

BIBLICAL MEDITATION

Psalm 119v15,16.

*“I meditate on your precepts and consider your ways
I delight in your decrees; I will not neglect your word.”*

There are different ways to approach the Bible. Listening to it; reading it; studying it; memorizing it. All of these have their important part to play. But in these next two weeks in our series on ‘Your Inner World’, we are looking at meditating on the Scriptures. So, what is biblical meditation? First a word about what it is *not!*

Biblical meditation is not the same as eastern meditation.

We can be negative when we hear the very word “*meditation*” because of its’ association with other religions and new age philosophy. Some of us still associate the word with a famous Indian spiritual guru.

Maharishi Mahesh Yogi died recently aged around 91. His name became synonymous with “Transcendental Meditation” (TM) in 1967 when the Beatles sat at his feet. He gave initiates a personal mantra or sound (usually in Sanskrit) which they were told to use while they meditated for 20 minutes in the morning and evening. Its repetition, he claimed, would enable them to attain a “deeper level of consciousness” and to “harmonize with the infinite.” Meditators would have the ability to perceive things beyond the reach of the senses and even acquire such abilities as levitating at will. This was called Yogic flying. – bouncing in the air in the lotus position. In the 1980’s he formed a political party - the Natural Law Party. They put up candidates in an election in the UK and claimed that if TM were performed by just 1% of the population the flow of “good vibrations” would flood over the nations and bring about a universal state of “bliss consciousness”. In 2002 he announced that he could combat terrorism if he raised 1 billion dollars to train 40,000 expert meditators.

Campbell McAlpine writes: *“Wherever there is the real, there is the counterfeit. One of the deceits that has ensnared millions is that true peace and tranquility can be obtained through transcendental meditation. However the ‘mantra’ cannot replace revelation by the Holy Spirit. TM seeks to provide a counterfeit practice for men and women who have been created to meditate on God, his character, his words, his works and his ways.”*

McAlpine goes on: *“A friend of ours, Tryna, who had been involved in TM before she came to know the Lord Jesus in a personal way, had this to say:*

We used to descend down into ourselves, firmly and consistently pushing away all distracting thoughts. Our goal was to arrive at a state of nothingness, which we called peace. I would settle down into a void of blackness, a darkness which could be felt. What a difference biblical meditation has brought to my life. God’s Word is the focus instead of self; satisfaction instead of emptiness; insight instead of darkness. Here was revelation from God

instead of another mystical experience. I found power in God's word to heal me and cleanse my mind, feed and satisfy my soul, and strengthen my spirit. Rev.3v20 became especially meaningful (words of Jesus to his people): 'If any man hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to him, and eat with him and he with me.' I learned to hear God's voice." ('The Practice of Biblical Meditation'. 1981)

Biblical meditation is very different from eastern meditation. It is primarily about knowing God Himself through His Son Jesus. Our desire is to meditate on *Him*, to know *Him* better, love *Him* more and live to please *Him*. And we need the Holy Spirit's help in this.

Meditation is a Bible theme.

For starters we read of Isaac going out in the field one evening "to meditate" (Genesis 24v63), but we are not told what he was meditating on. God's instructions to Joshua after Moses' departure are more specific. "*Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful.*" (Joshua 1:8)

But it is in the Psalms, the greatest of all collections of devotional material, that we find meditation more than anywhere else. The righteous man meditates on God's law (1v2,3) and God's works and mighty deeds (77v12). David prays, "*May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O LORD, my Rock and my Redeemer.*" (19v14) One Psalm - 119 (all 176 verses of it!), has been described as "*an elaborate, ingenious and passionate meditation on the Law of the Lord.*" The text I have picked out particularly this morning is from this Psalm. "*I meditate on your precepts and consider your ways, I delight in your decrees; I will not neglect your word.*"

Three words used for meditation in the Psalms are fascinating. As well as meaning 'study', 'commune', 'muse', "compare" and 'imagine', they also express the sounds a person might make while contemplating God e.g. 'mutter', 'make a solemn sound' and 'moan'. Even bodily posture is captured; one of the words can mean 'to bow down'.

