



P R A Y I N G

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D O N A L D S . W H I T N E Y

“Don Whitney’s suggestion to pray the Bible has made a huge contribution to my devotional life. This little book is explosive and powerful. Read it ready to experience a great step forward in your walk with Christ and in your commitment to prayer.”

R. Albert Mohler Jr., President and Joseph Emerson Brown
Professor of Christian Theology, The Southern Baptist Theological
Seminary

“My walk with the Lord has often been strengthened and encouraged by Don Whitney’s writing. Now he reminds us of the value of using Scripture as a prompt and basis for our prayers. This is a particularly helpful tool for those of us who often struggle to know what and how to pray or whose minds tend to wander during private prayer. This book will surely help many refresh their time with the Lord.”

Nancy Leigh DeMoss, author; radio host, *Revive Our Hearts*

“If you are looking for a book to teach you not only to pray but also to invigorate your intimacy with God through prayer, this is the one. I highly recommend this book written by a man who has instructed thousands of people about spiritual disciplines in academic circles and in church settings. My soul has been nourished as I have sat under Whitney’s teaching, especially on the topic of prayer. You and I need this book. You will be blessed in more than one way.”

Miguel Núñez, Senior Pastor, International Baptist Church of
Santo Domingo; President, Wisdom and Integrity

“I prayed through Psalm 23 with tears streaming down my face, asking myself, why have I not done this before? Perhaps you’ve been told to pray the Scriptures, but you haven’t because you were never taught *how* to. Whitney’s simple approach makes praying through the Bible accessible while also leaving space for the Word and Spirit to work in your heart. Don’t give up on prayer! *Praying the Bible* will help transform your prayer life.”

Trillia Newbell, author, *United: Captured by God’s Vision for
Diversity and Fear and Faith*

“Prayer and Scripture intake are both essential for spiritual devotion, like the left and right wings of a plane. Prayer is the Christian’s duty. It should also be the Christian’s delight. *Praying the Bible* will teach you to take in the joy of Scripture-led prayer.”

H. B. Charles Jr., Pastor, Shiloh Metropolitan Baptist Church,
Jacksonville, Florida

“Whitney offers a wonderfully practical, pastoral, and biblical approach to prayer that relieves personal boredom and unleashes spiritual power. It’s so simple it will shock you and, at the same time, invigorate a renewed prayer life with your God.”

Bryan Chapell, President Emeritus, Covenant Theological
Seminary; Senior Pastor, Grace Presbyterian Church, Peoria,
Illinois

“Whitney has taught the material in this book a number of times at the WorshipGod conferences I lead. Unfailingly his has been one of the most appreciated and life-affecting seminars we’ve offered. I can’t recommend this book highly enough.”

Bob Kauflin, Director of Worship, Sovereign Grace Ministries;
author, *Worship Matters* and *True Worshipers*

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 **CROSSWAY**

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For T. W. Hunt, the most prayerful man I've ever known. Thank you for decades of daily prayer for me.

And also for R. F. Gates, whom God used in ways neither of us could have ever imagined in that moment on March 1, 1985, when you held up the Bible and said, "When you pray, use the prayer book!"

And most of all, for my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

All this, indeed all of life, is for you and about you. After talking with you so many thousands of times, I can't wait to see you.

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The Problem

If I try to pray for people or events without having the word in front of me guiding my prayers, then several negative things happen. One is that I tend to be very repetitive. . . . I just pray the same things all the time. Another negative thing is that my mind tends to wander.

John Piper

Since prayer is talking with God, why don't people pray more? Why don't the people of God *enjoy* prayer more? I maintain that people—truly born-again, genuinely Christian people—often do not pray simply because they do not *feel* like it. And the reason they don't feel like praying is that when they do pray, they tend to say the same old things about the same old things.

When you've said the same old things about the same old things about a thousand times, how do you feel about

saying them again? Did you dare just think the “B” word? Yes, bored. We can be talking to the most fascinating Person in the universe about the most important things in our lives and be bored to death.

