

CHAPTER FOUR

MEDITATION: NOT JUST FOR GURUS

JOHN LOFTNESS

All couples fight. Styles of conflict may differ, but friction is inevitable. This is true for any two people who relate closely, be they roommates, co-workers, siblings, or lab partners. But because marriage is such an intimate relationship, fights between spouses are some of the most intense.

Nancy and I found this out soon after we married. She was used to cold warfare, I to Churchillian debates on the floor of Parliament. When conflict arose she withdrew behind a Berlin Wall of silence while I launched into emotional debate. She became intimidated. I got frustrated. The conflicts got worse.

So we talked about it, just the two of us, and we looked into the Bible to get some wisdom. We began to realize that our styles of handling conflict reflected worldly patterns of living that needed to change. We asked ourselves these questions: What does it mean for a husband to love his wife in the midst of a fight? What does it mean for a wife to submit to her husband when she'd rather catch the first plane out of town? What does it mean to "not let the sun go down on your anger"? How is it that "a soft answer turns away wrath"? We prayed together about these issues and asked God to help us apply the Bible's principles. We also asked him to help us resolve conflicts more quickly and learn something productive from each one.

In effect, what we did was practice the spiritual discipline of meditating on God's Word with the purpose of changing our thinking...and our lives.

"Stop allowing yourself to be molded by means of the spirit of this world, but continue to be transformed in your soul by renewing your mind," Paul told the Romans.¹ In our marital conflicts, my mind had been molded to

“ Why does the intake of God’s Word often leave us so cold, and why don’t we have more success in our spiritual life? Puritan pastor Thomas Watson has the answer. ‘The reason we come away so cold from reading the Word is, because we do not warm ourselves at the fire of meditation.’²

— Donald Whitney

fight in a selfish, aggressive way that hurt Nancy and damaged our relationship. How did this happen? The “spirit of this world” used past examples and experiences to get me to believe this was the way to fight. My mind had adopted manipulative methods rather than the Bible’s clear command to be “gentle, not quarrelsome”

(1Ti 3:3). Though I was certainly out of line, my behavior was not unique. Often our thinking conforms to the world’s pattern and we’re not even aware of it.

When the Spirit shed light on my failure to communicate lovingly with Nancy, I then became responsible for reprogramming my thoughts. That’s the partnership Paul

describes in Romans 12: God reveals, but we must renew. Insight and power for change come from the Holy Spirit, but the initiative must come from us. For me, that meant imitating a different mode of behavior when I disagreed with Nancy. It required making a conscious effort to speak softly to her. I had to make understanding a higher priority than self-expression. Sometimes I fail and revisit my old pressuring ways. But thanks to her patience and my practice, this is no longer a problem in our marriage.

What areas of your life have been shaped by the world’s mold instead of

God’s mold? Is there some habit of your flesh that sin has deeply ingrained in your soul? Do you struggle with an enslaving habit, self-pity, uncontrolled anger?

Your Father in heaven knows your symptoms. He also knows the cure: renewing your mind through meditation. Each day, as the Spirit reveals through Scripture where change is required, you can mentally discard wrong patterns of thinking and mentally acquire righteous patterns. Not only will you be shutting out the darkness, but you will be turning on the light: “And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit” (2Co 3:18).

1 What was the first lifestyle change you made after becoming a Christian?

**Meditate on
Philippians 4:8-9.**

What one excellent or praiseworthy thing can you meditate on today?

A Bad First Impression

What do you think when you hear the word “meditation”? Many imagine someone with a name like Maharishi sitting cross-legged on the ground, eyes closed, chanting a meaningless word over and over until he experiences cosmic revelation. It’s no wonder we’re a little hesitant when it comes to practicing biblical meditation.

