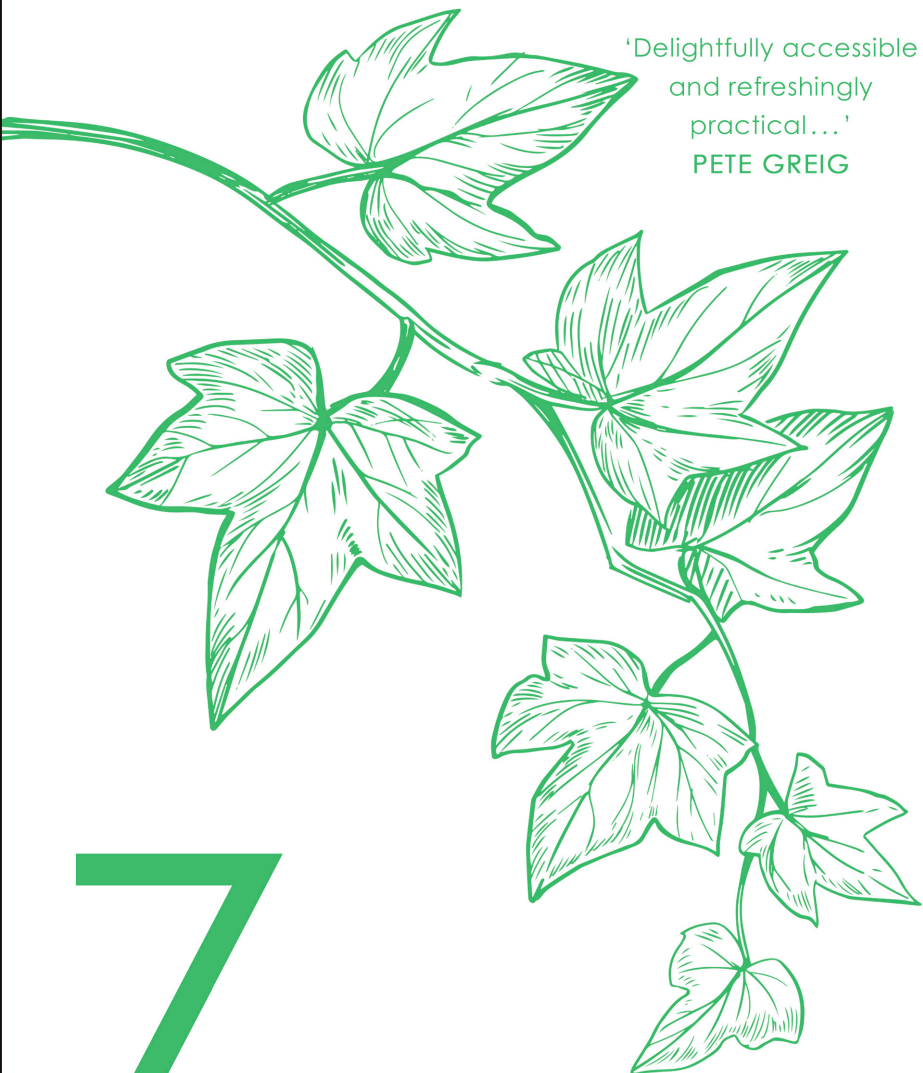


AMY BOUCHER PYE

'Delightfully accessible
and refreshingly
practical...'
PETE GREIG



7 WAYS TO PRAY

Time-tested practices for encountering God

This is a delightfully accessible and refreshingly practical guide to prayer, drawing on a broad range of traditions. Amy's love for the Lord, and her hard-won experience, shines through every page.

PETE GREIG, author of *How to Pray*

Prayer is communication with God about what we're doing together. No other book offers so many rich and practical ways to go deeper with him. I wish I had discovered *7 Ways to Pray* years ago, and I will be keeping my copy close to me in the future.

JAMES CATFORD, chair of Renovaré

I once read a book on prayer by a well-known author. It was, as I expected, brilliant. But afterwards I noticed something: while reading it, I hadn't actually been moved to pray. Not so with this winsome, practical book by Amy Boucher Pye. *7 Ways to Pray* not only stirred in me a hunger to know God more; it offered creative and accessible ways to do so. Keep this book close by. You'll be returning to it again and again. Highly recommended.

