

Meditation and Prayer

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Matt 13:44 *The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field.*

The kingdom of God is like buried treasure. The spiritual disciplines are part of the process of digging up that treasure. They are not something we do in order to receive salvation. Becoming a Christian is the process of buying the field; leaving our old way of life behind. We now have the field, but we need to dig for the treasure. This is not about legalism. If we knew we were sitting on buried treasure then we would want to dig. The spiritual disciplines are about digging into our inheritance in God. It is exciting to explore all he has for us! I want to start with two stories that illustrate hazards (pitfalls?) of digging.

(a) When I was about ten, I was looking in a book with the lad who lived next door to me and was about my age. We saw a picture of a cross section through the earth. There in the middle was a red fiery ball of the earth's core. Then around it in different colours, yellow, blue and pink were different layers. On the very outside was a thin brown line that was labelled as the earth's crust. It made the earth look like a giant gobstopper. We were transfixed by this picture. The brown crust looked so thin. So we decided that we were going to dig through it and uncover the next layer, which was blue I think. So we went to a patch of his dad's garden and started to dig. We dug and dug all day. All we had was brown earth and a few stones. No blue next layer. Then water started to come from nowhere and our hole became a mud-bath, the sides caved in and we just had lots of mess, but no blue layer!

The lesson for this story is that we can bring false expectations based on misunderstanding from we read or are told. This means we don't find what we are looking for (even if we do succeed in finding what God has for us) and we are disappointed and so we stop digging.

(b) In the early 1900s the British archaeologist David Hogarth started to dig at Zakros in eastern Crete where people expected there would be a buried Minoan palace, like the more famous one at Knossos. He found parts of a settlement but little more. He left, leaving his trenches still there. In 1938, John and Hilda Pendlebury explored the site and found very little. Then in 1962 Nikolaos Platon, a Greek archaeologist, started digging using Hogarth's trenches as his starting point. Almost immediately they found parts of the palace, and work has gone on since. The palace was unlooted and yielded thousands of artifacts. Hilda Pendlebury said "We must have been sitting on the very site, and yet we saw nothing."

Here there was buried treasure, a palace full of precious and beautiful artifacts that had lain under the surface of the earth for 3,500 years. We have treasure that has been prepared and laid down for us for even longer, since before the foundation of the earth. There was no evidence of it on the surface. The only way to find it was to dig. Hogarth found parts

of a settlement, yet missed the main treasure itself. It is estimated that if he had continued digging just a few more days he would have found it. We can often get little bits, but miss out on the real treasure because we give up and stop too soon.

So how do we dig for the treasure God has for us? One way is through meditation and prayer. Just like digging for treasure, meditation is hard work. Bernard of Clairvaux (as quoted by Foster) says “Waiting on God is not idleness, but work which beats all other work to one unskilled in it.” We must expect to put effort into meditating, but it will yield a reward (just like digging for treasure).

Scriptural references for meditation [ESV unless otherwise stated]:

- **Gen 24:63** *Isaac went out to the fields to meditate*
- **Josh 1:8** *The book of the law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night*
- **Psalm 1:2** *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, but his delight is in the law of the Lord, on his law he meditates day and night.*
- **Psalm 19:14** *Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord my rock and my redeemer.*
- **Psalm 49:3** *My mouth shall speak wisdom, the meditation of my heart will be understanding.*
- **Psalm 63:6** *...when I remember you upon my bed and meditate upon you in the watches of the night.*
- **Psalm 77:12** *I will ponder all your work, and meditate on your mighty deeds.*
- **Psalm 104:34** *May my meditation be pleasing to him, for I rejoice in the Lord.*
- **Psalm 119:15** *I will meditate on your precepts* **48** *I will meditate on your statutes* **78** *I will meditate on your precepts* **97** *Oh how I love your law, it is my meditation all the day,* **99** *your testimonies are my meditation* **148** *my eyes are awake before the watches of the night that I may meditate on your promise*
- **Psalm 143:5** *I meditate on all that you have done*
- **1 Timothy 4:15** **[AV]** *Meditate on these things, give thyself wholly to them* “These things” are Paul’s instructions, including the spiritual gifts Timothy received by the laying on of hands.

What meditation is not and what it is If you say meditation to someone they will probably think either of Eastern religions, such as Yoga or Buddhism, particularly Zen, or their modern secular equivalent Transcendental Meditation (TM). These both start in the same place as Christian meditation, but they go in a very different direction.

Among the most common barriers between us and God, are the concerns and cares of daily life. This has been a common feature for all people throughout time, but is particularly an issue in the 21st century Western world because of the noise, busy-ness and fast pace of our culture.

