

## The Call to Personal Biblical Meditation<sup>1</sup>

Jack C. Whytock

I want to preface this article by saying that I have personally tried to implement what we are going to study, but I feel that I have only begun, because I think it is a subject that takes the Christian all his or her life to come to grips with. But in saying that I also want to make another point. The subject of the call to Christian meditation in the Bible is something that I have become increasingly impassioned about, and especially for the development of Christian leadership. I think part of the reason we have a crisis in Christian leadership is because we are not training leaders in the old biblical art of meditation. I hope by the end of our study you, too, will see the truth of that.

### **Introduction: Prejudices Against the Practice of Meditation**

I want to begin with a word of honesty. I think most of us have some very negative prejudices against the subject of meditation. I think we need to be honest about that. I have identified five prejudices that I see I have had in the past, and perhaps still have to some degree, but I have endeavoured to overcome these.

The *first prejudice* we find as we come to the study of meditation is something like this: “Now that is more about Eastern religions, the mantras of India – mindless religion, anti-mind, anti-intellectual.” My response to that is: how very little we know about what Christian meditation really is.

The *second prejudice* we have is this: meditation is on the verge of mysticism. Now we certainly do not want to be accused of being mystics, so we say, “Well, we don’t want to be involved with this.”

---

<sup>1</sup> The following article first began as a lecture at a Leadership Conference in Kusadasi, Turkey, February, 2004. It has been expanded and the author gratefully acknowledges those who have so stimulated his thinking through their questions. The purpose here is not an academic treatise but a popular article to instruct and edify.

And my response is: how very little we know of the understanding our forefathers had about Christian meditation. If you only read casually in the life of Samuel Rutherford, you will find an antidote to that whole concept of false mysticism, or anti-intellectual, spiritist mysticism. Intellectual vigor was surely not absent from Samuel Rutherford. He was not a mindless man but a man who understood heart, mystical, intellectual religion. In one sense, he represents the best of that. We need to deal with this prejudice. We are not talking about Eastern mysticism, about anti-intellectual, spiritist mysticism. We are talking about the right element of true, biblical mysticism in faith and meditation.

The *third prejudice* we have against meditation is (and I actually had someone say this to me): we need to concentrate on the big themes in scripture – covenant, promise, sin, redemption. And I answer, true, meditation is not an over-arching theological construction. But there are over-arching theological principles for living the Christian life that are in the Bible, too. We are not just to be systematic theologians. We are also to become applied theologians, theologians of the heart. We need to be balanced.

*Fourth*, some people are saying meditation is not related to the latest “in” word –spirituality. Well, my response is, if spirituality does not grow out of meditation, throw out the spirituality.

And the *fifth* and perhaps most prevalent prejudice or argument against meditation is this, and every one of us will think it: Meditation takes too much time! “I’m busy, Preacher. Don’t you know I have three children in diapers? How do you expect me to meditate? Don’t you know that I have a large congregation? How do you expect me to meditate? Don’t you realize that I do shift work? How can I meditate? I’m tired. I’m worn out, and it’s too time consuming. You are just living back in the medieval period. Will you come into the 21<sup>st</sup> century?” I am not going to answer that one. I hope by the end of this article the content of what I present will answer this, because at the root of this argument is the issue of values and Lordship.

So, these are some of the challenges and prejudices that are in the world on this subject. Now I want to challenge you from the distant, Scottish past. Let us revisit what was once well understood in Christian circles about the art and the calling of biblical meditation. My challenge from the foggy past of Scottish church history is from the year 1647, and it is the meeting of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland. At that meeting, the Presbyterian forefathers produced a Directory and an Act of the Assembly. The Directory was “The Directory for Family Worship” and the Act was “The Act For Family

Worship.” It outlined three spheres of worship, in the non-Kuyperian use of that word. The three spheres were public or corporate worship, family or household worship, and private worship. I want to quote for you what the General Assembly of 1647 said in prefacing the act.

DIRECTIONS OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY,  
CONCERNING SECRET AND PRIVATE WORSHIP, AND  
MUTUAL EDIFICATION;  
FOR CHERISHING PIETY, FOR MAINTAINING UNITY, AND  
AVOIDING SCHISM AND DIVISION.

BESIDES the publick worship in congregations, mercifully established in this land in great purity, it is expedient and necessary that secret worship of each person alone, and private worship of families, be pressed and set up; that, with national reformation, the profession and power of godliness, both personal and domestick, be advanced.

I. And first, for secret worship, it is most necessary, that every one apart, and by themselves, be given to prayer *and meditation, the unspeakable benefit whereof is best known to them who are most exercised therein....*<sup>2</sup> [italics mine]

It is really interesting, in observing the culture of the church in North America, we are in the middle of what is being called “the worship wars.” And those worship wars centre around public worship and family worship. But, you know, the wars never hit the third sphere. How often do you hear the war engaged about secret, private, meditative worship? At least in some of the circles I roam around in, it is not discussed. Why? We in certain circles do not like hearing “piety” and “secret worship,” because it is of the heart and, yes, individualistic. But there is a voice calling us from the distant, foggy past of our heritage, calling us to this idea of piety and meditation in the secret worship of the soul alone with God.