SHERIDAN VOYSEY, author of *The Making of Us, Resurrection Year* and *Reflect with Sheridan*

What a wonderful, inspirational and much-needed book! *7 Ways to Pray* brings ancient prayer patterns and practices bang up-to-date, making them meaningful and applicable

in wonderfully new ways. I can't wait to use this book regularly as a rich but practical companion to prayer – it really is a gift to Christians everywhere.

CATHY MADAVAN, speaker, writer, broadcaster, author of *Irrepressible*

Meister Eckhart, the medieval mystic, summarized prayer by saying, 'If the only prayer you ever say in your whole life is "thank you", that would suffice.' Prayer easily becomes a burden for the disciple, when in fact it offers a path into God's presence, a space free from anxiety. Amy helpfully invites us to explore approaches to prayer where we find rest for our soul.

MICHA JAZZ, head of Waverley Abbey Resources, guardian of St Cuthbert's Oratory

What a beautiful, powerful and personal journey into God's sustaining presence with the loving and sure-handed guide Amy Boucher Pye. A gentle leader and strong companion, she taps into her uncanny ability to make prayer seem both practical and divine, offering fresh and intentional ways to pray – just when we and our hurting world need prayer the most. This will prove a well-loved classic.

PATRICIA RAYBON, author of *I Told the Mountain to Move*

Amy writes with honesty and wisdom from profound experience and learning. Her book is refreshingly practical and accessible for anyone who wants to grow in prayer, and

the ways of praying she explores are an invitation to deep encounter and intimacy with God.

SEAN DOHERTY, principal of Trinity College Bristol

We're tempted to think of prayer as something that, while it might be essential in some abstract way, exists at the periphery of 'real life'. Amy Boucher Pye insists that prayer carries us into the heart of what it means to be human, into the centre of pulsing life. Prayer carries us into God's expansive world. If we want to be awakened to what is real, if we want to see with the eyes of faith, then we want to learn to pray. And Amy offers us wonderful guidance.

WINN COLLIER, pastor; author of five books, including *A Burning in My Bones*; director of the Eugene Peterson Center for Christian Imagination

Amy has written about tried-and-tested techniques of praying in a fresh and accessible way for a new generation. Each of the seven ways is rooted in stories and offers very practical suggestions to get you praying.

LIZ HOARE, author, tutor of spiritual formation at Wycliffe Hall in Oxford

Whether your prayer life is vibrant or ho-hum, *7 Ways to Pray* will draw you deeper into the conversation with God you've always longed for. Here you'll find a path forwards to the *adventure* that prayer is meant to be!

ELISA MORGAN, speaker, author, cohost of *Discover the Word*

I know few people who find prayer easy, which is why *7 Ways to Pray* will meet such a great need. It is a practical, easy-to-follow guide to the life of prayer. Full of personal stories from the author and examples from church history, this book will help kick-start your prayer life and revitalize your walk with God.

TONY HORSFALL, author, retreat leader, mentor



Amy Boucher Pye is an author, speaker, retreat leader and spiritual director. She runs the *Woman Alive* book club and writes for publications such as the globally recognized *Our Daily Bread* and *New Daylight*. She has an MA in Christian spirituality from Heythrop College, University of London, and enjoys leading retreats, including at El Palmeral in Spain, Lee Abbey, Devon, and Penhurst Retreat Centre in East Sussex. She lives with her family in north London.

Find her on social media and at amyboucherpye.com. Share with her about the prayer practices at amy@amyboucherpye.com – she loves to hear how God meets with people!



WAYS TO PRAY

Time-tested practices for encountering God

AMY BOUCHER PYE



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in 2021 by NavPress

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*To Nicholas,
who prays faithfully even in the fog,
and to J and A
with hope, faith and love.
And to those who pray for me –
you know who you are.
I'm forever grateful.*

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Foreword

ON THE WALL IN OUR KITCHEN hangs a chalkboard with these words in my handwriting: ‘Prayer is about being deeply loved.’

