

# The Spiritual Practice of Meditating on Scripture

## The Centrality of Scripture

*"The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God endures forever." (Isaiah 40:8)*

The Bible is the word of God. We read Scripture with reverence. Words become familiar as we read them again and again in familiar ways. But always we are attentive to the authority of our King.

Other religions may come to their Scripture in fear, but not Christians. God is love. He reaches forth in love. And he has spoken from love. We come as children who know the love of the Perfect Father.

Christians read Scripture for:

- Guidance: 'Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path.' (Ps 119:105)

- Nourishment: '...man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.' (Deut 8:3)
- Training: 'All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.' (2 Tim 3:16-17)
- Life: 'But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.' (John 20:31)

## The Difficulties of Scripture

On the one hand, God's Word is given for us. On the other hand, it comes to us preserved over many distant centuries, written for different purposes to different people in different genres. Hearing God makes sense of both.

We can tend towards two problems:

1. Bypassing all historical and theological context we open our Bibles up seeking to hear from God. We find a few verses we love, a few verses we take out of context, and avoid big swathes of the confusing parts.
2. Fixating on the original intentions of the author we devote ourselves to study. Making sense of nuance, authorial intent, and redemptive history, we seek what God spoke in the first place but tie ourselves in knots tracing how to apply anything more than obvious gospel truths.

Both problems are described to the extreme, but I'm sure one resonates while the other feels like a 'them' problem. We must recognise that both approaches are reasonable. We must hold in tension the truth that God has given Scripture for us, and God has given Scripture through history.

How do we reconcile the two together for our own reading? Meditation.

## Meditating on Scripture

Meditation might evoke kneeling in a dark room offering deep grunts in pursuit of detachment from the world. That is not Christian meditation. Let's consider Psalm 1.

*Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked or stand in the way that sinners take or sit in the company of mockers, but whose delight is in the law of the LORD, and who meditates on his law day and night. That person is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither—whatever they do prospers. (Psalm 1:1-3)*

Psalm 1 is beautiful in its own right, but it also teaches us how to read the whole Psalter ahead (and really how to read all of Scripture). We're shown the path of a blessed person. They put aside the ways of the wicked, and instead walk in the ways of God. How? They delight in Scripture and meditate on Scripture.

If you want to flourish? Learn to delight in the Word of God above all else. Don't just esteem the Word. Don't just appreciate the Word. Don't just obey the Word. Delight in the Word. The picture painted is the eager desertion of foolish wisdom to instead come and drink from God's wisdom like a pure wellspring in the desert.

How do you know if you delight in the Word? Don't think of your good feelings, look at your behaviour. The person who delights in the Word, meditates on it day and night. What you turn to when you are tired and free reveals what you think will recharge and nourish you. Netflix? People? Socials? Delight is revealed when you draw from Scripture at all hours and in all circumstances.

Don't hear that wrong. Nobody is expecting you to go home from work tired, to pull out your commentaries and dictionaries to study the Bible. The word is meditate (literally muttering out loud to oneself). It is a picture of pondering, considering, turning over again and again.

The ancient illustration of delight and meditation is food. You're chewing on it, tasting the flavours, appreciating the texture, savouring the experience. You're finding nourishment and full of joy in the experience.

Perhaps you've read Scripture first thing in the morning and been struck by a key idea, thought or verse. Maybe, like a piece of gum that doesn't lose its flavour, you chew on it throughout the day. You appreciate different angles and think about different parts of your life.

Clarity comes at lunch over a confusing word from all your pondering. Work gets stressful but the verse in your heart casts light. You arrive home exhausted, but you pause in thanks to God for nourishing you. You meet a friend for dinner or sit with someone in your home on the couch and share the gold you stored up for yourself.

Meditating on Scripture wrestles with the complexity and depends on the nourishment. Meditating on Scripture is the practice of letting the Living Word live in you. Meditating on Scripture refuses to let the Bible be words on a page, but a means to God himself.

