

Nurturing the Free Heart

I meditate on your precepts and consider your ways. I delight in your decrees.

Psalm 119:15–16

So far in this book, we’ve explored how to free your heart from guilt, bitterness, and anxiety and how to defend your heart from attacks by the enemy. To keep your heart healthy and free, however, requires another important commitment. You must also *nurture* your heart.

The body cannot survive without nourishment. Each of us needs food and water to sustain and strengthen us; no one is immune to this requirement. Your spiritual heart is just as dependent on spiritual nourishment, which is the everlasting Word of God. Your heart will not stay free unless you feed and care for it properly. Jesus tells us that “Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God” (Matthew 4:4).

Many of us as believers and followers of Christ go to church. A number of us spend time reading our Bibles. Some of us are involved in Bible studies or take the time to memorize Scripture. The result is that we have an intellectual understanding of Scripture and what God has said to us and done for us over the ages. Yet so often, it stops there. As Alexander Maclaren has written, “We are all so busy thinking about Christianity that we have lost our hold of Christ.”¹

It’s been said that the greatest distance in the world is the eighteen inches from your head to your heart. You may *ingest* the nourishment that is God’s Word, but if you don’t consistently *digest* it, you will eventually grow weak, and your heart will once again be vulnerable to the snares of the enemy.

We know that eating healthy food will nourish our bodies. How, then, should we nurture our hearts? The best way I know is through an oft-forgotten practice: meditation.

Meditation Roots

We live in a hurried and harried world. The twenty-first century offers instant coffee and instant messaging, telecommuting and teleconferencing, fast tracks and fast food. We're a people with too much to do and too little time to do it. I read a story that illustrates what's happening to many of us:

A friend was running around the kitchen with her cell phone in hand, trying to heat leftovers in the microwave to eat in the car on the way to a meeting she was already late for. Her home phone rang, and the answering machine started blaring, just as she was dialing her cell phone to tell the people she was meeting she was running late. The only problem was that instead of dialing the number on the phone in her hand, she had punched it into the microwave keypad!²

In this pell-mell environment, if we stop for more than a few moments to think about something, we feel guilty since we're not "accomplishing" anything. To many people, the idea of meditation sounds old-fashioned and a waste of time.

Others see meditation as unbiblical. It reminds them of Hindu mantras or New Age techniques. In truth, however, Bible-style meditation is a time-honored method of study and worship. God's people have always been instructed to reflect on His commands: "Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night" (Joshua 1:8). It is a practice that is more than drudgery or duty. It should bring us joy: "[A man's] delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night" (Psalm 1:2).

Many people confuse meditation with memorization. There is certainly value in committing Scripture to memory. It is a way of planting Scripture in our minds that can be recalled and used for enlightenment or encouragement on a moment's notice. But those "memory roots" do not go very deep. A sudden hardship—a "storm"—may render them ineffective and wash those roots away. Meditation is a process that enables

Scripture to take root not only in our minds, but also in our hearts. By taking the time to understand and incorporate God's Word throughout our being, we are nourishing our heart. These "meditation roots" reach down so far that they will never be removed. They become powerful and effective.

Andrew Murray has written:

"I am convinced that one chief cause why some do not grow more in grace is that they do not take time to hold converse with the Lord in secret. Spiritual, divine truth does not thus become our possession at once. Although I understand what I read, although I consent heartily to it, although I receive it, it may speedily fade away and be forgotten, unless by private meditation I give it time to become fixed and rooted in me, to become united and identified with me."³

Meditation is an effective way to avoid the disconnect between a head full of Scripture and a heart full of sin. The Pharisees knew the facts of Scripture and were experts in doctrine, yet all their study of the Old Testament didn't change their lives. They still oppressed the poor, defrauded widows, and pursued shady business practices (Matthew 23:1–36). There was no heart application.

Author and theology professor Howard Hendricks has observed, "You can get mentally excited by the truth, yet fail to be morally changed by it."⁴ Meditation is the plow that breaks up the fallow ground (Jeremiah 4:3; Hosea 10:12). It enables you to rebuild your thought structures, refocus your emotions, and redirect your will. It removes the old thinking and attitudes and replaces them with God's truth.

