

HOW TO MEDITATE EXPERIENTIALLY:
SAVORING GOD AND HIS WAYS
By Eric L. Johnson

Evangelicals are known to be people of the Book, and above all other types of Christians we have emphasized the importance of knowing and understanding the scriptures through Bible study and exposition. Such understanding is essential to the task of the church and to our own growth. Knowledge of truth is a prerequisite to spiritual growth. However, knowledge must not be equated with spiritual understanding. The difference between meditating and studying is immense, and the evangelical movement in the 20th century has erred by so one-sidedly emphasizing the role of an intellectual understanding of the Bible. It has not always been so. Going back to Spurgeon, Jonathan Edwards, the Puritans, and John Calvin, spiritual understanding was recognized to be qualitatively different and higher than a simple rational grasp of doctrine. As Edwards suggested, “There is a distinction to be made between a mere notional understanding, wherein the mind only beholds things in the exercise of a speculative faculty; and the sense of the heart wherein the mind doesn’t only speculate and behold, but relishes and feels.” Religious Affections, (New Haven, CN: Yale University Press, 1959), p. 272.

It’s the difference between reading a book, even THE Book, and meeting with God. Understanding the Bible was never meant by God to be an end in itself, but rather a means to another end: loving, worshipping, glorifying, and enjoying God. And the Scriptures themselves encourage this experiencing of God.

Yet, one of the distinctives of a Protestant approach to Christian meditation is the central role of the Bible. One of the primary motives during the Reformation was the recognition that the Christian life needed to be grounded in Scripture, rather than human opinion or tradition. The fundamental reason for this emphasis, however, comes from what really lies at the heart of reformed thought: the glory of God. In understanding ourselves aright, we can never begin with our beliefs, opinions, or traditions. God is the one who knows us better than we know ourselves. Moreover, God’s knowledge of us in Christ was the special focus of the Reformation, particularly surrounding the concept of justification by faith. Our justified status before God as Christians (our perfect standing as completely righteous, holy, and loving, because of Christ’s substitution for us) is entirely a gift of God and not dependent upon our efforts whatsoever. And in justification, the sinner is declared righteous. This is God’s new word that newly defines the sinner, calling him righteous and so calling into being the new creation. It is through Bible reading that God re-creates the believer, transforming them into the perfection they are in Christ. Consequently, all genuine Reformational approaches to the Christian life emphasize the importance of Bible reading and meditation to spiritual growth. However, what is all-important is *how* we go about accessing the soul-transforming words of scripture.

One way to think about it is to distinguish between thinking that is done at a relatively superficial, highly mental level, and thinking that is done more deeply, within the heart and engaging more of the whole person. Thinking at the more superficial level (Level 1) is highly rational and factually-based; it includes memorization of information (even Bible verses), and focuses on grasping the logical and linguistic relations between

words, concepts, and themes in the text, possibly using grammatical helps and commentaries (in fact, most modern evangelical commentaries are meant to promote Level 1 understanding). Level 1 thinking is especially important for young Christians as they seek to replace their pagan, secular thoughts and beliefs with those of God's. Storing up the truth through memorization, Bible study, and rational wrestling with biblical concepts and themes is essential for re-constructing one's thought-life along biblical lines. Helping young Christians get the Word in at Level 1, then, is a necessary and beneficial task for a Christian people-helping. However, more is needed for soul-transformation that goes beyond the storage and understanding of information.

Level 2 thinking, on the other hand, aims at grasping and appropriating the personal, existential truth of the text. It savors the truth, sucking on its juices to pull out all the sweetness that lies within it. This spiritual understanding involves mulling over a truth, turning it over in the mind, putting it in different ways, imagining its intent, and seeing oneself as the direct focus of the truth.

This approach to the Bible requires more time and covers much less ground. Whereas one can read 4 chapters of the Bible in 15 minutes, Level 2 thinking may stay on one phrase or one verse for 15 minutes. It lingers on a thought, calmly receiving the truth and allowing God to speak to the soul through His word.