As a result, a great many Christians conclude, “It must be me. Something’s wrong with me. If I get bored in something as important as prayer, then I must be a second-rate Christian.”

Indeed, why would people become bored when talking with God, especially when talking about that which is most important to them? Is it because we don’t love God? Is it because, deep down, we really care nothing for the people or matters we pray about? No. Rather, if this mind-wandering boredom describes your experience in prayer, I would argue that if you are indwelled by the Holy Spirit—if you are born again—then the problem is not you; it is your *method*.

The Spirit’s Presence Prompts Prayer

Notice that very important condition—“if you are indwelled by the Holy Spirit”—for no method will enliven prayer for a person who isn’t indwelled by the Holy Spirit. Such a person has no sustained appetite for prayer, no long-term desire for it.

When God brings someone into a relationship with himself through Jesus Christ, he begins to live within that person by means of his Holy Spirit. As the apostle Paul writes

to followers of Jesus in Ephesians 1:13, “In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit.” In 1 Corinthians 6:19 Paul also reassures believers in Christ, “Your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God.”

Just as you bring your human nature with you whenever you enter any place, so whenever the Holy Spirit enters any person, he brings his holy nature with him. The result is that all those in whom the Spirit dwells have new holy hungers and holy loves they did not have prior to having his indwelling presence. They hunger for the holy Word of God, which they used to find boring or irrelevant (1 Pet. 2:2). They love fellowship with the people of God, finding it unimaginable to live apart from meaningful interaction with them (1 John 3:14). Hearts and minds in which the Holy Spirit dwells feel holy longings unknown to them previously. They long to live in a holy body without sin, yearn for a holy mind no longer subject to temptation, groan for a holy world filled with holy people, and earnestly desire to see at last the face of the one the angels call “Holy, holy, holy” (Rev. 4:8).

This is the spiritual heartbeat of 100 percent of the hearts where the Spirit of God lives. A person may be just nine years old, but if the Holy Spirit has come to him or her, then these hungers and desires are planted there (expressed in nine-year-old ways, of course, but they live there

because he lives there). And a person may be ninety-nine with a heart encrusted by the traditions and experiences of the years, but pulsing underneath is the ever-fresh, ever-green work of the Holy Spirit manifested in every person in whom he dwells.

And according to the New Testament letters of both Romans and Galatians, another of the supernatural heart changes the Spirit creates in all Christians is to cause them to cry, “Abba! Father!” (Rom. 8:15; Gal. 4:6).¹ Thus when someone is born again, the Holy Spirit gives that person new Fatherward desires, a new heavenward orientation whereby we cry, “Abba, Father!” In other words, all those indwelt by the Holy Spirit really want to pray. The Holy Spirit causes all the children of God to believe that God is their Father and fills them with an undying desire to talk to him.

“Something Must Be Wrong with Me”

Nevertheless, while this Spirit-produced passion is pushing against one side of our soul, colliding with that is our experience. And our experience says, “But when I pray, frankly, it’s boring.” And when prayer is boring, we don’t feel like praying. And when we don’t feel like praying, it’s hard to make ourselves pray. Even five or six minutes of prayer can feel like an eternity. Our mind wanders half the time. We’ll suddenly come to ourselves and think, “Now where was I? I haven’t been thinking of God for the last several min-

utes.” And we’ll return to that mental script we’ve repeated countless times. But almost immediately our minds begin to wander again because we’ve said the same old things about the same old things so many times.

“It must be me,” we conclude. “Prayer isn’t supposed to be like this. I guess I’m just a second-rate Christian.”

No, the problem is almost certainly not you; it’s your method. If you have turned from living for yourself and your sin and have trusted Jesus Christ and his work to make you right with God, God has given you the Holy Spirit. And if you are seeking to live under the lordship of Jesus Christ and the authority of God’s Word (the Bible), confessing known sin and fighting the lifelong tendency to sin instead of excusing it, then the problem of boredom in prayer is not you; rather, it is your method.

