

Praying With the Bible

Karl A. Schultz

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Introduction

The Bible's Versatility

The Bible is the story of humankind. It is a diverse collection of seventy-three books written over the course of a millennia in a wide range of cultural and political environments. It contains various literary styles and distinct theological and anthropological perspectives (ways of looking at God and humanity). As Thomas Merton observed, its breadth and universality makes it humanity's book as well as the Church's.

The Bible's authorship is a joint venture between God and humanity, which makes it unique in world literature. While its primary purpose is religious, it is also suited to other approaches and objectives. It has compelling historical, psychological, sociological, literary, motivational, and aesthetic applications that complement its spirituality.

The Bible has inspired some of the greatest art, drama, literature, and music the world has known. It has been analyzed and utilized by some of the world's most prominent psychiatrists and psychologists (e.g., Carl Jung, Viktor Frankl, Paul Tournier, Karl Menninger, Conrad W. Baars, Adrian van Kaam). Politicians and social activists have used and abused it in ways that have changed the course of history. The civil rights movement in the U.S. had roots in biblical spirituality, particularly the motif of the Hebrews' exodus from Egypt.

Praying With the Bible

Essential to the Bible's religious dimension is prayer and corresponding actions. This book is specifically concerned with "praying with the Bible." How is that different from prayer per se, or from reading the Bible? Is it a hybrid? Is the difference between "praying the Bible" and "praying *with* the Bible? (this book's title) substantive or semantics?

Let's begin with a definition of purpose. The objective of praying *with* the Bible is to dialogue with God and be taught, healed, and transformed by the encounter. The next and most important step is to live it.

Much of our communication with God is non-verbal. The Holy Spirit knows the language of the heart. Just as couples find contentment in resting in the silence of each other's company, likewise when we pray with the Bible we reach a point of simply lingering silently with the Lord and basking receptively in his presence. Praying encompasses more than saying formal prayers. It is God and the praying person communicating and offering themselves to each other.

Faith and prayer express themselves through works of love: "If any one says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen" (1 Jn 4:20; cf. Jas 2:14-17). As conveyed throughout the Sermon on the Mount (cf. Mt 5-7), and particularly in its conclusion, our subsequent actions reveal our prayer's substance and fruitfulness. Accordingly, this book is not only about how to pray with the Bible, but how to bring it to life.

Praying the Bible

Praying the Bible is a more narrow approach to the Bible. We are primarily concerned with praying it, as opposed to reflecting upon or studying it. We relive the biblical experience by entering into it imaginatively and spiritually, and praying about it. Obviously there is some overlap with praying *with* the Bible, for prayer involves some level of reflection and interpretation in order to make sense of the passage and utilize it as a means of prayer.

Sometimes when we pray with the Bible (in particular, the Psalms), we are simply praying the Bible. There is much crossover between the two, but the distinction remains.

Using the Bible as a prayer book has been part of Christian spirituality from the beginning. The book of Psalms was intended primarily to facilitate prayer.

Although the difference is subtle, I prefer using the conjunction “with” in reference to praying the Bible because it implies a joint venture, not only with the composers and original audiences of the Bible, but with all believers.

As Karl Barth observed, Christians should have the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. God has involved himself intimately in human affairs, and he wishes us to be his hands and feet. To do so properly, we need biblically inspired prayer in the context of the life of the Church (i.e., the Sacraments, devotions, service, and Christian fellowship / community). This book will provide a spirituality model suitable to such.

Who This Book is For

This book is for anyone who wishes to deepen their relationship with God through prayerful reading and living of the Bible. It does not presume familiarity with the Bible, and is written at a basic level. It will likewise be helpful for persons with an advanced understanding of Scripture who wish to engage it in holistic prayer as well as study, and for persons who teach Scripture and spirituality to others.

What This Book is About

You will learn guidelines for praying with the Bible according to the Church’s oldest and most widely utilized biblical spirituality model. I will integrate the wisdom of the Bible, Tradition, the Magisterium (the authoritative teachings of the Popes and Bishops), and the faithful (the person in the pew), while also sharing my own insights and experience.

We will explore *lectio divina*'s historical background and evolution, recent guidelines and exhortations offered by the Church, and its practice by believers. I will offer reflection questions and applications designed to help you discover *lectio divina*'s and the Bible's intimate and pervasive connection with your life.

In the Bible, God acted in human history on both an individual and communal level, and continues to do so. *Lectio divina* is a natural framework for bringing the Bible to life in the dual sense of making it come alive and relating it to life.

The Bible and Life

Prayer, the Bible, and life go together. God acts and speaks to us in life and the Bible, and both evoke prayer.

Praying with the Bible is an ongoing, dynamic, organic activity, rather than something we relegate to quiet time independent of the essential content and direction of our life. Thus, even though you may not be well versed in the Bible, you have life experience, which contributes significantly to a proper biblical interpretation, assimilation, application, and response.

The Bible is about each of us. It is our story. It is both timeless and time-conditioned. Parallels to and applications of its characters, events, circumstances, and teachings occur in our lives through the mystery of divine providence.

Praying with the Bible and discerning and responding to God's initiative in our life feed off each other. The Catholic model we will explore, *lectio divina*, is more than a spiritual activity; it is a way of life, communication, and personal and communal transformation.

Following is my favorite commentary on the Bible's correspondence to life. It can serve as a spiritual foundation for our exploration. It comes from Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini, S.J.,

emeritus archbishop of Milan, a renowned biblical scholar, ecumenical leader, and promoter of *lectio divina*:

“In the history of Moses, as in the other events recorded in the Bible, we find realities that are repeated in the life of every individual. Anyone who is inwardly open and acquainted with prayer can find in the words of scripture what is needed for his or her life.

It seems to me that the decisive questions to be asked by each person are

- * What does this scripture passage mean to me?
- * What is it saying to me?
- * How is it related to my life?

We might at first say, "It doesn't have anything to do with my life." But rather than remain with such a first impression, we should look for the cause and ask, "Why is there no connection between this Bible passage and my life? What would I want the connection to be?"

In this way, even a negative first impression can be a means of contact between what the Bible says and what we experience. Often this contact does not take place immediately, but only after we have entered into a dialogue, a wrestling with the words of scripture. Only then does it begin to shed light.

Such a dialogue is a decisive help toward prayer, which springs from our center and expresses our deepest yearnings. This is the aim of spiritual guidance: To help us express ourselves in prayer as we are, in keeping with our situation and nature.

Real prayer is not child's play. Scripture teaches us that prayer is a struggle, a battle. It places us face to face with our greatest difficulties. In prayer we are trained to look at the