When I bought the chalkboard shortly after we moved to Michigan in 2003, I intended to use it for a weekly rotation of inspirational quotes. But after a few weeks of those particular words remaining on it, our observant eight-year-old son confronted me. ‘Mummy, when are you going to change the board?’

Without thinking too deeply about my answer, I replied, ‘When those words sink into me.’

I don’t remember how those six words found me. Perhaps it was my own interpretation of something I heard or read. But eighteen years after I first scrawled them in chalk, they serve as both a testimony to God’s faithful work of transformation and a reminder of his continuing invitation: ‘As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love’ (John 15:9, NRSV).

This is prayer: a response of loving attention to the God who loved us first. Prayer is our consent to being loved in the same way that the Father has loved the Son. Prayer is saying yes to the generous hospitality of the God who says to his children, ‘I have

loved you with an everlasting and steadfast love. Remain in my love. Dwell in it. Rest in it. Make yourselves at home in it.’

I haven’t always seen prayer this way. For many years as a Christian, my prayers were driven by a sense of obligation, duty, fear and guilt. I was a striver who tried to ‘do things right’ for the Lord. Yes, prayer was a conversation, but that conversation – often an anxious one – began with me and my words to him. By God’s grace I began to see a different way, that prayer is not a ‘method’ or ‘technique’ but includes myriad and life-giving ways to practice receiving, resting in and then responding to the love of God.

Amy Boucher Pye knows this way of prayer and is a trustworthy companion for the journey. With engaging storytelling and practical examples, Amy weaves and translates wisdom from the ancient church into a guidebook that is honest, fresh and creative. Reading her words is like travelling through a landscape you thought you knew, only to discover treasures you hadn’t yet perceived. Even if you are already familiar with some of the prayer practices she describes, you’ll find new ways to rest in the love of God. What Amy offers in these pages isn’t simply seven ways to pray. These are seven kinds of prayer with many ways to say yes to God’s call to deeper intimacy with him.

In other words, you’ll find in Amy’s beautiful book many ways to say to the Lord, ‘I love you too.’

Grace in the journey,

Sharon Garlough Brown

Introduction

IN MY TWENTIES, my world changed. When I ended a relationship that I thought held my future, I felt bereft and lost. *Who will love me now?* I wondered through my tears. *And now I don't have any friends,* I moaned, thinking of how I'd left my high-school and university friends in Minnesota for the excitement of living in America's capital city, surrounding myself with those who knew my ex-fiancé.

In my pain, I turned to God. *Are you there?* I cried. *I can't hear you.* More silence. More tears.

Over the next months, in great need, I returned to God again and again, not knowing where else to go. And as the weeks passed, something changed. Through the help of the Holy Spirit, I started to quieten my inner voices – those saying I was worthless and hopeless – as I asked God to meet me. I read the Bible, searching for God as I hungered for love. As he responded, I felt at times as if the words jumped off the page and into my heart. My desire to know God and experience his love fuelled my reading, and I woke up earlier and earlier so I could feast on his Word.

I started to copy down passages from the Bible, applying the promises to my life. Although I read without much reference to their original context, I felt God speaking through them to my hurting, yearning heart. For instance, I read Isaiah 43:1-2 and revelled in the words, adapting them as if God were whispering them to me: ‘Don’t be afraid, Amy, for I’ve saved you. You’re passing through the waters, but don’t be afraid, for I am with you. The rivers won’t sweep over you, for I am the Lord your God.’ When I reached verse 4, I wondered at the amazing promise of God: ‘You’re precious and honoured in my sight. And I love you.’

Lord, you love me? I asked. Do you really love me? Is this promise meant for me?

As I paused, I sensed a nudge in my spirit, with a resounding *Yes*.

I thought, *Well, it’s right there written in the Bible that God loves his people. He must really love me, too.*

As I read each day from the Scriptures and poured out my feelings to God, I started to understand in a new way that I was made in his image and worth loving. I came to believe that these nudges of grace were loving assurances from God. Through my new way of hearing God through his Word, I was changed for ever.

The Joys and Challenges of Prayer

That’s why I’m so excited about prayer. The Creator of the universe, who is beyond and above us, yearns for a relationship with us. He loves to communicate with us. He receives

our longings and our praise, our petitions and our thanks to him. Not only does he respond to the cries of our hearts and the offhand prayers we utter, but he changes us. He makes us more like himself through the working of the Holy Spirit in our lives, and we become more compassionate and caring, more self-controlled and outward looking, wiser and with greater understanding.

