

Powering Your Prayer Life in the Psalms (Acts 4:23-31)

Please turn to Acts chapter 4 and I need to say upfront as we come to this subject of prayer, much of my Christian life I've struggled in prayer. I'm as prone to wander in my mind as anybody, I think I'm chief of sinners in that regard. It's easy for me to read and study hours on end, but to pray silently in prayer focused for many minutes has never been easy for me. That's in times I *plan to pray*. I'll also confess planning times to pray hasn't always been a consistent pattern of mine, and times I do are too often unfruitful, not powerful, even when I do stay on track. More often than not I prayed about things on my heart by saying the same old things about the same old things. As I pray about something, it triggers something else in my mind and it's only minutes later I'll remember I'm praying but can't remember what for!

Now if you *can't* identify with me, or think there's something wrong with me, you may be right. Pray for me because I need folks with stronger prayer lives supporting me. But if you *can* identify with prayer being a struggle, I hope this message will give you hope and help because I've found help and hope at the start of this year in prayer. Many men and women God has used have struggled in prayer, you'd be surprised to hear some of their names. It may also surprise you how a simple change in prayer method made a world of difference for them, helped them break through, and it has for me and it can for you. There's a key that for many has helped unlock doors in prayer and opened up to a new life and power in their prayer (it has for me). Not a new practice, it's an ancient pattern from Bible times, praying from Psalms.

In Acts 4:23 the Jewish leaders threaten then release the apostles and it says ²³ *When they were released, they went to their friends and reported what the chief priests and the elders had said to them.* ²⁴ *And when they heard it, they lifted their voices together to God and said, "Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them [praying Ps 146:6] ²⁵ who through the mouth of our father David, your servant, said by the Holy Spirit, Why did the Gentiles rage, and the peoples plot in vain? ²⁶ The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers were gathered together, against the Lord and against his Anointed'--[praying Ps 2:1-2] ²⁷ for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, ²⁸ to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place. ²⁹ And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness, ³⁰ while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are*

performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus.”³¹ And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness. [v. 33 adds great power, ends with great grace]

Is their great power in our witness? Is there great grace upon us all? This is inspired and recorded not just for the early church, but for us to have power in our Christians lives and in our prayer lives. Our world needs to be shaken by prayer, we need the filling of the Spirit more, we can use more boldness in our witness and words as we seek to speak God’s Word. Could it be part of our weakness and emptiness and fearfulness and lack of witness is in part because we don’t pray like the early church did? Could praying the psalms help us? There’s no magical or mystical new technique here, just old texts of God’s Word spoken and put in your own words in prayer to God for the things going on in your life. In their case psalms recited, reapplied to them. It’s not the only way to pray, not every prayer in the NT directly quotes the psalms, but many powerful biblical prayers come out of biblical passages:

- Jonah’s prayer in the belly of a fish was saturated with biblical psalms
- Daniel 9 is another scripture-filled prayer borrowing words from psalms
- The great prayer in Nehemiah 9 flows from scriptures, including psalms
- Mary’s Magnificat prayer (Lk 1) is much from Psalms, Hannah’s prayer (not word-for-word quotes but most lines use wording from the psalms)
- Zechariah’s praise to God in the same chapter begins like some psalms (some of the phrases are word-for-word using wording from the psalms)
- Simeon speaks to God in that chapter borrowing imagery from psalms
- The greatest NT example is Jesus Himself on the cross. He prays Psalm 22:1 word-for-word: *‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’* Don Whitney argues Jesus prayed the first verse out loud but prayed the rest of Ps 22 silently as pain of crucifixion made it hard to speak, much less breathe, but read the rest of Ps 22 and it’s the Lord Jesus speaking.¹
- Jesus’ last and dying words on the cross were praying word-for-word Ps 31:5 *‘Into your hands I commit my spirit.’* Jesus prayed psalms on the cross, we only have some of His words recorded. Some scholars think He was praying through psalms starting in Ps 22 and ending in Ps 31 as He died and certain verses prayed out loud for others to hear and learn²

