



GOD'S PRAYER PROGRAM





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Passionately Using the Psalms in Prayer

T. M. Moore

CHRISTIAN FOCUS





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For Steven Wright





THE PSALTER SAIL

“Fear not,” said he, “for we have our God Himself as our guide and helper. And ship your oars and set the sail; and God will guide His own boat and company as He pleases.”

Brendan of Clonfert (ca. AD 560)¹

His heart’s eye firmly set upon a land
of promised blessing, Brendan led his troop
of sixteen faithful friends to build a sloop
of skins, that they might follow where the hand
of God would lead. Full hard they rowed against
the unknown sea, yet they could not prevail.
So Brendan shipped the oars and raised the sail,
and let the wind of God propel him thence.

As Brendan found their feeble frames unfit
to gain the blessing, and unfurled his sail
to catch the welcome winds of God, so we
who seek the Savior’s face in prayer must quit
mere fleshly schemes, and principally avail
us of the psalter sail to cross this sea.

¹ Robert Van de Meyer, *Celtic Fire* (New York: Doubleday, 1990), p. 45; Charles Plummer, ed. and tr., *Lives of Irish Saints* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1922 [1997]), p. 53.







INTRODUCTION:

A MIGHTY STRUGGLE

The best thing, when it is possible, is to keep the patient from the serious intention of praying altogether.

-Screwtape to Wormwood¹

“For we do not know what to pray as we ought...”²

I don't recall the first time I ever came across this bit of apostolic insight; I must have read that passage many times during those early years of my walk with the Lord. But I do remember my frequent and frustrated response to it: You got that right!

Some believers, no doubt, have never had to struggle with prayer. I am not one of those, and I suspect that my experience of laboring to arrive at some satisfactory practice of the discipline of prayer mirrors what most have known who have ever taken up the challenge of this discipline.

For the first twenty years of my life as a believer I approached the discipline of prayer from many different angles. Using a variety of practices and props, I struggled with all my might, like Brendan and his sixth-century crew of missionary monks, to row my way to the blessings of God. But much of the time I felt I was making little headway. That prayer is important, and that all Christians should make prayer a vital part of their walk with the Lord, was drummed into me from the first days of my life in Christ by





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those who helped me begin to grow in grace. But that making effective use of the discipline of prayer can be a mighty struggle, one that can disappoint as often as it satisfies, well, somehow I failed to pay attention when they mentioned that.

I was taught to pray at first using the familiar "ACTS" formula. Some time in each of my prayers, I was told, should be given to Adoring the Lord, some to Confessing my sins, some to giving Him Thanks, and some to Supplications, or, prayers for my needs and those of others. Dutifully, I set out to master the use of this simple and helpful formula. For a while in those early years this proved to be a very satisfactory approach to prayer. But then I began to have questions.

For example, were my attempts at adoring the Lord the kinds of expressions of love that He wanted to hear? Was I saying them correctly? Adoring Him for the right things? The right reasons? Adoring Him as much as I should? With as much sincerity as He desired? Conversely, was I failing to adore Him in any ways I should due to ignorance, neglect, or other reason? Was I even saying as much as I wanted to say in my expressions of love for the God Who had saved me and was filling my life with so many blessings?

What about my prayers of confession? Were they sincere? Were my motives what they ought to have been? Was I covering all the bases, confessing everything I should? As often as I should? Confessing with the right attitude? Was I even using words that





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God would find acceptable? Was it all right to confess sins I didn't even know about, or should I just let those sleeping dogs lie?

Once the questions began, they quickly spilled over into every area of my prayers: Was I as thankful as I should be? For as much as I should? What was I leaving out? Should I be thanking God with greater frequency? Greater fervency? Greater breadth? Was I failing to give thanks for anything? Should I give thanks even when I don't feel thankful? If so, how do I do that?

The questions ranged even farther in the area of supplications: Whom was I leaving out? What was I failing to mention? Was I asking amiss, for things I wanted rather than things God wanted me to have? Are all the things my friends asked me to pray about even legitimate in the eyes of the Lord? Was I forgetting anything I had promised to pray for? What about the missionaries? Should I be praying for them? What about the lost? The leaders of my church? The rulers of the world's nations? My neighbor next door? What should I be praying about for all these people? How could I ever remember all this anyway?

Such questions led to frustration and disappointment with prayer the way I was then pursuing it. And these were the easy questions! The harder ones were the more personal questions relating to my attitudes and conduct in prayer: What does God think when my mind drifts like it does so often? Am I taking enough time in prayer?