Since we have quoted from the Scottish past, allow me to quote from the English past. Here I need only quote the full title by Nathanael Ranew, *Solitude Improved by Divine Meditation or A Treatise Proving the Duty, and Demonstrating the Necessity, Excellency, Usefulness,*

---

<sup>2</sup> *Act for observing the Directions of the GENERAL ASSEMBLY for secret and private Worship, and mutual Edification; and censuring such as neglect Family-worship* [Edinburgh: General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, August 24, 1647].

*Natures, Kinds, and Requisites of Divine Meditation.*<sup>3</sup> Surely this full Puritan title might speak to us in our modern age.

Now, the prejudices may be ours, yet the challenge from a dusty past of antiquity I think is still there. Donald Whitney recently said, “The need to meditate on God’s word is the most overlooked and yet possibly the most important part of private worship.”<sup>4</sup> Private worship is more than just reading, just as sitting in a pew is more than listening to a voice. There must be heart absorption. Again from Whitney, “We feel the life-giving power of the living water of Scripture most refreshingly when it percolates by meditation down and into the soul.”<sup>5</sup> Absorption. Percolation of the Word of God leading to application. James 1:25 – this is the hearer effectually becoming the doer and being blessed.

Now there is my introduction, and I want to proceed with what appears somewhat academic, but is very critical – a brief word study on our subject.

### **Point #1 – The Biblical Word-Family of Meditation.**

I want to remind us that meditation is an over-arching principle of the secret life of the Christian, one that needs to be grasped in increasing measure amidst all the wars that are going on around us in the theological realm. As meditation in the Old and New Testaments has a whole group of word families, I first want to develop a biblical theology of meditation from the biblical word groups. To begin with, in the Old Testament there are two main Hebrew words that speak of meditation, translated in most English versions as “meditate” or “meditation.” The first of them, *HAWGAH*, we find first in the book of Joshua – Joshua 1:8: “This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall *meditate* on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will

---

<sup>3</sup> Nathanael Ranew, *Solitude Improved by Divine Meditation* (reprint Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 1995). There is no need for me to expand here on the Puritans in general on meditation as Joel Beeke has laid this out well in his essay, “The Puritan Practice of Meditation,” and in “Appendix I: Bibliography on the Puritan Practice of Meditation,” in *Reformed Spirituality*, eds. Joseph A. Pipa, Jr., and J. Andrew Wortman (Taylors, SC: Southern Presbyterian Press, 2003), 73-100, 175-179.

<sup>4</sup> Donald Whitney, “Private Worship” in *Give Praise to God*, eds. P. G. Ryken, D. W. H. Thomas, J. L. Duncan, III (Phillipsburg: P & R, 2003), 302.

<sup>5</sup> Whitney, 302.

make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success.” (ESV) Some of the other places the word is used are (from the ESV):

**Psalm 1:2**

But his delight is in the law of the LORD,  
and on his law he *meditates* day and night.

**Psalm 63:6**

When I remember you upon my bed,  
and *meditate* on you in the watches of the night

**Psalm 77:6 & 12**

I said, “Let me remember my song in the night;  
let me *meditate* [muse] in my heart.”  
I will ponder all your work,  
and *meditate* on your mighty deeds.

**Psalm 143:5**

I remember the days of old;  
I *meditate* on all you have done;  
I ponder the work of your hands.

Now what does the word *HAWGAH* mean? Literally, it means “to mutter to oneself.” Now, we sort of laugh at that. You know, if you talk to yourself you might be on the verge of dementia. But actually, you are doing what the Bible says. You are muttering to yourself. It is a sound characteristic. It is interesting in the Hebrew *HAWGAH* is the word which describes the sound of the morning dove. You can hear a dove, can’t you? I used to hear them when I was in the barn at home. You could hear them high in the rafters, and you knew that it was the morning dove. It was “muttering.” It was making a sound. The word is also related to the growling of a lion over its prey, or a cat when it has its little mouse. It purrs over its mouse. It is meditating – “Should I take it and consume it or not? I’ll just give it another few minutes. I’ll think about it a little more.” *HAWGAH* – to mutter to oneself.

The word is also used speaking of a believer’s sighs in prayer. Have you been with a believer when he is in silent prayer, and maybe there is a heaviness, a sigh? Or sometimes when you are in a small prayer group or meeting, you hear a believer, maybe not doing the “amen” because we are not quite like that, but a quiet “Yes, Lord”. That is actually the beginning of what you are seeing in this *HAWGAH* – to mutter to oneself.

