Reclaiming the Lost Art of Biblical Meditation

Find True Peace in Jesus

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“Meditation is a lost art today, and Christian people suffer grievously from their ignorance of the practice. Meditation is the activity of calling to mind, and thinking over, and dwelling on, and applying to oneself, the various things that one knows about the works and ways and purposes and promises of God. It is an activity of holy thought, consciously performed in the presence of God, under the eye of God, by the help of God, as a means of communion with God.”

J. I. Packer in Knowing God
INTRODUCTION

My eyes stay open through the watches of the night,
that I may meditate on your promises.

Psalm 119:148

Meditation is not new; it is not new age. God devised it, not the gurus; and it’s based on the Bible, not on Buddha. Biblical meditation is an antidote to the unprecedented stress of our age. In a world where everyone is overwhelmed and undervalued, our survival, sanity, and saintliness depend on reclaiming the lost art of biblical meditation. This habit can dramatically lessen your anxiety in life, reduce your stress, bring new success to your days, and leave you with ocean pools of inner peace. There are more than two hundred references to meditation, pondering, and thinking in the Bible encouraging us to engage our thoughts with his Word. In fact, His approach to mindfulness is having a mind full of His Word. That’s why the Bible says:

• “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly”—Colossians 3:16.¹
• “Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus”—Philippians 2:5.²
• “Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in Your sight”—Psalm 19:14.³

If you’re a bit allergic to meditation, get over it. Bible-lovers needn’t apologize for advocating meditation, for we have the model from heroes of the faith:

• In the age of the patriarchs, Isaac went out at dusk to meditate in the fields (Genesis 24:63).
• The Lord told Joshua about the Law of God: “Meditate on it day and night. . . . Then you will be prosperous and successful” (Joshua 1:7–8).
• The Psalmist pictured those who meditate day and night as fruitful trees by rivers of water (Psalm 1:2).
• Jeremiah said, “When your words came, I ate them; they were my joy and my heart’s delight” (Jeremiah 15:16).
• The Virgin Mary treasured God’s words and pondered them in her heart (Luke 2:19).
• Jesus advised His followers to “hear the word, accept it, meditate on it, act on it, and bear fruit” (Mark 4:20).⁴
• The apostle Paul told us to think about things that are true, noble, and gracious, and to meditate on those things (Philippians 4:8).⁵
• The writer of Hebrews told us to “fix our thoughts on Jesus” (Hebrews 3:1).

Yet whenever I bring up the subject of meditation some people look at me as if I’d suggested they jaywalk across a busy street. There’s a reason for the confusion. Meditation as it is commonly viewed is not biblical meditation. In recent years new agers have hijacked the habit, and I was actually there when it happened. One day in 1970 as I walked across the quadrangle of the college I attended in Bristol, Tennessee, I heard exciting news. Maharishi Mahesh Yogi was coming—or maybe he was sending someone—to teach us Transcendental Meditation. When the day came, we packed the room for the mysterious robed man, and he taught us a few rudimentary TM techniques. He told us to sit properly, breathe deeply, and empty our minds. While interesting, the swami lost me somewhere between karma and mantra, and I didn’t fall into Zen.

The next year I transferred to another school, Columbia International University, where I met a group of people who also extolled the value of meditation, but they viewed it differently, as a biblical habit. We should constantly memorize, visualize, and personalize God’s Word, they said. I studied the Navigator’s hand illustration. Getting a grip on God’s word requires the four fingers of hearing it, reading it, studying it, and memorizing it. But the thumb that strengthens the grip is meditation. Once we have a grip
on the Bible, our feet go into action, putting into practice what we’re learning.

Biblical meditation is spiritual growth, emotional strength, deepening intimacy with the Lord, and soul-steadying peace. It’s how we pause long enough to be still and know He is God.

There is healing and holy power in pondering, picturing and personalizing passages of Scripture from God’s Word. And that’s my simple definition for true meditation:

*Biblical meditation is the powerful practice of pondering, personalizing and practicing Scripture.*

It’s as simple as that. While there’s value in breathing exercises and relaxation techniques (I’ll touch on those later), biblical meditation is more than contemplating the sensation of air passing through the tip of our noses. It doesn’t involve draining our heads of content but filling our minds with specific Bible verses and passages God brings to our minds at certain times. That’s part of the ministry of the Holy Spirit, whose job is to remind us of everything Jesus has said to us (John 14:26).

