



# CHAPTER 1

## Spending Time With God Through Biblical Meditation

*I remember the days of old; I meditate on all Your works;  
I muse on the work of Your hands.*

—Psalm 143:5

**M**y daughters, fifteen months apart in age, are as different as night and day. One is short, the other is tall; one is a private introvert, the other a gregarious extrovert; one is adventurous, having traveled the world; the other is a homebody who doesn't even own a passport. But there is one distinct trait they absolutely share, and that is their tone of voice. When they talk, they sound exactly alike.

For years, I could not tell them apart on the phone, which they loved to take advantage of at every opportunity. I learned to listen to the nuances, to the background noises, and to their story lines in order to recognize which daughter I was talking with. In the meantime, they joyfully took pains not to make it easy for me. Today they fool me less and less (and of course, caller ID helps!). Nevertheless, being able to distinguish their voices was a definite learning process for me.

### Listening to God

Just as I learned over time to distinguish my daughters' voices on the phone, hearing and recognizing God's voice is a process that improves over time with practice. The more opportunities you take to listen, the easier His voice is to recognize. One of the purposes of spending time with God through devotional practices is to provide opportunities to listen to God.

Recall a time when you recognized God speaking to you. What did He say, and what was your response?

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Jennifer Kennedy Dean says, "In learning to hear God's present voice, you don't have to worry about whether you are good at hearing. You can trust that He is good at speaking."<sup>1</sup> God desires personal conversations with us.

Read John 10:4, and in your own words, write what John says about hearing and listening to God's voice.

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John 10:4 holds the promise that believers will hear and recognize God's voice, and He will make sure you will hear Him if you allow Him the space to speak.

God understands the communication barriers you struggle with because of culture, upbringing, and personal experiences. He knows who you are, how you hear, and what speaks to you. He communicates in the way you will recognize and understand. But He needs the time. This is where devotional practices come in; they help you dig deeper into God's Word, providing opportunities for you to listen with understanding.

Through the power of the Holy Spirit, God speaks to us through His Word, through nature, through His providence, and through fellow believers.

How do you best hear God?

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One way to engage in authentic communication with God is through biblical meditation, as your mind is drawn to Him and as God speaks to you through His Word.

But biblical meditation is not always understood. In this chapter, we will consider the devotional practice of biblical meditation, how it differs from Eastern meditation, and how biblical meditation helps you to learn to recognize God's voice as you spend time listening to Him.

## Meditation

When I mention the word *meditation* at the beginning of my seminars, I often feel a little tension in the room. Some look at me sideways, and I suspect they are wondering whether they should make an immediate break for the door. Fortunately, no one has.

What comes to your mind when you hear the term *meditation*?

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There is a distinction between biblical meditation and other forms of meditation, such as Eastern, New Age, and Mindfulness. Since this type of meditation is repeatedly misunderstood, Christians often shy away from the subject altogether. So if you are feeling a bit nervous about the topic of meditation, I ask you to walk with me through this chapter before deciding whether or not to throw out the book. My hope is that this chapter on biblical meditation will help clear up any confusion or questions you may have.

## Webster's definition

According to Webster's dictionary, *meditation* is defined as continued thought or revolving a subject around and around in the mind (ruminating). As a synonym for *meditation*, Webster's dictionary uses the word

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*contemplation*, which is defined as a continued attention of the mind on a specific subject or topic. It is important to keep this dictionary definition in mind as we continue our discussion because this is our working definition.

## Eastern meditation

Many Eastern religions teach that the source of salvation is found within ourselves, eradicating the need for Jesus' sacrifice on the cross. The problem is seen not as one of sin but rather as a lack of knowledge of who we really are.

In Eastern meditation, detachment is the goal. People meditating in this manner attempt to empty their minds by detaching from their surroundings. The objective is to lose self and individuality by going deeper into the mind, producing an altered state of consciousness, merging with the cosmic mind or consciousness.

What difficulties do you see in this type of meditation for the Christian?

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In the parable of the unclean spirit ejected from his dwelling place, Jesus warns of the dangers of emptying the mind. Finding no place to rest, the unclean spirit returns to his former home, finding it empty and swept clean. With plenty of space to spare, he invites seven other spirits to live with him, and they are even worse than the first (Matthew 12:43–45). This parable is a strong reminder that an empty mind is an invitation for trouble.