And the method of most Christians in prayer is to say the same old things about the same old things. After forty years of experience in ministry, I am convinced that this problem is almost universal. Virtually from the beginning of their Christian life, it seems that nearly every believer suffers from this habit.

When prayer consists of the same spoken sentences on every occasion, naturally we wonder at the value of the practice. If our prayers bore us, do they also bore God? Does God really need to hear me say these things again? We can begin to feel like a little girl I heard about. Her parents had taught her the classic bedtime prayer for children

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that begins, “Now I lay me down to sleep.” One night she thought, “Why does God need to hear me say this again?” So she decided to record herself saying the prayer, and then she played the recording each night when she went to bed.

Perhaps you smile at her story, but you have prayer recordings in your head; they’re just a little longer or more sophisticated. Recorded in your memory are prayers—your own or the prayers of others—you can repeat mindlessly.

I pastored a church in the Chicago area for almost fifteen years. During the worship service one Sunday morning the ushers came forward to receive the offering, and one of the ushers was asked to pray. As the man was praying, I could hear someone else talking. I thought, *Surely this person will stop in a moment*. Then I realized it was a child, and I said to myself, *Some adult will quiet this child any second now*. But as the talking continued, I opened my eyes and saw in the second row the five-year-old son of the usher who was praying. Soon it became obvious that the little boy was praying the same words as his dad; not repeating after him but in unison with him. It was like when entire congregations pray the Lord’s Prayer in unison; instead this was a father and son praying “Dad’s prayer.” How could such a little boy do that? It was because every time his dad prayed, whether at the Lord’s Supper table at the church or the supper table at home, his dad prayed the same prayer. The boy had been in the world only sixty months, and he had already memorized everything his dad said when he

prayed. He could say the words of the prayer, but most of what came out of his mouth was just a repetition of what were, to his five-year-old mind, empty phrases.

There may be people in your own family, or your church, or somewhere in your background who, when they were or are called upon to pray, *you* could give the prayer because you've heard it so many times. Our hearts don't soar when we hear such praying; we just politely endure it.

One prayer does not a prayer life make. Prayers without variety eventually become words without meaning. Jesus said that to pray this way is to pray in vain, for in the Sermon on the Mount he warned, "When you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words" (Matt. 6:7).

The tragedy is that too often that's the way it is with our own prayers. We believe in prayer, and the Spirit of God prompts us to pray, but because we always say the same old things about the same old things, it can seem as though all we do in prayer is simply "heap up empty phrases." Although this drains most of the motivation from talking with God, we'll dutifully try to grind out another round of prayer; yet our minds constantly wander from the words, and we condemn ourselves as spiritual failures.

Praying about "the Same Old Things" Is Normal

Notice carefully—for this is very important—that the problem is *not* that we pray *about* the same old things. To

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routinely pray about the same people and situations is perfectly normal. It's normal to pray about the same old things because our lives tend to consist of the same old things.

For example, if I came to your church or Bible study group and randomly selected a handful of people, including you, then asked each person to get alone and spend the next five to ten minutes in prayer, I'm confident that nearly every person in the group would pray about the same half dozen things.

Each person would likely pray about his or her *family* in one sense or another. Married people would pray for their spouses, singles might pray to be married, parents would pray for their children, and so forth.

Doubtless everyone would pray about their *future*, perhaps asking for direction about some decision, such as a change at work or whether to move to a new place. Or their prayer might be about an upcoming event or some life change that's on their horizon.

It's very likely all would pray about their *finances*, seeking God's provision for that car, for those bills, or for school.

Most would pray about their *work*, or if students, they'd pray in some way about their schoolwork. It's normal for people to pray in regard to what they spend most of their waking hours doing during the week.

