Reading the Bible in Prayer and Communion with God
The following essay is excerpted from the contents of the ESV Study Bible.

By John Piper

Communion with God is a staggering thought. God created billions of galaxies and calls every star by name (Isa. 40:26; 42:5). He never had a beginning and will never end (Ps. 90:2). His ways are inscrutable and his judgments unsearchable (Rom. 11:33). His thoughts are as different from ours as the heavens are high above the earth (Isa. 55:8). “The nations are like a drop from a bucket, and are accounted as the dust on the scales” (Isa. 40:15).

If that were not enough to make communion with God unthinkable, consider that all of us are naturally rebellious against him. Therefore, his omnipotent wrath rests on us. We are by nature hostile to God and do not submit to his law (Rom. 8:7). Therefore, the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against us (Rom. 1:18). We are “by nature children of wrath,” “sons of disobedience,” and “dead in . . . trespasses and sins” (Eph. 2:1–5). How then can there be any thought of communion with God?

For Our Joy

Before we see the Bible’s answer, let’s clarify what we mean by “communion.” Communion refers to God’s communication and presentation of himself to us, together with our proper response to him with joy. We say “with joy” because it would not be communion if God revealed himself in total wrath and we were simply terrified. That would be true revelation and a proper response, but it would not be communion.

Communion assumes that God comes to us in love and that we respond joyfully to the beauty of his perfections and the offer of his fellowship. He may sometimes come with a rod of discipline. But even in our tears, we can rejoice in our Father’s loving discipline (Heb. 12:6–11). Communion with God may lay us in ashes or make us leap. But it never destroys our joy. It is our joy (Ps. 43:4).

To God’s Glory

Communion with God is the end for which we were created. The Bible says that we were created for the glory of God (Isa. 43:7). Yet glorifying God is not something we do after communing with him, but by communing with him. Many human deeds magnify the glory of God’s goodness, but only if they flow from our contentment in communion with him. This is why
we pray, “Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love” (Ps. 90:14). The joy of this communion in the love of God confirms God’s worth and shows his glory.

**Because of the Gospel**

But how is this unthinkable privilege of communion with God possible for sinners like us? The answer of the Bible is that God himself took the initiative to be reconciled to his enemies. He sent his Son, Jesus Christ, to die in our place and bear the curse that we deserved from God. “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us” (Gal. 3:13). So the wrath of God that we deserved fell on Christ (Isa. 53:4–6, 10).

Because God gave Christ as our substitute, we can be reconciled to God and enjoy peaceful communion with him. “While we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son” (Rom. 5:10). “Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom. 5:1). This peace leads to the unparalleled joy of communion with God (Rom. 5:11).

**The Gospel: The Bible’s Central Message**

Therefore, the first thing to say about the Bible in relation to communion with God is that the message of how to be reconciled to God for the glory of God is the central message of the Bible. There is no communion with God without salvation from our sin and God’s wrath. The Bible is the only book with final authority that tells us what God did through Christ and how we must respond through faith to be saved and to enjoy communion with God (2 Tim. 3:15).

But the Bible is more. The Bible tells the story of creation, of the fall of humanity into sin, and of the history of God’s chosen people Israel leading up to the coming of the Messiah, Jesus. Then it recounts the life of Christ and his teachings, his mighty works, his death, his resurrection, and his ascension. Finally, it tells the story of the early church after Jesus had returned to heaven, and how we are to live until Jesus comes again.

**The Bible Reveals God**

The God-inspired record of this history (the Bible) is the only infallible and authoritative book communicating and presenting God himself (2 Tim. 3:16–17; 2 Pet. 1:21). To be sure, God is active everywhere in the world today, and we experience his precious power wherever we trust him and do his will. But we will go astray if we make this daily experience of God the basis of our
communion with him. We know God for who he is, and meet him as he is, when we meet him through his Word—the Bible. We see this principle at work, for example, in 1 Samuel 3:21: “The Lord revealed himself to Samuel at Shiloh by the word of the Lord.” The Lord himself is revealed by his word, that is, by what he says to us, whether audibly or in written form.

Therefore, when we seek to enjoy communion with the Lord—and not to be led astray by the ambiguities of religious experience—we read the Bible. From Genesis to Revelation, God’s words and God’s deeds reveal God himself for our knowledge and our enjoyment. Of course, it is possible to read the Bible without enjoying communion with God. We must seek to understand the Bible’s meaning, and we must pause to contemplate what we understand and, by the Spirit, to feel and express the appropriate response of the heart.

