

## Praying Scripture

I recall several books that flew off the shelves during my years as an employee and then manager of a Christian bookstore. I happily sold *Love You Forever*<sup>1</sup> about a mother who sings a lullaby to her son at each stage of his life – during his childhood and into adulthood. “*I’ll love you forever, I’ll like you for always, as long as I’m living, my baby you’ll be.*”

I was uncomfortable with selling *88 Reasons Why the Rapture Will Be in 1988*.<sup>2</sup> I don’t think we stocked the revised edition explaining why the author’s calculations were off by one year and stating why he was now even more certain the rapture would occur in 1989.

I had mixed feelings about a run-away hit published in 2000. *The Prayer of Jabez: Breaking Through to the Blessed Life* written by Bruce Wilkinson is based on 1 Chronicles 4:9-10. Amid nine chapters of long genealogies filled with more than 500 unpronounceable names, we find these verses: *Jabez was more honorable than his brothers. His mother had named him Jabez, saying, “I gave birth to him in pain.” Jabez cried out to the God of Israel, “Oh, that you would bless me and enlarge my territory! Let your hand be with me, and keep me from evil so that I may not cause pain.” And God granted his request.*<sup>3</sup>

Wilkinson discovered Jabez’s prayer while in seminary and prayed it daily for 30 years before writing his book. He described the prayer as one that God always answers; one that contains the key to a life of extraordinary favor with God. He testified that thousands of believers who were applying its truths were seeing miracles happen on a regular basis.

In the book, Wilkinson encouraged Christians to invoke this prayer for themselves: *I challenge you to make the Jabez prayer for blessing part of the daily fabric of your life. To do that, I encourage you to follow unwaveringly the plan outlined here for the next thirty days. By the end of that time, you’ll be noticing significant changes in your life, and the prayer will be on its way to becoming a treasured, lifelong habit.*<sup>4</sup>

Critics of the book charged that it promoted the prosperity gospel, the belief that financial blessing and physical well-being are always the will of God for all Christians, and that faith, prayer, and donations to religious causes will increase one’s material wealth. Rather than prayer being a way to connect with and listen to God, it’s seen as a magic formula – a sure-fire way to get what you want.

It seems to me that Wilkinson read a lot more into this prayer than is warranted by its extremely brief mention in scripture. However, I do see value in using these words to ask for an expansion of ministry, blessing, and protection. I believe that praying scripture is a good way to pray and that for some people, in some situations the prayer of Jabez could a faithful way to talk with God.

There are endless forms of prayer: wordy and wordless, still and active; written and spontaneous; rote and conversational; silent and aloud; individual and group; formal and informal; spoken, musical and visual. Praying scripture can connect us to God and to people across the ages who have used these same words to pray. Praying scripture can assist us when it seems impossible to pray, when we have no words of our own. Praying scripture is one way of reading and understanding the Bible.

During the remainder of the sermon time, we’ll explore how this can work. We’ve already prayed one scripture when we sang the Lord’s Prayer. We’ll pray it again to conclude our worship. There are many options of biblical passages to use for prayer. I’ll suggest five.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> [Love You Forever - Wikipedia](#)

<sup>2</sup> [Edgar C. Whisenant - Wikipedia](#)

<sup>3</sup> 1 Chronicles 4:9-10, *New International Version* (as written in Wilkinson’s book)

<sup>4</sup> [The Prayer of Jabez - Wikipedia](#)

<sup>5</sup> Some of the commentary that follows is adapted from [15 Most Powerful Prayers in the Bible | Christian.net](#)

## 1 Samuel 2:1-10

One of the most powerful prayers of praise is found in 1 Samuel. Hannah was a faith-filled woman who faced the problem of barrenness, which in her day was considered shameful. Hannah prayed for a son and vowed that she would dedicate her child to God. She gave birth to a baby whom she called Samuel. Hannah offered these words in gratitude to God.

*My heart rejoices in the LORD.  
My strength rises up in the LORD!  
My mouth mocks my enemies  
because I rejoice in your deliverance.  
No one is holy like the LORD—  
no, no one except you!  
There is no rock like our God!  
Don't go on and on, talking so proudly,  
spouting arrogance from your mouth,  
because the LORD is the God who knows,  
and he weighs every act.  
The bows of mighty warriors are shattered,  
but those who were stumbling now dress  
themselves in power!  
Those who were filled full now sell themselves  
for bread,  
but the ones who were starving are now  
fat from food!  
The woman who was barren has birthed  
seven children,  
but the mother with many sons has lost them all!*