Now, the other Hebrew word is the one that is used all through Psalm 119. It is the Hebrew word *SEE/YACH* – to go over a matter in one’s mind; to turn it around; to revolve it in the mind; to silently reflect upon it; to have pious contemplations, thinking about a word. Psalm 119 uses it eight times. I will quote the verses for you (from the ESV):

**Psalm 119:15**

I will *meditate* on your precepts  
and fix my eyes on your ways.

**Psalm 119:23**

Even though princes sit plotting against me,  
your servant will *meditate* on your statutes.

**Psalm 119:27**

Make me understand the way of your precepts,  
and I will *meditate* on your wondrous works.

**Psalm 119:48**

I will lift up my hands toward your commandments, which I  
love,  
and I will *meditate* on your statutes.

**Psalm 119:78**

Let the insolent be put to shame,  
because they have wronged me with falsehood;  
as for me, I will *meditate* on your precepts.

**Psalm 119:97**

Oh how I love your law!  
It is my *meditation* all the day.

**Psalm 119:99**

I have more understanding than all my teachers,  
for your testimonies are my *meditation*.

**Psalm 119:148**

My eyes are awake before the watches of the night,  
that I may *meditate* on your promise.

Eight times the call to meditate in Psalm 119 – about what? God’s Word, His works, His ways. Now we are starting to see the emergence of our subject. But it is interesting Joshua 1:8 says, in essence: “You are called of God to meditate.” It is a call. Every one of us has a call – to meditate on the Word of God. In Psalm 119 we see a person meditating; he is communing over a matter.

Now there are many Old Testament texts that I could bring in to expand this, but I will give only a few. Remember Genesis 24:63 – Isaac is in the field in the evening, and in the Authorized text they insert the word “meditate.” It says: “He went out to the field in the evening to *meditate*.” As he looked up he saw camels approaching, and who was there? Rebecca. Now, what was he doing in the field? The Bible translators are at a loss because, on a contextual basis they have to come to the conclusion that Isaac was actually thinking about life and the future. He is head of the clan, and as head of the clan, will he get married? What will the future hold? Where will he go? What will he do? What will life be like? That is meditation. It is to ponder the future. There he was in the evening, out in the desert, meditating.

There are also many other places in the Psalms. I will mention two of the most well known. Psalm 1:2 (ESV), “But his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he *meditates* day and night.” And Psalm 19:14 (ESV) – the one we used to hear all the time in public worship: “Let the words of my mouth and the *meditation* of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.” The deep reflections within.

As an aside, it is interesting that this concept is actually taken over into a term in music – *affettuoso* (Italian), because it means the solemn motion of a march of dignity, to be deeply affected by a movement of music. *Affettuoso* – affection. Truth must be *felt*. Meditation must have an affection. There has to be a connection between truth and the heart. There has to be a depth of feeling and longing, when the soul is affected. It begins with a command – to meditate, but it affects the soul and is a deep murmuring of the heart around the Word. So, yes, I agree, meditation is not an organizing principle in systematics, but rather we discover that it is one of the keys to understanding the spiritual life of the Old Testament saints.

Now we turn briefly to the New Testament. The theme does not stop in the Old Testament; it is carried through into the New. Here we find new words, the Greek language. We start with *meletao* – to practice, to cultivate, to take pains with, think about, meditate upon. We find it in 1 Timothy 4:15: “*Meditate* upon these things; give thyself wholly to them; that thy profiting may appear to all.” (KJV) We do not have time

to go through 1 Timothy 4 and see the context fully, but verse 7 of that chapter says: “Exercise discipline over the thought-life of your mind.” That is about Christian living. Verse 15 then comes along and says: “*Meditate* upon these things.” (KJV) Think about them. Exercise your mind. Reflect. Think it through. Interesting, this is Paul speaking, the Hebrew of the Hebrews, trained in the school of the Pharisees, trained in a Jewish tradition that understood contemplation, meditation, reflection, and care over the Word. Even if it was abused, the system was there.

There is a related group of words in the New Testament. These are from the Greek word *noieo* – of rational reflection or inner contemplation; to perceive, apprehend, understand, gain an insight into, take note of, think over. The word is used in 2 Timothy 2:7 – “*Consider* what I say.” There you have it – “consider.” This is the word used by our Lord and Saviour in Matthew 6:28. Consider what?: “the lilies of the field.” And in Luke 12:24: “Consider the ravens.” It is also used in the Septuagint translation of the Old Testament: “Consider the ant.” (Prov. 6:6) Consider them, think about them, reflect over them. Now I want you to notice, the lilies, the ravens, and the ant are not the Word of God. They are natural revelation, creation, not Biblical revelation. Thus the Scripture says, “Think about the created order. Reflect over it.” We will expand that thought later.