Biblical meditation is *thinking* Scripture—not just *reading* Scripture or *studying* Scripture or even thinking *about* Scripture—but *thinking* Scripture, contemplating, visualizing, and personifying the precious truths God has given us. In the process, our minds become God-conditioned. We start looking at things as He does, which is
the essence of wisdom—seeing life from His point of view. Our attitudes become healthier and our emotions fall into line.⁶

It’s an easy habit to begin. It’s as portable as your brain, as available as your imagination, as near as your Bible, and the benefits are immediate. I’ve written this little book to give you some whys and hows about it, and to show you how meditation will draw you closer to the Lord and give you fresh insights into His ways, His will, and His Word.

Meditate on these things; give yourself entirely to them, that your progress may be evident to all.

1 Timothy 4:15⁷
WHY IS BIBLICAL MEDITATION IMPORTANT?

I call to remembrance my song in the night;
I meditate within my heart,
And my spirit makes diligent search.

Psalm 77:6

Harriet Tubman was a spy who, even in moments of extreme danger, evidenced nothing but raw, calm courage. Born into slavery in the 1820s, Harriet was nearly killed when her master hurled a metal object in her direction. She mounted a daring escape in 1849, then spent years rescuing hundreds out of slavery and leading them to safety. Her code name was Moses, because she never lost a single escapee. During the Civil War she became a secret agent for the Union Army, working behind enemy lines to scout...
out the territory. Despite a bounty on her head, she always seemed to know how to evade being caught.

A devout follower of Christ, she spent much time learning, memorizing, and meditating on various verses in the Bible, such as her beloved Isaiah 16:3: “Hide the fugitives, do not betray the refugees.” As she pondered her passages, she turned them into prayer; and in prayer she learned to practice God’s presence.

“I prayed all the time,” she told her biographer, “about my work, everywhere; I was always talking to the Lord. When I went to the horse trough to wash my face and took up the water in my hands, I said, ‘Oh, Lord, wash me, make me clean.’ When I took up the towel to wipe my face and hands, I cried, ‘Oh, Lord, for Jesus’ sake, wipe away all my sins!’ When I took up the broom and began to sweep, I groaned, ‘Oh, Lord, whatsoever sin there be in my heart, sweep it out, Lord, clear and clean.’”

In this way, Harriet forged a personality of action and audacity. She built a mindset that transcended her background and transformed her life. The same can be true for us. As we habitually hide God’s Word in our hearts, claim those special verses that seem to have our names on them, ponder and picture them and turn them into unceasing praise and prayer, we’ll practice the presence of God, and He will transform us into agents of audacity for His glory.

Let’s start with the basics. According to Romans 12:2, we are transformed by the renewing of our minds as God changes the way we think. That verse is part of a chain of texts in Romans that
provides a biblical basis for understanding the power of meditation. These verses explain what’s wrong with our minds, why we struggle with our thoughts, and how we can bring health and healing to our brainwaves and inner selves.

Without Christ Our Minds Are Dark Places

Imagine a university where the library was open only on moonless nights and all lights were prohibited. The students had access to the books, desks, and study carrels; but they had to pursue their studies in total blackness. Expensive volumes filled the reading rooms—some of them rare and valuable—and the students were free to move among the bookshelves and remove any resources they wanted. But everything was done in darkness—no lamps, no candles, no flashlights, no light of any kind. Total blackout.

That’s a picture of a world trying to learn, trying to think, and trying to meditate without the light of the life of Christ.

Referring to fallen humanity, Paul wrote: “Their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. . . . They exchanged the truth of God for a lie . . . . Furthermore, just as they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, so God gave them over to a depraved mind. . . . They have no understanding . . . .” (Romans 1:21, 25, 28, 31, emphasis mine). Without Christ our minds are dark as midnight.

The Bible says that apart from God’s grace in Christ, our
minds are corrupt (Titus 1:15); depraved (2 Timothy 3:8); anxious (Deuteronomy 28:65); cunning (Psalm 64:6); closed (Isaiah 44:18); warped (Proverbs 12:8); puffed up with idle notions by their unspiritual minds (Colossians 2:18), always learning but never able to come to a knowledge of the truth (2 Timothy 3:7). Every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart is only evil all the time (Genesis 6:5).

How can that be? The human brain is the greatest marvel of God’s creation—more complex than the largest star or the smallest atom. Like a finely-tuned engine, our brains are designed for only one fuel—Truth. The Truth that comes from God. The Truth that pervades His creation. The Truth found in His perfect character and infallible Word.