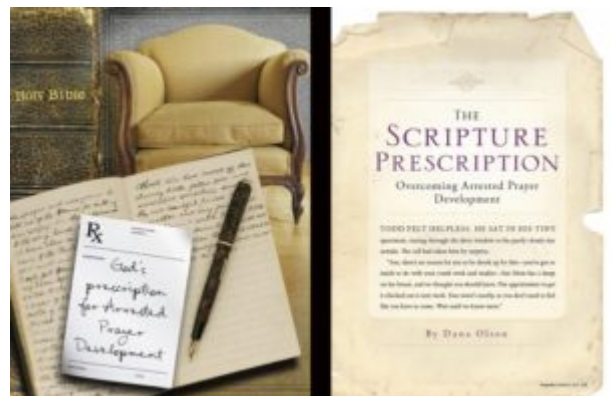


The Scripture Prescription

Overcoming Arrested Prayer Development

By Dana Olson

Todd felt helpless. He sat in his tiny apartment, staring through the dirty window at the partly cloudy day outside. The call had taken him by surprise.



“Son, there’s no reason for you to be shook up by this—you’ve got so much to do with your youth work and studies—but Mom has a lump on her breast, and we thought you should know. Her appointment to get it checked out is next week. Your sister’s nearby, so you don’t need to feel like you have to come. Wait until we know more.”

His dad’s voice sounded the same as always, but with those last words, out came a deep sob. “Please, Todd, just pray for us. Please pray. You know how to pray.”

Todd hadn’t moved from his chair in the hour since the call, hadn’t cried either. *This must be what shock feels like*, he thought. His mother . . . cancer . . . his dad’s rare emotion . . . what must his sister be feeling? The stream of thoughts repeated in his mind, but what haunted him most were his father’s words: “You know how to pray.”

Suddenly a very plain, unadorned thought hit Todd hard: *I don't know how to pray.* Though all alone, Todd blushed red with the realization. It embarrassed him. He was a seminary student, youth worker at a small church, graduate of a well-known Christian university, raised in a good church by committed Christian parents, yet he was *at a loss to know how to pray!*

A Case of APD

Todd steered his old red pickup through the traffic and across the city to his old university. He searched high and low, finally discovering a lone parking spot in a packed lot. An odd mix of emotions hit him as he passed through the doorway and into the halls: familiarity and weirdness, home and “you don't belong here anymore.” He knew right where to go, past the philosophy department office and into the Bible department hallway. He knocked gently, and a familiar voice responded, “Come in.”

“Dr. Warren, thanks for taking time. So good to see you.”

“Todd, I'm delighted you called.” They shook hands firmly, then Todd sat in the ancient upholstered chair, where hundreds of students had sat before him. Todd spent many hours as a student in that chair, exploring the mind of his favorite professor, getting advice and perspective. That's what Todd needed now.

The two caught up quickly. Then Dr. Warren shifted the conversation. “Now, tell me why you've come.”

It didn't take long for the former student to lay the circumstances before “the good Doctor” as Todd often called him. Before he was done, he found himself overcome with emotion, his head in his hands.

“Here’s the hard truth, Doc. I don’t know how to pray. I mean, I pray every day, several times a day. But really, beyond ‘God bless the food and thanks and please give us a great youth night,’ I don’t know *how to pray*.” Todd said the last three words slowly, deliberately, even harshly.

He looked up now to the pondering Dr. Warren. “I understand completely. I’ve been where you are,” he said. “Believe me, one can write books on theology and Bible commentaries and scholarly articles—and still not have the foggiest notion how to pray.”

“But Doc, you *do* know how to pray. You prayed with us in class, here in your office, even in the hallway! You are one of the godliest men I know. Something must have changed.”

“It did. And I’m going to tell you what it was. You have a very common condition, rampant in the church. I once had it. It’s called APD.”

Dr. Warren smiled, then turned serious. “Arrested Prayer Development. APD. Arrested development is the termination or interruption of a normal development process.¹ It’s common in many disciplines, such as psychology, physical therapy, and speech. Arrested *Prayer* Development is the termination or interruption of a healthy, growing prayer life.”

“Yes, that’s me all right,” Todd admitted. “But what do I do about it?”

“It’s very simple, Todd. I won’t even charge you for it,” Dr. Warren said playfully. “You need the Scripture Prescription.”