Eastern religions and Christianity approach meditation very differently. In his book *Song of Ascents*, E. Stanley Jones quotes a famous swami in India who taught his disciples, “Kill the mind and then, and then only, can you meditate.” It’s different for Christians. Instead of emptying our minds, we seek to fill them with God’s truth. Instead of listening to nothing, we’re listening to God to see what he wants to say. Biblical meditation involves looking at the Word, comparing it to our lives and to the world we live in, and then responding with concrete changes.

Meditation might seem more attractive if the Holy Spirit communicated at the urgent, breathless pace of a radio broadcaster or if the Scriptures read like the cover of a news magazine. That’s not the case, however. The Word and the Spirit speak an earth-shaking truth, but quietly. Sometimes we have to strain our ears to hear. Sometimes the Spirit withholds the meaning of Scripture to get at something else in our lives. The problem is not in his speaking but in our listening. He will not force us

For Further Study:

Read 1 Kings 19:11-13. What sign alerted Elijah to God’s presence? Do you find that significant?

“ Let us represent him unto our minds as we find him described in the Gospel; and there we shall behold the perfections of the Divine nature, though covered with the veil of human infirmities; and when we have framed unto ourselves the clearest notion that we can of a being, infinite in power, in wisdom, and goodness, the author and fountain of all perfection, let us fix the eyes of our soul upon it, that our eyes may affect our heart; and, while we are musing, the fire will burn.³

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— Henry Scougal

to listen to him. He comes and quietly says, “I’ve got something I’d like to say to you. I’ll just wait patiently until you are quiet enough to listen.”

Although this chapter will cover a number of practical techniques for meditating effectively on Scripture, it’s the end result—hearing and obeying God—that really matters. Imitating someone else’s method can be helpful in getting started, but what is important is that

whatever we do we stick to eliminating distractions, filling our minds with truth, and then waiting.

Distractions

Overcoming a fear of meditation is only the first obstacle in our path. We still face three adversaries, as missionary and martyr Jim Elliot wrote, that can easily rob us of delight during these intimate times with God. “I think the devil has made it his business to monopolize in three elements: noise, hurry, crowds....Satan is quite aware of the power of silence.”⁴

Noise. Back when I was in high school I used to think I could do my homework in front of the TV. For some reason Archie Bunker was always more interesting than trigonometry! It doesn’t take much volume for the TV or radio to distract us from the discipline of meditation. Most of us have noisy minds. I can be in a perfectly quiet place trying to meditate and my mind suddenly kicks into high gear and drives me down some country lane that leads to nowhere. We might as well admit there are a lot of things initially more interesting than Scripture. Regardless of what distracts us, though—pressures, responsibilities, or a lack of discipline—we need to learn to quiet our minds.

Hurry. Modern technology has greatly accelerated the pace of most everyone’s life. Microwave ovens, fax machines, and computers have made every second more significant. I sometimes find myself living in overdrive.

“ Are we training ourselves only in Christian activity, as good as that may be, or are we training ourselves first of all in godliness?⁵

— Jerry Bridges

Two days into vacation, when I’ve finally slowed down enough to relax, Nancy will jokingly remark, “Good to see you’ve finally arrived!” The Lord probably feels much the same. It’s extremely difficult to meditate when we’re always in a

hurry. To meditate we must first slow our bodies, then our minds so we can focus on the matters at hand. This is why I find the early morning my best time for meditation; my mind has yet to get wound up with the “to do’s” of the day.

Crowds. Some of us are always around people. Fellowship and outreach are great, but depending too much on interaction with others is unhealthy. There’s a certain security and affirmation we can only get from our relationship with God, and that relationship requires time alone with him. The silence might be intimidating at first. In time, though, these moments away from the crowd—

these private encounters with God—will become a source of great strength and joy.

How to Open Your Ears

The first priority, as we've already mentioned, is finding a quiet time and place where you will be as free from distraction as possible. Ruthlessly carve this out of your schedule. If Jesus could duck miracle-hungry crowds to spend time with his Father in solitary places, surely we can escape the demands of prime time television or home repairs.

