

Scripture Meditation: Let the Bible Read You

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Oh, the joys of those who...delight in the law of the Lord, meditating on it day and night.

They are like trees planted along the riverbank, bearing fruit each season.

Their leaves never wither, and they prosper in all they do.

Psalm 1:1-3, New Living Translation



Meditation on scripture is an effective time-tested practice from which any Christian can benefit significantly in the pursuit and cultivation of *agape*. And, just as importantly, regular engagement in scripture meditation leads to a deeply personal and life-giving relationship with God.

There are many transformative possibilities residing in this simple practice:

- Discernment of the deep motives of our own hearts;
- Holding firm to the correct foundation for human existence, Christ himself;
- Finding the Spirit's specific direction regarding important life decisions;
- Awareness of God's vision for the impact our lives can have in the world; and
- Embodiment of God's purposes so that we might become a word from God spoken to others for their blessing.

I teach regularly on the topic of Christian Spiritual Formation, and lead my classes through a group exercise in scripture meditation utilizing a Benedictine practice called *lectio divina*. I return to a select set of passages over and over again, yet I never seeming to exhaust the resources of these texts for my personal life and growth. Every time, without exception, the Spirit speaks something new and fresh to me.

How to Meditate on Scripture

Meditation on scripture involves a different kind of interaction with the Bible than academic study. As you approach scripture, the idea is to *let God's Spirit read you*: to listen to God's ever-speaking voice as it resonates through scripture (Psalm 19).

It advances through four stages, which, for our purposes here, will be called *reading, listening, praying, and resting*.¹

Step 1: Read the Text

The practice of scripture meditation begins with the simple reading of a Bible passage. Choose a short passage: a whole chapter is generally too long; a single verse is probably too short. Choose a book in the Bible and read it through a small section at a time from beginning to end, each day picking up where you left off the day before. In the gospels or other narrative portions of scripture, you might read one story or a block of teaching. In the epistles, choose a paragraph that holds together and expresses one unit of thought. Most of the Psalms are of appropriate length for this kind of reading. If you find that a passage is yielding fruit for you, it can be productive to come back to it daily for a week or more.²

Once you have selected a passage, read it through multiple times. If your setting allows, begin by reading the passage aloud, or by mouthing the words silently as you read. This allows you to engage multiple senses in your encounter with the passage. It begins in the mind, forms in the mouth, is heard by the ears, and is taken in to the spirit.

The goal of this phase is familiarization, comprehension, and understanding. As you read, ask questions of the text and observe details. If the passage tells a story, allow your mind to picture what is happening. If it is conceptual, do your best to understand the concepts presented. Read the passage through multiple times, each time seeking enhanced clarity, greater understanding, and deeper spiritual engagement with the text.

Step 2: Listen for the Spirit

As you read, keep your ear tuned to the Spirit. Remember that this process is *not a preparation for preaching and teaching*, and it is *not about others* who are close to you in life—the goal is to *let the Bible read you*. Recognize that an inclination to apply the passage to others is a temptation and a distraction. Prayerfully bring *yourself* before God with scripture as a lens.³

As you continue reading the text, you may find that a particular word, phrase, sentence, or concept stands out from the rest—almost as if the Spirit were directing your attention there. In some traditions, this is called “quickenings.” I think of it as God’s highlighter. When this happens, allow your attention to zero in on the highlighted word or idea, and listen to the Spirit. What is it about this concept? How does it apply to circumstances or heart-attitudes you have brought with you into the experience? You will find that God’s purpose in drawing your attention to a phrase or idea is easy to discern and is clear right away.

Step 3: Move to Prayer

¹ Gabriel O’Donnell, “Reading for Holiness: Lectio Divina,” in *Spiritual Traditions for the Contemporary Church*. ed. Robin Maas and Gabriel O’Donnell (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990), 48. In classical *lectio divina*, these stages are called *lectio, meditatio, oratio, and contemplatio*.

² Bonhoeffer, 90-91. “Whereas in our devotions we read long, consecutive passages, in our personal meditation we confine ourselves to a brief selected text, which possibly may not be changed for a whole week.”

³ Bonhoeffer, 91. “We do not ask what this text has to say to other people. For the preacher this means that he will not ask how he is going to preach or teach on this text, but what it is saying quite directly to him. It is true that to do this we must first have understood the content of the verse, but here we are not expounding it or preparing a sermon or conducting Bible study of any kind; we are rather waiting for God’s Word to us.”

