

BIBLICAL INSIGHTS #111: GOT MEDITATION?

By John Temples

A dear sister in Christ asked me a while back to put down some thoughts on meditation. Of course, she meant meditation as it relates to God's word, the Bible. I'm glad she asked me about that, because I got to thinking: For many years I have READ God's word...I have PREACHED God's word...I have ANALYZED God's word...I have STUDIED God's word...but I have neglected MEDITATING on God's word. Let's think about what it means to meditate on God's word and why we should do more of it.

WHAT IS MEDITATION?

If you ask a modern person what meditation is, he or she might say "it's a mental relaxation technique"; or they might think of an Eastern guru or mystic sitting cross-legged and chanting a mantra. Here are some modern definitions:

"[Meditation is] a practice where an individual uses a technique – such as mindfulness, or focusing the mind on a particular object, thought, or activity – to train attention and awareness, and achieve a mentally clear and emotionally calm and stable state." (Wikipedia)

"Meditation is a mind and body practice...for increasing calmness and physical relaxation, improving psychological balance, coping with illness, and enhancing overall health and well-being....There are many types of meditation, but most have four elements in common: a quiet location with as few distractions as possible; a specific, comfortable posture (sitting, lying down, walking, or in other positions); a focus of attention (a specially chosen word or set of words, an object, or the sensations of the breath); and an open attitude (letting distractions come and go naturally without judging them)."

(<https://www.nccih.nih.gov/health/meditation-in-depth>)

“[Meditation is] the practice of focusing your mind in silence, especially for religious reasons or in order to make your mind calm.”

(<https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/us/definition/english/meditation>)

Modern meditation differs from Bible meditation in that: (1) modern meditation is more a psychotherapy technique than a personal enrichment tool, (2) modern meditation is heavily influenced by Eastern mystical practices, and (3) modern meditation has as its main goal relaxation or “clearing of the mind.”

The purpose of Bible meditation, though, is not to clear or empty the mind, but rather to FILL one’s mind with God and His truth! Here’s how we might define meditation as it relates to our Christian life: “Meditation is approaching a Bible passage with an attitude of prayerful reflection for a deeper appreciation for its teachings and a fuller relationship with its Author.” In other words, it is setting aside “the paralysis of analysis” and reading Scripture, not as scholars dissecting a text, but as learners absorbing its power to make us better people. Wikipedia says: “Christian meditation is a form of prayer in which a structured attempt is made to become aware of and reflect upon the revelations of God. ... Christian meditation is the process of deliberately focusing on specific thoughts (such as a bible passage) and reflecting on their meaning in the context of the love of God.”

So here’s what Bible meditation is NOT:

- Just reading the Bible at random or to pass time
- Memorizing a Bible passage
- Studying or analyzing a text for a lesson or sermon
- Just staring at or mindlessly repeating a Bible word or passage
- Praying (in prayer, we *talk* to God; in meditation, we *listen* to God through His word).
- Closing your eyes and praying for the Holy Spirit to give you mysterious insight into some Biblical principle. He’s already given you the source of all spiritual insight: the written word. Open your eyes and READ what the Holy Spirit has already given.

Biblical meditation isn't even primarily reading for relaxation, although you may find it calming and comforting. It's never mindless or without purpose. Instead, to meditate means that your mind is focused on God and his Word. Bible meditation is pondering, dwelling on, musing, reflecting on, mulling over, perusing, and contemplating the words of Scripture to obtain a deeper understanding of the Bible message or for personal strength and comfort.

I have to admit that it's very hard for us preachers to meditate on the Bible. That's because just as soon as I say "I'm going to read this passage purely for pleasure or personal enrichment," I find myself thinking, "how can I make this text into a sermon?" I instinctively start analyzing and outlining a passage instead of appreciating it for its lofty concepts.

BIBLE PASSAGES ABOUT MEDITATION

There are nearly 30 references to meditation in both the Old and New Testament.¹ Here are some of the most powerful and familiar:

- "This book of the law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall *meditate* in it day and night, that you may observe to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success" (Joshua 1:8).
- "Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor stands in the path of sinners, nor sits in the seat of the scornful; but his delight is in the law of the Lord, and in His law he *meditates* day and night" (Psalms 1:1,2).
- "Let the words of my mouth and the *meditation* of my heart be acceptable in Your sight, O Lord, my strength and my Redeemer" (Psalms 19:14).
- "Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy — *meditate* on these things" (Philippians 4:8).
- "I remember the days of old; I *meditate* on all Your works; I muse on the work of Your hands" (Psalms 143:5).

¹ A complete list of Scripture references is at the end of this article.

SUGGESTIONS FOR BIBLE MEDITATION

Actually, you already know how to meditate. Do you ever worry about anything? Sure you do. We all do. Worry is meditation! When we worry, we fixate on one thing, lock in on it, chew on it, and look at it from every angle. Worry is just bad meditation. And we're all naturally good at it!

