to call people to be with the Lord and their community. Continuing this tradition, religious communities gather at set times during the day for prayer comprised of psalms, hymns, and Scripture readings that rotates on a four-week cycle and observes the Church’s liturgical feasts. The pope, cardinals, bishops, priests, nuns, sisters, brothers, and monks are all obligated to pray the full sequence of the Hours, observing as closely as possible the true time of day. Many laypeople also participate in the whole or part of these prayers. What this means is the whole Church participates in the Liturgy of the Hours, so at any point during the day, someone around the world is praying that prayer of the Church. When laypeople pray the Liturgy of the Hours, they are joining the greater Church in doing so.

Two of the most commonly known prayers from the Liturgy of the Hours are Morning Prayer and Evening Prayer. We should all pray a morning and evening prayer of some sort at least, be it simply a morning offering that gives our day to God, and a prayer that recollects God’s blessings for that day before we go to bed. When we do this, we enter into the natural rhythm of sunrise and sunset, when the day renews itself and when it comes to a close. Not only that, we join all of creation in praising and worshipping its Creator. These external acts help form our inner hearts, which makes prayer as essential a part of our lives as other important routines, such as sleeping, eating, and drinking. Having

healthy routines establish a healthy life, and the same can be said about a healthy routine in our spiritual lives. While routine possesses the danger of falling into monotony, it also sets aside for us a dedicated time for prayer. The time and place of prayer may be the same, but the prayer itself renews and deepens our relationship with God.

### ***Lectio Divina***

*Lectio Divina*, which means “divine reading,” is an ancient form of praying with Scripture that is still practiced by many today. It originated with the Desert Fathers of the fourth and fifth centuries. The Desert Fathers were some of the first monks, Christians who moved into the wilderness to devote themselves to a simple way of life of work and prayer. *Lectio Divina* is a slow, thoughtful encounter with the Word of God. When we pray the *Lectio Divina*, we listen to the Word of God spoken in Scripture, consider how God’s Word applies to our life, respond to God in prayer, and then rest in silence in God’s presence and allow Him to speak to our heart. Although simple to do, *Lectio Divina* can lead to a rich and moving encounter with God. There are four steps to *Lectio Divina*: *lectio*, *meditatio*, *oratio*, and *contemplatio*.

The first step, *lectio*, translates as “reading,” and we should read the words of Scripture slowly and intentionally. We read in order to listen to God, striving to hear the

words of Scripture as if He is speaking directly to us—because He is! *Meditatio* translates as “meditation.” In this second step of *Lectio Divina*, we are called to imitate our Blessed Mother, Mary, who, after the shepherds visited her and her newborn Son, Jesus, “kept all these things, reflecting on them in her heart” (Luke 2:19). We should reflect on what Scripture is telling us about our own lives and our relationship with God. *Oratio* translates as “prayer.” In this third step of *Lectio Divina* it is our turn to talk to God. We should respond to what God has revealed to us, no matter how big or small, by having a conversation with Him about it. *Contemplatio* translates as “contemplation.” This is perhaps the most difficult of the four steps of *Lectio Divina* because it requires silence. In the silence, rest for a moment in God and allow Him to move through you, to arrange your thoughts, and to speak directly to your heart. Now it is time to pause and know that He is God and He is with you. It may seem as if there is little difference between meditation and contemplation, but in reality they are very different. In the *meditatio* step, we actively engage the Scripture we have read and try to apply it to our own lives. In that step, we are doing something. In *contemplatio*, we must stop doing and learn how to be. In other words, we place ourselves in God’s hands and allow Him to fill us with His love and mercy.