So the Greek brings you two groups of words talking about disciplining the mind, reflecting, thinking about it, meditating. With this I am going to end our study of these biblical word families.

Yet, at the conclusion of our word study, let us take note that the characters in the Bible, the Old and New Testament saints, meditated. Who wrote the Psalms? Mainly David. He was a meditator, and he was not alone. Remember Isaac. What do you think Jonah was doing? He was doing a lot of meditation. And Daniel and many others. And I think in the New Testament of Mary. What did Mary do? “And she pondered all these things in her heart.” She thought about them. Mary, the mother of Jesus. And, the Lord Jesus, in secret, and Paul and Timothy.

In summary, if we were to set forth a definition of evangelical, Christian meditation, I would see it as the believer’s practice of pondering the scriptures with a heart which desires truth and righteousness, the inner being seeking the leading of the Holy Spirit. I introduce the ministry of the Holy Spirit here, and we will expand that in our next section.

**Point #2 – A Portrait of Biblical Meditation**

In an attempt, then, to pull all of this Bible language together, let's create a portrait of the art of biblical meditation. The over-arching truth about the practice of meditation for Christians is that it will be Bible-based. Consider these two quotations. Eugene Peterson put it this way:

The Christian Scriptures are the primary text for Christian spirituality. We don't form our personal spiritual lives out of a random assemblage of favourite texts in combination with individual circumstances; we are formed by the Holy Spirit following the text of the Holy Scriptures. God does not put us in charge of forming our personal spiritualities; we grow in accordance with the revealed Word implanted in us by the Word.<sup>6</sup>

And Nigel Westhead adds: "There is such a thing as Christian and Bible-based meditation."<sup>7</sup> With that introduction, I want to discuss five characteristics that I see emerging in a portrait of the art of biblical meditation.

**First, Biblical meditation dwells on Scriptural truth.** You must have the Scripture revelation informing you. Now, to be true, this will prove somewhat laborious for those of us living in the information-tech age, because it is not just looking for information. I do not mind the Internet. There are certain things that I love about it. But one thing I almost detest is that we have become information "junkies". You can get information on anything, but it is usually very poor information because it is so rarely in very much depth. There is a fundamental flaw here, and it is reflective of an Information Age. Too often today we train people to read for information, while what is lacking is the soul learning to savour knowledge and truth. Truth has to be savoured slowly and mulled over. It is laborious because it is a mental exercise – to ruminate on the truth of the Word of God. In Psalm 119 David took eight times to say the same thing. "And I meditate on the Law." I study it. I think about it. I reflect over it. I do not have small talk on it. I do not rely upon a technique, but on the Truth itself. I am really engaging in it. So the first characteristic I would see of Christian meditation is

---

<sup>6</sup> Peterson as quoted in Michael Haykin, "Biblical Spirituality and Meditation: 'A great heart warmer'" in *The Gospel Witness*, July/August, 2003, 7-9.

<sup>7</sup> Westhead as quoted in Haykin. Westhead's article originally appeared in the *Rutherford House Journal*, Vol. 3, Number 1, (Spring, 1996).

this: that it is informed from Scripture. It is rooted in truth. And as you and I meditate on truth, we are seeking God and we are saying, “What is the voice of God saying to me? What is His will? And is it going to change my character; an ethical, living change?” Truth informs to change. So the first characteristic in the portrait is that meditation is based upon biblical truth.

**Second, to meditate biblically includes meditation on God’s work in history, creation, and providence.** I have put all three together. *History* – Church history and Christian biography inform and inflame. But if you just read them to amass information, you have not meditated. Think about it – Does it change my life? Are there elements here I should implement in my life? Does it encourage me on? Such meditation evokes the right use of history. *Creation*. My illustration is from an excellent slide I saw recently taken by Peter Morrison. There was a seedling growing in the top of a wooden post. And in meditating over the seedling in the post inspiration was found – growth in the



strangest places – grace is like that! Now what is that? That is the art of a biblical meditation in which God’s created world becomes a panoply, informing our soul and causing us to think, “What would God teach me even through His created order?” Hear David in Psalm 8, Psalm 19, and others as well as our Lord Jesus: “Consider the lilies of the field. Consider the ravens.” Think about the created order, but with a spiritual, meditative heart, with a thoughtfulness about it. And

*providence*. What was Mary doing as she left the temple and she pondered all these things in her heart – the naming of her Son, the holding of her Son in the arms of Simeon, the language of Simeon. Now all of that can generally be called God’s providence, ruling and governing our lives. Mary was pondering God’s providence. Michael Haykin, the new president of Toronto Baptist Seminary, referred to Mary as the New Testament model, not of matrix, but of meditation. Now that is a biblical idea – the model of Mary meditating and pondering over providence shows us one element of meditation. In essence, this is personal soliloquy about providence.