Meditate on Psalm 95:2 and 100:4. How does thanksgiving prepare us to come before God?

The next step after choosing a time and place is to prepare your heart. As with all of the disciplines, a variety of methods will do—use whatever works best for you. I like to begin by reading the Word. If I'm groggy, I read aloud. Usually I like to pray through the Disciples' Prayer after I've listened to the Word since Scripture tends to add content to my prayers. Sometimes I don't have the concentration for this so I begin with worship and thanksgiving. These disciplines prepare me to meditate on God's Word with a right perspective.

Once your heart is ready, it's time to engage your mind. We should approach Scripture with the fundamental assumption that God speaks uniquely through his Word. The Bible attests to itself as being a living book. Consequently, we don't merely stuff our minds with the facts and principles of Scripture. That would be lifeless. Instead, we listen to what God is saying as to how to apply his Word.

This does not mean we should neglect background studies in the Scriptures. The Bible is an ancient book written over the course of more than 1,400 years by a variety of writers from a variety of cultures. To handle it accurately, we must seek a rudimentary grasp of what the writers meant in their own life context. The scope of this book cannot include Bible study methods, but there are lots of excellent materials available on the American market (some are listed at the end of this chapter), and chances are your church offers classroom Bible instruction. Some of my most life-changing insights have come during often tedious background studies of Bible personalities and books.

As true as it is that God speaks through his Word, we have to train ourselves to hear and recognize his voice. That's powerfully demonstrated in the following story by Bruce Olson, a missionary to the jungles of Colombia. We

can learn as much as he did from this hunting expedition with the Motilone Indians:

“Our intrusion into the jungles had brought the usual reaction from assorted birds and monkeys that day, but as

“ God is here and He is speaking—these truths are back of all other Bible truths; without them there could be no revelation at all. God did not write a book and send it by messenger to be read at a distance by unaided minds. He spoke a Book and lives in his spoken words, constantly speaking his words and causing the power of them to persist across the years.⁶

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— A.W. Tozer

we quietly slipped through the dense undergrowth, I noticed a sudden escalation in the volume and intensity of the cacophony. Millions of katydids joined the animal squawks and screeches, raising the noise level to the point where our human voices were nearly drowned out. I'd never heard anything like it. Astonished, I'd turned to a nearby Motilone and shouted, 'Listen to that! Isn't it incredible?'

“The Indian had nodded his agreement. ‘Yes,’ he'd called back, ‘we heard it too. It's a piping turkey!’ His remark had stopped me in my tracks. A piping turkey? All I'd heard was chaotic, ear-shattering racket! How could anyone notice the voice of one lone turkey in the midst of this din?

“The Motilone had signaled me to stop and listen quietly. When I did, it took several minutes before I began to pick out which sounds were which—animals, birds, insects, humans. Then slowly, the separate voices became more and more distinct. Finally, after more patient listening, I heard it. Behind the hue and cry of the jungle, behind the voices of my companions, behind the quiet sound of my own breathing, was the haunting, reedy voice of the piping turkey, sounding for all the world like it was calling to us from inside a hollow tube.

“It had been a poignant moment for me, a moment that had spoken to me of much more than the Motilones' highly developed sense of hearing and my own lack of auditory discriminations. It had made me wonder what I'd missed—not only in the jungles, but in my own spiritual life. How much had I overlooked when I'd failed to patiently ‘tune in’ to God's subtle voice in the midst of life's clamor and activity?”⁷

When studying the Bible, how can we sift through all the other noises—cars, trains, lawnmowers, the television, furnace, children—that compete for our attention? If, like Olson, we concentrate on listening, we will slowly

For Further Study:

Read Matthew 11:15. What does Jesus mean by this? What's the difference between hearing and listening?