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Saying things the right way, with the right attitude of heart? Should I pray things I've promised to pray even if I don't feel right doing so? Should I be kneeling, praying to myself, praying out loud, raising my hands? Does God care that I don't say "Thee" and "shouldst"? Should I be saying them? When should I pray? And how often? Does God know how frustrating and unsatisfying I find this whole business of prayer? Does He know that I'm ready to give it up? Does He care? Is He angry with me? Does He know that sometimes this business of prayer makes me a little angry at Him?

I knew there had to be more to prayer than what I was experiencing. Nevertheless, before long I began to be so burdened by these and a hundred other questions and concerns that I found it easier not to pray than to pray. Yet I knew that was wrong. So I took to praying spontaneously, praying as I "felt led of the Spirit" to pray. I abandoned the regular discipline of prayer and just sort of waited on the Lord throughout the day to call me to pray for this or that. If I felt the Spirit leading me to pray in the morning, then I would pray for as long as I felt His leading. I followed the same general regimen at other times during the day.

At first, this was a liberating experience. When I did take the time to pray, I felt some assurance that God had called me to it and was therefore listening to me. I tried to let my words be as spontaneous and sincere as I knew how to make them, and I allowed my mind to range in whatever directions I felt the





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Spirit was leading me to consider. I felt refreshed and satisfied in my prayers. That is, when I prayed.

Before long, however, I realized that I was praying less than ever. I'm certain that He must have been calling me, given the fact, for example, that He commands us to pray without ceasing. Either I was not listening or was so spiritually dull or otherwise distracted that I could not hear Him calling. Whatever it was, I found that I was praying very little during the course of the day, and the times I did respond to the Lord and pray were becoming shorter and shorter. Now I had reams of unanswered questions, a growing burden of guilt, and no effective way of dealing with either of these in prayer.

I next tried various prayer lists, always with the same result. They satisfied my need to talk to God for a while, but they failed to answer my questions or bring any relief to my frustration with prayer. In fact, my numerous prayer lists simply created even more questions, like, Do I have as many lists as I should? Am I really sincere about what I'm praying with respect to these lists? Worse, getting through my various lists in prayer began to be what the Protestant reformers used to accuse their Catholic opponents of – *opera operata*, mere religious duties that I performed in the belief that just performing them was all that God required.³ Somehow, I guessed – I hoped – that praying through those lists would work whether or not I felt or meant my prayers.

That, however, did not bring the sense of fulfillment in prayer that I was seeking. I tried writing my own





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prayers. Useless. I tried compiling and using the prayers of others. No good. I even tried just letting the Lord's prayer (Matthew 6:9-13) be my only guide, but not even that helped, since I still had all the unanswered questions concerning the various categories of prayer suggested by that masterpiece. I knew I was supposed to pray "this way," but I had almost no words, or, at best, very unsatisfying words, with which to fill up the areas of prayer our Lord indicated in His model prayer. Here the Lord Himself had gone to the trouble of giving me a guide to prayer, and I wasn't even able to follow those simple instructions!

I could not figure it out. God wanted me to pray, and I knew I should pray. I wanted to pray, but I was getting nowhere. I felt as though I was beginning to hate prayer, for it had become a burden too great for me to bear. I had been promised that God had a wonderful plan for my life, but I wasn't finding this part of it so wonderful. I had been pulling at the oars of prayer with all my might, and I wasn't making much headway in my spiritual journey. However, I knew I had to find a way to gain victory in this struggle with prayer.

Had it been current at the time, I'm sure I would have felt like Jack Nicholson in the film, *As Good As It Gets*, when, in the depth of his frustration, he walks out of his psychiatrist's office and says to all the waiting patients, "Do you ever wonder if this is as good as it gets?"

Had I some Elisha to draw back the curtains of my spiritual blindness,⁴ I might have seen the demons





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roaring with laughter at my hapless condition. I was a failure in prayer, and I concluded that Paul was right, I did not know how to pray as I ought. But I took no comfort in that apostolic insight.

Somewhere along the line in this growing struggle I began to notice something in my reading of Scripture and Church history. I observed that many of the great saints of the past fell easily and often to quoting the psalms and other passages of Scripture in their prayers. In fact, they seemed to rely on Scripture so frequently in their prayers that I began to wonder if they were either just unimaginative or lazy in prayer, or if they simply didn't know any better. Here were these great soldiers of the cross, to whom I was looking for guidance in my faith, and in the matter of prayer, and they seemed hopelessly stuck in the words of the psalms and other parts of the Bible. Didn't these people know how to pray as they should?