As far as mechanics go, the requirements are basic and few: you need a quiet place and time, and of course a Bible. A word or topical concordance is helpful for finding Scriptures on particular subjects of interest.

Writer Brad Archer offers some helpful information on Bible meditation: "The particulars of biblical meditation can vary, but the practice isn't complicated. A meditative practice that helps me is sitting quietly and thinking over a passage piece by piece, breaking it apart and dwelling on each word and line of Scripture. I would not be surprised if many of us, even those who scoff at the concept of meditation, have engaged in it without realizing it: If you've ever sat with a Scripture and gone over it repeatedly, trying to understand each word, you've meditated. If you've ever been compelled by a sermon or passage of Scripture to sit and think over a single attribute or testimony of God, you've meditated. If you've ever felt tempted and brought a Scripture to mind, going over it repeatedly to gain God's strength and rest, you've meditated. Meditation implies wonder and thought, remembering the Lord in all his glory and pondering him in his fullness: 'I will remember the deeds of the Lord; yes, I will remember your wonders of old. I will ponder all your work, and meditate on your mighty deeds. Your way, O God, is holy. What god is great like our God?' (Psalm 77:11-13)." (<https://unlockingthebible.org/2017/09/what-is-biblical-meditation/>)

A Gospel Coalition article lists five components of Bible meditation: Focusing, understanding, remembering, worshipping, and applying. (<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/5-steps-to-meditating-on-your-bible/>)

Donald S. Whitney, in his book *Spiritual Disciplines For The Christian Life*, said: "Meditation is not folding your arms, leaning back in your chair, and staring at the

ceiling. That's daydreaming, not meditation.... As opposed to daydreaming wherein you let your mind wander, with meditation you focus your thoughts. You give your attention to the verse, phrase, word, or teaching of Scripture you have chosen. Instead of mental aimlessness, in meditation your mind is on a track—it's going somewhere; it has direction."

Two practices that are especially helpful are these: (1) Read a passage aloud. (2) As you read, emphasize different words in the text. For example, John 2:5:

- **Whatever** He says to you, do it.
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- Whatever He says to you, **do it**.

If you're a Bible teacher or preacher, you might find that these musings will result in a sermon or lesson idea spontaneously popping into your head. But don't read with the idea that "I'm going to find an angle for a sermon here." Just read for a blessing and let a sermon idea happen naturally. It's like the old saying--if you chase a butterfly, you will probably never catch him. However, if you just sit quietly, he may light on you.

As you ponder a text, ask some questions:

- Who wrote this? (Or who said this?)
- To whom was it written?
- What were the circumstances and/or the setting? (The context.)
- What does this text say?
- What does this text mean? (Make sure that you know what the passage is really saying, not what you think it means or what you would like it to mean.)
- If I were to paraphrase this text, how would it read?
- What does this text mean to me?

One more thing: it's okay when meditating to chase rabbits! As you read a text, another reference may pop into your mind. Follow that rabbit trail! Or you might

see a link to another passage or a concept that you never thought of before. This is not the same as letting your mind wander; it's going where the living Word and your own creative juices take you in a disciplined and structured way.

David said, "Your word I have hidden in my heart, that I might not sin against You" (Psalms 119:11). That's the essence of meditation--hiding God's word in your heart. And there's a great blessing in that: you become more and more able to resist sin. That alone is enough to practice regular Bible meditation.² --John Temples

² And I just couldn't resist: There's a sermon outline in this text. God's word (the best thing) I have hidden in my heart (the best place) that I might not sin (the best reason).

ADDENDUM: WORDS AND SCRIPTURE REFERENCES

Here are the main words translated “meditate” or “meditation” in the Bible text:

- *Hagah* (Hebrew): muse, growl, moan, utter (Strong’s 1897). Found in: Joshua 1:8, Job, 27:4, Jeremiah 48:31, as well as various times in Psalms, Proverbs, and Isaiah.
- *Suach* (Hebrew): muse (Strong’s 7742). The Complete Word Study Bible further expands on the usage of this word to mean, “a verb meaning to be bowed down; to be downcast. It refers often to the despair of one’s soul.” Found in: Genesis 24:63.
- *Meletaō* (Greek): to care for, practice, study (Strong’s 3191). Found in: Acts 4:25, 1 Timothy 4:15.

Here are all the occurrences of the word “meditation” and related forms in the Bible (NKJV):

- *Meditation*--Psalms 5:1, 7:1, 9:16, 19:14, 49:3, 64:1, 104:34, 119:97, 119:99.
- *Meditate* or *meditates*--Genesis 24:63; Joshua 1:8; Psalms 1:2, 4:4, 63:6, 77:6, 77:12, 119:15, 119:23, 119:27, 119:48, 119:78, 119:148, 143:5, 145:5; Isaiah 33:18; Malachi 3:16; Luke 21:14; Philippians 4:8; 1 Timothy 4:15.