So we meditate on God’s work in *history* and *creation* – and that is not limited to the history of redemption in Scripture. God is involved in history since then. We are not Deists. We see in history and creation something to speak to our souls. Hear brother Jonathan Edwards. He wrote in his journal: “I rode out into the woods, having alighted from my horse in a retired place, and as my manner commonly has been, to walk for divine contemplation and prayer.” Secret, meditative worship, there in the New England countryside. George Mueller said, “I find it very beneficial in my health to walk thus for meditation before breakfast.” Now here he is doing something physical, but listen to the spiritual. “And am now so in the habit of using the time for that purpose, that when I get into the open air, I generally take out a New Testament of good-sized type, which I carry with me for that purpose, besides the Bible and I find that I can profitably spend my time in the open air.” Creation, providence, history, meditation. When the Christian awakes to the world around them, all the array of heaven and earth becomes that which you reflect upon and digest.

**Third, you meditate upon what is just and true.** Another characteristic of Christian meditation is that the subject of meditation is that which is just and true. Philippians 4:8: “Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – if anything is excellent or praiseworthy – *think* about such things.” (NIV) Put them into your mind. Put them into your heart. Thinking Christians are meditative Christians. And verse 9 in Philippians 4 goes further, from meditation to reflection to putting into practice. There is a chain. You can trace the chain. You start in thinking and meditation. It leads to reflection, and it says, now we implement it, now we put it into practice.

So the third characteristic of Christian meditation is you meditate upon what is just and true. Good character, noble character, virtuous living, what is beautiful and elegant. Do not be absorbed with that

which is dark. If you fill your mind with dark thoughts, you will become a dark Christian, but if you meditate upon that which is virtuous and lovely, it will bless your soul, there will be a value. So the characteristics of Christian meditation thus far: it is informed and shaped by God's truth; it includes history, creation, and providence; and it concentrates upon what is just and true.

**Fourth, it is meditating on God's splendour and majesty**, that is, the attributes of God. Psalm 145:5. "I will speak of the glorious splendour of your majesty, and I will *meditate* on your wonderful works." (NIV) And Psalm 63:6, "When I remember You on my bed, I meditate on You in the night watches." (NKJV) – meditating on the attributes of God, His majesty and glory. It changes private worship. It inflames public worship. It drives the soul to a greater affection for God. So the characteristics of Christian meditation, fourthly, include meditating on God's splendour and majesty and all His attributes. It is God we meditate upon and commune with.

**And, fifth, meditation inspires, guides, and shapes prayer.** The fifth characteristic of meditation, and I am not original in this, is that meditation inspires, guides, and shapes prayer. I believe there are two sets of twins presented in the Bible on meditation. The first set – we have already mentioned it – *meditation and truth*. You have to twin them together. Twin number two is this: *meditation and prayer*. They are twins. In Psalm 5:1, the NIV says, "Consider my sighing." I think the stress is a little wrong there. The New King James says, "Give ear to my words, O Lord. Consider my meditation." Now what is going on there? Give ear to my words is prayer, intercession, supplication, coming to the Lord in prayer. But you will notice the second part of verse 1 says, "Consider my meditation." Consider my meditative thoughts. Now what is happening is this: biblical meditation is shaping and molding prayer. David has been meditating, muttering to himself. He is muttering away and he is reflecting and it is turning itself into prayer.

I am convinced (though I will not take time to develop this here) that this is the only way to understand what the Apostle Paul is saying in his epistles when he writes such things as, "Pray without ceasing." None of us can pray intercessorily and with thanksgiving ceaselessly. You can not interpret that with a literalist approach. What he is saying is this: for the believer there is a continual experience of the heart thinking and shaping and molding desires and requests, issuing in prayer. "Give ear to my prayer. Consider my thoughts." In addition, we

do not always know how to pray about some things. Again, Paul is our encouragement when he says, “There is a groaning of the soul.” (Romans 8:26-27) There is almost a deep calling unto deep in which you say, “Lord, in my unformed praying, will You hear me?” Praying for mercy or for grace. There is a deep shaping of prayer. There is also a shaping of piety there. Keil and Delitzsch said in reference to Psalm 19:14, (“Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer.”), “Prayer is a sacrifice offered by the inner man. The heart meditates and fashions it; and the mouth presents it.” But it has to come from somewhere. It has to come from the inner man. It has to be fashioned. And the mouth is simply presenting it by uttering it forth in the form of words.

Meditation will also inspire personal prayer. I quote Müller, “We are apt often to read the Word with reference to others....” Would that be a good word for them? But when you read it and meditate upon it in reference to your own heart and soul, it will lead you to pray for yourself individually and particularly. So meditation inspires, guides, and shapes private prayer, but it also inspires, guides, and shapes public prayer. That is the fifth characteristic.