## Mindfulness

Mindfulness, another form of meditation, stems from Buddhist practices. This meditative form is becoming very popular in both Christian and secular communities.

Mindfulness is the opposite of Eastern meditation. Rather than focusing on emptiness and detachment from the world, Mindfulness meditation focuses on enlightenment through self-awareness. Wisdom comes through discovering and understanding how one thinks as well as how one feels emotionally and physically in the moment.

As a Christian, what issues if any do you see with Mindfulness meditation?

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Although Mindfulness meets the dictionary definition of meditation by focusing on something (the inner self), self is still the focus.

## Biblical meditation

The Hebrew words *הגה* (*hagah*) and *שׂיח* (*siyach*) are the two words most frequently translated as *meditate* in the Bible. Interestingly, these words mean, among other things, to meditate upon, to study, to muse, or

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to ponder. These definitions indicate biblical meditation is an active, rather than passive, act.  
Read the following texts, noting the focus of meditation:

Psalm 77:12 \_\_\_\_\_

Joshua 1:8 \_\_\_\_\_

Psalm 143:5 \_\_\_\_\_

Biblical meditation is God centered; it is reflective thinking on God or some facet of God:

- What God does or has done
- What God commands
- God's Word
- God's character or nature as revealed through His names
- God's creation or nature

Which of these facets of God are especially meaningful to you and why?

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Biblical meditation is neither detachment nor separation (Eastern meditation). Nor is it focused on self or self-reflection (Mindfulness meditation). Biblical meditation is attachment through focused attention on God.

Dawson Trotman, the founder of the Navigators, used the human hand as an illustration to explain the purpose of meditation.<sup>2</sup> The four fingers represent hearing God's Word, reading God's Word, studying God's Word, and memorizing God's Word. The thumb, however, represents meditating on God's Word because the thumb is what allows us to grasp and hold on to things. When we meditate on God's Word, we hold on to the text, we grasp its meaning, and we integrate the message of the text into our lives.

The goal of biblical meditation is purposefully holding on to God—creating an active connection with Him, internalizing and personalizing His Word so that He affects how “we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28).

One of my favorite authors writes, “The words and the character of Christ should be often the subject of our thoughts and of our conversation, and each day some time should be especially devoted to prayerful meditation upon these sacred themes.”<sup>3</sup> No matter what facet of God we meditate on, God is always at the center of biblical meditation.

## Jesus' example

Jesus' worship example reiterates that biblical meditation is neither purposeless nor based on emptiness of mind. Notice the following quote: “He studied the word of God, and His hours of greatest happiness were found when He could turn aside from the scene of His labors to go into the fields, to meditate in the

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quiet valleys, to hold communion with God on the mountainside or amid the trees of the forest. The early morning often found Him in some secluded place, meditating, searching the Scriptures, or in prayer.”<sup>4</sup>

What does this say to you about Jesus’ devotional habits?

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Meditation, in connection with God’s Word, and prayer were part of Jesus’ devotional practices. His example reveals that rather than something to be avoided, biblical meditation holds a valuable position in our worship time.

Ellen White writes that reading God’s Word slowly and meditatively until its “significance is clear to the mind, and its relation to the plan of salvation is evident, is of more value than the perusal of many chapters with no definite purpose in view and no positive instruction gained.”<sup>5</sup>

In encouraging her readers to meditate on the life of Jesus, Ellen White affirms that many benefits are received when time is spent in such meditation,<sup>6</sup> including a greater understanding of God’s Word.<sup>7</sup>

## Using biblical meditation

We have learned that the practice of biblical meditation is founded in God’s Word and supported by the Spirit of Prophecy. We have also observed Jesus’ example of using biblical meditation as a part of His devotional life. The question then is, how do we practice biblical meditation?

The act of biblical meditation can be compared to the way God created a cow’s digestive system. As it grazes in the field, the cow ruminates on its food, breaking it into smaller and smaller particles as it chews and rechews. God has developed this process so that the cow can take in all the nutrients possible. Biblical meditation is also God ordained—a method through which we receive spiritual nourishment from His Word as we figuratively chew and re-chew on a God-focused topic or text. It is the grasping of the text, the turning it over and over in the mind that makes the difference between simply reading a text and reading it meditatively.

## Practicing biblical meditation

Experiencing this devotional tool will give you a better understanding of how to use it. Using John 3:16, 17 as your example, take the time to complete the exercises as you read through the rest of this lesson.