*The LORD!  
He brings death, gives life,  
takes down to the grave, and raises up!  
The LORD!  
He makes poor, gives wealth,  
brings low, but also lifts up high!  
God raises the poor from the dust,  
lifts up the needy from the garbage pile.  
God sits them with officials,  
gives them the seat of honor!  
The pillars of the earth belong to the LORD;  
he set the world on top of them!  
God guards the feet of his faithful ones,  
but the wicked die in darkness  
because no one succeeds by strength alone.  
The LORD!  
His enemies are terrified!  
God thunders against them from heaven!  
The LORD!  
He judges the far corners of the earth!  
May God give strength to his king  
and raise high the strength of his anointed one.<sup>6</sup>*

Hannah begins her prayer with adoration. *My heart rejoices in the Lord.* It's always good to begin a prayer with praise. She continues by describing God's constancy and strength. *No one is holy like the LORD—no, no one except you! There is no rock like our God!* Some of the language she uses in describing the reversal she has experienced might make us uncomfortable. When prayers for food and children are answered, do we really want our enemies to starve and their children to die? But, ultimately, instead of taking matters into her own hands to achieve vindication for the oppression and injustice she has experienced, Hannah rejoices that God remains sovereign and will handle the eventual judgment. *The LORD! His enemies are terrified! God thunders against them from heaven! The LORD! He judges the far corners of the earth!* We can pray using Hannah's words or we can follow her example of praising God, rejoicing in God's steadfastness, and listing the ways we've seen God working in the world and in our lives.

## Psalm 16

The Psalms cover most every area of life and express a wide variety of emotions. They contain prayers for favor, repentance, help in trouble, safety from enemies, mercy, wisdom, and forgiveness. Psalm 16 is a song of trust.

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<sup>6</sup> 1 Samuel 2:1-10, *Common English Bible*

*Protect me, God, because I take refuge in you.  
 I say to the LORD, "You are my Lord.  
 Apart from you, I have nothing good."  
 Now as for the "holy ones" in the land,  
 the "magnificent ones" that I was so happy about;  
 let their suffering increase because  
 they hurried after a different god.  
 I won't participate in their blood offerings;  
 I won't let their names cross my lips.  
 You, LORD, are my portion, my cup;  
 you control my destiny.  
 The property lines have fallen beautifully for me;  
 yes, I have a lovely home.*

*I will bless the LORD who advises me;  
 even at night I am instructed  
 in the depths of my mind.  
 I always put the LORD in front of me;  
 I will not stumble because he is on my right side.  
 That's why my heart celebrates and my mood is  
 joyous;  
 yes, my whole body will rest in safety  
 because you won't abandon my life to the grave;  
 you won't let your faithful follower see the pit.  
 You teach me the way of life.  
 In your presence is total celebration.  
 Beautiful things are always in your right hand.<sup>7</sup>*

The first half of this psalm is a confession of faith, and expression of confidence in God who is the source of life's highest joys. The second half is a song of thanksgiving for the blessings of faith in God, which include guidance, stability, and facing life and death with hope.

### **Psalm 51**

A familiar prayer is Psalm 51. This is David's prayer of repentance after his shameful treatment of Uriah and Bathsheba.

*Have mercy on me, God, according to your faithful  
 love!  
 Wipe away my wrongdoings according to your  
 great compassion!  
 Wash me completely clean of my guilt;  
 purify me from my sin!  
 Because I know my wrongdoings,  
 my sin is always right in front of me.  
 I've sinned against you—you alone.  
 I've committed evil in your sight.  
 That's why you are justified when you render your  
 verdict,  
 completely correct when you issue your judgment.  
 Yes, I was born in guilt, in sin,  
 from the moment my mother conceived me.  
 And yes, you want truth in the most hidden places;  
 you teach me wisdom in the most secret space.*

*Purify me with hyssop and I will be clean;  
 wash me and I will be whiter than snow.  
 Let me hear joy and celebration again;  
 let the bones you crushed rejoice once more.  
 Hide your face from my sins;  
 wipe away all my guilty deeds!  
 Create a clean heart for me, God;  
 put a new, faithful spirit deep inside me!  
 Please don't throw me out of your presence;  
 please don't take your holy spirit away from me.  
 Return the joy of your salvation to me  
 and sustain me with a willing spirit.  
 Then I will teach wrongdoers your ways,  
 and sinners will come back to you.<sup>8</sup>*

This psalm is written by a person who is no longer covering up the truth about himself; someone whose confession is spilling out. It's a cry for divine forgiveness, appealing to God's goodness, mercy, and compassion. It acknowledges the relational barrier that sin creates, the importance of inner renewal that God can bring, and the way that forgiveness leads to testimony and praise.