There’s 3 helps for prayer we can see in Acts 4 that have helped me pray:

1. With the voice when possible (v. 24 says they lifted voices to pray)
2. With others at times (v. 24 also says they prayed together)
3. With scripture (in this case v. 24-26 is praying psalms word-for-word)

There's value in praying with people, and there's many other things we can study about prayer, but for tonight I want to focus on the 3rd help from Bible prayers we can learn, and that's praying the Bible, praying scripture, psalms

For me, it also helps to do it loud when I can when I pray in general or from psalms in particular, but even just looking at the scripture praying silently is a great help for my wandering mind. If you memorize a psalm or know part (or a song from it) it can help you pray when you don't have a Bible in front of you, but if you have an open Bible (or a smart phone with a Bible app or a Gideon's NT like I've used going on walks looking at verses then praying them in my words) it's the single most helpful prayer practice I've learned.

If you have the NASB, v. 24 has some of the words in their own words and part of it is the quote from the psalm: ²⁴ *And when they heard this, they lifted their voices to God with one accord and said, "O Lord, it is You who MADE THE HEAVEN AND THE EARTH AND THE SEA, AND ALL THAT IS IN THEM, [that part is word-for-word a quote from Ps 146:6 in the NASB wording] ²⁵ who by the Holy Spirit, through the mouth of our father David Your servant, said, 'WHY DID THE GENTILES RAGE, AND THE PEOPLES DEVISE FUTILE THINGS?' ²⁶ 'THE KINGS OF THE EARTH TOOK THEIR STAND, AND THE RULERS WERE GATHERED TOGETHER AGAINST THE LORD AND AGAINST HIS CHRIST.'*

That's quoting Ps 2 word-for-word in their Greek version of the OT. They either read it, or more likely recited it from memory, praying it from God's Word and then putting it in their own words in v. 27-30. They applied those Psalms to what they're going through. In v. 27 the words of Ps 2 reminded them what Gentile soldiers had recently done to their beloved Jesus. Roman and Idumean kings and peoples of Israel had raged against the Christ who was on stand before them. Their rulers had devised a futile thing because it was the sovereign God's predetermined plan, they say in v. 28. They pray in v. 28 in light of the Psalm they quoted in v. 24 about the sovereign Lord as creator and sustainer of all; the God who holds the whole world in His hand also has the hearts of kings in His hand, doing what His hand predestined.

In v. 30 they pray that hand, the same hand psalms say created heaven and earth, they ask the sovereign Lord's hand to work miracles again. And in v. 29 they seem to still have the words of Ps 2 in mind as they ask the Lord to look upon the threats of the enemies of God's people and give boldness to His servants. The word there is literally *slaves* and it also comes from the Greek text of Ps 2:11. They used God's Word to form their words in prayer.

Verse 31 says their prayer meeting was all shook up, that may not happen in a physical sense, but spiritually and metaphorically prayer shakes things up. And sometimes in Acts earthquakes happened, like Paul and Silas in jail as they sang psalms to God, apparently they're praying in song the hymnbook of the Hebrews, singing praise to God is a form of prayer and the psalms are the Hebrew hymnal as well as a book of common prayers for God's people.

It also says in v. 31 as they pray in this way they were filled with the Spirit. Paul wrote in Eph 5 as we're filled with the Spirit we speak in psalms with others and in praise and thanks back to God (also hymns and spiritual songs – some scholars think those include types of OT psalms also). 1 Cor 14:26 suggests hymns (psalms?) to God were common in corporate worship. The earliest NT book written, James 5:13 tells the early church to pray and sing psalms (that's the NKJV wording, others say *praises* but the same idea). It's clear here in the end of v. 31 after praying the psalms in this way they spoke God's Word with boldness and power. Verse 33 mentions great power they experienced to testify of their faith and another result was great grace on all. Spirit-filled praying the psalms gave the early church great power and grace

An article on prayer in the early church says: 'In the post NT churches the Lord's Prayer and the Psalms became the core of Christian prayer practices (Tertullian)...Apostolic Constitutions [writing in 300s AD states] Assemble yourselves together every day, morning and evening, singing psalms and praying in the Lord's house: in the morning saying the sixty-second Psalm, and in the evening the hundred and fortieth [Psalm] ... (Ap. Const. 2.59).'