## Reading

Before beginning any Bible study, always ask the Holy Spirit to lead and guide you. Why do you think this is essential?

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For the purpose of this exercise, the text is assigned; however, your reading can come from several places—a book, chapter, or verse of the Bible; a devotional reading; or a book on Christian living or growth.

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As you read, be aware of God’s interaction. This is difficult to explain; but once you try it, you will understand. The following points may help you.

- As you read, does a term, sentence, or phrase stand out?
- Do you find yourself reading the same words over and over?
- Does what you read bring an event, a song, a person, or a problem to your mind?

When you are stopped in this manner, write that phrase, sentence, paragraph, or text down. Consider how the ideas or stories intersect with your own life. Allow the text to speak to you personally by asking yourself, How is God using this to speak to me? (You may want to include the text’s reference or the book’s title and page number in case you want to refer to it again in the future.)

Remember, the goal of biblical meditation is not to read long passages of the Bible at one time. Rather the aim is to read slowly and reflectively until the Holy Spirit captures your attention. Keep in mind that learning to recognize how God speaks personally in this manner takes time and practice.

## Interacting with the text

As you become aware of God’s conversation through His Word, you have the opportunity to join Him as you interact with the text. This exchange creates an active participation rather than a passive skimming of the words. Although the thought of such connection with God’s Written Word may seem unusual initially, there are several ways to do so.

*Engage the senses.* One way to interact with what we read is through the use of our senses. Interestingly, the more senses we use at one time, the more involved with the text we become.

- Sight and sound: Reading the text uses the sense of sight alone. How could you add the sense of hearing?

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- Smell: What biblical example can you think of where the sense of smell was used during worship times?

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How could you add the sense of smell to your biblical meditation?

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- Touch: Writing out the word or passage on which you are meditating adds the sense of touch. (We will talk more about kinetic learning in chapter 8.) Writing helps you remember the text and helps you to focus on the words, enabling you to think more deeply.
- Taste: In one of my seminars, a participant asked, “How do we use the sense of taste?” Almost instantly, another participant responded, “Through experience.” Psalm 34:8 says, “Taste and see that the LORD is good; blessed is the one who takes refuge in him” (NIV). As we spend time listening

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to God, we come to recognize His presence more readily. We learn to experience Him in our lives, and we taste what it is like to be in relationship with Him.

Take a moment to interact with John 3:16, 17, using as many senses as possible. What senses were you able to use and how?

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*Ask questions of the text.* Another way to connect with the text is by asking questions. Questions help you dig more deeply, mining for the precious gems of truth that are waiting to be found.

Framing your questions with *who*, *what*, *where*, *when*, *why*, and *how* (five *w*'s and an *h*) can be helpful when forming questions. Here are some possible questions for this text:

- How does God reveal His love through Jesus?
- What does belief have to do with eternal life?
- When do I feel condemned?
- How do I respond when I feel condemned?

Using the five *w*'s and the *h*, form three questions from this verse and then write out your answers.

1. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

2. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

3. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

*Create a paraphrase.* Yet another way to interact with a text is by creating your own paraphrase—defining words and personalizing the text.

- Define words: Reviewing the definitions of familiar words enhances your understanding of the text. Take the time to write out the words you research, along with their definitions.

Look up the definitions to the words *believes*, *everlasting*, and *condemn*. Write down those meanings that speak specifically to you.

Believes: \_\_\_\_\_

Everlasting: \_\_\_\_\_

Condemn: \_\_\_\_\_

What new understanding do these definitions add to the text for you?

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- Personalize the text: Individualizing the text allows it to speak to you about you. Use your name in place of global words such as *world* or *people*. Here is an example, using a paraphrase of our text: “For God so loved [your name] that He gave His only begotten Son so that when I [your name] believe in Him . . .”  
Another way to personalize a text is to change the gender of words or pronouns to match your own.

Create a paraphrase by writing out John 3:16, 17, using the definitions that spoke to you. Remember to personalize the nouns and pronouns.

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## Look for God’s personal message

There are a few things to remember when listening to God.

God uses His Word to speak personally to us, so seek out what the text is saying to you. It is often easy to think, *So-and-so needs to hear this*, but the very lesson God has for you is then lost. Remembering that God is speaking to you about yourself alleviates the possibility of skipping over those difficult concerns God wants to reveal to you. Facts may be interesting, but growth comes from personal application, so always ask, What is God saying to me, about myself? How does this apply to *me*?