As all the great spiritual traditions of Christianity have recognized (and even non-Christian traditions), to get the most out of an insight, the soul must be quieted and peaceful. The Greek Fathers used the image of a quiet pool as a metaphor for the state of the soul that is to be aimed at. Only when the soul is completely still can it best reflect the glory of God. When restless and troubled, the "surface" is disturbed and no image can be reflected on it. Keeping with the image of a still pool, we might think of the souls as the vegetation on the bottom. When the surface of the water is turbulent, the water itself is murky and little light reaches the bottom; but when still, the water clears and the sunlight can penetrate directly to the bottom giving its life-sustaining power to the flora of the pool. Even so, spiritual understanding is best developed, we might say only developed, when quality time is spent on a regular basis in God's presence, reading His Word with a desire to hear him speak through that reading and personally touch deeply into the center of the soul.

The Christian counselor or people-helper wants to foster change in the person's soul. Simply put, the more the Christian engages in Level 2 thinking, the more will that person be changed, transformed through the truths of the scripture, and molded by the Spirit of God into Christ's image. Down through the ages, Christians have recognized it is not simply the mental grasp of truths that alone changes the soul (as important as that is as a means for soul-transformation), but it is through receiving as deeply as one can the truths of God, in so doing being created anew by the word of God who is able to say right into the soul: "Let light shine out of darkness!" (2 Cor. 4:6).

Before talking about how to meditate, the relation between Level 1 thinking about scripture and Level 2 should be mentioned, because Level 2 thinking cannot happen without some rational understanding of the words and concepts expressed in the text. Bible study is very helpful in getting at the actual meaning of a passage; memorization can be a great means for storing up in the memory system truth that can then be worked over through Level 2 meditation. Another way to contrast these two types of thought (for

purposes of soul-care) is developmental: Level 1 is especially important in cognitive reconstruction for Christians who lack a doctrinal understanding of God's truth (or at least have an impoverished understanding). Change at this level can occur fairly rapidly by the same mental processes used in the study of any discipline (e.g. biology). Level 2, on the other hand, is especially important for long term change of the heart, the kind of soul-transformation that takes years of soaking in the scriptures and being so deeply filled with their truth that, as was said of Bunyan, the very blood that flows through their veins is Bibline.

How to Meditate

So what is involved in spiritual meditation upon the scriptures? There are at least four steps in such activity.

It must begin with a relaxed body and soul, but it actually consists of an ongoing cycle of reading, deep thinking, listening, and praying, until the period of meditation is over. And though I speak of them as steps, the proposed order is logical, but is not meant to be followed rigidly.

Active Relaxation

First, then, the body and soul must be relaxed. We all know what it's like to be harried. We've been working all day on a mentally demanding task, and then we stop off at a grocery store to pick up some items for the weekend. Then, we have dinner and afterwards go out to some friends' house for a Bible study and some deep discussion about the "openness of God" controversy. When we get home that night, our brains/mind may be so wired from the activity of the day that we would likely be unable to think deeply, at least initially (and probably more likely to just sleep deeply). Contrast that "state of mind" with how you might feel after staying a few days at a friend's cottage. You wake up after a good night's sleep, have a light but satisfying breakfast, sit down for 15 minutes out on the veranda in a comfortable lawn chair overlooking an opening in the forest that spreads down to the beach of a small lake (and there's no children around. Children have no capacity to do Level 2 thinking; for them it's pretty much either sleep or activity time. This isn't meant to imply that meditation and children are mutually exclusive, but most of us find that the best meditation is done when the children are asleep or active somewhere else!). For most people, such conditions would usually lead to the soul's being relatively peaceful and pool-like. It is at this time, that the soul is also most receptive to God's thoughts.

