

# Biblical Meditation: Turning the Bible into a Conversation with God

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## 1. Introduction

- a. Prayer at its simplest form is a conversation with God (although I don't believe that is the best definition of prayer but more on that in a few weeks). Prayer is about communicating. We speak with God and He communicates back to us. At least that is how it is meant to work.
- b. Unfortunately this is not the experience that many people record having when they pray. Many people admit that they run out of things to say, get bored and feel lost or overwhelmed when they pray. Additionally, many people (everyone to some extent) have to overcome the thought, "Is anything even happening?"
- c. These feelings of inadequacy, boredom, and unbelief are real and powerful. They keep countless people from ever developing a healthy, vibrant, powerful prayer life.
- d. However, if prayer at its most basic stripped-down form is a conversation with God, then how is it that so many God-fearing, Jesus-loving, Spirit-filled believers struggle to pray and hear the voice of God speaking to them?
- e. I believe that much of the reason for this is that the practice of biblical meditation is something of a lost art form in our day and age. Meditation has been forgotten and replaced in favor of constant status updates, never-ending tweets, and catch phrases.
- f. This long forgotten spiritual discipline is a key that will unlock the doors of prayer in such a dynamic way that an entire new world will open up to those who give themselves to its practice.
- g. The term meditation simply refers to the process of turning the Bible into conversation with God. You could also call it prayerfully reading.
- h. The primary idea of mediation is going deep in the Scriptures through the intentional thinking, reading, singing and praying of a particular passage. Some have said that meditation is simply getting to know the Bible until the Bible knows you.

## 2. The Words of God

- a. If prayer is a conversation, then it is easy to understand what is necessary in order to pray. The primary medium of every conversation is words. We use words to communicate how we are feeling and what we think. Our hopes, dreams, hurts, pains, thoughts and ideas are all communicated through our spoken words.
  - i. Have you ever wondered where words came from? How did humans arrive at the conclusion that certain sounds and syllables mean certain things?
  - ii. Like everything else, this was God's design. This makes perfect sense when we remember John 1:1, "*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.*"
  - iii. Before creation, a Word existed. This Word was expressed within the Godhead itself. The Father, Son and Spirit all communicate through the use of words and primarily through the Word (Christ) Himself (Genesis 1, Psalms 2, 110).

- b. Our use of words to communicate and share thoughts, feelings, and desires is simply a product of the fact that we are made in the image of God. Because we are God's image bearers on the earth (Gen. 1:26-27) we communicate with others and with God in the same manner that God communicates with Himself.
- c. This is how we build relationships with anyone; spending time together and talking. When it comes to our speaking with God we have been given a distinct blessing from God- He has already started the conversation.
- d. Prayer then should really be seen as the "continuation of a conversation that God has started." <sup>1</sup> Our prayer life is nothing more than a response to words that God has already spoken.
- e. The conversation God has already started with us is two-fold. First, as we discussed at length in our previous session, we have been given the revelation of God in Christ Jesus. Secondly, we have been given the Bible. Prayer can simply be understood as our response to the revelation of the Word of God (Christ) through the language of the inspired word of God (the Bible). Put together, the revelation of Christ and the Scriptures make up the recorded words of God; the first part of a conversation.
  - i. The Bible is the language of God given to humanity. Therefore if we are going to speak with God and ultimately know God we must begin with the words He has spoken to us.

### 3. The True Word

- a. All true prayer starts with God's given revelation of Himself in and through Christ. He has clearly spoken to us through the mouths of His servants and prophets in the Old Testament and then most clearly through His Son Jesus Christ.

*"God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days **spoken to us by His Son...**" - Hebrews 1:1-2*

- b. The great theologian Hans Urs Von Balthasar offers the following commentary on the opening verses in the Book of Hebrews:

*"He gathers up all the words of God scattered throughout the world and concentrates them in himself, the intense focus of revelation...the 'many and various' words of the Old Covenant: there are also the words strewn throughout creation, stammered and whispered; the words of nature...the words uttered by the flowers and the animals; words of overpowering beauty and of debilitating terror; the words of human existence, in their confusing, myriad forms, laden with both promise and disappointment; all these belong to the one, eternal, living Word who became man for our sakes." <sup>2</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Timothy Keller: "Prayer", p. 50

<sup>2</sup> Hans Urs Von Balthasar: "Prayer"

- c. One of the primary revelations of Christ given to us in the New Testament is that Christ is the Word of God. He is God's declarative statement about Himself to humanity. The person and life of Christ are in and of themselves God's spoken word to us.

*"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God...And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth." - John 1:1-2, 14*

- d. Simply put, "Jesus is what God has to say."<sup>3</sup> Although the entire Bible is the infallible, inspired word of God even the Bible itself is clear that it is Christ Himself in the flesh that is the declared Word of God to humanity. Everything Christ does is declarative in nature.
- e. When we see Christ heal the sick and forgive the sinner we are hearing God's declaration of almighty power and gentle mercy over humanity. When we hear Christ say, "You have heard it said...but I say to you..." we are hearing the very voice that spoke to Moses on the top of Sinai and to the prophets in every dream, vision, and experience.

*"The highest conceivable revelation of God is not found in a vision or dramatically altered state of consciousness that we could somehow associate with a 'realm' other than ours. Instead, in disconcerting proximity, it is in the passing days and months of a carpenter in a small town in Northern Israel that we find the fullness of Divine disclosure."<sup>4</sup>*

- f. The truth is, and we must remember this, that it is entirely possible to scour the Bible without ever coming to Jesus.