In the New Testament the word is rare but the idea is present. We are encouraged to contemplate what God has done in Jesus Christ. At the birth of Christ, "*Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart.*" (Luke 2v19) The apostle Paul writes, "*Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things*" (Colossians 3:1f), and "*Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.*" (Colossians 3v16); and having given Timothy some apostolic instruction Paul urges Timothy to "*meditate on these things*" (1 Timothy 4v15)

What is biblical meditation?

McAlpine's definition is: *"Meditation is the devotional practice of pondering the words of a verse, or verses of Scripture, with a receptive heart, allowing the Holy Spirit to take the written Word and apply it as the living Word to the inner being. The result is the impartation of divine truth, being a response to God."*

So, how can we go about it? First you take a text of Scripture. For example, a particular text may come to your mind strongly; or you might want to work through a book of the Bible. In my case I have highlighted texts throughout my Bible that I intend for meditation at some point. Having done this, here are some guidelines I hope you will find helpful.

1. Biblical meditation involves lingering with the Scriptures.

Some years ago, when speed reading was in vogue, there was an article in the Reader's Digest by someone who had been stranded for months with only one book. They had learned to savour each word and sentence. The article was called 'Read Better, Read More Slowly',

Perhaps some of us can end up speed reading our Bible. But meditation is an unhurried and intimate drawing near to God through the Scriptures. You linger over the text you have chosen. You read it and re-read it. You relax and sit with the Lord, like Mary in Bethany sitting at Jesus' feet. This is captured beautifully in Noel Richard's song.

*"To be in Your Presence, to sit at Your feet
Where Your love surrounds me, and makes me complete.
This is my desire..."*

*To rest in Your presence, Not rushing away
To cherish each moment, here I would stay.
This is my desire..."*

Our lives are lived at such a hectic pace. It is therapeutic for us to dial down and sit at rest in God's Presence.

2. Biblical meditation draws you near in love to God.

In the Psalms David's meditation is always an act of loving devotion. Don't be surprised if meditation on a Bible text launches you into some love song to God, not a mantra! That is what happened in David's case. In fact the word for meditation in Psalm 19v14 can mean "resounding music". Many of the worship songs written in recent years have come out of personal worship.

This is one of the greatest blessings of biblical meditation - drawing near in love to God. In Psalm 104v34 David writes *"My meditation of Him shall be sweet."* (KJAV) Notice it is meditation of *Him*, God Himself! This word "sweet" is a love word. I wonder how many of this week's Valentine cards had the word "sweetheart" on them. The word "sweet" is used frequently by the great

American pastor and theologian Jonathan Edwards in his meditations on Christ. One of our great hymns begins: *'How sweet the name of Jesus sounds in a believer's ear.'*

Reading the Gospels is a wonderful way to meditate lovingly on Jesus. Through *written* words we can draw near in love to the *Living* Word, Jesus Himself. For example take a simple passage like Mark 1v40-42 and meditate on Jesus' love in healing this man of leprosy. This man's disease had affected him physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually. He had been an untouchable. But Jesus had touched him and made him well. Meditate on how the man must have felt about Jesus. Then think about you and Jesus.

"Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart." (Hebrews 12v2,3)

3. Biblical meditation means tuning in to heaven's frequency

This is how Gordon McDonald describes it: *"The act of meditation is like tuning the spirit to heavenly frequencies"* ('Ordering Your Private World'.) I like this image of tuning in a radio. Most of us can identify with it. We want to hear God speaking to us. It may take us some time to find the right waveband. It can take patience. Sometimes the sound is muffled or there is interference. And then, suddenly, you get it. It comes through loud and clear.

The point of all this is, of course, that we want to hear God's voice. We believe God speaks to us through the Scriptures. So we ask Him: "What do you want to say to me?" For this we need the Holy Spirit's help.

Rather than tuning in to listen, the writer of Psalm 119 prayed *"Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your law."* (v18) It is possible to look at a familiar text and suddenly see something you have never seen before. Most of us can quote Psalm 23v1. "The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want". I remember the first time I meditated on this verse and suddenly saw that the Lord is *my pastor*, (this is a "shepherd" word). I am a pastor, but I have a wonderful heavenly pastor who can meet all my deepest needs.

There is a spiritual power built into God's Word which gets through to us. J.B. Phillips described his experience of translating the New Testament: *"Although I did my utmost to preserve an emotional detachment, I found again and again that the material under my hands was strangely alive; it spoke to my condition in the most uncanny way."*

Simply by spending time with the Scriptures you open yourself up to the supernatural activity of God. You suddenly find yourself tuned in to heaven's frequency. The Spirit Himself has tuned you in.