There appears to be such a profound interrelation between the soul and the body that one must take steps to help get the body relaxed, so as to also help the soul get relaxed. Actually, many studies of meditation have been done (of course, many non-Christians engage in meditation as well as Christians), and they've found physiological evidence of a difference in the brain activity of Level 1 and Level 2 thinking. When measured on an electroencephalograph, Level 2 thought is a brain activity pattern between that of active consciousness and sleep. Though not usually sought after and developed, except by students of meditation, a brain state can be accessed and enhanced that appears to be ideal for receiving spiritual truth. Because of the mind's dependence upon the brain and the body, steps need to be taken that calm the

body and the brain, for in so doing the soul's receptivity will be enhanced. It is best then to meditate in a comfortable chair and spend a few minutes calming the body, perhaps even deliberately relaxing the muscles in one's legs and arms and torso, in order to promote the soul's restfulness (taking care, of course, not to get so rested that the body and soul fall asleep!). This is a skill and requires practice (just like any skill; think of learning to play the piano). However, eventually, perhaps after a few weeks or even months, it will be possible to fairly quickly (within 10-15 minutes) reach a calm, but peacefully active (an acknowledged paradox), state of soul, not asleep, but also more attuned than when busy filling out an application form.

Next, the first step in Protestant meditation (after asking God to bless it) consists of Reading. An important point here is the selection of the text, for not all texts are created equal. Some passages simply have more spiritual significance than others. Admittedly, some well-meaning people want to insist that since all scripture is equally inspired by God, it's all equally useful for our souls. But let's consider the differing benefits of, say, John 15 and the genealogy of Christ in Matthew 1. Both have theological significance and are important for a number of reasons. But there are juicier, sweeter thoughts in John 15 that are especially suitable for meditation. Pouring over the vine and branch imagery, the notion of abiding, the relation of love and obedience, and God's love for his people will have a far deeper impact on the soul than a consideration of the names of Jesus' ancestors.

At the same time, it should be said that some systematic type of reading is desirable. Otherwise the same favorite passages will be read and re-read. This is not all bad, but generally one's soul should be challenged to move beyond it's past, so regular exposure to a range of scripture is most healthy.

So, after selecting the reading, a small portion of the passage should be read at which time the second step begins. Deep thinking about the passage can happen in a variety of ways. As said before, it requires at least some rational grasp of the words and ideas in context. However, it moves immediately to a savoring of the thoughts, a chewing and enjoying and gradual swallowing of the truths that give life. Personal, existential questions can be asked of the text? What does tell me about God? What does it say about who I am, either as a sinner or as redeemed? What lifestyle or behavior change is being demanded? How will I be different after reading this text? And if reading a biblical story, this can involve imagining the details of the historical account, and seeing oneself in the place of one of the actors (e.g. a blind man crying out to Jesus for healing). Or if reading in Paul about our life in Christ we can think personally about the text's bearing on our nature. We can think about what it means for me to be declared righteous or raised from the dead. We can see ourselves putting to death the old self which was already crucified in Christ. Or if reading of some pivotal historical events, we can think about the theological transactions going on, for example when Christ was on the cross, and what was going on there between the Father and the Son.

There seem to be two processes that are useful for Deep Thinking in meditation: one uses words and thoughts, pure and simple, and the other uses pictures, images in our mind. Conceptual Deep Thinking mulls over the thoughts and words expressed in scripture, thinking about them in different ways and asking questions about them to kull out their meaning. Imaginal Deep Thinking uses the imagination to create pictures of the

truth in ways that also helps to process and accept the truth more deeply.

Savoring our new life in Christ as described in the baptism passage in Romans 6:1-11 using Conceptual Deep Thinking could involve thinking about our supernatural union with Christ that so identified Christ and ourselves that we mysteriously participated in his death and burial and resurrection. In the mind of God, we were there nearly 2000 years ago, and entered into judgment through his cosmic death over sin and alienation and also entered into perfection found in his eternal life manifested through his being raised from the dead. Upon believing in Christ, somehow we died to sin and its power and were given a new life and could love God and worship him and glorify him. However, we also use Imaginal Deep Thinking and picture ourselves, dirty and filthy, superimposed on Christ on the cross. We died with him. And then see ourselves placed in the tomb with him, dead as could be to pride, folly, and the world. And finally see him walking out of the tomb, shining and dressed in glorious white, followed by ourselves, looking, by God's grace, just as radiant. We are raised with Him.

