

“Meditate: Listening to God”

Matthew 6:25-33, Luke 10:38-42, Romans 12:2 & Ephesians 5:25b-27

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If you were stranded on an island and could have only a single book with you, what book would you choose?

Somebody once asked this question of G.K. Chesterton. Given his reputation as one of the most scholarly and creative Christian writers in the first half of the twentieth century, one would naturally expect his response to be the Bible. It was not. Chesterton chose *Thomas' Guide to Practical Ship-building*.

Pastor John Ortberg writes, “That makes sense of course. When we are trapped on an island, we want a book that will help us get home. We don’t want to be entertained or even informed. We want a book that will show us how to be saved. The truth is we are trapped—trapped in patterns of thought and behavior that lead to death. Chesterton himself once said that the doctrine of the Fall is the one Christian belief that is empirically verifiable. We are trapped, as Eugene Peterson put it, on an “I-land,” [pronoun I dash land] where we know neither ourselves nor God and are looking for a message that help is on the way. So the followers of Christ have historically sought to be a people devoted to the Word, [that is meditating on the Bible.] John Wesley said that a pivotal moment of his life came when he prayed to become ‘a man of one book’” the Bible.

Through the centuries Christians have told many stories of how they met God through the Bible. Augustine was a wild youth, he was searching all over for meaning, he indulged in a variety of things, he was restless, longing for purpose. Meditation changed Augustine’s life. Augustine tells of sitting under a fig tree and hearing a voice, “Take it and read”. It seemed to Augustine that the voice was God inviting him to read the Bible. After meditating on a few verses of scripture Augustine wrote, “it was as though my heart was filled with a light of confidence and all the shadows of my doubt were swept away.”

In the movie *City Slickers* Billy Crystal plays a confused, dissatisfied thirty-something character with a vague sense that life is passing him by. Jack a wise cowboy asks Crystal if he would like to know the secret of life. “It’s this,” Jack says, holding up a single finger. “The secret of life is your finger?” asks Crystal. “It’s one thing,” Jack replies. “The secret of life is pursuing one thing.” This resonates with Crystal for he is scattered, torn between obligations and his life is about many things yet it seems to him that his life is about nothing. With eager anticipation Crystal asks, “So what is that one thing?” Jack replies, “You have to find it yourself.”

Jesus said, **Matthew 6:25-33** “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will God not much more clothe you—you of little faith? Therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What

will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?' For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and God's righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well."

That last verse is also translated Matthew 6:33 "God will give you all you need from day to day if you live for God and make the Kingdom of God your primary concern." And "Give your entire attention to what God is doing right now."

Richard Foster says, "Christian meditation is the ability to hear God's voice and obey God's word. Meditation is that simple." Soren Kierkegaard saw double-mindedness as the essential disease of the human spirit. Double-mindedness is trying to live a life of divided loyalties. It is a failure to make an ultimate commitment to meditate, to seek first God's kingdom. Kierkegaard wrote a book entitled, "*Purity of Heart Is to Will One Thing*".

In essence Jesus told Martha to meditate, to will one thing, to listen to God. The gospel of Luke proclaims, Luke 10:38-42 "Now as they went on their way, Jesus entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what Jesus was saying. But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, 'Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me.' But the Lord answered her, 'Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.'"

If you want to be saved from double-mindedness and experience deep soul renewal you need to meditate, to listen to God and live God's will. The Apostle Paul wrote, Romans 12:2 "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect."

Meditation is reforming your mind by immersing yourself in Scripture. The psalmist writes of hiding God's Word in our hearts so that we might not sin. Ortberg asks, "So how do we read the Bible in a way that will purify our hearts and help us live as Jesus would in our place?" By being washed by scripture. The Apostle Paul writes Ephesians 5:25b-27 "Jesus gave up his life for the church to make believers holy and clean, having cleansed believers by the washing of water with the word. Jesus did this to present the church to himself as a glorious church without a spot or wrinkle or any other blemish. Instead, she will be holy and without fault."