But prayer can be hard, too. We might not sense God's presence in our daily lives, or we become disappointed with the circumstances we face. We might feel that God has let us down and wonder if he really is good and loving. Or we might find ourselves in a rut, checking off a daily time of devotions as a duty, not a joy, while uttering a quick prayer before moving on to something seemingly more pressing. How, then, can we re-ignite our first love? How can we not only enjoy our communication with God but allow him to change us too?

The good news is that God partners with us, meeting us where we're at and helping us communicate with him. That you've picked up this book on prayer indicates your desire to grow closer to God; he'll take that desire and magnify it, even as a mustard seed grows into a big tree. Know that you're not doing this on your own.

Know, too, that God will help you build healthy prayer habits into your life. Although habits don't ensure that we'll automatically respond prayerfully to situations of stress, anxiety or even positive happenings, they increase the likelihood that we will.

Maybe, though, you'd find it helpful to redefine how you see prayer. We can easily think we've failed if each morning we don't study the Bible and pray. I'm not knocking that kind of committed devotion, but I wouldn't want that practice to be my only way of praying.

You might wonder if God is really there or your prayers are 'working' if you don't encounter God in some way – such as through a mighty mystical experience – as you pray. It's true that God sometimes meets us in amazing ways; we may feel cushioned by his love or have a sense of unseen realities being revealed to us. But the wisdom of Christians throughout the centuries, including those seen as mystics, is that these transcendent experiences are neither the norm in the everyday lives of followers of Christ nor the goal of those seeking to communicate with him. For if we view prayer as a portal to some mystical plane, we can turn the act of praying into something we find intimidating, disappointing or exclusionary of others.

God loves you dearly and yearns to meet with you. He might have a specific gift to impart to you, but he might just want to spend time with you. I'm reminded of the interview of US newscaster Dan Rather with Mother Teresa, when he asked her what she said during her prayers. She responded, 'I listen.'

Rather asked, 'What does God say to you?'

She said, 'He listens.'¹

Ways to Pray

In our journey together, I'll introduce you to some tried and tested ways to pray that you may – or may not – be familiar

with. If you feel overwhelmed by the wealth of richness to explore, just focus on one or two of the practices. I hope you can embrace a sense of freedom and fun in using this book, whether moving through it from front to back or jumping from one chapter to another.

You might think of prayer as a solitary activity, but through communal prayer, God can meet us powerfully, whether we come together in pairs, triplets or in a bigger gathering. You can do many of the prayer exercises in this book on your own, but some are designed for groups as well.

On this journey together, we'll experience praying with and through the Bible, practising God's presence, hearing God, praying through lament, praying imaginatively and praying the examen. These practices have been around for centuries in various forms, but they are as relevant today as when people first used them to encounter our living God – the Trinity of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit.

First we'll look at ways of praying with the Bible, not only using God's Word as a springboard for our prayers, but also as a way to pray that originated in the monasteries, *lectio divina* (that's Latin for 'sacred reading'). This kind of praying, with its fourfold process of engaging with a scriptural text, helps us slow down to receive from God as we read his Word.

We'll also explore how to practice the presence of God, acknowledging that he is always with us through the

indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. Brother Lawrence, a monk in France in the seventeenth century, devised a way of praying at all times, but this exercise goes back much further. For instance, John Cassian in the fifth century was keen that the monks under his care should pray unceasingly.

What about hearing God? We'll explore this topic next, examining how people in the Bible heard God's voice. An important part of listening is discernment – testing what we hear to evaluate if we're really hearing God. We'll look at Teresa of Ávila, who lived in Spain in the 1500s – a time of suspicion and fear regarding spiritual matters – to see how she learned to discern God's voice.

Living in a fallen world, we face pain, heartache and disappointment. We need to know how to lament – to let out feelings of sadness and despair to our heavenly Father. We'll discover the biblical roots of this practice, especially through the Psalms and Lamentations.