2 What “squawks and screeches” make it difficult for you to listen to God’s voice?

- The latest *Sports Illustrated*
- A sink full of dirty dishes
- The sound of my own snoring
- Pressures at home or work
- Money problems
- School assignments
- Sports interests or hobbies
- An infinite loop of questions from my permanently curious three-year-old

Meditate on Joshua

1:8. Would a superficial, 5-minutes-a-day Bible study plan have given Joshua the strength and wisdom he needed to take the Promised Land?

“ I think a new world will arise out of the religious mists when we approach our Bible with the idea that it is not only a book which was once spoken, but a book which is now speaking.⁸

”
— A.W. Tozer

learn to recognize the Spirit’s voice applying the Scriptures to our life situation. With time it will become easier and easier to distinguish his voice from all the rest. Toward that end, here are some introductory steps to meaningful, meditative Bible study.

Pick your passage. Hit-and-miss Bible study saps motivation. It’s far better to have a plan, even if you don’t consistently meet it. There are several different kinds of plans you can use:

- Book studies (Acts, Proverbs, James, etc.)

Goal: Thoroughly study the themes and context of one portion of Scripture.

- Doctrinal studies (holiness, grace, justification)

Goal: Discover what the Bible as a whole says about one subject.

- Bible people (Joseph, David, Peter)

Goal: Learn how ordinary people followed God. This can be very encouraging, especially if you study the life of someone with traits or circumstances similar to your own.

- Character themes (anger, pride, talking too much)

Goal: Obtain God’s perspective on a character issue as well as his guidelines for character growth.

- Bible promises (peace, joy, provision)

Goal: Receive specific assurance for difficulties you face. For example, if you’ve lost your job, look up everything the Bible says about God’s provision.

As you are choosing your course of study, ask the Spirit to guide you to passages relevant to your current situation. Systematic study is important, but God also wants us to study according to our life situation. Are you having trouble with your parents? Study the biblical relationships between parents and children. Are you considering a major purchase? Study the Bible’s principles on finances. Are you facing a lot of pressure? Look up what the Bible says about peace and anxiety.

I like to work from a plan but remain open to change

I like to work from a plan but remain open to change

when a topic stimulates my thinking. For example, recently I decided to study Paul's epistle to the Philippians, for no other reason than that I felt it was time to look at one of Paul's letters. I read some introductory material from a few commentaries and used a study booklet by Donald Baker from the InterVarsity Press (IVP) series to guide me in my meditation. If a particular passage intrigued me I would look it up in the commentaries to see what others had said about it.

For several weeks I plugged along without any astounding insights, though I was usually refreshed just from doing the study. But then I hit the fourth chapter of Philippians and read of Paul's contentment regardless of his material prosperity. I felt challenged by this, so when I finished my Philippians study I moved to Randy Alcorn's

life-changing book *Money, Possessions, and Eternity* (Tyndale House, 1989). I also started reading through the book of Proverbs, copying down every passage that refers to the use of money. As a result of my study and meditation, I currently find my attitudes toward debt and savings in the middle of a major reorientation. Every morning for the past week I've been profoundly affected by the Scriptures and their application to my family's use of money. Nancy and I are looking at our budget and making changes as a result of meditating on the Word. In the future, during times of meditation that aren't so rich, I will remind myself of the life-changing experience that emerged from a line-upon-line study of the book of Philippians.

3 What's the most challenging decision or situation you currently face?

Which of the Bible study plans listed on the previous page would serve you best in responding to the challenge you just described?

Take small bites. Your mother's advice is as true for Bible study as it is for eating: small bites of God's Word are easier to digest. Reading Romans in one sitting gives you an overall sense of the book's purpose, but it doesn't lend itself to meditation. It's much better to read only a few verses and get something out of them than to plow through several chapters without any sense of relevance or application. For meditative Bible study, focus on one or two short passages of Scripture so you have plenty of time to digest all that's there.