That was the key for me. *Of course* they did not know how to pray as they should, any more than I – or you – do. The difference between them and me was that they had acknowledged the fact, had given up the pretense of depending on their own devices or schemes, and were finding satisfaction, blessing, and great power to serve the Lord in prayer by letting God's prayer program guide and sustain them. They had shipped the oars of their own efforts in prayer and hoisted the sail of God's prayer guide to carry them along in this most important discipline, and the Spirit of God filled that sail so that they mightily





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prevailed before the throne of grace. Their prayers were filled with quotes from the psalms, addresses to God that I recognized from that great song book of Scripture, and simple phrases, formulas, and ideas lifted from the psalms and inserted into their prayers at just the appropriate place to give their prayers real beauty and power. I concluded that the psalms came so easily and so often to them in their written prayers because they must have been using those God-given prayers in a disciplined way at other times of prayer as well. Like an athlete, who in the midst of a game or match, makes a certain move or executes a particular skill, virtually without thinking, because he has practiced it over and over during the week, these great saints fell into praying the psalms in public prayers because they used them so frequently in their personal times with the Lord.

I began to try praying portions of Scripture myself, especially from the psalms. At first it was awkward and seemed extremely artificial. I felt like a little child playing at prayer, merely imitating what I'd heard someone else doing in prayer without really understanding what I was saying or why. But this is how children learn, and something deep inside me said that it was worth staying the course. Not that I was determined to become some kind of exclusive psalm-prayer, that is, that my prayers would only ever be in the words of the psalms. But I believed that developing the discipline of using the psalms as a guide to my prayers at certain times of the day would not only provide a reliable regimen of prayer





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that I could regularly practice and improve, but also would strengthen my prayers at other times, giving me not only the precise words to use when I needed them, but also supplying guidelines to prayer and assurance that the words I used would be pleasing to God and, therefore, more likely to gain a favorable hearing.

For several years I pursued this discipline of praying through some of the psalms, mainly those with which I was familiar and felt comfortable—8, 19, 23, and so forth. At the same time, I returned to various of the practices I had previously tried in order to bring some balance and fullness to my prayers. But I found that nothing satisfied in prayer quite so much as simply letting a psalm guide me. Increasingly, I found that the psalms provided me with the words I needed; they led my mind to recall the requests others had asked me to remember; and they tapped the wellsprings of affection in my heart so that I could feel in prayer what God wanted me to. I began to discover a new joy in prayer, together with a confidence and assurance I had never known in prayer before. I began to find in prayer a greater sense of the presence of God, and a deeper sense of wonder and mystery at being before the throne of grace. I actually started to look forward to prayer. I began to schedule more time for prayer into my day. I also noticed that at times when I was praying outside the context of my personal prayers – in Bible studies, over meals, with friends, in leading worship – that phrases, quotes, and ideas from the





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psalms began to find their way into my words. The discipline of praying the psalms regularly was beginning to inform and strengthen all my prayers, just as I believe it must have done for the great saints of the Church throughout the ages, and I was starting to realize something more of the promise of prayer that Scripture holds out for us.

In due course I began to pray using all the psalms, working my way through the entire psalter on a regular basis. As I did, I found more satisfaction, more power, more assurance, more wonder, and more joy and peace in my prayers than I had ever known before. To be sure, this was no new discovery on my part. Great saints of the past had been down this path many times before, as we shall see. But it was new to me. And it was truly exciting! At the same time, I was praying more than I ever had before, and more frequently, and I have never noticed that my work has suffered or that I'm missing something I'd rather do because I've spent too much time in prayer. And I began to see more answers to my prayers as I kept going back over the prayer list God Himself had provided. They were not necessarily the answers I had sought, but I could clearly see that God was answering prayers according to His purposes and will for my life. He was hearing me when I prayed, and I could see in the answers He provided that He was shaping and growing me through prayer as well.

In short, I began to know the presence of God's Spirit, filling the sails of my prayers with His powerful





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presence, as He helped me, through the psalms, to realize the promise of prayer more and more.

This book is an attempt to share what I have learned about praying the psalms – following God’s prayer program – as a foundation for our prayers: how we can do this, why we should, and what we can expect if we do. My focus is on the discipline of praying the psalms as the basis for all our other prayers. I do not claim to have mastered this discipline, nor have all my questions and concerns regarding the practice of prayer gone away. Neither do I wish to suggest that all our prayers must be from the psalms alone. But, because of what I have experienced praying the psalms, using the psalms as my basic prayer program, prayer has become for me such a wonderful haven of sweet fellowship with the Lord and of confident conversation with Him, that I want to share what I have learned with anyone who may be struggling with this important discipline as I did. And the responses of students whom I have taught to pray using the psalms, and of those who have used my compilation, *The Psalms for Prayer*,⁵ lead me to believe that others might be able to find help in their prayers by adopting God’s prayer program, the psalms, as their fundamental practice of this important discipline.