We'll continue by engaging prayerfully with the Bible through entering the biblical stories imaginatively. Ignatius of Loyola in sixteenth-century Spain popularized this practice, which can help us move from an over-intellectualized reading of the Bible to one that engages our emotions, too.

Looking back can help us move forward through prayerfully examining ourselves with the help of the Holy Spirit. One form of this type of prayer is the examen, which was made popular by Ignatius of Loyola. We'll conclude with his

INTRODUCTION

instruction to consider not only the events of the day but also how we respond and see God at work.

A key part of each chapter is the prayer exercises I include. My hope and prayer is that you'll not just read about these ways to pray, but that you'll also put them into practice and encounter our loving God. If you come into his presence and receive from him, I'll give thanks and rejoice.

Are you ready?

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, open my heart and my mind to receive you during this journey of prayer. Teach me from your well of wisdom as I drink deeply at the source. Strengthen my ability to discern your truth as you drench me with your love and compassion. Amen.

1

GOD'S WORD TO US

How to Pray with the Bible

REJECTED, a thirteen-year-old sobbed into her sleeping bag at summer camp. The start of a teen romantic comedy? Perhaps, but that episode marked the first time I sensed God's voice through his Word.

When we arrived at the camp, we were bowled over by the ratio of boys to girls – just us four girls to twenty guys. We scoped out the guys and giggled over which was the cutest while we canoed in the crystal-clear lakes, cooked over a campfire, swatted mosquitoes and sang worship songs under the stars.

In the guy department, I kept hoping I'd be chosen, but while each of my three friends paired off, I remained alone.

On the last night, I looked from one friend to the next, each of whom was holding hands or standing arm in arm with their guys around the campfire.

Then one of the non-attached guys sneered at me. He pointed to an overweight boy and then to me (I was not thin) and said, ‘Oh, why don’t *you two* get together?’

Mortified, I ran back to my tent, scurried into my sleeping bag and released my sobs, feeling undesirable and worthless. Our group leader came and tried to comfort me, but I pretended to be asleep. A few minutes later, she left.

When at last the week was over and I was back at home, I tried to forget my feelings of rejection. I put on a brave face and pushed my hurt into a corner, not wanting to share it with my parents or friends. Or with God.

But to my surprise I received a letter from the group leader, who said how concerned she had been for me. The verses she quoted from Philippians pierced through my hardened exterior:

I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy . . . being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus. . . .

And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day

of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ – to the glory and praise of God.¹

I ran down to my room, found my Bible and looked for Philippians, reading the whole passage more than once. For the first time I felt as if God was speaking to me through the Scriptures. The words sailed off the page and landed in my heart, penetrating the places of hurt and rejection. I started to believe that the Lord had started a good work in me and that he wouldn't leave me. That I'd grow in wisdom and insights and would bear fruit. With the pages blurry through my tears, I pondered the promises in Paul's letter and began to make them my own.

That group leader was a conduit of God's grace, pointing me to his words of transforming love. I had begun the exhilarating journey of meeting God as I prayed and read his Word.

The Knowable God

God always makes himself known to us, and a primary way he reveals himself is through his Word. When we pray with the Bible, God infuses the experience with his Spirit. As with my memorable encounter after camp, God comforts us through what we read. Sometimes he corrects us or convicts us; often he teaches us as he imparts his wisdom.

The Bible's story of God and his people is one of intimacy and communication. It started when God spoke to Adam

and Eve directly in the Garden as he delighted in them and instructed them. When sin marred the relationship between him and his people, he called them back to himself, speaking to the Israelites through the prophets by the inspiration of the Spirit. Later, God the Father sent Jesus the Son to be ‘the Word [who] was with God, and . . . was God’.² God then sent us the Holy Spirit to dwell with us and in us as he comforts and teaches us. The unreachable, unknowable God reaches down and makes himself known.

God, as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, has also given us the Bible, limiting his words to a level we can understand. Thus, the church fathers spoke of the Bible as the ‘abbreviated word’.³ God our Creator meets us with grace and love in a form we can grasp. Jesus the Word fills the pages of Scripture with his acts of grace and redemption. And just as the Holy Spirit breathed the Scripture itself into life, so the Spirit breathes life into us as we read it.

