

The Role of Scripture Meditation in our Sanctification

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INTRODUCTION: The Puritans were strong where we are weak. This becomes apparent when assessing modern Christianity from a doctrinal perspective, for we find that evangelicals do not practice “theology applied”—instead they practice pragmatism. In contrast to this, the Puritans embraced a thorough-going anthropology—that is human nature known by the Bible. As a result they understood that the disease of sin can only be cured (by sanctification) when we deal with root drives—the deepest motives of the heart. These motives must be brought in line with God’s will otherwise we are left with merely an external Christianity (Kenneth L. Roth, *The Cure of Souls in the Thought of Richard Baxter*, ThM Thesis, RTS, Jackson, MS, 1995, pp. 1-7).

The true Christian makes holy living his main business in life. He is zealous for good works (Titus 2:14). He runs to win the prize (1 Cor 9:24). He wears the armor of God (Eph 6:13-17). He is diligent (Heb 6:11-12). He keeps believing despite the various problems he meets, knowing that God allows the problems in order to refine the believer and to test the reality of his faith. Blessed is the man who endures amidst temptation and trial (James 1:12). The faithful will receive the crown of life (Rev 2:10) (Jonathan Edwards, *The Experience that Counts*, Grace Publications, 1991, pp. 111-112).

I. Meditation gives us an intimate knowledge of God’s ways.

A. We cannot please God or order our way aright unless we know God’s ways. “Now therefore, I pray Thee, if I have found favor in Thy sight, let me know Thy ways, that I may know Thee, so that I may find favor in Thy sight” (Ex 33:13; Ps 25:4).

B. We must know God’s ways or we are certain to misinterpret His providence. The nation of Israel misinterpreted God’s providence and it cost them dearly (1 Cor 10:1-13; Heb 3:7-4:7). Israel went astray in their heart—they did not know God’s ways. As a consequence they provoked God by their rebellion and unbelief (Heb 3:10; Ps 95:8-11).

In order to prevent this kind of rebellion against the Lord, the true believer studies God’s ways that he might please God by responding properly to His providence. “The Christian heart is thoroughly persuaded that all things happen by God’s plan—all things for good and for the salvation of His elect who love Him” (John Calvin).

God’s ways are not our ways; His ways are not measurable by us (Is 55:8-9). If we lean on our own understanding, we will surely misinterpret His providence in our lives (Prov 3:5-6). Let us consider just how different God’s ways are from our ways:

He blesses through loss; sends power in our acute weakness; brings joy out of sorrow and radical faith out of confusion. He brings hope out of disappointment; fruitfulness out of close pruning; righteousness out of chastisement; trust out of delays and deprivation; exaltation out of humbling; submission out of scourging; sweet surrender out of affliction. We distance ourselves from those who consistently disappoint us; but God is longsuffering—He is the God of 10,000 times 10,000 restorations and endless installments of grace to His people (Ps 23:3).

C. Meditation prepares us to respond rightly to the twists and turns and ruts and roadblocks of life.

This is true because when our heart embraces the knowledge of God’s providence in our lives, it produces deep gratitude and thanksgiving. Joy is the outcome of knowing that God is our Protector and Defender and that His work will benefit our welfare (Ps 118:6; 56:4). In God’s

works of providence, His boundless wisdom and His infinite power are united. This makes God utterly trustworthy. This is the great reason we may have “all joy” amidst our trials (James 1:2).

BUT, we will only recognize God’s wisdom toward us if we know the end toward which God is working in our lives: “Also we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will, to the end that we who were the first to hope in Christ should be to the praise of His glory” (Eph 1:11-12). This is His purpose and goal: God intends that His children be eternal trophies of His grace. We are to rejoice that He set His love upon us from all eternity. What God is putting us through is inseparable from the perfect goal that is in His hands. We are to know that God is working toward a perfect end that will bring endless joy to God and to us. The more we feed our faith on these truths; the deeper our confidence will be that He knows what He is doing (2 Thess 2:14-15).

The promise in Romans 8:28-30 that ‘God is working all things together for the good of those who love Him’ is a comprehensive statement about divine providence. Christians get in trouble when they assume that God’s love will guarantee them a trouble-free life. This is not what Christ told His disciples. When Jesus spoke of the gift of divine love and joy in John chapters fifteen and sixteen, He states that in the world we will have tribulation (Jn 16:33).

We are to expect affliction, hardships, and tribulation—expect to be misunderstood and persecuted—count on it. Jesus even indicates that if we do not anticipate these tribulations; then we are likely to stumble (Jn 16:1). One theologian startled his seminary students by declaring,

Men, the litmus test to find out your actual theology is the doctrine of God’s providence by which you operate. Your true theology is revealed in your approach to divine providence, for in your response to God’s providence your actual convictions about omnipotence, omnipresence, and omniscience are made manifestly clear.