Once you have a sense for the direction of your interaction with God, the next step is to press in to that conversation in earnest. As you move from *listening* to *praying*, your role becomes active. Begin questioning the text and the Spirit, exploring the height, width, depth, and breadth of the topic or issue the Spirit has brought to the fore.⁴ This should be done in a conversational rhythm, intermittently listening to God, and then articulating your own thoughts, questions, and even confusion. Open your journal and begin praying with your pen. Praying with your pen helps focus you, allows you take the conversation with God to a deeper level, and will prompt you to pray a wider range of expression to God—and it forms a permanent record to which you might return later. Do not shy away from expressing your feelings to God—even the ones that you fear may not meet with God’s approval. Do not practice false piety here. If you are angry with God—tell God that you are angry, and why you are angry, and express the intensity of your anger! Remember that God knows your thoughts and understands them better than you do! Express the honest emotions of your heart in complete transparency. Keep praying until you have said all you need to say, and have received all that you need to hear from God. Some traditions call this “praying through.” There is great benefit in following the conversation through to completion.

Step 4: Rest in God’s Presence

This next phase is a kind of prayer, as well, though it is not prayer expressed in words. In the *resting* phase, your prayer becomes a “basking” in the presence of God with an attitude of thankful love—a dwelling in the spacious presence of the Spirit of God, allowing the peace and joy of that presence to infuse the entirety of your inner being. The fourth-century Christian leader John Cassian describes this experience in a way that resonates considerably with present-day experience: “The soul, bathed in light from above, makes no more use of human language, which is ever inadequate. Instead, something rises up in it, like a superabundant spring, which overflows from prayer and goes up towards God, in a way beyond all telling.”⁵

Rest in this space and enjoy! Take time to love on God and allow God to love on you. Before you leave this space, consider taking up your pen again to write an expression of thanks and love to God in your journal.

An Exercise in Scripture Meditation: John 5:2-9a

Prelude 1: Prepare a Place

Find a time and place to pray that is free from distractions, and that is comfortable for productive prayer. Dim the lights, turn off electronics, and remove all items other than a Bible, a journal, and a pen.

Prelude 2: Center Down

After opening the Bible to John 5:2-9a, begin the whole process by setting your heart and mind on God who is present in the person of the Holy Spirit. Breathe out the cares of the day, submitting them to God, and breathe in the fact of His presence. Wait in silence, refraining from worded prayer, until your spirit begins to connect with God’s Spirit (1 Corinthians 2:9-13).

⁴ Ruth Haley Barton, *Sacred Rhythms: Arranging Our Lives for Spiritual Transformation* (Downers Grove: IVP Books, 2006), 51. “How do I feel about what is being said? Where do I find myself resonating deeply? Where do I find myself resisting, pulling back, wrestling with what scripture might be saying?... Why do I feel this way? What aspect of my life or my inner being is being touched or spoken to through this scripture? What do my reactions tell me about myself—my attitudes, my relating patterns, my perspectives, my behaviors? Am I willing to look at that in God’s presence?”

⁵ Mayeul de Druille, O.S.B. *The Rule of St. Benedict: A Commentary in Light of World Ascetic Traditions* (New York: The Newman Press, 2000), 148.

Step 1: Read the Text

Read the passage aloud multiple times. Do this with your spiritual ear directed to the Lord's spirit. On the first time through, read for understanding and clarity. On the second and third times, expect that the Spirit will draw your attention to a sentence, phrase, or word, as if it has been highlighted just for you. Narrow your focus to that sentence or those words and ask the Spirit to clarify why He has directed you here.

Step 2: Listen for the Spirit

Use worded prayer to express your responses to the Spirit and to ask for greater clarity. Let the Bible read you. Submit yourself before the Word of God, under the authority of the Father, focused on the voice of the Spirit.

Step 3: Move to Prayer

Pray through to the end. Keep praying until you have nothing left to say to God and until you have heard all that the Spirit would speak to you. Pray with your pen, writing in your journal any thoughts, insights, or responses to the Spirit's voice. Articulate the essence of your prayer in seven sentences.

Step 4: Rest in God's Presence

Move to the prayer that is beyond words, enjoying the Lord's presence in an attitude of thankfulness, resting in God's love. Lift your face toward heaven and let your smile open up to Him—or let your tears pour out. Be genuine and know that you belong to God in the fullness of your being. Don't hurry this phase; enjoy it. Pray with your pen again, summing up with a seven-sentence expression of thanks and love to God.

Postlude 1: Reflect with Others

Find a trusted Christian friend and set a time to meet and process your scripture meditation. Make sure the friend knows your intention. Meet at a time and place where you can speak freely and won't be interrupted. Present yourself with humility and ask for candor and honesty.

Postlude 2: Put Feet to It

Return to your journal and compose a ten-sentence prayer describing and affirming your intended course of action. How do you expect to change your way of being in the world? Be careful about over-promising. Allow God's grace to break into this moment. Affirm your openness to the Spirit's work of cleansing and transformation, realizing that God is the one who empowers real change in a Christian's life.