Let's turn to Ps 62 as an example, the psalm many in the early church used to begin their day in prayer. You don't have to pray Ps 62 in the morning, if your prayer life is already vibrant and powerful, and there's something else or somewhere else in Scripture that really helps you, great. But Ps 62 and other scriptures can help and seem to be inspired to help God's people pray.

62:1 *For God alone my soul waits in silence; from him comes my salvation.* [that can be a great way to help for a quiet time with the Lord, be reminded as you pray along those lines to look to God alone that day, to be reminded of your salvation that comes from God. Turn the him/he to You in prayer: ² *He alone is [say You alone are] my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall not be greatly shaken.* Praise God for being your rock and what that means to you, a mighty fortress, ask for help to trust that and not be shaken. v. 3-4 isn't a prayer but it acknowledges sinful men as we can, then pray v. 5

⁵ *For God alone, O my soul, wait in silence, for my hope is from him.* ⁶ *He only is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall not be shaken.* ⁷ *On God rests my salvation and my glory; my mighty rock, my refuge is God.* ⁸ *Trust in him at all times, O people; pour out your heart before him; God is a refuge for us.* Those are good things to pray and even say out loud, it's not that God needs to hear them to boost Himself up, our soul needs to hear this - notice the "O my soul...O people" - this is to boost us and encourage us as we trust and pour out our heart in prayer. Talk to God in the verses that are prayers or turn them into your own prayers, let God talk to you in the others

⁹ *Those of low estate are but a breath; those of high estate are a delusion; in the balances they go up; they are together lighter than a breath [That's not talking to God in prayer here, read as God talking to us]* ¹⁰ *Put no trust in extortion; set no vain hopes on robbery; if riches increase, set not your heart on them.* ¹¹ *Once God has spoken; twice have I heard this: that power belongs to God, [now he talks to God, pray v. 12] and that to you, O Lord, belongs steadfast love. For you will render to a man according to his work.*

You can use verses from the psalms to help you talk to God, and it's a book where God not only helps you talk to Him, He talks back to you in psalms! Read the next verse as God talking to you and as you come to a verse that you can set to prayer, pray it back to God. How many of you have heard of the A.C.T.S. prayer pattern? A=Adoration, C=Confession, T=Thanksgiving, S=Supplication/requests. That's a helpful pattern and the psalms help fill out

Adoration, - or if that's hard to get your mind around, think A for Attributes:
 - what Attributes of God do I see in this psalm I can praise Him for?
 - what are some truths of God in v. 2, He's ...

Confession - confess sin in light of text, if your heart isn't where text is

Thanksgiving - thank God for the truths about God you see in the psalm

Supplication - a request in light of v. 1 could be 'help me talk to you alone today, help me to be silent when I need to be, help me to wait patiently for what I need to wait for today.' Or like the end of v. 2 'help me not be shaken by this concern on my heart' or like v. 8 'help me trust you at all times today and help me pour out my heart in prayer and find refuge in you alone today.' All those types of prayers you can pray for others on heart (friends, family).

What if you're in a spiritually dry place? Ps 63 is a prayer from a dry place:
O God, you are my God; earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.

² *So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary, beholding your power and glory* [there's adoring God, His attributes of power and glory worshipped].

