

## The *Praying in the Spirit* Series

# Now That You've Spoken in Tongues

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I know a young man named Bob, a Pentecostal, who has not spoken in tongues since his initial encounter with the Holy Spirit. Unfortunately, he is just one of many who have had an incomplete charismatic experience. Perhaps they were taught that the experience was once-and-for-all and never to be repeated. Or maybe, in their minds, the encounter was so exalted that they believed a common occurrence of it would diminish its value. Others may have been startled, even frightened, by this awesome contact with God—further familiarity was not considered reverent. Still others, having experienced tongues only after much tarrying, agonizing, and begging, may have concluded that once was difficult enough. For whatever reasons, many charismatic Christians have lost out on the richness of this experience because they were not instructed that they could and should continue to use their prayer language.

### Using the Prayer Language

The apostle Paul implied that he prayed in tongues as much as he prayed with his understanding: “For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful. So what shall I do? I will pray with my spirit, but I will also pray with my mind; I will sing with my spirit, but I will also sing with my mind... I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you” (1 Cor. 14: 14 - 15, 18). Since Paul was reluctant to speak in tongues to edify the church, he must have spent most of his time speaking in tongues and personal prayer and praise of God. These verses show that Paul did not stop speaking in tongues after his initial experience and that he used glossolalic utterances in his personal prayer life beyond the “church walls.”

In this passage of Scripture, Paul uses three words in his description of glossolalic language that provides us with indicators of his own use of tongues. In verse 14 he calls it “praying” (*proseuchomai*); in verse 16 he calls it “praising” (*eulogeo*);” also in this verse he calls it “thanksgiving” (*eucharisteo*). If we are to use the prayer language Biblically, certainly we should let the words of Paul, Spirit-inspired apostle and charismatic *par excellence*, inform our doctrine and practice. According to Paul, we may use our heart-language to pray to God—that is, petition Him; we may use it to praise Him for who He is; or we may use it to thank Him for what He has done.

To get an idea of what Paul may have had in mind when he related tongues to these different approaches to God, we might take a look at how Paul and other New Testament writers use the terms “praying,” “praising,” and “thanksgiving”:

*We may use tongues in our in private prayer life and in corporate worship.* “When you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray [*proseuchomai*] to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you” (Matt. 6: 6; see also Mark 1:35; Luke 9: 18; Acts 10: 9). Here Matthew uses the same word for “pray” that Paul uses to describe speaking in tongues. And we have already seen that most, if not all, of Paul’s use of the prayer language was done outside of the church. This is not to say, however, that we should not pray within an assembly of believers. Luke tells us that Peter “went to the house of Mary the mother of John ... where many people had gathered and were praying” (*proseuchomai*; Acts 12: 12; see also Luke 1:10). In one of the most beautiful scenes in the Scriptures, Luke describes his and Paul’s sad farewell to their friends in Tyre: “All the disciples and their wives and children accompanied us out of the city, and there are on the beach we knelt to pray [*proseuchomai*]. After saying good-bye to each other, we went aboard the ship, and they returned home” (Acts 21: 5-6 ). We, too, being many members, may approach God corporately, praying in the Holy Spirit.

*We may use tongues to pray for the spiritual welfare of others.* “And this is my prayer [*proseuchomai*]: that your love may abound more in more and knowledge and depth of insight” (Phil. 1:9). Here is an excellent way to use your new language—pray for others. Lift up your Christian friends, especially those who have ministered to you and perhaps even brought you into the Kingdom. Paul wrote that he longed for these brothers and sisters “with the affection of Christ Jesus” (verse 8). In verse 3 he said, “I thank [*eucharisteo*] my God every time I remember you.” To another church he wrote, “How can we thank [*eucharisteo*] God enough for you in return for all the joy we have in the presence of our God because of you?” (1 Thess. 3:9). In your heavenly language, give thanks to God for your friends and lift their spiritual needs to God.

*We may use tongues to pray for the ministries of others, especially missionaries.* “Devote yourselves to prayer [*proseuchomai*], being watchful and thankful [*eucharisteo*]. And pray [*proseuchomai*] for us, too, that God may open a door for our message...” (Colossians 4:2-3; see also Acts 13: 3; 14: 23; 1 Thess. 5:25; 2 Thess. 3: 1). Paul devoted a portion of his prayer time to praying in the spirit. Here he is requesting prayer from other Christians; it is safe to assume that Paul desired his readers to lift him and his companion, Timothy, up to the Lord with their minds and with their spirits. We of the 21st century Church should also lift up our missionaries to God, using the mind and the spirit. In Acts 6, the Church was brought together and seven men were chosen to help the apostles with more practical matters. Before beginning their duties, these men were prayed for (*proseuchomai*; verse 6). We may do likewise, lifting of our church’s workers to God with our prayer language as well as our native tongue.

*We may use tongues to pray for the physical welfare of others.* “And he took the children in his arms, put his hands on them and blessed [*eulogeo*] them” (Mark 10:16; see also Matthew 19:13). This concept of blessing, which comes to us from the Old Testament, carries with the idea of handing one over to the protection of God. How comforting it is to know that we can submit our loved ones to God and rest peacefully, knowing that they are in the hands of an all-knowing, all-powerful, and merciful God. Perhaps you have loved ones whom you desperately need to turn over to a stronger and wiser power. You could take time now to entreat God in their behalf, to release them to God, to truly *bless* them. You may do this with your prayer language and your native tongue.