II. Meditation helps us order our lives so that they are pleasing to God.

A. Why do we meditate upon Scripture? We do so in order to learn what pleases God. There are a number of N.T. texts which open up this intent: “Therefore also we have as our ambition, whether at home or absent, **to be pleasing to Him**” (2 Cor 5:9). “For you were formerly darkness, but now you are light in the Lord; walk as children of light for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness and righteousness and truth, **trying to learn what is pleasing to the Lord**” (Eph 5:8-10). “For this reason also, since the day we heard of it, we have not ceased to pray for you and to ask that you may be **filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you may walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God strengthened with all power, according to His glorious might for the attaining of all steadfastness and patience; joyously**” (Col 1:9-11).

For our good and for His glory, God demands obedient people. Keeping; observing; and practicing His commandments is to be our life direction as His children. “You are not your own; for you have been bought with a price, therefore glorify God in your body” (1 Cor 6:19a-20). Psalm 119 records the lifestyle of the believer who meditates upon God’s precepts (Ps 119:15, 23, 27, **48**, 78, 97, 99, 148). “And I shall lift up my hands to Thy commandments, which I love; and I will meditate on Thy statutes” (v. 48).

B. Guidelines for meditating upon a precept or commandment of God. As an example, consider the verse, “Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time” (1 Pet 5:6). First, before meditating on the verse it is important to study the verses

immediately surrounding the text—the verses situated just before and after verse six provide the context necessary for accurate interpretation. By studying the context surrounding verse six, we discover that this verse is dealing with the believer’s response to God’s providence. Next we may ask questions such as these in order to meditate on the text:

- What does this precept say about God’s character?
- Is there a specific promise or benefit associated with the command?
- Can you detect God’s kind intentions toward you in this precept?
- Why is it in my best interest to obey this command?
- What resistance do I have to obeying this precept?
- How might I enlist God’s help in obeying this command?

III. Meditation promotes spiritual passion.

A. Religion with no heart (without spiritual affections) is a detestable thing to God. The Lord says to apostate Judah, “*This people draw near with their words and honor me with their lip service and they remove their hearts far from Me, and the reverence for Me consists of tradition learned by rote*” (Is 29:13). Scripture meditation is a marvelous preventative to the spiritual ailment described above. Without meditation it is easy to settle into ritual, formula, and formalism in worship (Matt 15:7-9).

A great benefit then of meditation is that it slows us down enough to feel God’s truth upon the heart—equipping us and prompting us to think more deeply about God. This helps us feel more deeply and biblically about God. Meditation moves religion out of a corner of our intellect and into our passions and will; causing the whole man to be encompassed by the thought of God.

Church history is filled with examples of how the Christian religion devolved into dead formalism. Fallen man by nature is not a worshipper of Yahweh; but of idols. But, by the wonder of regenerating grace God creates a sanctuary of true worship in the heart of the redeemed. God’s true abode is His people. He is enthroned upon their praises.

However, we know from church history that as false religion made inroads into Christendom, the sanctuary of God was moved from the heart of man to the church building itself. Spectators filled the edifice to witness a performance in the ‘sanctuary’. Professional clergy performed the ‘worship’ carrying out their religious forms and rituals—the sensual replaced the biblical principle of worship in spirit and in truth.

Martin Luther described the Roman Catholic mass as ‘the poor man’s opera’. Therefore, let us ever be mindful that God is seeking true worshippers who will worship Him in spirit and in truth (Jn 4:23-24). Meditation upon the Word of God is invaluable at this juncture; for meditation keeps the sanctuary of God situated in the heart of the believer!

B. Meditation is our door to true worship. Study Psalm 145 and you will be convinced that there is no true worship unless some meditation is taking place. Meditation prepares us for worship by causing us to ‘see’ and understand God as He is—as awesome, almighty, and sovereign and all-seeing. Our great need in preparation for worship is to wait upon the Lord; fixing our minds upon His majesty UNTIL we find our passion for His glory renewed.

We do not perform this spiritual exercise alone—the Spirit of God is there assisting us in our meditation upon the Word (1 Cor 2:10-16). He is eager to write upon our hearts the beauty, desirability and excellence of God. THEN, our worship becomes personal and passionate; for we are expressing back to God the impressions upon our hearts made by the Word of God through meditation. Throughout this process, the Holy Spirit animates our spiritual affections through meditation until our response to God is one of wonder, awe, love and praise.

C. *Meditation trains and tunes our spiritual affections.* Scripture commands us to build ourselves up in our most holy faith (Jude 20-21). We must do this habitually or we will inevitably slide in the direction of spiritual entropy. The discipline of Scripture intake and meditation is our necessary food (Job 23:12). Meditation is needful to shake us out of spiritual stupor and into fervency.