³ *Because your steadfast love is better than life, my lips will praise you* [his lips confess the Lord's love is better, and if we're not living like we believe that, confess that to the Lord, confess you're not worthy but He's worthy of praise, and commit to thanksgiving like v. 4] ⁴ *So I will bless you as long as I live; in your name I will lift up my hands.* ⁵ *My soul will be satisfied as with fat and rich food, and my mouth will praise you with joyful lips ...*

That can easily be turned into a supplication, a request, i.e., 'help my soul be satisfied in you, God, more than anything, give me joyful lips. v. 6: *when I remember you upon my bed and meditate on you in the watches of the night* ... These are truths to remember when we're lying in bed at night, if we can't sleep we don't have to count sheep, we can count blessings, pray the psalms. v. 7-8 speak to God directly, v. 9-11 may not speak to us as directly as we're not David and don't have the same enemies he had as the anointed king over God's chosen nation Israel, so we don't have to speak those words to God if they're uniquely about David (or some psalms talk about Messiah, enemies of God He will deal with in the last day, imprecatory psalms we leave for the Lord to fulfill, vengeance is His). Some verses in psalms aren't as suited to pray as others, but even some like v. 11 that are talking about King David you can pray in light of ('help me to rejoice in God like David did, to exult')

One commentary says Ps 63 became a regular prayer to start the day for the early church,⁴ in 4th century many prayed Ps 148-50 in AM, Ps 141 in PM, and 'with the Desert Fathers and the early monastic communities... psalms began to be used regularly within daily worship ... The practice was to use the psalms as an inspiration for silent prayer and meditation. A psalm would be read, followed by a time of silence, and this pattern repeated.'⁵ You can also do it out loud, read a verse as God's Word speaking to you, speak it in your own words back to God if appropriate, repeat next verse, keep going.

George Muller in the 1800s, a man known for his great faith and prayer life, wrote he really struggled in prayer, but praying this way was a breakthrough

January 13th (1838 journal entry he describes reading life of Whitefield and he discovered Whitefield's) 'success in preaching the gospel is evidently to be ascribed, instrumentally, to his great prayerfulness, and his reading the Bible on his knees. I have known the importance of this for years; I have practised it a little, but far too little. I have had more communion with God to-day, than I have had, at least generally, for some time past.

January 14th [next entry begins day with a long time] ...prayed...over Psalm 63. God has blessed my soul much to-day. My soul is now brought into that state, that I delight myself in the will of God, as regards my health. Yea, I can now say, *from my heart*, I would not have this disease removed till God, through it, has bestowed the blessing for which it was sent. He has drawn out my soul much yesterday and to-day. Lord, continue Thy goodness, and fill me with love! I long more fully to glorify God; not so much by outward activity, as by inward conformity to the image of Jesus.¹⁶

Homework assignment for next week (be doers of Word, not hearers only):

1. Try praying through a psalm each day this next week (if you can, find a prayer place where you can out loud or quietly uninterrupted)
 - if you're already have a reading/praying plan try adding this to part of it, at least 5-10 minutes to let psalm inform prayer
 - I'm using the psalm for day of month (ex: yesterday was Ps 23, today is Jan 24th so I'll pray Ps 24, I plan to keep going through the psalms. If you come to verses or a whole psalm that's harder to pray, move on to another one across the page
2. Think of categories you normally pray for (friends, family, future) and pray for them using the psalms and pray for other things that come to mind in reading the psalm (alert to other things to pray for)
3. If you're doing it, if it helps, send a text or email on how it's going
 - any encouraging things you're finding as you pray psalms
 - any challenges or questions, I can try to answer next week
 - if you pray a verse for a friend that may help them, share it

If you're not sure where to start tomorrow morning, Ps 5 was a prayer David wrote for the morning (we'll also sing it as we close, so it's one you can pray without a Bible in front of you): *Give ear to my words, O LORD, Consider my meditation.*² *Hearken unto the voice of my cry, my King, and my God: For unto thee will I pray.*³ *My voice shalt thou hear in the morning, O LORD; In the morning will I direct my prayer unto thee, and will look up.*

Let's pray.

¹ Don Whitney, *Praying the Bible*, p. 87.

² Gordon Wenham, *The Psalter Reclaimed: Praying and Praising with Psalms*, p. 38-39.

³ <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/jesuscreed/2015/10/13/prayer-in-the-earliest-church/>

⁴ *Harper's Bible Commentary*, p. 461-462.

⁵ http://www.faithandworship.com/Prayer_in_the_early_Church.htm

⁶ George Müller, *Autobiography of George Müller* (Nisbet and Co., 1914), p. 98.