Eastern meditation seeks to counteract this by emptying oneself becoming detached from the world. Personal identity is lost in a cosmic consciousness. Transcendental meditation does the same but is framed in pseudo scientific language rather than spiritual language. It concentrates on controlling brainwaves to reduce stress and improve physiological and emotional well-being. Again it is an emptying.

All this spiritual emptying is rather dangerous, **Luke 11:24–26** *When the unclean spirit has gone out of a person, it passes through waterless places seeking rest and finding none it says “I will return to my house from which I came”. And when it comes and finds the house swept and put in order then it goes and brings seven other spirits more evil than itself and they enter and dwell there. And the last state of the person is worse than the first.*

Christian meditation starts from the same place, namely that the hurry, noise and busy-ness of the modern world distracts us from hearing God. But rather than empty ourselves of all of life, we seek to put aside the distractions of the every day world so that we can concentrate on God. The scripture verses above speak of meditating **on** something. Maybe God’s word, his law, his precepts, his promises or his gifts.

Meditation is a great, go anywhere, do any time activity. Many of the biblical references talk about meditating in bed. For example **Psalms 63:6** *...when I remember you upon my bed and meditate upon you in the watches of the night.* I normally sleep soundly, but sometimes I wake up in the middle of the night and can’t get back to sleep. I can’t put the light on to read as this will wake Chris up. It is just me (and God) alone in the dark. It is a perfect time to meditate. Another occasion I remember was in a minibus going in Turkey in the dark travelling to the airport. I did not want to concentrate on the driving as the driver was going too fast and the roads were not great. So I meditated on God. I am sure none of the other passengers knew!

In January I was part of a team going to India. The plan was that Andrew, James and I would do teaching in the bible college and at weekend conferences for rural pastors. In the event, Andrew had to return as soon as we arrived. I had nothing planned and was suddenly the one who had to deliver lots of teaching! Janet prayed for me that God would provide. He did. Most nights I woke up (maybe something to do with jet-lag). I then started thinking about what I should preach about the next day. Rather than getting anxious about it, I gave it up to God and meditated on his word. Every time the result was a sermon. The only time it didn’t happen was on the last Saturday night. I didn’t know whether I would be called on to say something on in the Sunday service – it would be quite likely. I received nothing. I got a bit concerned, but gave it over to God. As it happened, I was not called on to say anything. God knew. He is in control.

If nothing happens when you meditate, then just worship him. Don’t be like I was when digging and be put off by it not looking like it did in the book, and don’t give up. You just might find the buried treasure at the next dig.

A pattern for meditation

Psalms 131 [NASB] *O Lord, my heart is not proud, nor are my eyes haughty; Nor do I involve myself in great matters, or in things too difficult for me. Surely, I have composed*

and quieted my soul; like a weaned child rests against its mother, my soul is like a weaned child within me. O Israel, hope in the Lord from this time forth and forever.

This Psalm has three verses. For me they give the pattern for meditation.

- The first step is to actively **not** do certain things. To not be proud and haughty, that is not to think that we are more important than we really are but to realise how small we are compared to God and his works. Humility is a prerequisite for meditation. Also, we do not involve ourselves in things too difficult for us. It can be tempting to try to analyse what God is doing in our midst. To argue from circumstances or what we read and then to extrapolate. You will find when you begin to meditate that all sorts of thoughts will come into your head from nowhere. These are distractions which you have to actively reject. They are like tree roots and rocks that we would come across if we started to dig for treasure.
- The second step is to actively do things. To actively still and quiet our thoughts and emotions and to actively rest against God. The image here is a wonderful one. Just imagine a hungry young child. They are fractious and whiny and cry. But once they have fed they are suddenly quiet and content and rest against their mother. This is a great picture to have. The child is completely dependent on the mother, for warmth, for food, for love, for security. Is that how we see our relationship with God? When we meditate we quieten ourselves, we reject the anxious and irrelevant thoughts and concentrate on our closeness to God, we rest against him.
- The third step is that as we make God our focus, he builds things into us. In this Psalm it is hope and trust. It can be other things. As well as being spiritual and about our character, it can also be practical and about what we do. Richard Foster says “Historically, no group has stressed the need to enter into the listening silences more than the Quakers and the result has been a vital social impact far in excess of their numbers.” Meditation produces godliness in us and that can take many forms. It emphasises our relationship with the living God from which all our deeds and actions emanate.

Personal prayer

I'm not going to talk about corporate prayer. But I do want to put in a plug for our organised times of corporate prayer: 7:00–07:30am every Friday here, with coffee provided; 10:00-10:30am every Sunday upstairs in the conference room, specifically for the Sunday meeting; we are going to start monthly prayer breakfasts on Saturdays to pray for the hope Sundays. First one on 3rd July 8:30-10:30am.

