



The Relationship Between the Bible and Prayer

I like to get up early, before anyone else in my family. I need the moments of quiet before the chaos that is a typical morning with alarms, lunch making, and school drop offs. Today I woke up while it was still dark, sat by the fireplace with a coffee in hand, and I read four psalms, the first chapter of Acts, and then I sat in silence. If someone were to ask me how I started my day, I would have simply said: *I prayed.*

People have been praying to deities for thousands of years, perhaps since the very beginning of humanity. Prayer is not exclusive to the Christian faith; it is a nearly universal aspect of religion that is shared across religions throughout time. But what is prayer? In particular, what exactly is Christian prayer? It is one of those things that is easy to recognize but hard to define. To look back through Christian history, we see a variety of answers to this question. The desert recluse and eventual abbot (whose book the *Ladder of Divine Ascent* influenced countless Christians), John Climacus wrote, “Prayer is by nature a dialogue and a union of man [*sic*] with God. It achieves a reconciliation with God.”¹ I find his definition particularly helpful because it implies that both human and God are active participants in prayer, and the act of praying brings them closer together. In a similar vein, twentieth century philosopher and Carmelite nun, Edith Stein, wrote that, “Prayer is a Jacob’s ladder on which the human spirit ascends

¹ John Climacus, *Ladder of Divine Ascent*, trans. Colm Luibheid and Norman Russell (New York: Paulist Press, 1982), 274.

to God and God's grace descends to people. The stages of prayer are distinguished according to the measure in which the natural efforts of the soul and God's grace participate."² Again, we see the active participation of both believer and God. We see relationship.

Prayer can take endless forms. It can be freeform, it can be memorized prayers, it can be a short plea, such as *Lord have mercy*, or a long conversation with God. It can be a broken, *Why God?* Or a relieved, *Thank you, God*. It can be sitting in silence and listening. Prayer is hard to define because it can be so many things.

The topic at hand for this issue, though, is not just prayer, but the relationship between prayer and the Bible. Through the articles in this issue, you see different perspectives, but there is an overarching theme that prayer and the Bible are intrinsically intertwined. Yes, you can pray without scripture, and you can read scripture without actively engaging in prayer, but the two are connected. They *should* be connected.

Many of Christianity's most influential prayers come from the Bible. The Lord's Prayer is found in the New Testament (Matthew 6:9–13, Luke 11:2–4). The Magnificat is found in Luke (1:46–55), and parts of the Hail Mary is found in Luke as well (Luke 1:28, 41–42). Even the simple, *Lord have mercy*, or a variant of, is found in multiple places in the Bible (Just a few examples: Psalm 25:6; Psalm 51:1; Psalm 86:1; Isaiah 33:2–6). Oftentimes, we take our prayers from the Bible. When our own words are lacking, the Bible can give us the words we are so desperate to express but can't articulate; the psalms are particularly helpful in this regard.³

One of the most important Christian practices that combines prayer and the Bible is that of *lectio Divina*, or divine reading in English. It is a key activity in the *Rule of St. Benedict*. Within this practice is the understanding that scripture is a deep well. When one goes to scripture, one must be open to the idea that an encounter with God is possible and that there are layers of different interpretations and experiences. This is unlike modern methods of biblical interpretation, such as literal interpretation or the historical-critical method. Scripture is

² Edith Stein, *Essential Writings*, ed. John Sullivan, OCD (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 123.

³ Rolf Jacobson, "There's a Psalm for That: How the Psalms Speak in Daily Life," *Word & World* 43, no. 4 (2023): 310–320.

a place of active encounter with God. It is not necessarily about “correct” interpretation but how one experiences the text in that moment and how one can encounter God through it.

Yes, one can divorce the Bible from prayer, from God. One can make studying it purely an intellectual exercise, but the Bible remains the place where one can read about God’s relationship with humanity, God’s promise, the Incarnation, the crucifixion, the resurrection, and about the struggles of the earliest Christians. It is a place where we *encounter* God, if we are open to it, and maybe even if we aren’t. When we approach the Bible, we should be prepared for the possibility of relationship with God through prayer—the possibility that scripture and prayer, together, will *change* us. ⊕

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