

His Word, Your Words

Immersing yourself in Scripture breathes new life into your prayers.

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I used to feel impatient in grocery store lines or while waiting to get off a plane. On good days, I might simply zone out. On bad days, I wondered why things took so frustratingly long.

Lately, however, things have changed. I'm taking my energy to the interesting place of prayer. In the supermarket, for example, I often pray a version of Psalm 23: "Thank You, O God, that You are my shepherd. As I make purchases, Your teaching guides my choices. Thank You that I really do have everything I need, even when I crave more. Thank You for still waters and green pastures that I can experience even while standing in line. I can ignore these magazine covers and gadgets by the checkout line and focus on how You long to restore my soul."

Such moments have begun to blur any neat compartmentalization between prayer and meditating on Scripture. When we immerse ourselves in Scripture, it becomes the language and pattern of our dialogue with God. Scripture meditation not only trains us to hear God speak, but its themes also permeate our response to God in prayer. Prayer then becomes a back-and-forth conversation with our transcendent, yet intimate, Father-Creator, who desires to act in great power in us.

Saturated with the Spirit

One example of how Scripture forms our inner self is the song of Mary, known as the Magnificat (Lk. 1:46–55). Mary was so saturated in Scripture that it shaped her response to the event that would change her life forever. Rather than cooing "Wow!" or "Awesome!" when Elizabeth greeted her as blessed among women and the "mother of my Lord" (Lk. 1:42–43), Mary burst forth in a seemingly spontaneous, passionate prayer song. But was it really that spontaneous? Scholar Norval Geldenhuys writes:

Some critics have asked whether Mary had her Old Testament open before her when she uttered the song. They forget that all pious Israelites from their childhood days knew by heart songs from the Old Testament and often sang them in the home circle and at celebrations. Mary was steeped in the poetical literature of her nation, and accordingly her hymn also bears the unmistakable signs of it.

Mary overflowed with ideas, words, and phrases from Hannah's celebration of her own son Samuel's birth (1 Sam. 2:1–10). In 1 Samuel 2:1, Hannah prayed, "My heart rejoices in the Lord." Mary reiterated that idea in Lk. 1:46–47: "My soul glorifies the Lord and my Spirit rejoices in God my Savior."

Hannah also had a strong sense of God's character and personal involvement:

The Lord sends poverty and wealth; he humbles and he exalts. He raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap; he seats them with princes and has them inherit a throne of honor.

—1 Sam. 2:7–8

Hannah's prayer reinforced the importance of looking beyond our own concerns to seeing how God acts in the world. Hannah saw herself as a part of God's bigger scheme; she refused to focus only on her own triumph. Similarly, Mary understood that God inverts the plight of the hopeless: "He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty" (Lk. 1:53).

Another sign of Mary's saturation in Scripture is seen in how automatically she responded with ideas that matched the heart of God. Others no doubt viewed Mary's circumstances—unmarried but pregnant—as

problematic. Mary did not. Instead, she poured out a song drenched with the language of Scripture, including a number of allusions to various psalms (Ps. 38:6, 71:19, 98:1, 103:17, 107:9, 111:9, 132:11).

Mary's response to God shows that she had not just mechanically memorized Hannah's song and the psalms. She did not quote Scripture as we often do—knitting our eyebrows and rolling our eyes to recall the exact wording. Instead, these passages molded Mary's thought patterns and her conversation with God. She truly knew these scriptures *by heart*. Hannah's prayer had no doubt cultivated Mary's heart for years; Hannah's words and thoughts about God had become hers.

A New Accent

Immersion in Scripture—through reading and studying, memorizing and meditating—results in prayer conversations that can occur anywhere.

On a certain leg of my morning bike ride, for example, I pray for several pastor friends. Soon after I began praying for them, I decided that I wanted to pray more substantively. So I memorized Paul's prayer in Eph. 3:16–21. I was then able to pray that they would be strengthened with power through the Spirit in their inner being (no wimpy sermons), that they would be rooted and grounded in love (in every difficult conversation), and that they would grasp how wide and long and high and deep the love of Christ is (and pass on that love to others).