Explore the text. There's usually far more to a passage

“ We fail in our duty to study God’s Word not so much because it is difficult to understand, not so much because it is dull and boring, but because it is work. Our problem is not a lack of intelligence or a lack of passion. Our problem is that we are lazy.⁹

— R.C. Sproul

For Further Study:

Read Acts 17:11. What distinguished the believers in Berea? Could the same be said for you?

of Scripture than meets the eye. The excitement of Bible study comes as the Spirit reveals hidden treasure in verses we may have skimmed over hundreds of times.

Several strategies serve this purpose. Start by reading the passage aloud and repeating it over and over.

Instead of rushing on to the

next verse, linger over anything that catches your attention. If you have time, memorize a verse. Then begin asking questions, probing the text from every possible angle. “Lord, how do you want me to renew my mind through this passage? What did James mean when he wrote this about considering it joy when we face trials? What kinds of trials was he facing? What trials am I facing? How can I overcome my tendency to complain and rejoice instead?”

In the book *Martin Luther’s Quiet Time*, Walter Trobisch includes four simple questions that Luther used to enrich his own personal devotions. With each passage he read during his times of meditation, Martin Luther asked himself:

What am I grateful for?

What do I regret, or what makes me sad?

For what can I intercede?

What am I to do?

Put it in your own words. If you understand what you’re reading, you should be able to paraphrase it in your own terms. This simple strategy makes it much easier to remember what you’ve learned. If you can’t put it in your own words, give the passage a little more study.

Get personal and specific. When you read Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, it’s unlikely that his thoughts on meat sacrificed to idols strikes you as relevant. I have yet to see a display in my local supermarket that says, “Temple Meat! 50% Off!” Before going on to the next passage or closing your Bible, though, try to make some personal application. If meat sacrificed to idols no longer tempts Christians to compromise, what does? Secular music? Miniskirts? Recreational shopping? A few beers? Cable TV? What tempts *you* to compromise, and what are you going to do about it?

The Bible is our sole norm of faith and practice. It is our final authority. Bruce Milne writes in his book *Know*

For Further Study:

Unless we hold tightly to the principles of Scripture, we'll be "blown here and there by every wind of teaching" (Eph 4:14). See Paul's urgent appeal for sound doctrine in 1 Timothy 4:16, 2 Timothy 4:3-4, and Titus 1:9.

Meditate on Psalm 1.

How does the picture in verse 3 show the benefits of meditation?

4 When God led the Israelites through the Jordan River into Canaan, he told them to erect memorial stones as a sign of his faithfulness (Jos 3-4). Put up one "stone" in the space below by describing a specific act of God's faithfulness to you.

the Truth, "If we are to know who God is, who we are, and what God wants of us, we need to study Scripture." The suggestions I've presented may be enough to get you started, but I would strongly suggest that you investigate the books recommended at the end of this chapter. They are full of practical ways to make your Bible study more productive and enjoyable.

Keeping a Journal

Keeping a journal is an excellent way to record and preserve what God shows you. To use a phrase coined by John Wimber, it documents your "private history" with the Lord. Nancy has journals describing her interaction with God that go back to her teenage years. What a treasure! The simple act of writing out our thoughts focuses our meditation and makes us less prone to distraction.

Here are some other specific ways in which a journal contributes to our meditation:

It enables us to track God's curriculum for us. We know by faith that God has a plan and purpose for our lives. But when we look through pages from the preceding months and years, we can see just how God has been unfolding that plan.

It nurtures us during dry times.

Our growth in Christ seems to be seasonal. Sometimes we recognize his voice daily; at other times our meditations seem desert-dry. When our feelings no longer provide motivation to seek God, a journal reminds us of the things he has already said and done in our lives. This gives us grace to persevere until the fruit returns.

It gives us hope for the mundane.

Incremental change is almost unnoticeable. Day to day, our journal entries probably won't appear too impressive. But when we look back and see how God's daily building blocks have added up, we'll be surprised at what has actually taken place in us.

