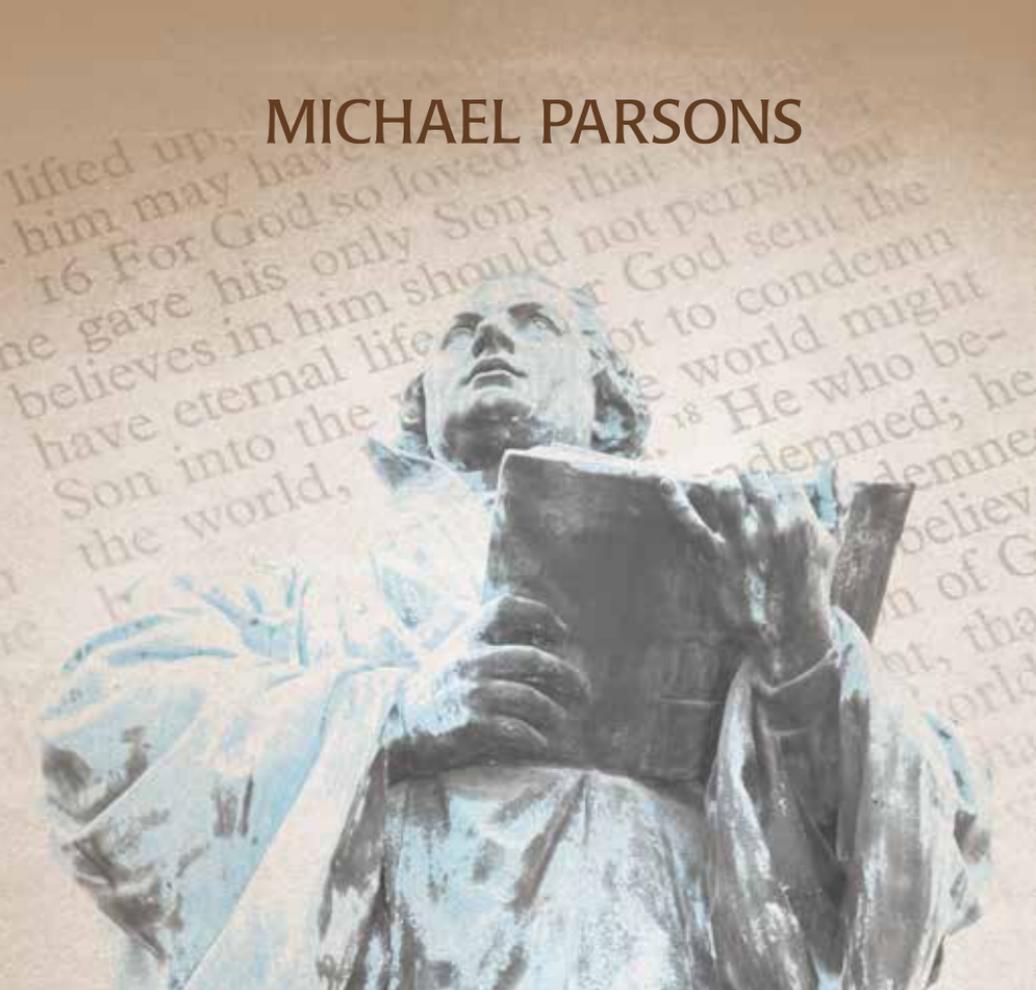


MICHAEL PARSONS



# Praying the Bible with Luther

A simple approach to everyday prayer

1517–2017 500th anniversary of the Lutheran Reformation

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A simple approach to everyday prayer

MICHAEL PARSONS



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The Bible Reading Fellowship (BRF) is a Registered Charity (233280)

ISBN 978 0 85746 503 0

First published 2017

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 0

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

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## Introduction

I should be upfront about this book. It's not a book *about* the reformer, Martin Luther. It isn't a biography of the man and his times, for example; nor a study of his theology. There are quite a few books like that published to commemorate the 500 years since the Lutheran Reformation in Europe (1517), but this isn't one of them. And, it's not a book *about* prayer, either, though there will be a number published on that topic this year too, I've no doubt. So, what is the book about? It's actually a resource book, a practical aid to help readers to pray. It uses a method of praying that Luther employed, so it necessarily introduces him and his method in Chapters 1 and 2 to give some idea of the man and his spirituality—particularly his approach to praying. Chapter 3 adopts his method and applies it to our situation in the 21st century.