So we sketch the portrait of Christian mediation with those five characteristics: it is based upon biblical truth; it includes the realms of history, God’s creation, and providence; it dwells on what is pure, just and good; it is inflamed by the characteristics of God, His splendour and majesty; and it shapes, molds, and issues in prayer in the Holy Spirit.

### **Point #3 – The Practice of Meditation**

Well, you are saying, “It is great theory, brother. How do you do all this? What is it going to look like? What about the practice of it all then?” To make it simple, let’s do another five. In what I am about to say, I will endeavour to show universal practices and not peculiarities and techniques. I am not here to give you a technique. I can not offer that to you because God made you an individual in His image. But I can, perhaps, point out some universal principles that will be an aide in the practice of meditation.

**Throughout the Bible we see the practice of meditation in seasons of solitude.** Seasons of solitude enhance meditation. Now notice I said “enhance.” They do not guarantee it. Martin Luther spent hours alone in his cell. I can tell you it did not exactly enhance his spirituality. There was a problem he had to deal with first, and that was pardoning grace and the justifying work of Christ’s righteousness. So

note carefully what I am saying here. However, there should be seasons of solitude in the practice of meditation. See Psalm 63:6 – “On my bed I remember you. I think of you through the watches of the night.” The reflection of the psalmist is not corporate. It is singular. “I think of you through the watches of the night.” Solitude. Yes, it is hard to find. We will address that in a moment. But the practice of meditation has to guard seasons of solitude. It will enhance a biblical, spiritual meditation. I believe Paul’s understanding of “praying without ceasing” is methodically akin to “meditating without ceasing.” It is ongoing, day and night, and, of course, is enhanced in solitude but not limited to it.

I was once asked if the practice of meditation is just another way of saying my “quite-time.” I believe it is much bigger than having a daily quite-time. It very well may include this, but is broader in its extent than this.

**Now the second practice is this. We have to read, study, and memorize Scripture,** because it stokes the fire of the furnace of meditation. Now, I realize not all are going to be tremendous readers. I also realize that not all are going to be great memorizers. We are not all the same. But there is a principle that God’s children should try to do some reading and they should try to do some memorization. One may memorize John 3:16 and it may take a year to do that. Another might be able to memorize John 3 in its entirety in a week. But that is the way God has made us. We are different. We are unique. Some may be able to read vast amounts of material well, and enhance their lives. But I would encourage you to ask a question before you start comparing your reading and memory skills to others. Ask this question: “Is my reading an expression of my desire for God?” That is the better question to ask. That changes the emphasis, doesn’t it? Do I desire God? Do I want to plant Scripture in my mind, because it is going to reshape my thinking? Then I will desire to read and memorize His Word in the Spirit’s illuminating power.

Now I will suggest one technique here. If you are not good at reading the Bible, maybe you could select a theme or a text. Say I really want to study the subject of – let’s pick something out – forgiveness. Then work your way from beginning to end through the Bible. It may take you a year. Is there anything wrong with that? No, that is wonderful. Take a concordance; look up the verses; ponder the key words; see how they are illustrated in the Bible. Read different translations. Ask questions about it. Dissect, categorize, think through the meaning, savour the truth. Perhaps, as our forefathers used to do, you could keep a little journal book and write down the verses. Some of

us may need accountability with a brother or sister or a group for us to develop in memorization or a commitment to reading. Fine. But, in any case, start to read and memorize, because it will stoke the fire of



*Rembrandt's Philosopher*

Christian meditation. So, number one, in the practice of Christian meditation, we need to practice seasons of solitude. Number two, we need to read, study, memorize, and stoke the fires of meditation.

**Number three – we need to discipline the mind.** Psalm 1:2: (ESV) “But his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night.” Now that is time – day and night. He had work to do. I have work to do. You have work to do. But what we need is to discipline the mind. I am going to suggest that every one of us tends to discipline our minds extremely well – in a wrong way. We all meditate upon actions that are done against us, and we are well practiced at it. You are doing the laundry. “Boy, so-and-so. They really were uncharitable in what they did or said.” What are you doing? You

are pondering it. You are meditating over it. Then why not discipline your mind to what God would have? Disciple the mind, train and discipline the mind to meditate day and night on what God says. Start to change the themes of your meditating.

Recently I read a very interesting little story. This is so real, and we need to live in a real world. There was a mum who was very busy. She had three small children all in diapers. Well, how do you meditate like that? She found a way. Right at the change table she had an open Bible. Every day she only had time at each diaper change to read one verse of Scripture. But, she said, "I would think about it after every child and it kept me going." That made me think. You see, there is a time and a place to meditate, but we need to value that and to discipline the mind.

