

QUESTION 3

Why Must the Bible Inform and Guide Prayer?

Prayer is part of what it means to be human. In this chapter, we want to consider what role Christian Scripture has, or should have, in shaping prayer. This question may seem odd at first: If prayer is such a normal part of the human experience, wouldn't bringing the Bible into the discussion restrict or constrain prayer? Yes, focusing on biblical parameters for prayer is indeed restrictive—and as I argue in this chapter, such restriction is desirable, for it seeks to conform our practice of prayer to the revealed will of God. After exploring the nature of the Bible, we will consider three ways that it might inform and guide our praying.

The Bible's Attributes Encourage Our Prayers

All Christian traditions value the Bible, yet various traditions hold differing conclusions about what the Bible is and why it is valuable. Protestants overwhelmingly consider Scripture as the final and best authority for theology and practice. Throughout this book, we will consider important reflections on prayer offered by women and men during the church's long history, but Scripture takes precedence over their suggestions. The priority of Scripture is bound up in its nature and attributes, particularly in its sufficiency, authority, and inspiration.

The Bible does not answer every question we might ask about prayer. For example, should Christians keep a journal in which they record their prayers and God's answers? Are prayers shared through text messages different from prayers spoken in person? Is it better to pray in the morning or in the evening? The fact that the Bible does not address these particular questions does not diminish its teaching on prayer or somehow render it outdated, for Scripture tells us everything we *need* to know in order to pray: God exists, he created everything (including us), he invites us to pray, he delights in our prayers, he

moves in response to the prayers of his people, and so on. Another way of saying that the Bible tells us everything we need to know about prayer is what theologians call the Bible's *sufficiency*.

The doctrine of Scripture's sufficiency has a twofold focus. First, it emphasizes the fact that the Bible gives everything that sinners need in order to be saved. Second, the Bible tells believers how to live faithfully. On this second point, theologian Gregg Allison offers a helpful reflection: "Scripture provides everything that Christians need to please God fully. For every task that God calls believers to do, he completely equips them to accomplish his will through his Word (and, certainly, empowered by his Spirit)."¹ We will consider the ministry of the Holy Spirit in prayer in several of this book's questions, but here we affirm that Scripture is a sufficient guide to our prayer. God tells us everything we need to know in order to pray.

We trust in Scripture's sufficiency because of the related doctrine of its *authority*. God created all things and governs them by his authoritative speech (Heb. 1:1–3). As creator, God has the prerogative to rule his creation and express his boundaries for faith and obedience. God is the ultimate author of Scripture and thus the Bible has God's authority. God chooses to reveal himself in creation and through Scripture. Both forms of revelation show us true things about God, and we are obliged to learn and follow these truths rather than to follow our own hunches or formulations about what we think God is like or what we suspect he might require. God reveals what he requires for people to live faithfully, including information about prayer. So as we seek to better understand prayer, we must understand prayer as it appears in the Bible, both positively (by way of affirmation) and negatively (by way of opprobrium). Because God is the author of Scripture (by way of human authors, to be sure), we can trust what the Bible says about prayer to be true.

The Bible has authority and sufficiency because it is *inspired*. In popular culture, to say a book, movie, or song is "inspired" might recognize some exceptional quality: a poignant turn of a phrase, a memorable plot, an enjoyable scene. Though Protestants will differ on some details, in general what we mean by inspiration is that although human authors are responsible for giving us the physical text of the Bible and their unique authorial stamp is evident, God is the Bible's ultimate author.² The apostle Paul put it this way: "All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work" (2 Tim. 3:16–17 NASB 1995). The English word "inspired" is the Greek *theopneustos*, the "out-breathing of God." Since God is its

1. Gregg Allison, *50 Core Truths of the Christian Faith: A Guide to Understanding and Teaching Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2018), 32.

2. Here I affirm what theologians have long called "verbal plenary inspiration."

ultimate source, Scripture is profitable in many ways. Here we focus on the ways that Scripture is profitable with regard to its teaching on prayer.

First, Scripture teaches us what prayer is and what it is not. Positively, Scripture shows us so many godly people praying that we have a lifetime of worthy examples. Negatively, it shows us people whose prayers God rejects or refuses to hear. Scripture offers reproof when we stray into practices of prayer that mimic pagan practices or self-righteous religion. It offers correction for wrong theologies of prayer. Then, because all those who are saved have an external righteousness given them by Jesus, not a native righteousness, Paul suggests Scripture trains us in this new just standing before God; that is, because we are rebellious children, we need to relearn how to enjoy fellowship that was broken in the garden of Eden when our first parents gave in to sin. Finally, because Scripture is inspired, it can prepare us for every good work, including prayer.³ What are some specific ways, then, that the Bible should inform and guide our prayer?