What was his method of praying? Briefly, he believed firmly that the words of the Bible and our own praying should be joined together, combined to form a strong, faithful approach to God. He developed a *lectio divina* reading of the Bible from which he prayed. This is a straightforward way of praying that will be explained again and practised through the following chapters.

Luther would begin each dedicated time of prayer with a reading of a scriptural passage. Seeking the Lord's help, he would meditate on it with the following four 'strands' uppermost in his mind. Then he would pray, having his thoughts shaped by his reading:

- instruction, or teaching: What do I need to know?
- thanksgiving, or grateful praise: What should I be grateful for?
- confession, or repentance: What sins shall I confess?
- prayer, or supplication: What do I now need to pray for?

This book is a straightforward resource to help you to pray in a similar fashion: reading scripture, reflecting on what it means to you and praying.

After introducing Martin Luther and his method, the book begins to apply it to praying today. Chapter 4 demonstrates Luther's method in action, beginning by the end of the chapter to ask you to take part. Chapter 5 continues in a similar fashion but asks you to do more in terms of the reflection and the prayer. Chapter 6 suggests passages to read, gives some short clues to approach the text with, and leaves you to get on with it. The final chapter advises other contexts in which this method may be used. So it's an incremental approach to using Luther's method. You're not thrown into the deep end, but you'll eventually get there!

You can see from this brief outline that you'll start as a 'novice' and conclude as an 'expert'. You'll find plenty of instructions and assistance on the journey. So let's start with the reformer, Martin Luther, and then move on to his method of praying.

## Chapter 4

# Following Luther's example: starting out

Having outlined Luther's method of praying at some length, perhaps we're ready to make that first attempt at following his example. The first half of this chapter presents some Old Testament passages, the second moves on to New Testament extracts, six of each. These have been carefully selected because they appear to give clear boundaries in terms of their subject. What I mean by that is that each passage appears to come to its own completion; there is no sense of having to wait for the next instalment or the sequel.

The biblical passages are drawn from different genres of scripture—history, poetry, prophecy, Gospel and letter—and will probably elicit very different responses from their readers; that is, from us! They are also well-known passages that most of us will have heard preached, will have read in home groups, and among our family and friends. Like most learning, it's probably easiest to start with what's familiar!

This chapter sees me following Luther's method in order to demonstrate the approach and, hopefully, to draw from a reading of the biblical passages ways of forming our prayers through reflection on God's word. By that, I mean that I have sat down with each of the biblical passages that follow and attempted the reformer's simple way of praying: exploring and thinking through the passage, asking the questions of it and turning what I've discovered into prayer. Essentially, that's what Luther was wanting: thoughtful, heartfelt praying that begins with God (in his word) and ends with God (in worship and gratitude). Before we begin, though, we might just remind ourselves of a couple of things from the preceding chapter.

First, it would be good to remember the four strands that form the method of Bible reading. They are:

- instruction, or teaching
- thanksgiving, or grateful praise
- confession, or repentance
- prayer, or supplication

Then, it will be helpful to keep in mind the questions that will allow and encourage us to apply these aspects to our own lives and spiritual development as followers of Jesus Christ. So we might ask:

- What is the Lord seeking to teach me from this passage? What do I need to know?
- What should I be grateful for on reading this portion of scripture?
- How does this passage impinge on my conscience and what in it encourages me to confess particular sins? What sins shall I confess?
- What do I now need to pray for, to cry out to God for?

Also, here is a reminder of the more pertinent items from the list of guidelines to help make your experience of praying more purposeful.