When we meditate we are making regular ‘treasure checks’—by that we mean that we are practicing biblical self-confrontation, asking the serious question, “Where does my treasure reside?” Heart and true treasure are inseparable (Matt 6:21). Through meditation we display to our affections clear views of the desirability of our object of faith. We do this so that our heart will more strongly attach itself to our true treasure in Christ (Col 3:1-4).

Our lower nature pulls us toward decline; sloth; neglect; and stagnancy. Some of the O.T. metaphors for spiritual stagnation are quite graphic and memorable: *a pancake not turned (Hos 7:8); an undrinkable sediment-filled wine bottle (Jer 48:11); unplowed and unplanted farmland (Hos 10:12); a leaky polluted reservoir (Jer 2:13); a paralysis of indecision between two opinions (1 Ki 18:21); a weed-filled vineyard producing only sour grapes (Is 5:1-6).*

God’s Word in the heart is essential to holiness (Ps 119:11). Meditation keeps us moving in the direction of spiritual vitality. Meditation protects us from the imperceptible spiritual drift which threatens and endangers our souls (Heb 2:1-4). Doubt in our lives tends to grow slowly like algae in an aquarium. Meditation is the answer—it re-tunes our spiritual passions to seek God with all of our heart (Ps 119:148; 145:1-7). Our meditations remind us that our whole lives are to be a living monument to God’s love and faithfulness (Ps 63:6-8).

There is a kind of joyful labor in meditation. Man’s spirit was made for God—for the eternal; for the heavenly; but our flesh resists the spiritual discipline of meditation. Just as energy is required to overcome the pull of gravity; so also meditation is the ‘energy’ required to get past the gravitational pull of our nature. I used to own a Volkswagen bus. We had a standing joke about my vehicle—namely that my van could accelerate nicely downhill; but complained like a worn out draft animal when it had to climb a hill. This can be an analogy for meditation. When we meditate, we are doing the work necessary to ‘fly into’ the presence of God in order to commune with Him (Ps 77:11-15).

The following is an example of a meditation upon Christ by R. M. M’Cheyne. Here are instructions for lying down under Christ’s righteousness: let Jesus bear your whole weight. He loves to be the whole support of the soul. He is a jealous Savior who must be entirely trusted. . . Christ is not [merely] the way to God; He is our Fountain of Living Water. Be strong in His grace—there is enough in His supply for all the needs of His people—[He has] unsearchable riches. Live out of yourself and upon Him. Tell Him, since he requires of thee, He must give grace in accordance with your need—according to the riches of His grace. Let His hand hold you up in a billowing sea. Look to Him as much for sanctification as for justification (Andrew Bonar, Memoir and Remains of R. M. M’Cheyne, Banner of Truth, 1966, pp. 307, 427).

IV. Meditation develops our ability to pray.

A. *As meditation enables us to think more deeply and biblically about God; it will translate into more effective communication with Him (prayer).* When we read of saints and Biblical heroes who prayed with power, transparency, and intimacy; we are sometimes tempted to imagine that such ability was solely a spiritual gift. Such was not the case. Their prayers were the fruit of unseen spiritual discipline—the discipline of meditation.

A wonderful example is the prayer of Hannah (1 Sam 2:1-10). And what is amazing is that in the N.T., Mary's "Magnificat" (her great worship hymn) (Luke 1:46-55) is believed to be based upon her meditations upon Hannah's prayer! The point is that these prayers were not first impressions; but were composed out of Scripture meditations. The content of these prayers were distilled from the thoughts and spiritual affections which filled their daily meditations.

- B. *When the Psalmists prayed; they often met God in some very unusual places (despair; anxiety; betrayal; disillusionment; injustice; depression; guilt; fear; sickness; oppression).*** Meditation helps us express our thoughts and feelings to the Lord. Read the Psalms and you will be convinced that God cares deeply about our emotions. The Psalms are 'real to life;' they speak to every joy and trial. Says Steve Lawson, in the Psalms we find the godly man dealing with the heart-rending crunch of life. He is chased by enemies, he faces death, and he struggles with depression. Psalms speaks to every season of life—they are utterly realistic about suffering (Steven Lawson, "Expository Preaching of the Psalms" 2004 *Winterim*, The Master's Seminary, Lesson one, pp. 22).

Calvin notes in his commentary on the Psalms, "[The Psalter is] an anatomy of all parts of the soul." Psalms takes the attributes of God out of the realm of abstraction and into a glorious interface with the believer (Ps 146). The believer in covenant with God discovers that God has "harnessed" His own attributes for the welfare of His redeemed child. God's dealings with His people are seen in concrete ways such as forgiveness, protection, guidance, provision, refuge, and hope (Ps 78; 103; 147).