Years ago, I got a lesson on the power of meditation from a member of my first congregation, in a small church in Carver, Oregon. There was a woman there we all called "Grandma Hoyt." She was the portrait of everyone's grandmother: gray hair, glasses, a little plump, and the sweetest smile and personality this side of the Rocky Mountains. I sensed that she and the Lord had a special relationship. I had the feeling nothing could faze her.

One Sunday I challenged my congregation to choose a verse they were already very familiar with and meditate on it each day for the following week. I didn't know who would take up my challenge or what the impact would be, but I believed there had to be someone who would benefit from an encounter with meditation. To my surprise, right after the next Sunday service, Grandma Hoyt jostled past the other worshipers to greet me at the front of the sanctuary. Her smile was extra bright that morning.

"You know, Pastor," she said, "when I was a young girl, we always concluded our Sunday school classes by reciting Psalm 19:14 together: 'May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O LORD, my Rock and my Redeemer.' Every Sunday it was the same thing. But this week, I did what you said. I took that verse I'd said hundreds of times and began to think about it and pray over it and meditate on it."

Grandma Hoyt took a breath. There was a twinkle in her eye.

"Pastor, it was the most amazing thing," she said. "The last few days, whenever I was tempted to say something negative or complain or gossip, I'd remember 'May the words of my mouth' and be checked immediately in my spirit. It happened every time. That Word had gotten down into my heart."

That is the goal for each of us—for "that Word" to get down into our hearts and change our lives.

Let's explore in more detail how it can happen.

What Is Meditation?

Let's start with a definition of meditation that we can agree on. A dictionary definition might read this way: a form of private devotion consisting of deep, continued reflection on some religious theme. Andrew Murray has described meditation as "Holding the Word of God in your heart until it has affected every phase of your life,"⁵ while J. I. Packer has written, "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."⁶

There's a far more earthy way to explain meditation—it's a process by which you chew on the Word of God as a cow chews the cud. I don't know if cows actually meditate, but they certainly have the time and the disposition for it!

However we describe it, meditation is a process that involves wrestling with the message of a section of the Bible. It means to accept it, as Scripture says, "not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is at work in you who believe" (1 Thessalonians 2:13). It must be real and come from the heart. It is encountering the Lord in order to be searched thoroughly, guided specifically, and strengthened internally.

Meditation should lead us to reflect on four amazing aspects of God—His Word, His works, His wonders, and who He is. Reading through the Psalms is an excellent way to prepare your heart for meditation on His Word: "I lift up my hands to your commands, which I love, and I meditate on your decrees" (Psalm 119:48).

Psalm 77 reminds us of both the mighty works and the wonders of our Lord: "I will meditate on all your works and consider all your mighty deeds. Your ways, O God, are holy. What god is so great as our God? You are the God who performs miracles; you display your power among the peoples" (v. 12–14). We should consider His handiwork in creation, throughout history, and in our personal experience.

The Word, works, and wonders of God are designed to lead us to a deeper contemplation of and desire for Him. We begin to see that only He can nourish our hearts: "O God, you are my God, earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you, my body longs for you" (Psalm 63:1).

After reading this, you may feel you understand what meditation is and its purpose. You may feel prepared for it. But what does it mean, in practical terms, to meditate? How do you do it? It's not as daunting as it sounds. Believe me, if you know how to worry, you know how to meditate!

The most important step is committing to making meditation a priority in your life. Find a quiet time and place to focus on God's Word. It might be your bedroom when you first get up or when you go to bed. It might be your office. It might be in your car at lunchtime or at a nearby coffee shop. The main thing is to find a comfortable place away

from distractions where you can reflect on your life and what God has to teach you. Bring a Bible, a pen or pencil, and a notebook. Take a deep breath and clear your mind of other concerns. This is a time for just you and the Lord. Begin with a prayer and invite Him to speak to you.

Now you're ready. Here are a few more steps to help you get going.

1. Identify an area of your life that is a struggle. We've already talked about guilt, bitterness, and worry. Is it one of these? If so, you may want to review that chapter. Are there other problem areas? Be honest with yourself about what you're dealing with today.