It builds our faith for personal change. When our first three children were all aged four and under, Nancy felt her motivation for ministry in the church eclipsed her motivation for motherhood. She was dissatisfied with this

and often struggled to reconcile what she viewed as two competing missions in her life. At that time she wrote in her journal, “Lord, make me a woman who has passion for her children!” She prayed this prayer regularly and supplemented it by reading godly books on parenting.

God answered her prayer. She now sees there is no conflict. Motherhood is as much ministry as anything else she does. She still serves our church with passion, but has

“ The whole Bible has this aim and this power: to create hope in the hearts of God’s people. And when hope abounds, the heart is filled with joy.¹⁰ ”

— John Piper

become equally passionate about training our children. She has the two in such balance that she now can do both guilt free. Without those early journal entries to remind her, she might not realize how much she has changed.

There are a few guidelines you should consider when starting a journal. Above all else, keep it simple. Don’t attempt to maintain a comprehensive diary with pages and pages of notes. A few sentences will do. Also, be creative with your journal entries. Write down quotes, dreams, Bible passages, excerpts from books you’re reading—anything to inject life into your time. Be completely honest with God as you express what’s on your heart. Finally, make sure *God* is your focus. Avoid becoming too preoccupied with yourself or with your style of writing. These notes aren’t intended for public consumption so you need not become self-conscious.

Meditating on God’s Word teaches us to think biblically. If we take seriously what the Holy Spirit writes on the tablets of our hearts (2Co 3:3), we will sustain the power of his instruction by putting it down on paper. Better yet, we’ll go one big step further by obeying what he says. When he gives us treasures through our meditation on his Word, let’s learn from the parable of the talents and put his gifts to work (Mt 25:14-30). It’s a great way of ensuring that the treasures keep on coming. ■

Meditate on Matthew 7:24. What’s more important than hearing God’s words?

GROUP DISCUSSION 1. A.W. Tozer writes, “The Bible will never be a living book to us until we are convinced that God is articulate in his universe.” What do you think he means?

2. Can you think of one area where the Holy Spirit has helped you renew your mind? What areas still need work?
3. Why do we first need to change our thinking before we can change our behavior?
4. How would you describe the difference between Eastern meditation and biblical meditation? (See page 39)
5. Once we discard wrong patterns of thinking, how can we make sure they don't return?
6. Did Bruce Olson's jungle experience seem relevant to your efforts to hear God? Why or why not?
7. Rate your current experience with Bible study: Very exciting, Somewhat exciting, Middle of the road, Somewhat lifeless, Very lifeless.
8. Describe any experience you've had with keeping a devotional journal.
9. How much can we expect to hear from God if we don't obey what he says?
10. If the FBI investigated our claim that we are submitted to the Bible's authority, what evidence would they find in our lifestyle?

**RECOMMENDED
READING**

Knowing Scripture by R.C. Sproul (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1977)

The Joy of Discovery in Bible Study by Oletta Wald (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1975)

Tabletalk magazine, published by Ligonier Ministries in Lake Mary, Florida contains a month's worth of daily Bible reading with commentary

Words of Life by Leland Ryken (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1987)

Words of Delight by Leland Ryken (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1992)

NOTES

1. The author's expanded paraphrase.
2. Donald Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1991), p.45.
3. Henry Scougal, *The Life of God in the Soul of Man* (Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle Publications).
4. Quoted in Donald Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, p.187.
5. Jerry Bridges, *The Practice of Godliness* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1983), p.43.
6. A.W. Tozer, *The Pursuit of God* (Camp Hill, PA: Christian Publications, Inc., 1982), p.75.
7. Bruce Olson as told to Susan DeVore Williams, "Bruce Olson's Nine-Month Colombian Captivity" (*Charisma and Christian Life*, November 1989).
8. A.W. Tozer, *The Pursuit of God*, p.82.
9. R.C. Sproul, *Knowing Scripture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1977).
10. John Piper, *Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Books, 1996), p.128.
11. Barna Research Group, *The Church Today: Insightful Statistics and Commentary* (Glendale, CA, 1990).