- Sit in a comfortable chair
- Pray for God to help
- Stick to the task in hand
- Take the suggested questions seriously
- Keep God and Jesus as central, not self
- After reading and prayer, wait

Let me underline before we begin, though, that your reading (that is, your ‘thinking out loud’) will be different than mine. We are different people with different experiences of life, of church and of God. So don’t worry that you might have brought out different things from the biblical passages than I have. Some things will be the same or similar, of course—what we might call the core ideas, perhaps—but

others will be our own personal tangents as the Lord speaks to us through the word by his Holy Spirit. That's the way it works! And you'll notice too that the passages are of different lengths, as are my responses to them. Luther encourages flexibility, so I've made no attempt to standardise what happens in the 'thinking out loud' sections that follow. Some 'thinking out loud' sections are longer than others. This is usually for one of two reasons: I found more to say on a passage, or I had more time to devote to the exercise. Again, that's the way it works!

Also remember that this isn't about researching, or about reading commentaries or concordances. Here in these exercises, after prayer, we simply read the word of God and think and reflect out loud before responding in the way that Luther suggests. Because this is a book, my thinking out loud comes (hopefully) as ordered thoughts, but in reality that's not absolutely necessary, and certainly not generally the way it happens. Just think and jot down thoughts as they come, as the Lord reveals them to you.

I'll give you something to consider at the beginning of each exercise, something that might be useful in reading my response and something too that might help you later in your own responses through Chapters 5 and 6. This will include advice on how we might look at a passage: discerning its shape, the main point, and so on. About half way through, I'll leave the final prayer to you as a first step in making this your own. Later, you can have a go at the final two strands of Luther's garland, too.

Two final thoughts, before we begin. First, I would suggest that you don't read this book from now straight through. The exercises are supposed to be discrete portions, so why not read each one reflectively and prayerfully instead?

Second, I should underline here that what follows has a rather objective feel to it because of the public nature of the written and published word. If I were doing this exercise in private I would

consider more immediate and personal concerns about myself, my family, my friends, the church I attend, the specific circumstances of the world and so on. It would be both inappropriate and too time-specific here, but remember that the Lord wants us to be 'real' and true to our own circumstances.

Ready to start?

## Exodus 19:3–8

Then Moses went up to God, and the Lord called to him from the mountain and said, 'This is what you are to say to the descendants of Jacob and what you are to tell the people of Israel: "You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites.'

So Moses went back and summoned the elders of the people and set before them all the words the Lord had commanded him to speak. The people all responded together, 'We will do everything the Lord has said.'

### Thinking out loud

*Sometimes we can clearly differentiate characters in a narrative, a discernment that might help us to see what's happening and how helpfully to read the passage. I try this here.*

My first thought in reading and rereading this short passage from Exodus is that there are clearly three characters involved in the narrative: God himself; Moses, his servant; and the people of Israel, his people. Following Luther's advice that we always start with God (or with Jesus Christ), I want to begin with him. This makes sense anyway, as he dominates the passage; everything revolves around him and his spoken words—in fact, Moses and the people appear to be defined by his presence and their relationship with him. The fact that Moses 'went *up* to God' is itself indicative of the Lord's position both physically (literally, up at the summit of Mount Sinai) and morally (he is holy, authoritative, to be obeyed) and the

movement upwards seems to be a good image of this. He is also described as the God of the whole earth which, again, removes him from our limited thinking and unimaginative theology; our deficient understanding. As Creator of the whole earth and more besides, God possesses the whole earth and everything and everyone in it. He is magnificent! Breathtaking and awesome! To move towards God is to move 'upwards' in so many ways.

This astounding God speaks to Moses. This, itself, is one of the many tremendous and gracious blessings that we experience: God speaks, he reveals himself to us. He accommodates himself to who we are. He talks! His authority is accentuated by the fact that when he speaks he commands allegiance from his people, Israel. He asks them to obey him as he deserves (v. 5). But, interestingly, he does this on the basis, not of his magnificence and grandeur, but of his intimate relationship with the people of Israel. Whereas he judged and destroyed the Egyptians, he carried Israel 'on eagles' wings' (v. 4) and saved them, bringing them to himself. So, significantly, the Lord demands obedience based on his initiating love, his covenant and the historical circumstances of their liberation by the hand of God. He speaks of them as (potentially) his 'treasured possession'—distinguishing them from 'all the nations' (v. 5). It's interesting, and something we don't often remark on, that the Lord speaks of them as his treasured possession *if* they obey him. This is conditional at this point in history, as is their becoming 'a kingdom of priests and a holy nation'. God is busy forming a people for himself at this juncture.