Each of these believers would probably pray about some *Christian concern*, such as something related to their church or to a personal ministry involvement with someone. Pos-

sibly they would pray for a brother or sister in Christ who is suffering or for someone with whom they are trying to share the gospel.

And then each one would almost certainly pray about the *current crisis* in his or her life. I have read that each of us experiences a relatively significant crisis on an average of once every six months or so. The matter may be a good thing or a bad thing, a birth or a death, a job change you want or one you don't want, but it's such a big deal that when you pray, it's one of the first things that comes to mind. This situation devours so much of your attention that you need no prayer list to remind you to pray about it.

If you are going to pray about your life, these six things *are* your life, aren't they? If you don't think so, how much of your life is not at all related to your family, your future, your finances, your work or schoolwork, your Christian concerns, and the current crisis? These are the areas where you devote almost all your time. Moreover, these are the great loves of your life, the places where your heart is.

And, thankfully, these things don't change dramatically very often. Families, for example, don't experience the changes of marriages, births, and deaths month after month, year in and year out. While there may be frequent small changes in these areas, really big changes in our family, work, etc., usually don't happen every week or even every month.

So, if you are going to pray about your life, and if these

six things *are* your life, and if these things don't change significantly very often, that means you are going to pray *about* the same old things most of the time. That's normal.

Saying "the Same Old Things" Is Boring

Therefore the problem is not that we pray *about* the same old things; rather, it's that we *say* the same old things about the same old things. It seems that virtually everyone begins to pray this way sooner or later, and it is boring. And when prayer is boring, we don't feel like praying. When we don't feel like praying, it's hard to pray, at least in any sort of focused, heartfelt way.

That's when we are tempted to think, *It must be me. I must be just a second-rate Christian.*

The natural response to such discouragement can be, "Then stop it! Quit praying. Why do this to yourself? If prayer is so boring and leaves you so frustrated and disheartened, then don't pray anymore."

A true Christian would recoil, astonished at such a suggestion. No matter how boring a believer's prayer life, no matter how few prayers are answered, no matter how deep the sense of failure in prayer, anyone indwelt by the Holy Spirit can never permanently give up prayer. That's the result of the ongoing ministry of the third person of the Trinity, which is referred to by theologians as the "preserving work" of the Holy Spirit. Once the Spirit of God brings people to spiritual life, he preserves them in that life, grant-

ing them the grace to persevere in the evidences of that life, such as prayer. In other words, once the Spirit causes a person to begin to cry, “Abba! Father!” he continues creating Godward looks and pleas in that person forever.

So, due to the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit, you believe in prayer and you really want to pray. But when you try to pray, it just feels like, well, like something’s wrong. Then perhaps you hear a sermon on prayer, or you hear a testimony about answered prayer, or you read a book (like this one) on prayer, and for a while you go back to prayer, recommitted and rejuvenated but basically still saying the same old things about the same old things, just with a bit more spiritual “oomph” behind it. Very soon, though, the new enthusiasm evaporates, and you find that saying the same old things about the same old things is as boring as before, only now you feel guiltier than ever because you had been so resolved that things would be different this time.

Once again you return to what seems the inevitable conclusion: “It must be me. Something’s wrong with me. I must be just a second-rate Christian.”

“THIS LITTLE BOOK IS EXPLOSIVE AND POWERFUL.”

R. Albert Mohler Jr.

When you pray, does it ever feel like you're just saying *the same old things about the same old things*?

Offering us the encouragement and the practical advice we're all looking for, Donald S. Whitney, best-selling author of *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, outlines an easy-to-grasp method that has the power to transform our prayer life: praying the words of Scripture. Simple, yet profound, *Praying the Bible* will prove invaluable as you seek to commune with your heavenly Father in prayer each and every day.

“My walk with the Lord has often been strengthened and encouraged by Whitney's writing. This is a helpful tool for those of us who often struggle to know what and how to pray.”

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