## **Lectio Divina**

Let me introduce you to an approach to Scripture called Lectio Divina. The term has been thrown around much in recent years, but don't be fooled into thinking this is a faddish reading program. This is not unique way of reading, but simply the way to read the Scripture in the early church, being formalised in later centuries.

You might like to integrate these steps into your personal reading of Scripture. But you will still gain much if you glean its wisdom and actively apply these principles into your existing approach. They include:

- Reading
- Meditating
- Praying
- Contemplating

### 1. Reading

Reading is what it sounds like: reading the text. Not only walking front to back, we are pulling all of the faculties of reason and consideration into reading the text. As 21st century western readers, we consider all the historical and contextual details of the text.

We notice what words are repeated, what themes are important, how does the author make the point? Through this stage we become familiar with the text of Scripture and seek to make sense of the piece of writing in whatever form and provenance it has arrived to us.

Don't be fooled into thinking this is cumbersome or time-consuming. This is an investment in our life-long journey with Scripture, and especially over time we draw on the gold we've mined previously to quickly find our feet in the text.

### 2. Meditating

Guigo II's 'Ladder of Monks' describes the stage of meditation as "the busy application of the mind to seek with the help of one's own reason for knowledge of hidden truth."

If reading was where we put the food into our mouth, meditation is where we are starting to chew, swallow and inwardly process. We have been considering the text before us with our heads, now we are seeking to ponder the text with our hearts.

How does this enrich my understanding of Jesus? What does this mean for the Christian life? How does this grate against my current living? What does this mean in my world?

Note the shift from questions of the text to questions of ourselves and the world. This is not an act of your own reasoning; this is the work of the Spirit of God who lives within us, casting light and teaching us as he promised he would (John 14:26).

Our Anglican Book of Common Prayer captures our desire in a beautiful prayer:

*"Blessed Lord, who hast caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning; Grant that we may in such wise hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that by patience and comfort of thy holy Word, we may embrace, and ever hold fast, the blessed hope of everlasting life, which thou hast given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen."*

This ought to be a stage in itself in our time with God in Scripture, but equally ought to be the 'day and night' process of Scripture once we close our Bibles and get moving.

### 3. Praying

We have hopefully seen and drawn gold from the Word. We are hopefully stimulated, delighted, and convicted in some measure. We hopefully already have something to meditate upon throughout the day. But we also want to allow God to speak clearly and directly into our life. We are inviting our present God who lives within us by his Spirit to guide us.

We are praying slowly through the text as we read again that the Spirit would bring fresh 'lowercase r' revelation. Perhaps he will direct our eyes and minds to a phrase, verse, or idea that he would have us hear? Perhaps God will speak in the still small voice to cast light on our life and offer direction or delight as our loving Father?

Let me be clear if this sounds unfamiliar. We believe that the Spirit within us is the active presence and power of God, who continues to guide us as our shepherd (Psalm 23, John 10) in subjective ways as well as the obvious objective ways. Scripture remains our guide and authority, and nothing from the Spirit counters or overturns that.

But the most powerful part of your time in Scripture might not be an exegetical or meditative insight, but a single word, theme or phrase that is barely the main point the author was making! A quick example: Recently I read a verse so familiar that I actually already have it memorised. But the Spirit overwhelmed me to the point of joyful tears drawing my eyes to the word 'already'. Waves of Divine love washed over me as I realised I had nothing to prove, nothing to lose, and nothing required of me. God already loves me as I am right now.

#### 4. Contemplating

*"And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit." (2 Corinthians 3:18)*

Our faces are transformed like Moses' on Mt Sinai when we contemplate the glory of God. This is as distinct from the previous three steps, even as it incorporates much of all three of them. We can read, learn, receive, and enjoy from God. Contemplation is the act of gazing, beholding, grasping, and heart-felt worshipping over the Divine Beauty of God in the gospel.

The greatest formation of your soul and life comes not through knowledge, theology, or wisdom, but through true encounter with God. Temporal creatures depend on words and concepts, but contemplation doesn't necessarily involve or require words.