These prayers in the language and pattern of Scripture are one way God transforms us into Christlikeness. Consider how often we pick up ideas from those we spend time with—perhaps even their accent or odd laugh. Similarly, when we hear God speak to us in Scripture, the words and ideas percolate in our minds until we think they're our ideas. God rubs off on us, so to speak. We set out only to interact with God and enjoy God's presence, but we find to our surprise that we have soaked up the mind of Christ.

Authors Glandion Carney and William Long had this process in mind when they wrote about the purpose and place of Scripture in our lives.

The heart of ethical mastery of the Scripture is to allow Scripture to move us. It is when Scripture becomes so deeply embedded in our lives that it need not be "drawn out" and "thought about" to have an influence. It becomes part of our very soul. It shapes us. Its very contours become the contours of our thoughts, words and hopes. This is beyond the stage where Scripture is used to extract comforting verses or even "principles of living." Scripture becomes our most engaging conversation partner.

When the Scriptures saturate our souls, we are more likely to act on them. This is different from articulating correct doctrine or professing profound ideas. Instead, truth becomes so deeply embedded in how we think and act that to act apart from it sounds ridiculous. When such ideas are part of the way we "live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28), they tumble out in our conversations with God.

Prayer-Shaped Moments

Sometimes God uses Scripture to call us back to what Jesus asks of us as His disciples. I experienced this after a recent retreat.

As the speaker for this retreat, I longed for the tone of the retreat to be one of seeking God. Thus, I'd asked the retreat planners not to create a "fun and games" atmosphere, but a reflective one that would invite attendees to pay attention to how God might be moving in their lives.

From my perspective, however, that did not happen. Throughout the weekend, I battled judgmental impulses. God's consistent response to me was, "I didn't bring you here to judge. I brought you here to serve." I spent a lot of time praying for the people around me and fighting to keep my heart right. By the end

of the retreat, I was tired but glad that God had enabled me to keep surrendering those judgmental moments to Him. I was home free . . . almost.

For the ride to the airport, I was ushered into the backseat of a car. The two people in the front plunged into a conversation that didn't include me. Normally this would not have bothered me. But perhaps because I'd already fought so hard all weekend to keep my heart right, I felt deeply excluded. I tried not to listen, but even that was exhausting.

I could feel myself falling again into an abyss of judgment. I knew it was not safe to pray spontaneously. So I dug into my purse for the folded, dog-eared, coffee-stained copy of the Sermon on the Mount that I carry with me. In a flash, I found these words:

Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.

—Mt. 7:1–2

Though I knew these words by heart, I needed to see them in print. It was such a relief to read the truth I knew. It was as if I could hear God's voice—gentle but firm—reminding me of whom I am committed to be. Clutching my papers, I began to pray silently: "I will not judge, O God. I don't want to be condemned the same way I'm condemning others. I want to be generous and overflowing in how I measure events."

Then I read, "Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?" (v. 3). The word *look* is the same one used in Mt. 5:28 for those who look lustfully. I recalled how Augustine talked about the problem of "the look." Adultery of the heart begins with the look that is too long, too intense, too intentional. I prayed: "Yes, O God, I confess I am looking long and hard at the behavior of the folks in the frontseat just so I can judge them."

Then the words *sawdust* and *plank* leapt out at me. "Oh God, I confess to You that I am obsessed with finding sawdust. I am the Sawdust Queen, yet so weighed down with planks in my own eyes. Please forgive me." I sat riveted for several miles, gazing out the window at the beautiful hills. I'm not a country-western music fan, but I almost broke out into a spontaneous song about being the Sawdust Queen.

My prayers of confession and repentance melted into surrender and peace. Still clutching Jesus' words, I prayed, "I, the recovering Sawdust Queen, am greatly loved by You, O God, who skillfully eases planks out of my eyes."

As the miles passed, I moved into praying for growth in Christlikeness for the people in the frontseat and for myself.

Since that time, I've had moments where it has not even occurred to me to condemn the people I once would have judged. This change in my behavior is, I believe, immeasurably more than I asked for that day (Eph. 3:20). It's evidence of God's mysterious kingdom working in my life to change my pattern of thinking.

God's words call out to us to come home in prayer to find freedom from the sin, fear, and heavy weights that cling to our souls. When we're finished, we find that Christ, and His words, dwell in our hearts more deeply.