Moses, the second character, is the faithful servant of God. In this passage we see that in the way he climbs the mountain towards God's localised presence and in the way that he responds to God's words that he is to speak to the people. He summons them and 'sets before them all the words the Lord had commanded him to speak' (v. 7). The short phrase '*all* the words' indicates and emphasises his obedience and willingness to serve God. He sets before the people everything the Lord spoke; not a word was forgotten or left out.

The people of Israel are the third 'character' in the passage. The first thing I notice about them is that they have history with the Lord who speaks to them through Moses. Before he calls them 'the people of Israel' (v. 3) he identifies them as 'the descendants of Jacob', which reminds them (and me) that historically they are as progeny included in the covenant that the Lord graciously made with Jacob—they have history! This should give them confidence in the God who calls them 'the descendants of Jacob'; he has already taken the initiative with them in the person of Jacob, he already loves them, has already chosen them. Again, they have history with God in a more recent, immediate manner as he reminds them of his kindness and mercy in liberating them from Egypt 'on eagles' wings' (v. 4). The image of the eagle reminds me of the red kites that fly above my house: free, high, safe, strong, swift and out of reach. The images of being carried on eagles' wings and of being a treasured possession speak of being valued, of being intimately loved, of being cherished and kept safe.

It's fascinating to me that when Moses speaks the words of the Lord to the people they are said to 'respond together', as one people (v. 8). At this point they are obviously enthusiastic and determined to obey the God who has shown them such wonderful mercy. When God asks, 'Will you?' they respond, 'We will!' Grateful hearts respond to grace. I know, of course, that their obedience is short-lived; but the immediacy of their reply demonstrates, at least at this point in their story, their thankfulness and their determination to please the Lord who loves them.

**1 Instruction or teaching:** What is the Lord seeking to teach me from this passage? What do I need to know?

The main lesson that the Lord teaches me from this short, well-known passage is that he is a God who involves himself in our lives. Here, though he descends to the height of a mountain, he has loved the people of Israel so intimately that he's rescued them from their enemy and now seeks to galvanise that relationship by speaking his

will into their lives. The same is true of me. I too have history with the Lord. He has initiated a relationship with me through Jesus Christ; he has rescued me from my enemies (sin, the flesh and the devil, as Luther would say); he has recreated me into a new life by the Holy Spirit. Perhaps there is a shape to our experience of salvation, and it starts with the divine initiative to form a people for himself.

Second, the passage underlines the truth that God speaks. This is something we all too often take for granted, but we shouldn't! That the God who created everything and sustains all things speaks to humanity is an amazing thing. He reveals himself to us. He demonstrates his love by words—and ultimately, of course, by *the Word*, Jesus Christ (see John 1:1–18). The passage shows that he sometimes speaks through intermediaries, like Moses, his servant. That's certainly true today as we hear sermons, prophecies and the like. But he also speaks words to us directly, if we have the ears to hear what the Spirit says to us.

## 2 Thanksgiving or praise: What should I be grateful for on reading this portion of scripture?

Taking up the two points under 'instruction' above, I'm grateful that the Lord is involved in my life and that he speaks to me. First, I praise the Lord that he is the kind of God (and there is no other!) who is intimately immersed in my daily existence. I praise him as my redeemer; but, more than that, I praise him for not leaving me to my own ways. He is somehow 'entangled' in the detail. Taking the initiative, he cares for me, as he did the people of Israel; he sees me as a treasured possession and I'm immensely thankful.

I'm also thankful that God deigns to speak to us. As I see him speaking to and through Moses I'm grateful that he still speaks today. It reminds me of the importance of the scriptures, through which he speaks his love and care; the importance, too, of faithful sermons gifted with the Spirit's blessing; of words—sometimes apparently casual ones—that speak his grace into situations; of his encouraging

voice, heard from time to time in situations of difficulty and distress. Communication indicates relationship; revelation demonstrates love.

**3 Confession or repentance:** How does this passage impinge on my conscience and what in it encourages me to confess particular sins? What sins shall I confess?

