

# Meditation: Not So Mysterious

Two ways to move Scripture off the page and into your life

by Jan Johnson

Ever get sick and tired of old habits that won't go away? You find yourself whining when you should be grateful. You trash someone in your mind when you should care about his needs. You feel lazy when there are so many exciting things to do. What does it take to have the heart of Christ, to obey the commands that seem so difficult?

Trying to be good doesn't work because such efforts are about us, not about Christ. What works better is connecting with God in deeper ways that allow God to "[work] in you to will and to act according to his good purpose" (Phil. 2:13).

One important—but overlooked—way to connect with God is meditating on Scripture. Joshua wrote: "Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it" (Josh. 1:8). As we invite God to move beyond the door of our inner being by meditating on Scripture, He works miraculous heart changes within us that lead to a more Christlike life.

The psalmists valued meditation; they mentioned it 16 times in Psalms. By inserting the word *selah* 71 times in Psalms, they encouraged resting in and reflecting on the Word. Though *selah* is sometimes dismissed as a mere musical notation, most commentators agree that it was used at points where the singer or psalm reader should pause to reflect.

But reflect on what? The objects of meditation include aspects of God's character (such as God's unfailing love, see Ps. 48:9), God's works (see Ps. 77:12), and God's precepts and ways (see Ps. 119:15). Beyond that, we are given little instruction. That's why I wasn't sure what to do in my early attempts to meditate. I turned to classic Christian writers for help. Just as there are many ways to pray and study Scripture, Christians throughout the ages have found many ways to meditate. Those who've gone before me have helped me connect with God in ways that have surprised me. Let's look at two specific approaches to meditation.

## Spiritual Exercises

One of the best-known ways to ponder God's character, works, and ways is a format originated by Ignatius Loyola, founder of the Jesuits. Loyola's methods, recorded in his book *Spiritual Exercises*, have been used for hundreds of years. He urged people to enter into Scripture with all five senses: sight, hearing, taste, touch, and smell.

If this idea startles you (as it did me), consider A. W. Tozer's words:

The same terms are used to express the knowledge of God as are used to express knowledge of physical things. "O taste and see that the Lord is good" (Ps. 34:8). "All the garments smell of myrrh and aloes and cassia, out of ivory palaces" (Ps. 45:8). "My sheep

hear my voice" (Jn. 10:27). "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God" (Mt. 5:8) . . . What can all this mean except that we have in our hearts organs by means of which we can know God as certainly as we know material things through our familiar five senses?

Using the five senses allows you to experience the text in a fresh way. For example, as you enter into the text of Mk. 10:17-22, you may take the role of the rich young ruler and see what he saw. In verse 21, Jesus "looked at him and loved him," then immediately challenged him to give up what he apparently loved best: his wealth. Years ago, I began meditating on that passage. Ever since, I have regularly had a sense of God looking at me, loving me, and then challenging me to give up ingrained habits I hold close: self-centered thoughts, judgmental attitudes, the need to be right. When nothing else has been able to persuade me to relinquish such things, that picture of Jesus' loving yet challenging gaze has resurfaced, and I have quietly acquiesced.

As I meditate on a passage, I often ask myself, *What did the biblical scene look like?* At first, this was difficult. But then I decided to pretend I was Cecil B. DeMille creating a scene for a biblical epic such as *The Ten Commandments*. When I meditated on the transfiguration of Christ, I tried to imagine Jesus' radiance. This passage required that I bring in Steven Spielberg too adding the special effects of lightning-bright clothes. Then as I imagined the scene, I wondered (as a skilled movie director would), *What was Jesus doing when His appearance changed?* I peeked at the original script and found that Jesus was praying (Lk. 9:29). I immediately prostrated myself on the floor and said to God, "As I pray, change me, too. Make me the person You wish me to be."

Another meditation question I use is, *How would I have behaved if I'd been a disciple standing by?* As Jesus talked to Legion in that graveyard by the sea, how would I have responded to the screams of the demonized man and the smell of blood from his cut flesh (Mk. 5:5)? What would I have thought of my teacher, who was not intimidated by this naked, crazed man, but cared for him? Would I have wanted to run for the hills? Would I have gotten out of the boat to watch Jesus in action (which, according to the text, none of the disciples seems to have done)?

For meditation to work, you need to pay attention to the details of Scripture. Though this may seem similar to Bible study, meditation differs in technique. In Bible study, you dissect the text; in Scripture meditation, you savor it and enter into it. In Bible study, you ask questions about the text; in meditation, you let the text ask questions of you. In Bible study, you examine how biblical facts relate to each other; in meditation, you let God speak to you in light of the facts you've already considered. Meditation is about absorbing scriptural truth: seeing in our minds how God behaved in Scripture and being open to His leading to behave in the same way.

