

SCRIPTURE PRAYER: Listening to God's Word

By Chuck & Lenore Barresi

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Scripture prayer has been very special to us. It has been one of the most grace-filled steps we have taken in our search for a closer relationship with Our Father praying with scripture is one of our favorite ways of talking with and listening to God.

Most of us have heard Holy Scripture referred to as love-letters from God. They are His word to us right here, right now. Through Scripture He guides us, instructs us, tells of His love for us and gives us words of hope and encouragement. We don't have to be Bible scholars in order to pray Scripture; we don't have to interpret or try to figure out what is being said because it is all there for us:

"All Scripture is inspired of God and is useful for teaching- for reproof, correction, and training in holiness so that the man of God may be fully competent and equipped, for every good work." (2 Timothy 3:16-17)

On our Encounter Weekend Scripture began to come alive for us In "The Parable of the Sower," "The Wedding Feast at Cana," and the readings of the Mass, it seemed as though we were there with the Lord as these events were taking place. It was exciting and challenging. Afterwards, dialoguing on Scripture occasionally, we made it even more familiar and personal.

During this period of time in our lives, we worked very hard on our own relationship and our relationship with God and with our Church. No one could ever accuse us of being "married singles". We were a sign of our Sacrament to all those around us.

However, we both knew deep within us that the one area where we were "married singles" was in our prayer life. We could share with each other our deepest feelings, our love for one another in our sexual relations, and we could share our innermost secrets as a Team on Weekends, but we found it difficult to pray as a couple or to discuss couple prayer. Looking back on it, we treated our prayer life as even more intimate and private than our sexual relationship.

Scripture is the recorded history of our family of believers; the daily experience of man's relationship with God, both before and after the life of Jesus. If it were continued today, our names would be recorded in it along with Paul, Timothy and Jeremiah. The times may be different, but the struggles, doubts, fears, joys and excitement are the same. The message is applicable to our lives; it is written for us today. There is something in Scripture for everyone.

As a matter of fact, on one Weekend as a Team Couple, we were told by an atheist after the Cana sharing that he marveled at the variety of personal responses so many couples had to it. Indeed, he could not deny that there was "something" there. Even a nonbeliever can recognize that Scripture is inspired and communicates God to man.

Several years ago, on a Marriage Retorno, we learned how to pray scripture. In fact, the central purpose of the Retorno is for dialoguing couples to learn scripture prayer as an individual and as a couple.

There are no hard and fast rules to follow in praying scripture, so what we will share with you is what we have learned, tried, and adapted for our own use. We urge you to do the same.

Lenore: One Scripture passage which I never quite understood was: "Whenever you pray, go to your room, close your door and pray to your Father in private." (Matthew 6:6) It seemed to me to be a rather negative judgment of praying at Mass, with Chuck, or in a group of people. However, St. Ambrose, the 4th Century Bishop of Milan, explains that Jesus was not talking about

“. . . a room with four walls separating you physically from others, but the room that is within you, where your thoughts are shut up; the place that contains your feelings. This room of prayer is with you at all times; wherever you go it is a secret place, and what happens there is witnessed, by God alone.”

In order to center on God before praying scripture, I place myself in this secret room in my mind. Sometimes I picture myself at a beautiful lake in Utah which we saw while on a camping trip out West. The lake was turquoise in color and so peaceful it took my breath away. We stopped at a roadside table there to relax and just drink in the beauty around us.

In my individual prayer, I picture myself sitting at that table with Jesus and allow Him to speak to me. When I center on Him in this way I can block out distractions and am at ease. The beauty of the surroundings which He created make Him come alive for me and I can concentrate on what He has to say to me through Scripture.

Think of a special place where you can go in the secret room of your mind to be open to what the Lord has to say to you. This is what is called a "centering exercise."

Chuck: In my individual prayer, before centering on the Lord, I pick a scripture passage to pray. After putting myself in His presence, I read it aloud, slowly and with thoughtful attention. I imagine myself there, and think of how I would react if Jesus were saying these words to me. To do this I substitute my name where it is possible. For example:

"Stop worrying then, Chuck, over questions like, 'What are we to eat, or what are we to drink, or what are we to wear?' The unbelievers are always running after these things. Your heavenly Father knows all that you need. Chuck, seek first His kingship over you, His way of holiness and all these things will be given you besides." (Matthew 6:31-33)

This passage was written for me, for this very moment of my life, and not just for those living almost 2000 years ago!

I then re-read the passage aloud and let the words sink in slowly. The Lord is speaking to me!

In a notebook I write down some key words or phrases that have special meaning for me. Again, this is the Lord speaking to me. However, I have to be careful to spend more time in reading and listening than to writing. The writing is to refresh my memory when Lenore and I pray the Scripture together, so I can share with her what the Lord has said to me.

I then sit quietly and just listen. I put myself in God's presence and allow Him to speak to me. This quiet time is very special to me. I must be patient; I must give God the same courtesy of listening as I do when Lenore or others are talking to me.

In our couple prayer we follow approximately the same format. As a couple, we center on Him and say a brief spontaneous prayer asking Him to be with us and to guide us during our prayer time. We speak what is in our hearts. We then share with each other what happened to us in our individual prayer, what God said to us, perhaps about us as individuals or as a couple. We speak to God, we tell Him what we as a couple want Him to know. We praise Him, we thank Him.

We then pray a scripture passage in which either of us saw our relationship during our individual prayer time. We listen quietly and let God speak to us as a couple. As in our private prayer, we cannot rush this time. It is important that we give Him enough time to speak to us.

We then share with each other what God has said to us. Over the time we have been praying scripture as a couple we have shared many words of love and encouragement that God has spoken to us. Can you imagine the joy in being able to share with your spouse what God has said to you? We rejoice in it!

As Father Armand Nigro, S.J. says in his article *Praying Together as a Couple*,

"Isn't it strange, even tragic, that so few Christian couples do this? They share meals and conversation, work and play; they share their own bodies and hopes and plans, but do not openly share Jesus together. Yet Jesus is their deepest reality, their deepest source of unity, joy and fulfillment."

Sometimes we have a "desert experience." Scripture seems dry, as though there is nothing there for us, as though God is not speaking to us. At those times we have learned that we must be patient and relax. After all, God is always with us. Perhaps we are trying too hard and He wants us to know that He is in control, not us! Just the fact that we are reading His word and listening for Him to speak shows our love for Him. He will not let this dry period last for long!

For us personally, playing "Bible roulette" (flipping through the pages and picking a passage at random) does not seem to be satisfying. We prefer to concentrate on one theme for a period of time. The daily Missalette from Church is an excellent source of passages for us. Also, several books give daily Scripture passages to follow.

This method of praying Scripture has opened up a whole new world for us, a world where we are aware of God's presence with us and we are anxious to hear His Word and to serve Him. He will speak to us as often as we allow Him!

Those of us who have made an Encounter Weekend have been gifted with the opportunity to learn to communicate with one another and to deepen our relationship. In the same way, we can communicate and deepen our relationship with Abba, Our Father. His love-letter to us has already been written. All we have to do is believe, accept, read and pray, and thank Him for His word!