2. Select a relevant section of Scripture that speaks to the issue. For example:

Guilt—Romans 8:1

Bitterness—Ephesians 4:29–32

Worry—Philippians 4:6–7

Lust—1 Thessalonians 4:1–8

Temptation—1 Corinthians 10:13

Fear—2 Timothy 1:7; Isaiah 41:10

Impatience—Isaiah 64:4

Jealousy—Galatians 5:19–20

Discouragement—Psalm 42:11

Gossip—Psalm 19:14; 141:13; Ephesians 4:29

Irritability—Philippians 4:4

Anger—Ephesians 4:31–32

Greed—Matthew 6:19–21

Loveless—1 Corinthians 13

Pride—1 Peter 5:6

3. Memorize the section of Scripture selected.

4. Pray to the Lord for illumination. What does this Scripture mean for your life? What is God saying to you?

5. Analyze by asking some key questions.

Is there a promise to claim?

Is there a command to obey?

Is there a sin to avoid?

Is there an example to follow?

Is there a prayer to repeat?

Is there a condition to meet?

Is there an error to note?

Is there a challenge to face?

Is there a truth about God, Christ, or the Holy Spirit to consider?

Is there a habit I ought to begin?

6. Personalize the text. Say it or write it out, inserting personal pronouns and your name.

7. Define key words and rewrite the text in your own words.

8. Visualize the text becoming real in your life. Get a clear picture of what God is about to do through your willingness to meditate.

Not so long ago, I was reminded of the power of godly meditation. There was a man who was making life difficult for me. He opposed me in every way possible. I'm not proud to say that I developed a bitter attitude toward him—I wanted nothing to do with the guy.

When I realized that I was full of bitterness, I knew that I had to do something about it. I knew that bitterness was wrong, that it would poison me and all my relationships. I had preached on it many times! But now I had to let that truth sink deep inside me. I had to nurture my heart.

Somewhat reluctantly, I turned to a few of the steps above. I looked up Ephesians 4:29–32, which includes the words “Get rid of all bitterness...Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.” I wrote the passage down on a three-by-five-inch card and stuck the card in my shirt pocket at the start of each day. Beginning with my morning prayer time and continuing during break times throughout the day, I pulled out that card and reflected on each phrase in the passage. As the days passed into weeks, I felt the Holy Spirit working on me. Like water running down a shower drain, I sensed my bitterness draining away.

The day came where I had to meet my “tormentor” and another man for breakfast. To my pleasant surprise, our time was cordial and I felt no anger or bitterness toward him. Thanks to my encounter through meditation with the Holy Spirit, my heart was free.

There is no precise formula for effective meditation. Anything that enables you to hear God’s voice and incorporate His Word and teaching into your life is a move in the right direction. He is the master gardener. When you are connecting in this way with the Lord, you will always find Him nurturing your heart.

Ignite the Fire

Meditation is much more than a quiet intellectual activity. It is an active search for God that will ignite a life-transforming fire. This purifying fire will burn away the worries and sins of your old life. What will remain is a heart full of joy, strength, and respect for God’s Word: “‘Is not my word like fire,’ declares the LORD, ‘and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?’” (Jeremiah 23:29).

I can say with confidence that blessing, power, and prosperity in your spiritual life and service will be in measure and in direct proportion to your commitment to meditation on the Word of God. We are told in Scripture, “Meditate on [the Book of the Law] day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful” (Joshua 1:8); and “Blessed is the man who...on his law meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers” (Psalm 1:1–3).

Meditation leads to spiritual strength. It brings us vitality, stability, and victory. It fills our hearts with joy and yields “fruit in season.” It creates a momentum of its own: the more we reflect on God, the more our heart hungers for Him.

Yet if we are not careful, this lifeline to the Lord can be damaged or severed completely. As David F. Wells has written, “The desire for God does not appear overnight like the desert bloom. It is, like all life, fragile in its infancy. Like a newborn child it has to be carefully tended, nourished, and trained.”⁷

There is that word again: *nourished*. There is nothing quite like the free and untroubled heart. It reveals a vibrant and deeply satisfying relationship with God. So nourish that relationship. Cultivate it. Protect it from the entanglements that can strangle your lifeline. It will keep your heart free. And it will enable you to delight in a moment-by-moment encounter with the living Lord.

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A Thought to Remember

Meditation is the most effective way to avoid the disconnect between a head full of Scripture and a heart full of sin.

A Verse to Review

“But his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers.” Psalm 1:2–3

A Question for Reflection

What specific Scripture will you move from your head to your heart?