4. Biblical meditation internalizes the Scriptures

Gordon McDonald again, writes: *“One takes a portion of Scripture and simply allows it to enter the deepest recesses of self.”* One of the ways this is expressed is by comparison with eating. Meditation has been described as *“the digestive faculty of the soul.”* You inwardly digest Scripture.

We see this in various Scriptures: *“How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth.”* (Psalm 119v103) The prophet Jeremiah said: *“When your words came, I ate them; they were my joy and my heart’s delight.”* (Jeremiah 15v16) Ezekiel too! *“(God) said to me, ‘Son of man, eat what is before you, eat this scroll; then go and speak to the house of Israel.’ So I opened my mouth, and he gave me the scroll to eat. Then he said to me, ‘Son of man, eat this scroll I am giving you and fill your stomach with it.’ So I ate it, and it tasted as sweet as honey in my mouth.”* (Ezekiel 3v1-3)

The great eighteenth century evangelist George Whitefield learned to internalize the Scriptures, so that they fed him. He said: *“I began to read the Scriptures upon my knees, laying aside all other books and praying over, if possible, every line and word. This proved meat indeed and drink indeed to my soul. I daily received fresh life, light and power from above.”* George Muller called it his “Soul Food”, and described how he would get up early to *“meditate on the Word, searching every verse to get a blessing out of it ... obtaining food for my soul.”*

But what does this actually mean? I take it to mean that I let the scripture sink in and do me good. This is truth I am taking in. And I allow the truth do its work in me and become part of me. Even though I may not know immediately what good it is doing me. Like food, I know it is giving me strength and stamina and building spiritual muscle. It also equips me to resist the temptations that swirl around me each day: *“I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you.”* (Ps. 119v11) This is inner fuel for life.

In the desert *“the tempter came to Jesus and said, ‘If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.’ Jesus answered, ‘It is written: ‘Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.’”* (Matthew 4v3,4) The Christian can even talk of feeding on Christ Himself by faith. This is the very language Jesus used. *“I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty.”* (John 6v35) When we meditate on Him we are satisfied.

5. Biblical meditation personalizes the Scriptures.

Richard Foster writes: *“Whereas the Study of Scripture centres on exegesis, the meditation of Scripture centres on internalizing and personalizing the passage. The written word becomes a living Word to you.”* (‘Celebration of Disciple’)

It is possible to access this very simply with some Scriptures. You might even insert your name in the text. For example Galatians 2v20: *“I have been*

crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."

Some texts may come in a particularly personal way to you at key times in your life. As a result they become *yours*; they come to have powerful significance for you. They are underlined in your Bible. And these scriptures may come to you again and again from different directions throughout your life. Do you recognize what I'm talking about?

Two texts from the prophecy of Isaiah played an important part in my call to Christian ministry and I often go back to spend time with them: they are Isaiah 61v1-4 and 43v1-3. What about you? Do you have texts you return to and meditate upon because they have become *yours*?

In this way the scripture makes a difference to your life. The Puritan Thomas Watson said *"Read Scripture, not only as history, but as a love letter sent to you from God."* This is heart-shaped reading of Scripture! The Bible is not just neutral history, this is truth that comes to you personally and which you can take into your day with you.

6. Biblical meditation encourages you to think

We must not underestimate the importance of our brain in meditation! Before the Scripture reaches our heart it must go through our head. This is a safeguard against us slipping into fanciful conclusions or sentimentality.

Once again we underline, Biblical meditation causes us to think about God: about who He is and what He has done. That great preacher Charles Haddon Spurgeon said: *"There is something exceedingly improving to the mind in a contemplation of the Divinity...plunge yourself in the Godhead's deepest sea; be lost in his immensity."* A.W. Tozer said: *"We are called to an everlasting preoccupation with God."*

This is what *"theology"* is! John Goldingay illustrates this delightfully in his Old Testament Theology (Vol.1). *"Let us imagine that God is like a lion, as the OT says. Testimony is then like telling people you have met a lion. Preaching is like inviting people to come and meet a lion. Theology is like reflecting on your meeting with a lion. It will involve some distancing, though during the process of reflection the lion may suddenly pop its head round the door."* Theology is thought and reflection on revealed truth concerning God. True theology should lead you to love God more and be more in awe of Him!