God always speaks with purpose. Seek His purpose through the reading you are focused on. Is He asking something of you? Revealing something to you? Drawing you closer to Him through encouragement? Is He working to change your character?

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Reread your paraphrase of John 3:16, 17. Write out God's purpose for you in this reading. What is He asking of you?

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## Respond to God

Knowing God's purpose in speaking is vital because His purpose gives direction to our response.

James 1:22 tells us, "But don't just listen to God's word. You must do what it says. Otherwise, you are only fooling yourselves" (NLT).

As God reveals His purpose for speaking, our next step is obedience to that purpose.

It is important to remember that God speaks only as we respond. So when it seems God is silent, go back to the last time you heard Him speak and ask, Have I responded to His purpose?

What God is saying to you as you meditate on His Word may not be immediately understood or grasped. Just as gold is hidden deep within the earth, God's message is hidden beneath the surface. It may require some patient digging to discover His meaning for you. You may have to go over the passage several times, reading it in several translations or paraphrases before you discern God's words for you. Don't give up. Be patient with God and with yourself, and your patience will be rewarded.

For this practice, spend a few moments reviewing what God is asking of you through John 3:16, 17. Then write out your prayer response to Him. (We will look closer at prayer journaling in chapters 3 and 4.)

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## My story

One morning during my devotional time, Isaiah 43:18, 19 came to mind: "Do not remember the former things, nor consider the things of old. Behold, I will do a new thing. Now it shall spring forth; shall you not know it? I will even make a road in the wilderness and rivers in the desert."

As I read the text, wrote it out, reflected, and prayed over the words, I struggled to understand what it meant to me personally. After I continued to pray and listen for God's response, the thought came to me to read the text in *The Message* Bible. Here the paraphrase reads: "Forget about what's happened; don't keep going over old history. Be alert, be present. I'm about to do something brand-new. It's bursting out! Don't you see it? There it is! I'm making a road through the desert, rivers in the badlands."

As I reread this paraphrase, I immediately understood what God was saying to me. I struggle with letting go of hurtful events, words, and people. I churn them over and over in my mind long after an incident has passed. This unhealthy ruminating affects my present attitude as well as my peace and joy. It even influences my relationship with those I interact with during the day who have nothing to do with whatever I am mulling over in my mind. Through this text, God asked me to let go of old history, to stop reliving the past, and to start living in the joy of the present.

Putting God's purpose, as seen through this verse, into my life has been a process of practice. Changes have not occurred overnight. Fortunately, when I revert to my old self-talk, God is quick to remind me of this text. Together we are forming a new and healthier habit for which I am very grateful.

## Final thoughts

All relationships require communication if they are to grow and flourish. What relationship do you see between biblical meditation and communication with God?

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God is anxious to talk to you. Klaus Issler reminds us, "When we are ready to listen, God the Spirit speaks to us, either giving us the significance of the scriptural passage we are contemplating, offering specific words of guidance for the matter at hand through others or a voice within, or letting a certain feeling overcome us."<sup>8</sup> When we allow time for God to speak, He will.

## Summary

Biblical meditation has these characteristics:

- It is founded upon God's Word,
- It provides an avenue for communication with God,
- It opens your spiritual ears to His voice,
- It gives you the opportunity to saturate yourself with His Word,
- It builds a relationship with God as you allow His Word to live within you, and
- It creates greater awareness of God's presence throughout your daily life.



*Prayer is not monologue but dialogue; God's voice in response to mine is its most essential part.*

—Andrew Murray<sup>9</sup>

# Putting Into Practice

The following devotional exercises provide opportunities to experience the practice of biblical meditation using the guidelines found at the end of this practice module. The five assignments are for use throughout the week and will help you to create a habit of spending time every day with God.

## Assignment 1: God's Word and Biblical Meditation

Read each of the following texts from the New King James Version of the Bible.

1. As you read each text, ask God to show you what the text says about biblical meditation.
2. Write down your observations as well as what you have learned.
3. What is God saying to you through this exercise?

Psalm 1:2

Psalm 63:6

Psalm 77:12

Psalm 119:15, 78

Psalm 119:48

Psalm 143:5

Psalm 119:23, 97

## Assignment 2: The Benefits of Biblical Meditation

The following quote summarizes the many benefits of biblical meditation.