*We may use tongues to praise God.* “Whenever the living creatures give glory, honor and thanks [*eucharisteo*] to him who sits on the throne and who lives for ever and ever, the twenty-four elders fall down before him who sits on the throne, and worship him who lives for ever and ever” (Revelation 4:9-10). This is John’s description of the “living creatures” who surround the throne of God, “Day and night they never stop saying: ‘Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come’” (Revelation 4:8).

Offering praise to God—expressing adoration and veneration—is one of the primary functions of the prayer language, for worship often becomes ineffable, and joy becomes unspeakable. At these times, if we do not allow the cerebral or cognitive man to give way to the spiritual man, we will forever worship God with the severe limitations of the intellect. If you have had intense times with God where the best you could do in the way of expressing your heart’s feelings to God was to weep or to sigh, you were but a short step away from the biblically sanctioned use of the special prayer language. Groans and moans might be considered pre-Pentecost expressions of worship that, since Pentecost, find their counterpart in the God-ordained manifestation of tongues.

Having said the above, I should caution you about waiting until you feel emotionally stirred before using your prayer language. An emotionally charged context, human-centered as it is, could even defeat the purpose of the glossolalic experience, which is primarily to reach out *voluntarily* and *consciously* to God. If I were seriously ill, for example, I would want someone to pray for me with heightened sensibility and awareness—in English and in the Spirit. Whether he *feels* particularly spiritual or holy or ecstatic would not be relevant—unless his ecstasy diminished his awareness of my need! Of course, God may bless us with moments of ecstatic joy during worship, but when we petition God in behalf of another, we should be sober and alert—until God turns our mourning into joy!

*We may use our prayer language to pray that others will receive the baptism the Holy Spirit.* “When the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them. When they arrived, they prayed [*proseuchomai*] for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit, because

the Holy Spirit had not yet come upon any of them; they had simply been baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus. Then Peter and John placed their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit” (Acts 8:14-17). After instruction in the Scriptures, our own faith, experience, and prayers can be great aides to those seeking the baptism in the Holy Spirit. Our prayer in tongues for one seeking Christ’s baptism may serve as a catalyst for his faith. In fact, if you are praying for someone to receive the Holy Spirit, it is important that you pray in English (or your native tongue) *and in your prayer language*. If you continue to speak in language that he understands, you will probably distract him. (You may also place your hand upon his head or shoulder, preferably from the front so you may speak with him should further counseling be necessary.)

*We may use tongues to pray for our own spiritual growth.* “Watch and pray [*proseuchomai*] so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak” (Matthew 26:41). We should pray persistently that we might be spiritually strong to resist the temptations of the flesh, the world, and the devil. And what better way to strengthen ourselves than through an instrument that the Bible says was given specifically for that purpose: “He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself . . .” (1 Cor. 14: 4). Jude tells us that while we are “waiting anxiously for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to eternal life,” we should be “building [ourselves] up . . . praying in the Holy Spirit . . .” (verse 21, verse 20, NASB).

Other uses of the prayer language include petitioning God for guidance (Acts 1: 24) and healing (James 5: 13-15); praising God because of the salvation of souls (2 Cor. 4:15) and because of the generosity of other believers (2 Cor. 9:11-12); giving thanks to God for food provisions (1 Timothy 4:3-5; 1 Cor. 10:30; Matthew 14:18-19); offering thanksgiving as the Christian antithesis to obscenities and coarse joking (Ephesians 5:4); and praying over the communion elements (Matthew 26:26; 1 Cor. 10: 16). No doubt, you can think of other occasions when your personal, private prayer language would be useful and biblical. I have saved for last one of the most important occasions that allow the use of the prayer language. In this case, it might be said that tongues are *required*:

*We may pray in tongues when we have no idea of what we should be praying.* “. . . [T]he Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray [*proseuchomai*], but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the Saints in accordance with God’s will” (Romans 8:26-27). When the doctors themselves are baffled, how then do we pray? When a loved one’s arrival is long overdue, how then do we pray? When an important and difficult decision must be made and there is no clear direction, how then do we pray? Romans 8:26-27 assures us that we need not feel helpless just because we do not know what to pray, for the language of the Spirit will intercede for us. The Spirit who knows our hearts and knows our situations *and knows the will of God* cannot pray amiss! Praise God!

In relating all of these verses to praying in tongues, I am not claiming that they were written originally with tongues in mind. But I am saying the apostle Paul made this connection when he wrote under divine inspiration the tongues may be used for *prayer, praise, or thanksgiving* (see 1 Cor. 14:14-17). Here, Paul uses the same terms he used to describe his communication to God in his learned language.

By surveying the many ways in which the Christian may address God with a prayer language, I hope that I have opened new doors for Pentecostals and charismatics who had thought their experience was to be a rare and singular one. I urge you to make the same resolution that the apostle Paul made: *to pray with your spirit and with your mind* (1 Cor. 14: 15).

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