**The fourth principle in the practice of meditation is this: pray in the Spirit.** Now this means meditation, prayer, and the Holy Spirit are absolutely inseparable. We must practice reading the Word, seeking, praying for the Holy Spirit's illumination. If we want to truly meditate upon Scripture, we have to recover a right doctrine of the Holy Spirit. We must read it in the power of the Spirit. George Mueller said: "In all our reading of the Holy Scriptures, let us seek carefully to have the help of the Holy Spirit. Let us ask for Jesus' sake that He will enlighten us." Those of you who know me realize that I believe the doctrine of the illumination of the Holy Spirit is greatly neglected in the whole *loci* of theology. Prayer, meditation, and the Holy Spirit. This is an article on the call to meditate on the Word. Then we have to confess anew that the operative power of the Holy Spirit is necessary when we read the Word, privately as well as in public worship.

**The fifth principle in the practice of Christian meditation** following prayer and the Holy Spirit is very simple – **one word – obedience.** "If this be neglected, you will find that the reading of the Word, even accompanied by prayer, meditation, and faith, will do you little good."<sup>8</sup> The book was *Spiritual Secrets of George Mueller*. Do you agree with that? "If this be neglected, you will find that the reading of the Word, even accompanied by prayer, meditation, and faith, will do you little good." Now, he is not speaking of perfection there. But he is saying that when you meditate on the Word, you have put it into practice in your daily life. You have to do it. "If you know these things, happy are you if you do them...." And in the measure in which we

---

<sup>8</sup> *Spiritual Secrets of George Mueller*, ed. Roger Steer (England: OMF Books, 1985), 69.

carry out what our Lord Jesus taught, so much in measure there is a happiness in the children of God. There is the blessing of God.

#### **Point #4 – The Value of Meditation**

Those are some of the universal principles in the practice of meditation. But, is there value in meditation? Is it worth the effort? Well, here is my plea: there is a great value! And I take you right back to where we started. *Meditation has value.* It brings me to think again of the dire crisis in Christian leadership today. And, I repeat, I think part of the reason we have a crisis in leadership is because we do not see meditative leaders any longer. Now here is what I see as five of the values in the practice of biblical meditation.

**Number one, it will start to change and renew our minds.** Paul says that in Romans 12:1 and 2. “Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God. This is your spiritual act of worship. 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.” The Bible is telling us there that we do not think correctly. None of us has correct thinking. Our thinking is not fully sanctified. As Christians we need to manage our thought-life, to pause and ponder, to retreat purposely from this world and to be alone with God, to meditate on Him and His Word. But notice what Paul says. “Be transformed by the renewing of your mind. *Then* you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is.” I think right there is part of the cause of the crisis in leadership – because we tend to act and speak before we have ever meditated and tested in our hearts our thoughts and subsequent words and actions, and it gets us into all kinds of trouble. Biblical meditation is a means of transforming your mind, and it will transform your thinking. It will transform your piety. It will transform your lifestyle. Here I would contend that in our modern discussions of developing a Christian worldview, we should start one step back – namely, by first establishing the practice of biblical meditation.

**The second value – meditation cultivates joy in the believer.** Psalm 104:34 – “May my meditation be pleasing to Him, as I rejoice in the Lord.” You are directed in thought from yourself to the Lord of grace, and you find joy in Him. Now this is experiential to the core – I am not sure I have met many, in fact I am not sure I have met any Christians who practice and really understand biblical meditation who

do not have the joy of the Lord. I am not saying all the time, but there is a tenor of joy in their lives. Meditation has value – it cultivates joy in the believer.

**The third value of biblical meditation is this: it will make us clear-sighted and balanced leaders.** I address here specifically all who lead. If you are a leader today, I want you to hear this. Meditation will make us clear-sighted and balanced leaders. Now that may be somewhat pragmatic. You might think, “If I pursue this thinking theologically, how might it develop?” If you are a leader, you cannot afford not to think logically and with consistency, yet you also must know when there is *not* room for consistency. As Ted Donnelly said, “Consistency is the hob-goblin of small minds and small thinking.” Paul was the most inconsistent man alive! He circumcised one day, the next day he did not. Why? Because he thought through the matter and he knew how to make a clear judgment, a discerning call. Meditation will make us clear-sighted and balanced leaders. Think through your leadership. Do you want to be a balanced leader? Do you want to be clear-sighted? Then take up the art of meditation. I believe this would transform our leadership in the Church of the Lord in a wonderful way. I also believe it would take away so much of the strife and the party spirit that is characteristic of every single denomination I visit. I think if we would cultivate a more biblical, meditative heart and practice, we would be more clear-sighted, and we would be more balanced. I do not think it would remedy all the problems, but I think it would help a great deal.

**Value number four,** and this one we all love, **we shall be spiritually refreshed.** Do you at times need to be spiritually refreshed with God? Yes. Biblical meditation will spiritually refresh you and nourish your soul. Do not put it all on the preacher. Do not count altogether on the public gathering for worship. Public, corporate worship is good. It is the highest form of worship. But there is secret worship, too, through which we will be spiritually refreshed and nourished in our souls. Our souls will be nurtured, progress in faith, and find health. Our hearts will be enflamed. Yes, it will take effort, but it will be worth it.