So what does it mean to be washed by scripture? Imagine having a mind cleansed of all the debris that blocks your best intentions. Imagine be clear and confident that you are living God's will for your life, that you are making a difference, that you are making earth more like heaven. Imagine living your passion, gracious hospitality, passionate worship, joyful service, divine-like generosity, fasting to feast upon God, the focus of simplicity, the freedom of confession. Imagine overflowing with so much abundant love that loving God and others energizes you. That is what it is like to have your mind washed by scripture. That is what it means to Colossians 3:16a "let the word of Christ dwell in you richly..." This is how we renew our souls. This is our great need, to meditate, to hear God's voice through scripture so we know how to live the Kingdom of God here and now.

The Bible describes meditation as listening to God, reflecting on God's works, rehearsing God's deeds, ruminating on God's law. In each case there is changed behavior as a result of our encounter with the living God. Repentance, obedience and renewal are features of meditation. Jesus daily took time to meditate. Jesus sought God, his heavenly Father, listened and communed with God. Jesus beckons us to do the same. Meditation is cultivating a friendship with Jesus. Meditation believes that we live in a cosmos created by our personal God who delights in our fellowship. Therefore mediation is communication between God the Lover and us, the beloved. In mediation we create emotional and spiritual space which allows Jesus to construct an inner sanctuary in our heart. Jesus said I stand at the door of your hear and knock. God longs to eat with us, to listen, talk and play with us. God hopes we will enjoy each other and that all of us will feel at home when we spend time with God. God desires a perpetual Holy Communion feast in the inner sanctuary of our heart. Meditation opens the door and welcomes Jesus into our heart.

We should strive to meditate every day. The first step of meditation is to empty our minds. To meditate is to detach from the confusion around us in order to have a richer attachment to God. For most muchness and manyness are the primary temptations. We are often cluttered, pushed and pulled. Henri Nouwen says our minds are like a banana tree filled with monkeys constantly jumping up and down. It is rarely still or quiet. Our minds race with thoughts, like numerous chimps clamoring for attention. Dietrich Bonhoeffer confessed, "Often we are so burdened and overwhelmed with other thoughts, images and concerns that it may take a long time before God's Word has swept all else aside and come through... This is the very reason why we begin our meditation with the prayer that God may send God's Holy Spirit to us through God's Word and reveal God's Word to us and enlighten us."

Begin your meditation with a prayer for understanding. Sometimes it helps to light a candle, focus on an icon, listen to a song or enjoy scenery. For some having a place is important, a certain room, chair, a closet, someplace where you will not be disturbed. For me walking clears my mind, centers me on God and prepares me to hear God through the Bible. Some people smell a fragrance. Some like to stretch. Foster suggests an exercise called "palms down, palms up." Sit upright in a chair "begin by placing your palms down as a symbolic indication of your desire to turn over any concerns you may have to God. Inwardly you may pray, "Lord, I give to you my anger toward John. I release my fear of my doctor's appointment. I surrender my anxiety over not having enough money to pay the bills. I release my frustration over trying to find a job. Whatever it is that weighs on your mind or is a concern to you, just say, "palms down." Release it. After surrender, turn your palms up as a symbol of your desire to receive from the Lord. Perhaps you will pray silently: "Lord, I would like to receive your divine love for John, your peace about the doctor's appointment, your patience, your joy." Whatever you need, you say "palms up." Having centered down you are now reading to listen to God speak to you through scripture. I have a mental image of Jesus sitting with me by a campfire beside a beautiful lake just as the sunsets that enables me to be a better listener as I read scripture.

Read a small amount of scripture slowly 1 to 40 verses at the most. You are reading not for information rather for soul renewal. Ortberg suggests, "Read scripture slowly the way you would read a love letter at the height of romance. Certain words may stand out to you; allow them to sink into your heart. ...[Always ask], "God what do you want to say to me in this moment?" Dietrich Bonhoeffer says, "Just as you do not analyze the words of someone you love, but accept them as they are said to you, accept the Word of Scripture and ponder it in your heart, as Mary did. That is all. That is meditation."

Enter into the text by engage all of yours senses. What are the smells, tastes, sights, sounds, touch? Place yourself in each person as an active participant. Alexander Whyte declares, "with your imagination...open your New Testament. At one time, you are the publican: at another time, you

are the prodigal...at another time, you are Mary Magdalene: at another time, Peter in the porch...Till your whole New Testament is all over autobiographic of you.”

Another way to meditate is by reading scripture out loud. This will likely focus your attention and give you the advantage of perceiving by both eye and ear.