- C. *Our problem as believers is that often our prayers never go beyond telling God what we think He wants to hear.*** God wants contact with our whole being—our entire personality. Therefore, it is impossible to commune with God from behind a mask. The Lord desires an interface with our whole personality—He does not want rituals; pretending; and religious forms. Scripture enjoins us to "*pour out our hearts*" to the Lord (Ps 62:8)—to "*cast all of our anxiety upon Him*" (1 Pet 5:7).

Believers sometimes go weeks or even months without heart contact with God. Meditating on the Psalms can do much to cure this spiritual malady. Many of us could freely admit that it took a measure of affliction to move us to really talk to God from the heart. In some cases it is not until some painful trial 'squeezes' a cry from us that we are utterly honest with God in prayer and then appeal to Him for immediate grace and mercy to help in our time of acute need (Heb 4:16; Jer 12:2-3).

It is common for Christians to stuff negative emotion down inside—'splitting off' from negativity. In that approach, negative emotion tends to be seen as a nuisance rather than as an opportunity for an appointment with the Lord. The psalmists saw negative emotion as divinely appointed occasions to meet with the Lord in order to pour out their hearts to God. Author Paul Zahl sets forth the gospel of Jesus Christ as the basis for *being real with God in our prayers*: For the Apostle Paul, sanctification is this continuing process of receiving the word of Christ's righteousness imputed to us. "The process is as long as life itself, reaching to the darker continents within ourselves and our culture that we never knew existed. Sanctification is justification by extension" (Paul Zahl, *Who will deliver Us?* Seabury Press, 1983, p. 76).

Zahl indicates that our natural tendency due to our fallen-ness is to 'defend' our fears and pains by denying and repressing them. We shrink away from negative emotion because it is

such a stinging reminder of our defectiveness by reason of sin. Zahl's exhortation is astounding—he urges believers to move past crippling unassimilated negativities. He comments on the power of Christ's imputed righteousness continually received:

The scars of the past can be healed. [The word of imputation can] be a messenger of affirmation and nurture to the hidden fear thus entering our world as a mediator of the atonement. . . [This makes for substantial healing; this is] good news to the solitary places of fear, the unevangelized territories of our hearts. . . The death of Christ is the radical answer to the problem of human resistance to love. . . [The death of Christ] announces a resounding, eternal affirmation of the human spirit, yet in all its need [and] pain. . . [Christ's death] holds together concepts and experiences, such as justice with mercy and man's justification with his sinfulness. . . [His death] is a unitive concept, grounded in an historical event that stands as the marvelous basis for the taking into ourselves. . . the most damaging truths of the human situation, and thus by assimilating them in the cross, transfiguring them and redeeming them. We preach Christ crucified, 'the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men' (Ibid, p. 84-85).

D. Meditation promotes biblical self-confrontation in our prayer life. Meditation lets us regularly examine ourselves by the Word of God. Our progress in following Christ involves ongoing repentance and mortification of sin. When we fail to meditate regularly; it is too easy to settle for a standard of behavior that is acceptable to the flesh. Meditation shines a spotlight upon our lives—it renews our commitment and our resolve to walk obediently by the Scriptures in the power of the Spirit (Ps 119:9-16, 106, 112-113). The Word of God makes us wise so that we hate every false way (Ps 119:23, 27, 97-105).

When we meditate frequently we will be more responsive to divine correction. Regularly reasoning through passages of Scripture equips us to profit from the affliction, trials, and chastisement that God sends (Ps 119:75-78; 77:6-12). Our part is to cooperate with God's purposes in His discipline of us His children (Heb 12:4-13). Meditation on the Word gives us a chance to enter the divine perspective so that we respond properly to the discipline.

Hebrews chapter twelve is a powerful resource offering protection from the wrong reactions to divine discipline. This chapter cautions against: *regarding the Father's discipline lightly; forgetting the exhortation to submit to it; growing weary under it; losing heart; fainting (unbelief); turning to sensuality for comfort amidst trials.* The biblical goal for every Christian is to grow in faith to the point that he or she can say amidst divine correction: "Father, you know best."

E. One of the best ways for a believer to begin the discipline of meditating on the Word is to start a spiritual journal. On the topic of journaling for the sake of godliness, Maurice Roberts writes:

A spiritual diary will tend to deepen and sanctify the emotional life of a child of God. There is great value to of becoming more deeply emotional over the great issues of faith. Our age is not deep enough in feelings. Biblical men are depicted as weeping copious tears, as sighing and groaning, as on occasion rejoicing with ecstasy. They were ravished with the very idea of God. They had a passion for Jesus Christ—His person, offices, names, titles, words and works. It is our shame to be so cold, unfeeling and unemotional in spite of all that God has done to us and for us in Christ. . . The keeping of a diary might help to put us right in this respect also.