I used to go with my grandfather collecting sap for maple syrup. He was of the old school. He had the big kettle on a chain. We worked and worked and worked. But, you know, it was worth it – to get that gallon of maple syrup! It was worth it at the end of the day. Even after the boiling and the boiling and the boiling...it was worth it. The old

Puritan, Nathaniel Ranew, in the 17<sup>th</sup> century said, “Meditation is that which keeps alive the fire on the altar, and helps to make it burn...Meditation is a great heart warmer.” We need spiritual refreshment. We need spiritual nourishment. What did David say in Psalm 39:3? “My heart grew hot within me, and as I meditated, the fire burned; then I spoke with my tongue.” We need nourishment. We need that kind of spiritual fire in the soul. The Church will be led and will be blessed and will be a blessing and you will be blessed. Meditation will make you hot again. The fire will burn.

**The fifth value** is one I have been thinking about only recently, and is perhaps strange. **Meditation will make you deal with your anger.** There are two verses for that. The one is Psalm 4:4. “Stand in awe, and sin not. Commune (meditate) with your own heart upon your bed, and be still.” Stand in awe and sin not. What was he going to sin over? He was going to lash out with rage and anger. What does the Apostle Paul say? “Let not the sun go down on your anger, your rage.” Meditate it through. Think it through. Stand in awe and sin not. Meditate and commune with your own heart upon your bed and be still. *Selah.* Meditation will help us deal with our anger as well.

So the value. Biblical meditation will transform your mind, renew your thinking, and you will test things. It will bring you joy in the Lord; it will cultivate it. It will make clear-sighted and balanced leaders. It will spiritually refresh and nourish. It will warm the soul. My heart grew hot within me as I meditated, said David. And fifth, it will help us deal with anger.

In conclusion, the call to meditation – does it still reflect something of the Indian mantras? No. We are Christians. There is a Christian call to biblical meditation. There is a challenge from the distance Scottish past. There is a great word-family in the Bible, in Hebrew and in Greek. The characteristics are rooted in the Scripture, but they are expansive beyond that. We see the practice of it in the men and women of the Scripture. It should be a part of our lives. The values of it are immense.

Let us not be afraid to recover the very word “meditation” into our Christian language today. It was Martin Luther who said three things make a theologian: *oratio* (prayer), *meditatio* (meditation), and *tentatio* (trial, the struggles to live faithfully by Scripture). I am afraid if we were asked what three things make for a theologian, we might include knowledge or, at best, truth, then orthodoxy and practice. Luther offers us something deeper and ultimately not in contradiction at all to the

truth! We must possess a meditative disposition to the truth which we have as Christians. This is the call that we summons here. It is the art of true, biblical meditation that leads to a vibrant, experimental Christianity.

### **Select Bibliography**

Beeke, Joel. "The Puritan Practice of Meditation" and "Appendix I: Bibliography on the Puritan practice of Meditation," in *Reformed Spirituality: Communing with our glorious God*. Edited by Joseph A. Pipa, Jr., and J. Andrew Wortman. Taylors, SC: Southern Presbyterian Press, 2003, 73-100, 175-179.

Clowney, Edmund P. *CM\* Christian Meditation*. Nutley, NJ: Craig Press, 1978.

Harris, R. Laird, Gleason L. Archer, and Bruce K. Waltke, eds. *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, Chicago: Moody, 1980.

Haykin, Michael. "Biblical Spirituality and Meditation: 'A great heart warmer.'" *The Gospel Witness*, July/August, 2003, 7-9.

Kittle, Gerhard, ed. *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. Edited and translated by Geoffrey W. Bromiley. 10 volumes. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964-1974.

McAlpine, Campbell. *The Practice of Biblical Meditation*. Tonbridge, Kent: Sovereign World, 2002.

Ranew, Nathanael. *Solitude Improved by Divine Meditation*. Reprint. Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 1995.

Shantz, Douglas H. "Mysticism and the Christian." *Faith Today*, March/April, 1991, 16.

Sin, Jack. "Contemplate." *Evangelical Times*, March, 2003, 32.

Steer, Roger, ed. *Spiritual Secrets of George Müller*. England: OMF Books, 1985.

*The Directory for Family Worship*. Original 1647. Reprint. Inverness: Free Presbyterian Publications, 1983, 417-422.

Thomas, Derek. "Help for the mind: Christian meditation." In *Help for Hurting Christians: Reflections on Psalms*. Darlington, England: EP, 1991, 27-37.

Whitney, Donald. "Private Worship." In *Give Praise To God*. Edited by P. G. Ryken, D. W. H. Thomas, and J. L. Duncan, III. Phillipsburg: P & R, 2003, 289-316.