

Biblical Meditation



Peter Dodd

Meditation

What is the meaning of Meditation in a Biblical context?

For most, meditation brings the Eastern idea of emptying one's mind and letting the topic do its work in the inner recesses of your mind. It inevitably brings to mind the image of a Buddhist monk sitting cross-legged going, "Ommmmmmmm" or a New-Age hipster sitting in the Lotus position in front of a candle.

But to really understand meditation, we need to understand first what it is for. In the “foreword” of King Solomon’s collection of proverbs, he wrote,

- 1) The proverbs of Solomon, son of David, king of Israel:
- 2) To know wisdom and instruction, to understand words of insight,
- 3) to receive instruction in wise dealing, in righteousness, justice, and equity;
- 4) to give prudence to the simple, knowledge and discretion to the youth—
- 5) Let the wise hear and increase in learning, and the one who understands obtain guidance,
- 6) to understand a proverb and a saying, the words of the wise and their riddles.
- 7) The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction.

Proverbs

1:1-7 ESV

The proverbs of Solomon, and indeed all of scripture are there to provide us with wisdom and understanding on how to receive instruction on wise dealings, righteousness, and justice etc. These do not happen automatically from reading; the instruction must be acted upon. But before that can happen, they must be fully understood, and the meaning and application worked out.

If I were to ask what is the first scripture you think of when speaking of meditation, perhaps most people would go to Psalm 1.

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Psa 1:1-6 ESV

- 1) Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers;
- 2) but his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night.
- 3) He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers.
- 4) The wicked are not so, but are like chaff that the wind drives away.
- 5) Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous;
- 6) for the LORD knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.

The man who is blessed by the Lord is distinguished by the fact that he delights in the law of the Lord, and is constantly meditating upon it. But what does it mean, to delight in the law of the Lord?

The *International Standard Version* interprets it slightly differently:

Psa 1:2 But he delights in the LORD's instruction, and meditates in his instruction day and night.

Let's get a few Hebrew definitions out of the way first, so that we can understand what David meant.

'Esher: *Blessed*, The recipient of God's favour, resulting in happiness or joy

Chêphets: *Delight*, Take pleasure, to find valuable, desire

Torah: *Law*, Precepts, direction, instruction

Hagah: Murmur, mutter, *ponder*, muse

This is not to be confused with

Hagig: Murmur, *complain*, brood or sulk, contemplate one's suffering.

Note: This is only used twice, in Psalm 5:1, and Psalm 39:3

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❗ One could say therefore that the man who finds God's instruction valuable and takes pleasure in it, continually contemplating its meaning and pondering and musing on the application of those instructions will be the recipient of God's favour, resulting in great happiness

Let's look a little deeper at what this looks like.

❓ Why should we be delighted in God's instruction?

- God has not left us to our own devices, expecting us to try to please Him without knowing Him. He has given us His Word- the scriptures, so that we can know Him. This means we matter. God cares enough that he left us with a collection of writings about Him by people who had known Him personally, and people who had dealings with Him, so that we can learn from them, and better develop our relationship with Him ourselves.
- He is a happy man who does not have to search for direction, but has it already hidden within his heart in the form of scripture – MacArthur (c.f. Psalm 119:11)

❓ What would meditating on God's instruction look like in practice?

James 1:22-26

22) But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.

23) For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror.

24) For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like.

25) But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing.

26) If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless.

Once more we see that like a mirror, the law- God's instruction, tells us what needs to be done. We still need to take action, but first we need to look intently into that mirror of the law to ensure we know what it looks like, understand it, and know how to apply it in our own lives and context.

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❗ To meditate on the Word of God therefore must mean to fully engage the mind, not to empty it. It cannot mean to just hear it and give it intellectual assent – it must mean to hear it and contemplate the meaning, weighing up the implications, considering the actions.

Charles Spurgeon cited his own pastor:

“Meditation chews the cud, and gets the sweetness and nutritive virtue of the Word into the heart and life: this is the way the godly bring forth much fruit.”

Meditation does not even depend on how you do it. To quote Spurgeon again:

“Many lack because they only read and do not meditate. It is not only reading that does us good; but the soul inwardly feeding on it, and digesting it. A preacher once told me that he had read the Bible through twenty times on his knees and had never found the doctrine of election there. Very likely not. It is a most uncomfortable position in which to read. If he had sat in an easy chair he would have been better able to understand it.”

❗ Some may argue that it is good to teach ourselves self discipline, so that one may concentrate when one does need to meditate. Self-discipline is not a bad thing, but it should not take the place of study. We need the discipline so that we can study without distraction . c.f. 1Timothy 4:8.