God communicates with us in many ways through the Bible and seeks the response of our communion with him. If God indicts us (2 Cor. 7:8–10), we respond to him with sorrow and repentance. If he commends us (Ps. 18:19–20), we respond to him with humble gratitude and joy. If he commands us to do something (Matt. 28:19–20), we look to him for strength and resolve to obey with his help. If he makes a promise (Heb. 13:5–6), we marvel at his grace and trust him to do what he says. If he warns us of some danger (Luke 21:34), we take him seriously and watch with a thankful sense of his presence and protection. If he describes something about himself (Isa. 46:9–11), his Son (Mark 1:11), or his Holy Spirit (John 16:13–14), we affirm it and admire it and pray for clearer eyes to see and enjoy his greatness and beauty.

Fellowship with the Triune God

In all these communications, it is God himself that we most want to see. Communion with God is not merely learning about God but enjoying fellowship with God in the truth he reveals about himself. The apostle John, who enjoyed unusually close communion with Jesus while he was on the earth, said that he wrote his letters so that we might enjoy this fellowship: “That which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ” (1 John 1:3). In other words, the Bible records the words and deeds of God so that by means of these we have fellowship—that is, communion—with God.

This fellowship is with each person in the Trinity: with the Father (1 John 1:3), with the Son (1 Cor. 1:9), and with the Holy Spirit (2 Cor. 13:14). This is possible because each person of the
Godhead communicates with us in a way that corresponds to his unique role in creation, providence, and salvation. As the great Puritan John Owen wrote in his classic *Communion with God*, the Father communicates himself to us by the way of “original authority,” the Son from a “purchased treasury,” and the Spirit by an “immediate efficacy.” Each person, as Owen says, communicates with us “distinctly” in the sense that we may discern from which person particular realizations of the grace of God come to us. But “distinctly” does not mean “separately”: particular fellowship with each person of the Trinity is always one facet of ongoing communion with all three.

**Humble, Bold Prayer**

Finally, from this Father-initiated, Son-purchased, Spirit-effected communion with God, we pray with humble boldness (Heb. 4:16). That is, we speak to God the Father, on the basis of Christ’s work, by the help of the Spirit. This speaking is called prayer. It includes our confessions of sin (1 John 1:9), our praises of God’s perfections (Ps. 96:4), our thanks for God’s gifts (Ps. 118:21), and our requests that he would help us (Ps. 38:22) and others (Rom. 15:30–31)—all to the glory of God (Ps. 50:15), for the hallowing of his name, which must ever be our goal.

Prayer is the verbal aspect of our response to God in communion with him. The Bible does speak of “groanings too deep for words” (Rom. 8:26), but ordinarily prayer is the response of our heart to God in words. It may be in private (Matt. 6:6) or in public (1 Cor. 14:16). It may last all night (Luke 6:12) or be summed up in a moment’s cry (Matt. 14:30). It may be desperate (Jonah 2:2) or joyful (Ps. 119:162). It may be full of faith (Mark 11:24) or wavering with uncertainty (Mark 9:24).

But it is not optional. It is commanded—which is good news, because it means that God loves being the giver of omnipotent help (Ps. 50:15). The Bible reminds us that ordinary people can accomplish great things by prayer (James 5:17–18). It tells us about great answers to prayer (Isa. 37:21, 36). It gives us great examples of how to pray (Matt. 6:9–13; Eph. 3:14–19). And it offers amazing encouragements to pray (Matt. 7:7–11).

**God Gets the Glory; We Get the Joy**

The Bible shows that prayer is near the heart of why God created the world. When we pray for God to do what only he can do, he alone gets the glory while we get the joy. We see this when
Jesus says, “Whatever you ask in my name, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son” (John 14:13), and then later says, “Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full” (John 16:24). In prayer, God gets the glory and we get the joy. God is the overflowing fountain; we are satisfied with the living water. He is infinitely rich; we are the happy heirs.

Central to all our praying, as we have seen, must be our longing that God’s name be hallowed in the world—known and honored and loved (Matt. 6:9). To that end, we pray (1) for his church to be “filled with the fruit of righteousness . . . to the glory and praise of God” (Phil. 1:11); (2) that the gospel would spread and awaken faith in Jesus among all the nations (2 Thess. 3:1); and (3) that many who do not believe would be saved (Rom. 10:1). In this way, the aim of God’s Word and the aim of prayer become the same: the glory of God and the salvation of the nations through Jesus Christ.