As we pray with the Bible, we welcome God’s Word to come and live in us. One of the Puritans, William Law (1686–1761), illustrated this when he said that Scripture ‘should only be read in an attitude of prayer, trusting to the inward working of the Holy Spirit to make [its truth] a living reality within us’.⁴

For many Christians, the first and most common way of engaging with God’s Word is with their intellect. This is good – vibrant and strong Bible study is important to sustain a vital faith. But this shouldn’t be our only way of reading the Bible. We might think of Martin Luther

(1483–1546) as one who studied the Bible deeply, which he did. But he was also steeped in a prayerful reading of it. He said, ‘You should meditate . . . not only in your heart, but also externally . . . reading and rereading [the words of Scripture] with diligent attention and reflection, so that you may see what the Holy Spirit means by them.’⁵ Perhaps Luther drew on his experience as a monk in making this observation, for in the monasteries they spoke Scripture aloud as they prayed.

Take and Eat

‘Don’t swallow it in a big lump!’ That was the warning of the beloved French abbot Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153), who delighted in a slow, deliberate reading of the Bible. He said that if we eat too quickly, without careful chewing, we’ll be cheated of the delicious flavour of the Bible, which is sweetened by the spice of the Holy Spirit.⁶

This sense of eating the Scriptures – chewing on them, swallowing them and feeding on them – comes through in the Old Testament. The prophets Ezekiel and Jeremiah ate God’s Word and delighted in it. Ezekiel said, ‘It tasted as sweet as honey in my mouth.’⁷ For Jeremiah, God’s words were his ‘joy and [his] heart’s delight’.⁸ The image of eating underscores the importance of bringing God’s Word deeply inside ourselves. We can chew and meditate on it, receiving its nourishment as it feeds us from the sweetness of God’s love.

As we eat God’s Word, it makes itself at home within us,

as we see in Paul's letter to the Colossians: We 'let the word of Christ dwell in [us] richly'.⁹ In the Greek this means that God's Word comes and stays in us.¹⁰ First we welcome the Word as a visitor to our dwelling – that is, to our minds and hearts. Then we keep on extending the invitation until the house-guest becomes a permanent resident inside us.

As we dwell in the Word and it lives in us, it comes alive within us, as the writer to the Hebrews said: 'The word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.'¹¹ We can experience those uncanny moments of coming across a passage and feeling the words burn into our hearts. God can comfort us when we're hurting as we read a line of the Psalms; he can convict us with his teaching from the Sermon on the Mount. As you read the Scriptures, pause before you delve into them and ask God to speak to you. He loves to respond when we seek him.

When we consider the charge to take and eat, we can ponder a striking image that church father Origen (c. 184–c. 253) used: 'His flesh and blood . . . are the divine Scriptures, eating which, we have Christ; the words becoming his bones, the flesh becoming the meaning from the text . . . and the blood being faith in the gospel of the new covenant.'¹²

If you're comfortable doing so, sit with those images of sinew and text for a few minutes, asking God to bring them to life in your mind's eye so that you can grasp in a new way the relationship between Christ and the Scriptures.

Prayer Practices

Following are some ways to pray with the Bible, all of which I've employed during various seasons of my life. As one who enjoys writing, I tend to focus on the practices that involve creating a Scripture poem or putting the text into my own words. You, of course, may resonate with the Bible differently.

Moments of Grace

At times in our journey of faith, we might be tempted to play 'Bible roulette', where we open the Bible randomly to find a specific passage meant for us in that moment. But this practice doesn't always have the hoped-for results. When I prepared a talk about praying with the Bible, I decided to open the Bible and see what I landed on. Jeremiah 6:5 made me take pause: 'So arise, let us attack at night and destroy her fortresses!'