<sup>7</sup> Psalm 16, *Common English Bible*

<sup>8</sup> Psalm 51:1-13, *Common English Bible*

Confession is telling the truth – telling the truth about our lives and the world in which we live. When we confess the truth about our lives and name our reality honestly, we discover that God is already there, eager and ready to offer cleansing and forgiveness.<sup>9</sup>

With confession comes freedom: freedom from the work of covering up what we think we need to hide, freedom from the guilt of falling short of God’s desires, freedom from the impossible task of being perfect, freedom to see ourselves as God sees us – flawed, forgiven, and loved. With this freedom comes the motivation and renewed energy to seek God’s heart and follow God’s ways.

### **Romans 8:35-39**

A few weeks ago, we read from Paul’s letter to the Christians in Rome.

*Who will separate us from Christ’s love? Will we be separated by trouble, or distress, or harassment, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written,*

*We are being put to death all day long for your sake.*

*We are treated like sheep for slaughter.*

*But in all these things we win a sweeping victory through the one who loved us. I’m convinced that nothing can separate us from God’s love in Christ Jesus our Lord: not death or life, not angels or rulers, not present things or future things, not powers or height or depth, or any other thing that is created.<sup>10</sup>*

What will separate us from God? Nothing. What will separate us from God’s Spirit? Nothing. But what if we are being killed? Nothing. But what if we are being persecuted? Nothing. But what if we are suffering? Nothing. But what if we are ill? Nothing. But what if we are lonely? Nothing. But what if we made a huge mistake? Nothing. Nothing separates us from God’s love.

### **Luke 18:13**

The last biblical prayer I’ll share with you this morning is quite short, even shorter than the prayer of Jabez. It’s found in one of Jesus’ parables as recorded in Luke 18.

*Jesus told this parable to certain people who had convinced themselves that they were righteous and who looked on everyone else with disgust: “Two people went up to the temple to pray. One was a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and prayed about himself with these words, ‘God, I thank you that I’m not like everyone else—crooks, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week. I give a tenth of everything I receive.’ But the tax collector stood at a distance. He wouldn’t even lift his eyes to look toward heaven. Rather, he struck his chest and said, ‘God, show mercy to me, a sinner.’ I tell you, this person went down to his home justified rather than the Pharisee. All who lift themselves up will be brought low, and those who make themselves low will be lifted up.”<sup>11</sup>*

Of course, I’m not suggesting you use the words of the Pharisee pointing out all your good deeds and thanking God that you’re not like that person over there. The humble prayer of the tax collector, *God, show mercy to me, a sinner*, demonstrates our reliance on the mercy and compassion of God.

A version of this prayer, called the Jesus Prayer, has been widely taught and discussed throughout the history of the Eastern Orthodox Church. *Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.*

It works well as a simple and profound breath prayer. Breathe in – *Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God* – breathe out – *have mercy on me, a sinner*. Breathe in – *Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God* – breathe out – *have mercy on me, a sinner*.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> June Alliman Yoder, Marlene Kropf, Rebecca Slough, *Preparing Sunday Dinner: A Collaborative Approach to Worship and Preaching*, Herald Press, 2005, p. 33.

<sup>10</sup> Romans 8:35-39, *Common English Bible*

<sup>11</sup> Luke 18:9-14, *Common English Bible*

<sup>12</sup> This section of the sermon draws heavily from *Sacred Pauses: Spiritual Practices for Personal Renewal* by April Yamasaki, Herald Press, 2013, pp. 160-161.

As creatures that need oxygen to live, we breathe automatically and unconsciously. With every breath, we depend on God's spirit who sustains the world. How fitting then, to link our prayers to the rhythm of our breathing. Breath prayers remind us that we depend on God as much as we depend on the air that we breathe. Breath prayers remind us that we need to pray. They engage both mind and body, both heart and soul. With each breath, we pray with our whole being.

A shorter form of the prayer can be used throughout the day in the midst of any activity to pray for others as well as for ourselves – *Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy*. For the friend who looks so together on the outside, but who secretly struggles with depression– *Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy*. For the couple who started out as friends and now after years of marriage look at each other as strangers– *Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy*. For those who are going hungry today while others have too much– *Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy*. For when we don't know how to pray for someone we care about– *Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy*. For when we don't know how to pray for ourselves– *Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy*. For when we don't know what to pray for in a situation that seems to have no solution– *Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy*.

The prayers we've considered this morning and many others scattered throughout the Bible can assist us as we seek peace together. They help us to experience peace with God, peace within ourselves, peace with others, and peace with creation. I challenge you to pray scripture as a regular part of your life. I encourage you to explore prayers of the Bible and use them in the way that works best for you. May this way of praying become a treasured custom.