1. Circle the mentioned benefits of meditation (there are at least ten).
2. Write down which ones mean the most to you and why.
3. What do you hear God saying to you through this reading?

As the mind dwells upon Christ, the character is molded after the divine similitude. The thoughts are pervaded with a sense of His goodness, His love. We contemplate His character, and thus He is in all our thoughts. His love encloses us. If we gaze even a moment upon the sun in its meridian glory, when we turn away our eyes, the image of the sun will appear in everything upon which we look. Thus it is when we behold Jesus; everything we look upon reflects His image, the Sun of Righteousness. We cannot see anything else, or talk of anything else. His image is imprinted upon the eye of the soul, and affects every portion of our daily life, softening and subduing our whole nature. By beholding, we are conformed to the divine similitude, even the likeness of Christ. To all with whom we associate we reflect the bright and cheerful beams of His righteousness. We have become transformed in character; for heart, soul, mind, are irradiated by the reflection of Him who loved us, and gave Himself for us.<sup>10</sup>

## Assignment 3: What God Says About Biblical Meditation

Using the biblical meditation guidelines found at the end of this chapter (also found in appendix B), consider Joshua 1:8 in light of biblical meditation.

## Assignment 4: Recognizing God's Presence

Using the biblical meditation guidelines, reflect on Jeremiah 31:3, 25. Use at least two different translations or paraphrases.

1. Write the passage on a four-by-six-inch card or mark the text in your electronic device so that you can refer to the text throughout the day. Meditate on the words, their meanings, and how the verses speak to you.
2. Watch for God throughout the day through the lens of this text.
3. In the evening, journal where you recognized God during the day, what He used to speak to you, and what you heard in your encounters with God through this text.

### **Assignment 5: Biblical Meditation Through Christian Literature**

The goal of reading Christian literature is to meet Jesus.

Reflectively read chapter 10 (“A Knowledge of God”) in *Steps to Christ*.<sup>11</sup> Reading the chapter through is secondary, so take all the time you need.

1. As you read, pause to journal the passages that God uses to speak to you, employing the biblical meditation guidelines.
2. Remember to write out the sentence or passage that speaks to you along with your reflections and feelings.
3. What is God saying to you and asking of you through this reading?

## **Endnotes**

1. Jennifer Kennedy Dean, *Live a Praying Life* (Independence, MO: Master’s Touch Publishing House, 2000), 106.
2. “The Word Hand,” The Navigators, accessed November 6, 2017, <https://www.navigators.org/resource/the-word-hand/>.
3. Ellen G. White, *The Sanctified Life* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald®, 2006), 92.
4. Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press®, 1905), 52.
5. Ellen G. White, *Christian Education* (Battle Creek, MI: International Tract Society, 1894), 58.
6. Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 5 (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press®, 1948), 740.
7. White, *Christian Education*, 119, 120.
8. Klaus Issler, *Wasting Time With God: A Christian Spirituality of Friendship With God* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2001), 181.
9. Andrew Murray, *With Christ in the School of Prayer* (Norcross, GA: Trinity Press, 2013), 87.
10. Ellen G. White, *The Faith I Live By* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald®, 1958), 150.
11. Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ* (Oakland, CA: Pacific Press®, 1892). You can read *Steps to Christ* online and at the Ellen G. White Writings website: <https://m.egwwritings.org/en/book/108.4#0>.

## Biblical Meditation Guidelines

1. Pray for the Holy Spirit's presence to bless and to lead you during this time.
2. Ask God for the text or reading upon which He would have you meditate.
3. Interact with the text or reading:
  - Read it aloud in several different versions and/or paraphrases.
  - Write out the text word for word in your journal.
  - Emphasize words within the text by writing them out, along with their definitions.
  - Write what these words and their definitions say to you.
4. Ask questions of the text or reading. Use the five *w*'s and an *h* (who, what, where, when, why, and how).
5. Look for what God is saying to you:
  - Personalize the nouns and pronouns by using your name or gender.
  - What is God's purpose for you in this text? Is He asking something of you? Revealing something? Drawing you closer to Him?
6. Journal as you interact with the text or reading:
  - Write your observations of what this text or reading says.
  - Write your thoughts. (What does this mean or say to you personally?)
  - Write your response to God's Word to you through this text or reading. (What emotions are you feeling? What thoughts are you thinking?)
  - Write your prayer response to God.