Todd had a small notebook with him and he wrote the words down as Dr. Warren said them.

The Bible is God’s prescription for APD. The way to break through in your prayer life is to pray Scripture. Read Ephesians 6:17-18. Take the sword of the Spirit, the Word of

God, praying in the Spirit. What God has brought together we ought not separate—the Bible and prayer. Pray the Bible!

“Church history is full of examples of great people of faith whose lives were revolutionized when they began the discipline of praying the Bible,” Dr. Warren continued. “Martin Luther. George Müller. Hudson Taylor. Taylor’s children would wake up in the night and find him reading the Bible and praying by candlelight. Müller said he struggled to keep his mind on prayer until he learned to pray with his Bible open. He would read, then pray, read, then pray. Müller realized that letting the Bible set the agenda led into all kinds of prayer, such as exaltation, confession of sin, making various requests, thanking God, and the like.”

Dr. Warren’s office was now a classroom. “Understand, Todd: *This is what changed my prayer life.* I was where you are now for a long time. I felt stuck in a giant rut. ‘God bless the missionaries. God bless my family. God help me. Thanks for the food.’

“Then, from reading about Christians of the past, and their prayer lives, and also reflecting on my study of the Bible, there it was. So obvious, I had to try it. Soon I was praying with God’s Kingdom agenda in mind! I was praying God’s will as God gave it to me. More than that—as I prayed Scripture I was getting to know God personally. He spoke to me through His Word as never before! The Scripture Prescription is the way to overcome Arrested Prayer Development.”

Todd looked up from his notes to see Dr. Warren’s eyes almost dancing. He couldn’t help smiling. “Tell me what to do.”

As the teacher spoke, his student continued to scratch the words onto the page.

Don’t make this complicated! Keep it simple. NOT reciting memorized portions (the Lord’s Prayer).

Choose a book of the Bible.

Read a few verses each day (a paragraph or literary unit).

Reflect on what you've read, jotting a few notes as thoughts come to mind.

Ask, "Lord, how should I pray?"

Read the verses again, slowly, chew on them.

Then PRAY!

"As you do this, Todd, it may seem awkward at first. It was for me. But, I can't stress this enough, keep on doing it! Don't stop. Make it a daily habit. A few verses a day, read-reflect-pray. And like taking a medication day after day, over time a whole new world of prayer will open up to you. You will be amazed."

A Greater Kingdom Agenda

Todd reviewed his notes early the next morning, sitting at his simple kitchen table. He fondly thought of Dr. Warren's big bear hug when Todd left the office. "God will heal your mother, Todd, on earth here, or in glory forever. Either way, I am excited for you because you're going to learn to pray in a way that can transform your life, and all those you influence, for years to come."

Todd had already been reading in 1 John, so that's where he turned. But instead of reading for a few minutes and then praying briefly for the day as he normally did, today he tried Dr. Warren's method. Here is what he wrote down in the notebook for that day:

1 John 3:16-18

Jesus is our great example of love.

What does it mean to “lay down our lives for the brothers”?

Pray for persecuted Christians who are laying down their lives today for Christ.

Help me be generous with others—don’t let me “walk on by.”

Why are we tempted to talk about love but not really live that way?

He read the passage twice, reviewed the notes he had jotted, reflected for a few moments, and then prayed. After praying through these thoughts, a couple specific examples came to mind of people he really needed God’s help to love. He prayed for them by name. Then he prayed for his mother’s health, his dad and sister, and a few other items he kept on a list.

Afterward, Todd had a clear realization: With his old way of praying, he would not have prayed about loving the difficult people in his life. He would not have prayed for persecuted Christians, and he probably wouldn’t have thanked God that Jesus laid down His life for him. Praying the Bible had pushed him to pray with a greater Kingdom agenda, to pray specifics he wouldn’t have thought of otherwise.

It was a start for Todd. Day after day he continued. Some days the praying came quickly and easily. Other days it felt painful! But Todd didn’t stop. First, 2 and 3 John, then Ezra and Nehemiah in the Old Testament, then back to Jude and Revelation. Todd prayed through them all.

Prayer for Real

“Todd, thanks for your call. How’s your mother doing?”

“Thanks for asking. She had surgery, and is doing fairly well.