Within the Torah itself – the law, we read God’s commands:

18) “You shall therefore lay up these words of mine in your heart and in your soul, and you shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes.

19) You shall teach them to your children, talking of them when you are sitting in your house, and when you are walking by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise.

20) You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates,

21) that your days and the days of your children may be multiplied in the land that the LORD swore to your fathers to give them, as long as the heavens are above the earth.

Deuteronomy 11:18-

25 ESV

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The words of God were to be symbolically bound upon the wrist and forehead and evidenced in everything we do and everything we think about. The time to talk about the instructions from God is morning and evening, in the house, and on the street. They were to be a reminder as you come in and go out.

But it is not just the law (*Torah*) that we can look to.

Psa 77:11 I will remember the deeds of the LORD; yes, I will remember your wonders of old.

Psa 77:12 I will ponder all your work, and meditate on your mighty deeds.

In Genesis 28, Jacob set up a stone as a reminder of God's promise to him. A physical reminder of God's grace to Him.

When Israel crossed the Jordan in Joshua 4, they placed a pile of rocks as a memorial to God's grace and mercy by the riverbank as a reminder to later generations.

In Joshua 24, when the people and Elders of Israel promised to serve God alone, they set up a pile of stones as a reminder and witness of their promise to God.

A physical reminder does not have to be a pile of stones, or even a few symbolic words from a famous passage in a box tied to our forehead and wrist. The scriptures themselves were written for a reason:

I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you *may know* that you have eternal life.

1John 5:13 ESV

So, how will we, or anyone else be saved if we do not hear the Word of God, and understand it?

Rom 10:13-15 NIV

13) for, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."

14) How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?

15) And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!"

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Look at verse 17:

17) Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard *through* the word of Christ.

Faith and Salvation do not come simply by hearing the message, - we all have free wills. We all know people who have heard the Gospel message and not done anything about it. But it is heard *through* the word of Christ, as one has the Gospel explained to them and goes on to consider what it means. We need to ensure then that we know and understand what we read in scripture.

❓ Can we explain the Gospel to someone who asks?

We can only give what we have. We get it from scripture.

There are several examples of meditation in the scripture – we just don't recognise it as such very often.

An example of a meditation on the Works of God is Psalm 8. Please read this through before continuing.

Verse 3 is the key: “When I see Your heavens...” is translated “When I *consider* the heavens...” in some translations.

The Hebrew word רָאָה ‘Raw’aw’ means to observe, consider or contemplate, or even to make something visible.

Here we see David's thought process:

- God is not unknowable, but He is capable of being known personally
- His Glory, majesty and splendour are beyond our grasp
- In spite of those who hate God and what He stands for, even naïve children know how great God is, and will tell other people about it
- How powerful must God be to create the Earth and the Heavens?

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- What is Man, compared to God's creation?
- Why should God care for us?
- In spite of our status as created beings, we are honoured as only slightly lower than other Heavenly beings.
- Yet we wield God's dominion over this earth
- The animals, birds and fish are subject to us
- All this points to the glory and majesty of God. (Remembering that '*Name*' is equivalent to *reputation* in Hebrew thought.)

David has looked at the evidence before him and considered what that reveals about Man in the context of God's universe. Where does Man fit in? Ultimately, what does that in turn say about God, Man's Creator?

So, how do we meditate? The idea seems to imply not just a study of what it says and means, but a contemplation and consideration of what it means for us in our context (Prov 4:20-27). Let me stress, while it is somewhat subjective, it is still grounded in the reality of what it says. In other words, it is asking, "What does this mean *for me*?" NOT "What does this mean *to me*?" ('How does this affect me?' not 'How do I understand it?')

So, in simple terms, we need to ensure we know and understand what we are hearing or reading. Once we know that, and are convinced that we understand it correctly, we can look at what it actually means. Once we have grasped the meaning of what it is trying to tell us, we can consider how that can apply in our own lives. Why is that important? Because we are firstly responsible to God for our own spiritual well-being and conduct: "Remove the plank from your own eye before the speck in your brothers'."

But all of this requires thought, contemplation and careful consideration. And that is the process of meditation. And meditation is a form of worship, giving God the honour due to Him.

Proverbs 4:20-27

What is Biblical Meditation?

Blessed is the man whos' ... delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night. Psalm 1.

What is meditation from a Biblical viewpoint? Far from emptying the mind, it must be to fill the mind with instruction and insight from God's Word and actions. But what does that look like? This is a short work for personal or group study.



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