I confess that I don't always give God his due. Honestly, I wonder if I ever do, in fact. As for the people of Israel, God has done so much for my salvation. He has loved me with an everlasting love. Through his Spirit he has given me life in all its fullness. Through Jesus Christ he has conquered the grave and given me hope. By speaking to the people of Israel, as he does here, God reminds them of who he is and of who he has been for them. He demands their allegiance on the basis of his outstanding love. The point is, their God is my God; their Saviour is mine. The Lord who speaks to them is the one who reveals himself to me.

Also, I know that too often I find initial enthusiasm for the Lord's words easy. It seems to come naturally. I'll read a passage or hear a powerful sermon and say, as the people of Israel said, 'Yes! I'll obey! I'll follow! I'll be a witness for you, Lord! I'll seek justice! I'll care for the sick!' I have no doubt that the people responded with sincerity, as I do; they wanted to follow God's ways and to obey his word, just like me. Generally, I'm not questioning my sincerity—though at times it's a rather superficial and momentary enthusiasm—but I know only too well how short-lived and fragile that resolve sometimes is. And I confess it in the face of this passage.

**4 Prayer or supplication:** What do I now need to pray for, to cry out to God for?

I need to pray for spiritual insight to know God as he reveals himself and to acknowledge, with thankfulness, his saving love. I need to ask

that he shows me anew his involvement in my life and to ask him to commission me again into his mission of life and of justice. I need to cry out for the Holy Spirit to encourage me to a lasting obedience that will glorify his name.

*Thinking out loud encourages us to look closely at the passage in front of us and, though we can't really say we have a full understanding of what's happening in this short passage from Exodus 19, we can say that we have a better understanding, an understanding that opens up to the four strands of Luther's simple praying: instruction, thanksgiving/praise, confession and supplication. The strands have personalised what we've discovered because we apply them by asking the pointed and revealing questions. Now comes the prayer, shaped by this exercise, fashioned by it, so that we gain a better grasp of the biblical text and are able to pray accordingly in its light. The prayer doesn't need to use everything we've discovered; though if you have time, it can do.*

**Loving and covenant-making God, the God who saves, thank you for this passage of scripture. Thank you for revealing yourself to me through your word, revealing yourself as the God intimately involved in my life—historically and today. That's truly amazing! Speak to me your purposes that I might obey you from a heart responding to your grace. Empower me by your wonderful Spirit to live a life that consistently glorifies you. Lead me from my initial enthusiasm and cause me to persist in my obedience. Help me to be your treasured possession, part of your holy nation. Sustain me in my call, that the world will see something of you and of your Son through me. Forgive me for not giving you your due, not acknowledging your eminence, not persevering in the faith more clearly. Accept my heartfelt thanks and praise, O God. Amen**

# Praying biblically and with intent

There is a need in today's church to relate scripture and prayer in such a way as to enable us to speak God's words after him. This book takes a simple *lectio divina* approach developed in the sixteenth century by Martin Luther and offers practical guidance to pray in this way.

Beginning each time of prayer with a Bible passage, Luther would meditate on it with four 'strands' in mind: teaching, thanksgiving, repentance and supplication. Then he would pray, having his thoughts shaped by his reading, praying God's words after him, confident of God's grace. *Praying the Bible with Luther* explains this method, demonstrates it and encourages readers to follow his example, helping us to turn scripture into prayer and to pray it into our own lives today.



Currently commissioning editor for The Bible Reading Fellowship, **Michael Parsons** is the author of several books on the Reformation and an Associate Research Fellow at Spurgeon's College.

'Michael Parsons proves a wise and gentle guide to reading the word of God not only with our head but with our hearts. His passion for the Bible and Luther is infectious.' *Amy Boucher Pye, author of *The Living Cross**

'Three excellent chapters outline Luther's scripture-centred approach, followed by an imaginative series of steps where the author first allows us to "overhear" how this works for him before we are nudged to have a go ourselves. This book could change your life!'

**David Kerrigan, General Director, BMS World Mission**

'This is more than a simple approach to everyday prayer; it's a deep book for those who desire to be serious about prayer. Highly commended for use personally and with small groups.' **David Coffey OBE**



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