Yet Francis of Assisi (c. 1181–1226) found his life's calling through a seemingly random act of God. He went over to a prayer book and asked God to guide him. He let the book fall open, and there found his vocation to spend his life for the poor.¹³ The early Franciscans followed Francis in this practice, opening the Bible three times when they sought God's guidance.¹⁴

My dad tells the story of how he and my mother wanted a Scripture passage for each of us children. They prayed and then opened their Bible, and the verses they found for each of us have over the years proven apt. For example, for the

child who went through a period of rebellion, they received, ‘Parents, never drive your children to resentment but bring them up with correction and advice inspired by the Lord.’¹⁵ For another child, about whom they prayed for direction and guidance: ‘Let us never slacken in doing good; for if we do not give up, we shall have our harvest in due time.’¹⁶

I remember a time of deep grief when I opened the Bible in desperation, begging God to speak to me through it. I was nineteen, and I’d just heard the shattering news that one of my closest friends died in a car accident. Plagued with worry about whether she was in heaven, I flipped through my Bible, asking God to show me something – anything – that would help me in my sorrow and confusion. I was amazed to land on this: ‘The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God. For who knows a person’s thoughts except their own spirit within them? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God.’¹⁷ I read and reread the line from the apostle Paul to the church at Corinth, the words bringing immediate relief. I realized as I digested them that I didn’t need to be asking these ultimate questions – I’d never know what went on in Sue’s heart and mind. Only she did, and the Spirit of God.

Moments of grace such as these can feel powerful, and undoubtedly God delights in speaking to his children by whatever means we are most open to at a particular moment. But as we mature in our faith, we find that we don’t need to search through the Bible randomly. Nor do we view it as a medicine chest, picking out a certain verse in Scripture

as a cure for a particular ailment. God wants us to enjoy a relationship of trust with him, where we come to know him intimately through conversation and spending time together. As we seek him and his direction, listening for his leading and obeying him when we sense the way forward, we grow in confidence and in union with him.

I'm not suggesting you play Bible roulette, but perhaps God would delight to impart to you something from his Word; maybe he's waiting for you to take the time to listen and seek him out. Why not spend a few moments resting in God's presence, a Bible open in your lap, or a Bible app open on your phone? Ask God through his Spirit to bring to mind something from his Word just for you, for right now. A well-loved phrase from one of the New Testament letters might pop into your head, or maybe a refrain from a song or hymn based on a passage from the Bible, or even the chapter and verse reference of a Scripture text itself. Wait and receive, and then spend some time weighing how the text applies to your life and whether you've heard from God.

A version of this exercise – one that might appeal especially to extroverts – is to ask God to reveal a passage from the Bible through one of your conversations today. Our Western culture has been soaked in Scripture throughout the centuries, with so many well-known phrases becoming part of common parlance that we might not even be aware of them. Be open and notice God's Spirit at work through the words you speak and hear.

Personalize Scripture

After her beloved dog died, Susan received a visit from her lifelong friend Cheryl, who came to support her as she grieved her sweet canine companion. Susan had prayed for years that Cheryl would come to know Jesus, but Susan had always hesitated to talk about her faith with her. But when they went for a walk in memory of their furry friend, Susan felt moved several times to personalize Scripture, speaking it out to her friend: ‘For God so loved Cheryl, that he gave his only begotten Son . . .’¹⁸

Susan later felt God was at work when she read that day’s devotional from *Our Daily Bread*, which was an article I’d written entitled ‘Called by Name’. I wrote of how Mary Magdalene’s attention was arrested when Jesus spoke her name at his tomb, and how God similarly calls us by name.¹⁹ Susan delighted to give Cheryl the article, pointing out how the topic fit so well with their conversation on the walk. She told Cheryl that God cared not only for the big things in her life but also for the little things, because he knew her and called her by name. Susan found her experience of personalizing Scripture for her friend profound and moving, and Cheryl felt that God cared for her.

I, too, have used the act of personalizing Scripture. After a break-up, I needed a practice that wouldn’t overwhelm me but would penetrate to the tender places within. I began writing out some of what Jesus said in the gospel stories, adding my name again and again so that the words would move from my head to my heart: ‘Amy, ask and it will be given to

you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will open.²⁰ Or, 'When you exalt yourself, Amy, you will be humbled, but when you humble yourself, you will be exalted.'²¹ Or, 'Amy, my peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Amy, do not let your heart be troubled and do not be afraid.'²² Seeing my name in these familiar words helped me realize that God could intend them for me.