Sometimes meditate by reading a selection of scripture three times. The first reading take in the whole text. The second reading listen for a word or phrase that touches your heart or draws your attention. Focus and repeat that phrase. Sit with it listening to how it connects to you, perhaps, an experience, image, memory or dream. Also listen for God to place new thoughts in your mind. The third reading listen for an invitation, what is God asking you to do or be?

Another way to meditate is to take one verse of scripture with you through the day. The psalmist declares fruitful living comes to those who meditate on scripture day and night. Meditation is often a slow process like a root drawing moisture from a nearby river to bring nourishment to a great tree. Select a verse of scripture, write it on a paper and read it throughout the day. Sustain attention to God’s word will reveal deep insights.

Memorizing scripture is a powerful way to transform your mind. Use Bible tools or your reading to select verses that inspire you and address matters in which you need help. If you are struggling with a temptation, a discipline or feeling find scriptures that address your concerns and memorize them.

Meditation is a tool to help you listen to God. Sometimes it is helpful to stick with a selection of scripture for a week or two using different approaches. The goal is not to get through the Bible. The goal is to get God’s word through you.

Foster writes, “Often meditation will yield insights that are deeply practical, almost mundane. Instruction will come on how to relate to your... [family or friend] or how to deal with this sensitive problem or that business situation. It is wonderful when a particular meditation leads to ecstasy, but it is far more common to be given guidance in dealing with ordinary human problems. Meditation sends us into our ordinary world with greater perspective and balance.... You must not be discouraged if in the beginning your meditations have little meaning to you. There is a progression in the spiritual life...be patient with yourself...You will be going against the tide, but take heart; your task is of immense worth.

Give your entire attention to God. God is speaking loving words that will renew you. Take time to meditate, to connect with God, to listen to God, to have your soul renewed. Amen

Soul Renewal

Spiritual practices for your extreme makeover

Meditation is

Christian meditation is the ability to hear God's voice and obey God's word.

Practice meditation by...

- † listening to God.
- † reflecting on God's works.
- † rehearsing God's deeds.
- † ruminating on God's law.
- † cultivating a friendship with Jesus.
- † creating emotional and spiritual space which allows Jesus to construct an inner sanctuary in your heart.
- † everyday emptying your mind, praying for understanding, then listening to God through scripture.
- † centering with God, perhaps light a candle, focus on an icon, listen to a song, be silent, imagine being with Jesus in your favorite place, smell a fragrance or enjoy scenery.
- † assuming a posture that enhances your listening, perhaps sitting, kneeling, laying flat, stretching, a certain pose or walking.
- † finding a place free of distractions.
- † by the palms down, palms up exercise. Sit upright in a chair "begin by placing your palms down as a symbolic indication of your desire to turn over any concerns you may have to God. Inwardly you may pray, "Lord, I give to you my anger toward John. I release my fear of my doctor's appointment. I surrender my anxiety over not having enough money to pay the bills. I release my frustration over trying to find a job. Whatever it is that weighs on your mind or is a concern to you, just say, "palms down." Release it. After surrender, turn your palms up as a symbol of your desire to receive from the Lord. Perhaps you will pray silently: "Lord, I would like to receive your divine love for John, your peace about the doctor's appointment, your patience, your joy." Whatever you need, you say "palms up." Having centered down you are now reading to listen to God speak to you through scripture.
- † reading a small amount of scripture (1-40 verses) slowly the way you would read a love letter at the height of romance. Certain words may stand out to you; allow them to sink into your heart.
- † asking, God what do you want to say to me in this moment?
- † entering into the text by engage all of yours senses. What are the smells, tastes, sights, sounds, touch?
- † placing yourself in each person as an active participant.

- † reading scripture out loud.
- † reading a selection of scripture three times. The first reading take in the whole text. The second reading listen for a word or phrase that touches your heart or draws your attention. Focus and repeat that phrase. Sit with it listening to how it connects to you, perhaps, an experience, image, memory or dream. Also listen for God to place new thoughts in your mind. The third reading listen for an invitation, what is God asking you to do or be?
- † selecting a verse of scripture, writing it on a paper and reading it throughout the day.
- † memorizing scripture that inspires you or addresses matters in which you need help.