We are seeking to take all that we have uncovered, immersed in the indwelling presence of the Spirit, and contemplate God. Not contemplate truths about God, or Scriptures revealing God. But God himself. This is the end goal of existence when we come face to face with Love himself, having been restored in perfection and united with Christ.

We spoke about meditation as the 'day and night' process, but we equally want to contemplate God in the constant 'day and night'. Unlike our Old Covenant forefathers, we are the temple of the Living God and have unrestricted access and invitation to his presence. May we be people who live and draw from the presence of God.

### **Meditation in Practice**

Now to finish. There are many practices that fit within and between the steps of Lectio Divina that Christians have found incredibly helpful for meditating on Scripture. Feasting on and depending on the Word of God is the greatest investment in life, so it is worth whatever you put in.

Can I encourage you to challenge yourself? You are capable of more than you think. Leave this article with at least one practical resolution for how you will let the word of Christ dwell richly within you.

#### Memorising Scripture:

- Create a short list of life-verses. Prov 4:23 'Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it.' I have a small pile of 'life verses' which resonate particularly with the contours of my soul, that I have memorised to guard my heart and can turn to whenever I'm in need.
- Memorise a few verses regularly (daily, weekly, or monthly). However frequently, build somewhere into your rhythms an intentional moment where you memorise some Scripture. Perhaps you could choose a short section each month and devote 3 minutes to revising it during your time with God, then rehearsing it throughout the day.
- Memorise a chapter/book of the Bible. At various points I've memorised a chapter of one of Paul's epistles. I couldn't recite the whole text of each to this day, but the phrases and contours of the text remain in my brain, along with giant chunks that surprise me when they come out at times.

#### Reading Scripture in different ways:

- Read the whole Bible in a year, a term or a month. If you haven't done this, or if it's been a while, this is a huge investment in your spiritual life. You'll understand the whole of Scripture better, make connections across the whole, and be able to go deeper in your future reading because you've learnt the high-level details.
- Read books of the Bible in one sitting. I have found previously untapped gold and unravelled confusing knots by reading a book of the Bible front to back in one sitting. It can feel like drinking from a firehose, but the vision and understanding you will receive is unparalleled.
- Read small chunks. Focus on a few verses, or even one verse at a time, without short-changing the time you devote to reading. You'll find more time and more ability in the practice of meditating and contemplating. Especially for the intellectually bent among us, sometimes we must force ourselves to slow to reach the heart.

#### Getting creative:

- Use Scripture journals. You can buy small little books with single books of the Bible within that have space to mark up the text, write notes, doodle and draw. These are so helpful.
- Use your own journal. Write stuff down. You'll gain in the moment by processing in a new way, and you'll gain in the future as you look back on how God spoke. Try the meditation and contemplation steps in this way to build up a record of 'God insights'.
- Rewrite the text. You might find copying down the text in your own hand a slow way of pondering in a fresh way, and then have a space to write reflections or doodle over the text.

### **Some Suggested Bible Reading Schemes**

Choose one to try out!

*Robert Murray M'Cheyne* [www.mcheyne.info/calendar](http://www.mcheyne.info/calendar)

A scheme for daily reading that takes readers through the New Testament and Psalms twice each year, and through the rest of the Bible once. The Scripture listings in the "Family" columns can be read in family devotions, and those in the "Private" columns can be read privately, in personal devotions.

*Lectio 365* [www.24-7prayer.com/resource/lectio-365/](http://www.24-7prayer.com/resource/lectio-365/)

With the Lectio 365 app you pray the Bible by meditating on the scriptures and asking God to speak through them.

*Bible in One Year* [www.bibleinoneyear.org](http://www.bibleinoneyear.org)

A free Bible reading app from HTB UK and Alpha, with commentary by Nicky & Pippa Gumbel

*Read Scripture* [www.readscripture.org/](http://www.readscripture.org/)

An app to read the bible at your own pace

*Explore Devotion* [www.thegoodbook.com.au/explore](http://www.thegoodbook.com.au/explore)

The Explore App contains daily Bible readings with questions to help you engage with the Bible