The Bible Shows People at Prayer

Scripture provides numerous and important examples of people praying, and we can learn much about prayer by paying attention to these accounts. With Paul, we believe that “whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, so that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope” (Rom. 15:4 NASB). Readers may notice that I have emphasized a descriptive role of Scripture here rather than a prescriptive one. This emphasis reflects the freedom found in Scripture. Other scholars have recognized the interesting fact that while prayer was so central to worship in the old covenant, the law prescribes no technique, no form, nor any ritual regarding prayer in Israel.⁴ In a similar way, prayer was vital to Jesus’s experience and to that of his disciples and the earliest Christians, yet the New Testament is virtually silent with regard to prescriptive forms or ritual observance. Where Scripture is prescriptive, however, we want to understand its requirements and order our practice faithfully.

The Bible Reveals Our Weaknesses in Prayer

Another reason that we ought to listen to the Bible’s teaching on prayer is that Scripture can reveal blind spots, weaknesses, and areas for growth in our prayers. We read of the early church “devoting themselves to prayer” (Acts 1:14) and ask if we are similarly devoted. We hear Paul encourage the

3. Although the constraints of this series dictate chapter word counts, I mention here the importance of even greater confidence in Scripture by noting its infallibility and inerrancy. Since God cannot lie, his Word is utterly trustworthy and will never lead us astray.

4. See Christopher R. Seitz, “Prayer in the Old Testament or Hebrew Bible,” in *Into God’s Presence: Prayer in the New Testament*, ed. Richard N. Longenecker (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 16.

Philippians not to let anxiety overwhelm them but instead to pray (Phil. 4:6) and consider how debilitating our own worries can be. We hear the longing prayers of the psalmist for God to show him wonderful things and bend his heart toward obedience (Ps. 119:18, 36) and struggle to remember when we sought such spiritual growth rather than physical gain. Scripture serves as a guide for us to evaluate our own practices of prayer against an authoritative standard. Such reflection is often challenging, for we come to see how weak our faith is and how shallow our requests often are; yet we can be comforted in the fact that, our Lord excepted, all of the positive examples of people who prayed well were people like us: created in God's image but liable to weakness and dependent upon God's grace. Here we find hope: though they were weak as we are, they were able to pray. God heard their prayers despite their frailties; he will also hear ours.

The Bible Reshapes Our Priorities in Prayer

Were it not for the Bible's examples and teaching on the full spectrum of prayer, my own prayers would be largely self-focused. Even with awareness and reflection on the richness of biblical teaching on prayer, I must fight this tendency to only pray primarily *about* me and *for* me. Returning to John Bunyan's definition of prayer from the first chapter, we recall that prayer involves talking with God "for such things as God has promised, or according to his Word."⁵ When we grow in praying "according to his Word," we will come to see how God would have us pray for others and come to pray with a godward focus. We will still pray about ourselves, but the things we learn to ask will be expanded and formed through God's priorities. Throughout their lives, Christians should come to Scripture over and over again to grow in their understanding of God's promises and requests consistent with his Word. In subsequent questions we will consider how specifically to approach the Bible in this way.

Summary

The various questions that form the balance of this book reiterate the central theme of this chapter: Scripture is our best and authoritative guide for prayer. That we give priority to Scripture does not mean we need not or should not listen to other Christians when they seek to teach us about prayer. In humility, we realize that others may have better understood what the Bible teaches about prayer or more faithfully appropriated this teaching than we have! Though we all have the privilege of reading and interpreting Scripture, we are not all equally skilled in this task and thus we value the place of community, where God has appointed teachers and peers to help us read faithfully. As we listen to the teaching of others about prayer (or about any other

5. See Question 1. Bunyan, *I Will Pray*, 4–5.

aspect of faith), we always return to the Bible to evaluate their answers in light of God's standard. The Bible reveals truths about prayer that God, in his kindness, has chosen to make known to us in order that we might pray faithfully. These truths form a theology of prayer, and in Section 2 of this book, we will consider several important questions about this theology.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Why should the Bible inform and shape our prayers?
2. How do the concepts of sufficiency, authority, and inspiration relate to prayer?
3. What are some ways that you have been “reproved and corrected” (2 Tim. 3:16) by Scripture in your own prayer life?
4. How does the Bible's role of equipping believers for “every good work” (2 Tim. 3:17) affect prayer?
5. Why do you think some people resist the Bible's teachings about prayer?