There is follow-up treatment. I spent Christmas there, and it was a special time for our family.”

“And how’s your prayer life, my friend?”

“Doc, that’s why I called. I can’t thank you enough. It’s awesome. Praying God’s Word has completely changed my prayer life. It’s been several months now, and I’m sure I’ve got a lot more to learn, but wow, I can pray for an hour and not even think about it. And when I’m praying with others in my small group– or with our church staff, or the youth– consistently things I’ve been praying in the Bible will come out of me. Our pastor even said, ‘Todd, you pray with such insight and depth, please tell us about it.’

“As a result, I got to teach the Scripture Prescription to our staff. I’m teaching our youth council leaders, too! Doc, I’m not saying it’s perfection every day. But you were so right. Over time my prayer life has gotten healthier and my walk with God deeper. My walk with God is so much more intimate, and personal, and *real!*”

Todd could hear Dr. Warren’s smile in his voice: “Whatever you do, don’t stop battling APD. This prescription has changed you, and it can change your youth group, and your church. Thanks be to God!”

¹Thanks to Dr. Ned Stringham for his explanation of arrested development, many years ago. Also, seed ideas for this method of praying Scripture were discovered long ago in the powerful sermon, “The Power That Wields the Weapon,” by Dr. John Piper.

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and mentor Dr. Warren Wiersbe.

A Jazz Pianist Learns to Pray

I had spoken at this large, suburban church the year before. My text was Ephesians 6:17-18 regarding the sword of the Spirit and prayer. I ended the message by inviting people to their knees, following along in their Bibles as I prayed through a section of the Sermon on the Mount. I exhorted them to consider praying through Scripture, a few verses a day, on a daily basis.

Now I was back in this Rocky Mountain city, and standing before me was the church keyboardist. I was familiar with this gifted musician because I had been a guest at one of her jazz concerts. She played an awesome "Sweet Georgia Brown"!

I thanked her for attending our Concert of Prayer that evening. I was truly blessed and thankful for her response:

I came tonight to tell you how your message last year impacted me. I was raised in the kind of church where the only prayers prayed were read out of the bulletin. I knew nothing about personal prayer. I wandered far from God. Eventually, the ministry of this church helped me come to Christ.

But I still had no idea how to pray. What do you say? What do you talk about? Then last year, you challenged us to pray Scripture. I went home and told the Lord, "I'll pray through the Psalms if You'll help me to pray." And so I did. I prayed through the Psalms.

And I'm here to tell you, it changed my life.

The Scripture Prescription can help you overcome Arrested Prayer Development, too! Give it a try. It's known to change lives.

-Dana Olson

The Scripture Prescription at Church

Since returning to pastoral ministry two years ago (after more than 20 years in local church prayer mobilization), we have taken steps to teach our entire congregation to pray Scripture. Only time will tell of the Kingdom impact, but here are the steps we've taken:

1. We publish a daily Bible reading guide with "think about it" questions and prayer points. Our goal is to help people spend time in their Bibles and learn to pray Scripture on a daily basis. (Unfortunately, studies show that most Bibles are rarely opened and seldom read.)
2. When our Faith Groups meet (home cell groups), instead of Bible study, they talk about these daily readings. Because all are reading the same passages and praying the same prayer points, groups can discuss things such as, "At work there are some people who are really hard to love; that's what I found most challenging in 1 John 3," or "I just don't get why that passage led to praying for persecuted Christians." After talking it over, the groups pray insights from the Scriptures together. All our Faith Group leaders have been taught the simple method of praying the Bible, which is demonstrated in "The Scripture Prescription" article.
3. Our weekly prayer meeting is now called "Praying God's Word." The first half is spent discussing a passage of Scripture (lately we've been in Ecclesiastes, which can be tough). Then the second half of the time we pray what we found in the Bible. We also pray from our church's

daily prayer list.

4. As a leader, I take opportunities to model praying Scripture for people. Sometimes I pray from a passage during our worship time. I will conclude my message by praying a prayer based on the passage I preached. Even in counseling, I will guide individuals to Scripture and encourage them to pray it back to God.

Given time, we believe our church family can all learn to pray God's Word. We hope to have an army of more than 400 Christians equipped to pray, using "the Scripture Prescription." God help us!

-Dana Olson