I recommend this simple practice, which can have profound results. Wonder where to start? Here are some suggestions, and yes, a few of them cut to the heart:

- Matthew 6:25-34 (Don't worry)
- Matthew 18:6-9 (Causing others to stumble)
- Mark 7:17-23 (That which defiles)
- Mark 13:32-37 (Keeping watch)
- Luke 6:20-26 (Blessings and woes)
- Luke 13:22-30 (The narrow door)
- John 14:15-21 (The promised Holy Spirit)
- John 17:20-26 (Jesus' prayer for us)

Write Bible-Inspired Prayers

I like to give myself permission to put the Bible into my own words. As I write, I ask God to slow me down and help me engage with the meaning. I seek the Holy Spirit to highlight words or phrases that especially resonate with that moment in my life.

One example is Paul's prayer from Ephesians 1:17-19:

I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people, and his incomparably great power for us who believe.

We can recast this prayer, while retaining much of the language from our English version:

Glorious God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, I ask that you would give me your Spirit of wisdom and revelation that I might know you better. Open the eyes of my heart and enlighten me, that I might know the hope to which you have called me – the riches of your glorious inheritance and your incomparably great power. Amen.

Just a few changes – turning Paul’s words into the first-person singular (or plural) – make the prayer feel like it’s our own.

Writing out passages of Scripture can move us naturally to pray about concerns in our lives. Here’s how I engaged with Jeremiah 46:27 some years ago, first typing out the words of Scripture to let them sink into my heart:

I will surely save you out of a distant place,
your descendants from the land of their exile.
Jacob will again have peace and security,
and no one will make him afraid.

From this passage, I wrote a prayer that reflected my own journey:

Lord, you will certainly save us out of a distant place. Today even after nearly eight years, England feels like a distant place. Celebrating my son's second birthday, not with my family of origin, but here in this distant land. You said to the Israelites long ago that you would save them from the land of exile. Well, their descendants, that is. And no one would make them afraid. Save me, Lord, and make me not afraid. Give me peace and security, I pray.²³

Select a passage to engage with; for example, if you're reading through a book of the Bible, take the next section you're reading. Put it into your own words, as a prayer of intercession, a cry of the heart, or a prose rendering. You may wish to pray through the content and apply it to your life or to something you're concerned about in the world.

Pen a Scripture Poem

Madame Guyon (1648–1717) wrote, 'If you read [Scripture] quickly, it will benefit you little. You will be like a bee that

merely skims the surface of a flower.²⁴ Writing down the Scriptures as a prose poem slows down our reading so that we can, in Guyon's words, 'plunge deeply within to remove its deepest nectar'.²⁵

For many years, I've taken the bit of the Bible I'm pondering that day and turned it into a Scripture poem. This practice helps me consider the words and their meaning slowly and meditatively. Through this stripping-down process, I turn the ideas over in my head and my heart.

Here's an example from when Jesus taught his disciples and the crowds, adapted from Luke 6:37-38:

*Judge not
and you won't be judged.
Condemn not
and you won't be condemned.
Forgive
and you'll be forgiven.
Give
and you'll receive.*

*Into your lap
will be poured
a good measure –
pressed down,
shaken together
and running over.*

*With the measure you use,
it'll be measured to you.*

Writing the words of Scripture in this condensed form helps us get to the heart of the passage. The process of winnowing the words, shaving them down to the few needed to convey the meaning, helps us grasp their wisdom at a deeper level. And it's fun.



As we pray God's words to us in the Bible, we find Jesus the Word meeting us and the Holy Spirit guiding, comforting and convicting us. Praying with the Bible provides a foundation for our lives as we follow God, receiving and extending his love. We can enjoy many ways to pray with and through the Bible, including an ancient practice we'll explore next.



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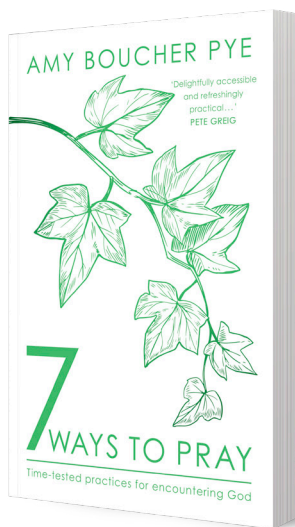


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