### **Lectio Divina**

As I tried to meditate on the discourse and poetic texts, such as the New Testament letters and Old Testament poets and prophets, I found that another classical method helped me: lectio divina. This kind of meditation has been used widely among believers since the

sixth century. *Lectio divina* consists of four parts: reading a passage, meditating on that passage, praying, and contemplating God. After the Scripture is read aloud, participants wait for a word, phrase, or image from the passage to emerge and stay with them. From this phrase or image, the participant asks, *What does this passage say to me right now?* (Bible study before meditating is important preparatory work because it asks, What did the passage say to listeners then? This keeps us from coming up with absurd answers to this question.)

Once while meditating on Mt. 11:20-30 (10 verses or fewer work best for *lectio divina*), I was struck by the word *weary*. I pondered that word for a while and began picturing weary people who needed Jesus for their rest. I was so grateful that Jesus was there for the weary. I read the passage aloud again, and this time I noticed the word *gentle*. I spent some time thinking about how much weary people need gentle people.

A few weeks later I found myself at a school reunion. I don't know why, but everybody there irritated me. I listened to the women at the next table yak endlessly, and I thought terrible things about them, such as, *No wonder they couldn't stay married!* At the same time, I was highly aware of my own judgmental attitude. I became so sick of myself that I got away and asked God to help me with this harshness. "Make me gentle," I prayed. The words of Mt. 11:28 immediately came to mind: "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest." I pictured one of the women who had annoyed me and prayed, "O God, she is weary and burdened. Give her rest. Help her come to You."

I did that with a few others until I felt strong enough to return to the gathering. In the midst of parties and sight-seeing, I kept praying Mt. 11:28 for each person I met. My attitude changed completely. I felt merciful and genuine in my heart and started having fun! I would never have prayed this way if I hadn't spent time with Jesus meditating on that passage.

### **Danger Ahead?**

Some evangelical Christians are wary of meditation because it's practiced in other religions. But it's important to remember that Christians do not meditate the same way that practitioners of Eastern religions do. The goals are different. In Eastern religions, participants empty their minds and fill them with nothing. In Christianity, we seek to surrender our hurried to-do lists, our worry about today's appointments, and our obsession with what others think of us and focus instead upon the words and images of Scripture.

Other Christians object to using the imagination in meditation. But since I read Richard Foster's words about "sanctifying the imagination" many years ago, I've asked God to purify my imagination along with my heart, mind, and will. Isn't it wiser to give the imagination to God to be retrained than to ignore it? If we don't, our imagination finds entertainment of its own and gets us into trouble. When activated by the images and truths of Scripture, the imagination supports the penetrating Word of God's ability to become active in our lives.

## Doing Nothing?

But what if you meditate and "nothing" happens? What if God doesn't confront you with a verse or you don't get a personal insight? That's normal.

My long years of meditating on Zeph. 3:17 have helped during these times: "The Lord your God . . . will take great delight in you . . . [and] will rejoice over you with singing." When I don't receive any fresh insights while meditating, I imagine God delighting in me and singing over me. As I've tried to picture this scene, I remember how I used to rock my children and sing all three verses of "Great Is Thy Faithfulness" until they fell asleep. (A friend of mine pictures God as a father standing on the sidelines of a soccer game and cheering whether or not he makes a goal.) These quiet "nothing" moments of meditation are valuable because we can enjoy the company of God without yammering about our 455 prayer requests. To simply enjoy God's presence is a delightful thing.

Over the years, I've noticed that meditation often results in "accidental obedience." I meditate on a passage, and without realizing it, I am "careful to do" God's will (Josh. 1:8). I meditate on Jesus challenging the rich young ruler, and I begin giving up obsessions. I meditate on Jesus' gentleness with the weary, and I am gentle with those around me. I meditate on being loved by God, and I am conscious of God's love in ways I haven't been before. This accidental obedience—or spiritual formation—works a lot better than trying hard to be good. This way, God comes into my soul and sits with me, teaching me to abide in Him.

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### About the author:

Jan Johnson is a writer and retreat speaker. As a trained spiritual director, she helps believers immerse themselves in God's Word. She also volunteers with a drop-in center for the homeless. Her book *Listening to God* (NavPress) includes 30 passages of Scripture and directions for meditating on them.

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