Seeing ourselves in Romans 6 can help our souls to grasp its significance in a different way than simply understanding the concepts taught. However, following a reformational approach to meditation, it is important to make sure our imaginations are guided by scripture concepts, rather than the other way around. God gave us his Word and expects our meditations on the truth to be Word-driven. Otherwise, we run the risk of having alien themes that depart from God's understanding shape our meditations (e.g. humanistic or new age thoughts and images). This is especially important when considering the use of our imaginations since they can easily lead the mind in all kinds of directions. It should also be mentioned that some people are better at one of these than the other, but both are helpful for deepening our reception of the truth.

The third step in meditation involves Listening. This step is often left out of evangelical discussions of Bible study. In Bible study, we can take the role of the Master Interpreter, confidently grasping (conquering) the text with our superior wisdom and insight. Biblical meditation is supposed to be poles apart from this false type of Bible study and is aided when we clearly set aside this third step. Here, the believer rests from an active processing of the text that was the focus of deep thinking and waits upon God expectantly to apply the truth to one's soul. "What do you want me to get out of this passage Lord?" "How, Father, would you have me apply this to my life?" Then, the soul waits, in stillness and peace, for God to speak. There are usually no fireworks or powerful impressions; in fact, God does not always speak in such a way (and sometimes, it must be admitted, we cannot hear him because of our temporary spiritual darkness). However, this step trains the soul to look to God for the personal application of the text. Most importantly, it systematically invites God to converse with us in our devotion times.

The last step in the meditation cycle is Praying. Here, we respond to God's word to us, entering into a conversation with our Father and friend. We thank him and worship him and cry to him and complain to him. We tell him how good he is. We pray in behalf of someone out of the text. We ask for his help to fulfill his word in our lives. We speak out of our hearts in light of the Word and answer his initiation into our hearts. Then, we enter the cycle again, reading, deeply thinking, listening, and praying.

Such a process is slow-going; not much seems to happen during these times and not much change is evident in the short-term. For this reason, young Christians can get

impatient with this process and give up. This is also the reason more seasoned Christians don't persevere in meditation. The one immediate benefit is that such times often can bring peace and patience to an anxious or angry soul. Again, meditation is a learned skill (dependent though it is on the Holy Spirit). As one learns how to meditate through repeated practice and exercise over months and even years, one can with increasing regularity access spiritually-obtained peace during the meditation time. However, the real goal of such meditation, obtained over years, yes decades of meditation, is the wisdom that is supposed to be the corollary of old age and a spirit that is filled with grace and peace.

How to Pray Meditatively: Meeting with God in Our Devotion Times

Before finishing this discussion of one's devotion time, it's necessary to point out the different quality of prayer with God. We all know that we can speak with another person having different levels of connection or presence of mind. When talking with another person we can be barely there, listening with one ear while thinking about something else. Or we can be thoroughly empathic and caught up in what the other is saying, feeling a deep intimacy and communion of spirit. So it is with prayer. We can pray the words and not even be aware of God's presence. Perhaps we can distinguish the difference between praying to God and praying with him. Praying with God involves speaking to him "face-to-face," recognizing his presence in the room and that our meditative prayer time is genuinely interpersonal. This doesn't mean there is no profit or value to prayer that is less personal on our part. If that were the case, only perfect people could pray. However, increasing this existential quality of our prayer is a goal we should always seek to realize. The more genuinely and deeply we "come into his presence," the more real is our communion with God and the more we are personally benefited from the time we spend in prayer.