Bill Hybels opens his book *Too Busy Not to Pray* with the following statement:

Prayer is an unnatural activity. From birth we have been learning the rules of self reliance as we strain and struggle to achieve self sufficiency. Prayer flies in the face of those deep seated values. It is an assault on human autonomy, and an indictment of independent living.

The following passage connects prayer and meditation.

Philippians 4:6–9 *Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God which surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.*

Finally brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me – practise these things and the God of peace will be with you.

As we draw near to God, we can give him our requests, concerns and needs so that our meditation is not just a one way thing but a two way process. If you go to our Sunday 10:00-10:30 prayer meeting you will find it is often like a corporate meditation session, with people kneeling, or prostrate in silence. The two things are closely linked.

We can focus on whatever is true, honourable, just, pure and so forth. That is meditation. But we can also let our requests be known to God. Both of these processes result in the peace of God being with us.

I think we know more about prayer and meditation, but do we actually pray more? I will leave the answer to that to you. I want to try and debunk some of the false ideas we have about prayer.

(a) God already knows about what we are praying about. I remember someone (who will remain nameless) telling me about a friend of theirs who had been woken up in the night and felt compelled to pray for a friend. It transpired later that the friend had hurt themselves and was asking God for healing. They were healed at just the time the second person was woken up to pray. The person telling me the story was a bit put out by this – it seemed too super-spiritual! They said that surely God could have just healed them without waking up someone else to do so. Of course he could. He doesn't need us to do anything! But he wants to build relationship with him. So he involves us in doing things with him.

Chris tells the story of when she was about seven, “helping” her dad take the slates off the roof of the house and put on roofing felt and then put back the slates. Of course she could be no help in this process – indeed she probably hindered him somewhat. But it helped her bond with him and feel that she was close to her dad and involved in what he was doing.

(b) Do we treat God like a slot machine? Sometimes we can approach God as if he was Father Christmas and we could write a letter asking for Christmas presents. All we have to do is write them down and, miraculously, they would appear on Christmas morning in our stocking. If they are not there we are disappointed. In the same way we get confused if God does not answer our prayer when and how we want. Think again about me digging to find out about geology. The goal of prayer is not things we get out of it, but the joy of co-labouring with God and developing our relationship. If we treat our prayers like a Christmas present list we are not furthering our relationship with him. After all, we don't have any kind of relationship with Father Christmas! The best kind of prayers say something like “Lord, please show me what you are doing and what you want me to do as part of that process”.

(c) Do we treat prayer like a scientific process? The underlying principle behind a scientific experiment is that if we do the same process at any time or in any place then the same things happen and we get the same results. For those who are not scientists but are cooks, it is the same thing. If we follow the same recipe then we get the same dish out. We can spend our time reading books and talking to others and analysing our own experience in order to somehow perfect our technique. We seem to have an underlying idea that if we just fast long enough, read enough scripture, use just the right magic phrases (such as “in the name of Jesus”?) then God will always, automatically answer our prayer. Books are full of principles of prayer which we try to learn. But it is all about relationship.

A meditation practice session.

Luke 10:41–42 *Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion which will not be taken away from her.* What is that good portion? In **v39** we read *Mary sat at the Lord's feet and listened.*

This is a good scripture to meditate on. I have asked the musicians to come and sing “To be in your presence, to sit at your feet.”. I don’t want you to join in. You can stay sitting down.

Remember there are three stages. (1) There will be issues, thoughts, hopes, worries, desires, frustrations that float to the surface. You must give them up to God. Declare that you trust him, that he knows all these things and he has good plans for you. You do not want to be a Martha, being anxious and troubled about many things. (2) Actively still and quieten your soul. Declare your love for Jesus. Declare your trust of him. That picture of a child on its mothers shoulder, perfectly at rest and calm with him. This is sitting at the feet of Jesus. (3) As you have drawn near to God, so he will draw near to you. I don’t know what form your interaction will take. He may answer some of the issues you have consciously given to him. He may overwhelm you with his love. But whatever happens this is the goal of meditation.

Often it helps to reinforce what is going on inside with the posture of our body. Foster describes a simple meditation exercise to help with this. It is called “Palms down, palms up”. In the first section, when we are putting aside issues we put them down with downward facing palms. In the second stage we focus on God with upward pointing palms, as in worship. Do this if t helps. Don’t do it if it doesn’t help.

Bibliography

- Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, Chapter 2 Meditation; Chapter 3 Prayer.
- Bill Hybels, *Too Busy Not to Pray*
- Philip Yancey, *Prayer: Does it make any difference?*