In the pages that follow we will look, first, at why prayer is important. Unless we are first convinced of the importance of the discipline of prayer to our life in Christ, we will not be much motivated to learn





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how to pray as we ought. Once we understand the important place of prayer in the life of faith, and all that God promises through this discipline, we will want to take it up eagerly, and according to God's purpose and design.

Next we will take a brief look at the psalms and the way they have been used in worship and prayer by the people of God from all ages. We are part of a grand tradition of the followers of Christ, and we must be willing to learn from and carry on that tradition, not only in what we should believe, but also in how we practice our faith through such disciplines as prayer. Previous generations of the followers of Christ found the psalms a valuable resource for their prayers. As we are the beneficiaries of their faithfulness in many ways, we should be willing to learn from them in this area as well.

Then we shall examine some of the different approaches to praying the psalms – using God's prayer list – that I have found helpful. My purpose in this section will be to equip the reader with a variety of ways to pray through the psalms, letting God's Spirit lead and fill us as we unfurl the psalter sail that God has graciously provided for our journey of faith. This will help you to appreciate the great flexibility, diversity, range, and power of the psalms, as well as to experience the deep satisfaction that praying them can bring.

After this we will consider some general guidelines and special challenges that come to us as we take





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up God's prayer program and use the psalms as the basis for our prayers. How do we appropriate all the references to Israel, Jerusalem, and the enemies of God's people? What use can we make of the various imprecatory psalms? What about when a psalm just doesn't express what I'm going through, or when it expresses something that I'm not experiencing?

Next, we will look at the promise of God's prayer program. How should we expect to benefit from using the psalms in prayer? What will the Lord do in my life if I stay the course with Him in this discipline? How will I be changed?

Finally, we will consider the greatest challenge in praying the psalms – that of staying with the program in the face of temptations to give it up. Following God's prayer program is not an easy business. It can be difficult and frustrating at times, and we may feel like moving on to something else, going back to some of those old devices and schemes we've tried before, or maybe finding some new ones, or even giving up on prayer altogether. How do we recognize and resist these temptations so that we can continue to know the power of prayer God's prayer program can provide?

Three appendices will conclude our study. In the first I will provide three different schedules for praying through the entire psalter on a regular basis. Readers should find one or more of these helpful in beginning to submit to this discipline. The second will include some samples of psalms set to familiar hymn tunes for singing. Singing the psalms, as we shall see,





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can be a valuable addition to one's times of prayer. Many – if not all – of the psalms were meant to be sung; while we have lost the original melodies that were written for them, we may create “new songs” of our own, using familiar tunes to allow us to sing the psalms of God to the praise of the glory of His grace. The final appendix is really more of an index, suggesting psalms to pray for selected topics, needs, or concerns. Readers may find this index helpful in getting started with God's prayer program.

My overall objective in this study is to help you see that the psalms are, like Brendan's sail, a wonderfully useful tool for catching the wind of God's Spirit as He comes to us on the sea of our lives and carries us along His power. We cannot get to where God is taking us by our own efforts. We need the power of His Spirit, carrying us along on the course marked out by His Word. God's prayer program is, like Brendan's sail, the means of gathering the Spirit's power to propel us on our journey, for the prayers God has provided us are the most reliable aids to which we can turn. By learning to pray the psalms – by using God's prayer program, not instead of, but as the foundation for all our other approaches to prayer – we can enjoy a more consistent, more powerful, and more meaningful, and more truly satisfying experience of prayer than we have ever known before.

I want to thank Willie MacKenzie, Ian Thompson, and all the good folk at Christian Focus Publications for taking on this project. Willie's own example of praying the psalms, and the encouragement he





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gave me over breakfast one morning, rekindled my belief in this project and my hope that many might find it useful. And, of course, I am grateful to my wife, Susie, for her encouragement and many, many helpful suggestions in helping to prepare this book for publication. Her editorial and other suggestions have been, as always, invaluable. This book goes forth with the prayer that God will use it to help rekindle joy and power in prayer in many of His people, to the greater praise of the glory of His grace.

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Spring, 2004

¹ C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1961), p. 28.

² Romans 8:26.

³ For a good look at how the reformers viewed these practices, see Martin Luther's *The Pagan Servitude of the Church*. When I first read that tract, I felt as though he was looking into my own heart.

⁴ 2 Kings 6:17.

⁵ T. M. Moore, *The Psalms for Prayer* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002).