This kind of thinking is not just head knowledge; it offers insight and understanding. . Psalm 119v99: *"I have more insight than all my teachers for I meditate on your statutes."* *"Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is - his good, pleasing and perfect will."* (Romans 12v2) Insight for life!

In Bible meditation it is the Holy Spirit, who knows God perfectly, who gives us this insight. He “*searches the deep things of God*” and “*knows the mind of God.*” (1 Corinthians 2v10-16)

And remember, without warning, “*the lion may suddenly pop its head round the door.*” As you are reflecting on God in the text of Scripture you suddenly find He is present! You are encountering Him and then your thinking gives way to awe and worship.

7. Biblical meditation stores up spiritual treasure

As you meditate you can ask “*What precious truth have I found here?*”

On two occasions we are told that Mary, the mother of Jesus, stored up spiritual treasure. At the birth of Jesus: “*Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart.*” And then, years later, after the incident in the Temple in Jerusalem: “*Then he went down to Nazareth with them and was obedient to them. But his mother treasured all these things in her heart.*” (Luke 2v19, 51)

One way we can store up spiritual treasure as we meditate is to memorize scripture. How well stocked is your storeroom with Bible texts? If you were stranded without a Bible how much Scripture would you have stored in your memory?

Sometimes when I’m awake in the night and can’t get to sleep I try to recall every text I can. I usually begin with Scriptures I deliberately memorized as a new believer using the Navigator’s Topical Memory System. Then I might work through the sayings of Jesus – so many of them are indeed “memorable”! Then I go through some of the worship songs written in recent years, many of which are straight scripture – so they are in the storeroom as well. And if I’ve meditated on particular Scriptures I invariably find that I have memorized those too without realizing I’ve done it.

For those who want to teach others this storing up of spiritual treasure is such a key. Notice, in Matthew 13v52, what Jesus said, “*every teacher of the law who has been instructed about the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old.*” Sometimes Bible teachers are asked how long it takes to prepare a message. The real answer is not in hours but in years. Over the years riches are acquired. They are in your inner room, your ‘*kruptos*’. And when the time is right these treasures are brought out to enrich others too.

This is not just for preachers and teachers. It is for every believer. Each day you meditate on a text of scripture you store up fresh treasure. As you meditate you ask “*What precious truth have I found here?*” And invariably the treasure you discover can be brought out to bless others at some point. It may be just what someone you meet that day needs to hear. It may come out in a Sunday worship meeting or when the cell group gather; the Spirit suddenly brings to mind something you have stored up so that you can bless others.

“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.” (Colossians 3v16)

Notice how, in Matthew 13v52, some of these treasures are new and some are old. We should expect to keep on finding new treasure rather than find ourselves only with treasure acquired long ago. But neither should we despise those treasures we have cherished for many years.

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Campbell McAlpine tells a story he heard from an elderly Christian, recalling an incident from his youth. He was at a big annual denominational conference and noticed, sitting on the platform, a man in a rough suit, with his head leaning to one side and his mouth partially open. He asked a friend: *“Who is that?”* He was told that he was the speaker; a farm labourer who had left school at the age of twelve. So he sat back, waiting for the worst! After the hymn singing and prayer, this big man stood up, came forward to the rostrum, stretched his arms out and quoted the verse of a hymn:

*“O Christ what burdens bowed thy head
My sin was laid on thee,
Thou sufferedst in the sinners stead
Took all the guilt for me.”*

Suddenly the place was filled with the presence of the Lord. Then he opened his Bible and spoke and drew the most wonderful truth from the Scriptures. It was like *“honey from the rock”*. The young man was so impressed he spoke to the preacher at the close. *“Where do you get all this?”* he asked. The labourer explained that it was his practice to rise early every morning, light a candle, get dressed and read one or two verses of Scripture over and over again. Then he would put his coat on and walk up and down the country lane allowing the Holy Spirit to take the truth he had read from his head to his heart. *“This is where I get it all.”*

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This will do for now on this theme of Biblical meditation. But the next message in this series flows out from this one. We will look at ‘Praying the Scriptures’; this is where we turn our meditation back to God in praise, thanks, confession, petition and intercession.

John Wilthew. February 2008.