*"And the Father Himself, who sent Me, has testified of Me. **You have neither heard His voice at any time, nor seen His form.** But you do not have His word abiding in you, because whom He sent, Him you do not believe. **You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me.** But you are not willing to come to Me that you may have life." - John 5:37-40*

- g. God the Father Himself declares to us that all of Scripture, all of the Law and the Prophets, are meant to be interpreted and understood in light of the Christ the Word made flesh. The words of Moses, Elijah, David, and the rest of the prophets in the Old Testament point to Christ as do all of the words of Peter, James, Paul and the rest of the New Testament apostles.

*"This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. **Hear Him!**" - Matthew 17:5b*

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<sup>3</sup> Brian Zahnd: "Jesus is What God Has to Say", [www.brianzahnd.com](http://www.brianzahnd.com)

<sup>4</sup> Stephen Venable: "Life of Christ Course Notes"

#### 4. Getting Language

- a. As we begin to look at the actual practice of meditation and how to turn the Bible into a conversation with God it is critical that we do so on the foundation that was laid both last week and in our previous section. The role of prayer, and we will discover the role of the Bible in prayer, is always to lead us to the person of Christ so that we can hear Him.
  - i. Again, prayer is simply our responding to the Word of God (Christ) through the words of God (the Bible).
  - ii. God has spoken to us through the Word (Christ), to which we respond by speaking the word (Bible) back to Him. This is the nature of our conversation with God. He declares Christ to us and we speak His words back to Him.
  - iii. If we are to grow in prayer and sustain prayer our eyes must remain fixated upon the beauty of Christ and our ears in tune to the declaration of God in Christ Jesus.
  - iv. True prayer happens when it is in response to Christ. As He declares to us His heart for the poor, broken, and downcast of society we respond in prayer for those that are on His heart by speaking His word back to Him. Our prayers therefore are not birthed out of our own desires, passions or convictions but out of the revelation of Christ that is being declared to us.
- b. God the Father has spoken through His Son, Jesus is the Word of God made flesh, the Spirit then takes what belongs to Christ and speaks them to us.
  - i. The trinitarian nature of communication through the use of words can also be seen in the story of creation (Gen. 1), a number of Psalms (Psalms 2, 110), and the very prayer life of Jesus as He prayed to the Father through the Spirit (John 17).

*“He will glorify Me, for He will take of what is Mine and declare it to you.” - John 16:14*

- c. Earlier we said that one of the common points of frustration in prayer in general is not knowing what to say. The primary reason for this is simply that we do not know the Word Himself, which we talked about in our previous session, nor do we know the word that was given to us, the Bible. Unless God’s language has been spoken into us we will have nothing to speak back to Him.
- d. This becomes easy to see when we consider that Christ is God’s word spoken to us and our job in prayer is simply to carry on the conversation that has already been started.
- e. The Bible should then be seen as the language of God. It is both how He speaks and what He says. Therefore if we are going to respond to the Word of God we must use the words of God. To speak our own words or to use our own language turns prayer from a dialogue into a monologue.

- f. For us to rightly speak God's language and pray we must therefore be filled with the word of God so that we can speak it back to Him. To convey this idea of being filled with the word of God the biblical writers often use the metaphor of "eating the scroll".

*"But you, son of man, **hear what I say to you...open your mouth and eat what I give you...Son of man, eat what you find; eat this scroll, and go, speak to the house of Israel.**' So I opened my mouth, and **He caused me to eat that scroll.** And He said to me, 'Son of man, feed your belly, and fill your stomach with this scroll that I give you.' So I ate, and it was in my mouth like honey in sweetness." - Ezekiel 3:1-3*

*"Your words were found, and **I ate them,** and Your word was to me the joy and rejoicing of my heart..." - Jeremiah 15:16*

*"How sweet are Your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!" - Psalms 119:103*

- g. When we allow the word of God to get into us we are empowered and enabled to speak the language and words of God back to Him through prayer. But before we can speak we must hear.
- h. Here in lies the issue for many struggling Christians in prayer. We often speak before we have heard anything. Not even God Himself speaks before He hears. We are told that the Holy Spirit does not speak on His own authority but only that which He hears from the Father (John 16:13). And Christ said that He does nothing or says nothing except what the Father shows Him (John 5:19).
- i. The starting place of prayer therefore is not speaking but listening. Our first responsibility is to hear Christ (Matthew 17:5) and then speak in response to what we hear.
- j. Biblical meditation is simply that act of listening and responding.
- i. This truth and order of reality (listening before speaking) is clearly seen in how children learn and develop the ability to speak. Language is something that we learn very early in our lives and because of that we don't remember how we actually learned to speak.
  - ii. We know from research that "language is spoken into us. We learn language only as we are spoken to. We are plunged at birth into a sea of language...Then slowly, syllable by syllable, we acquire the capacity to answer: mama, papa, bottle, blanket, yes, no. Not one of these words was a first word...All speech is answering speech. We were all spoken to before we spoke."<sup>5</sup>
  - iii. Anyone who has seen a child learn to speak can attest to this. When someone speaks to a young toddler they try to mimic and repeat what was just said. Through this process of hearing and repeating eventually language is learned and the meaning of those words is learned.

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<sup>5</sup> Eugene H. Peterson: "Working the Angles: The Shape of Pastoral Integrity", p. 49

- iv. Research also tells us that children learn words and language primarily from their father or father figure.<sup>6</sup>
- v. We must then, like a little child, plunge ourselves into the sea of God's language, the Bible, if we are going to learn how to speak God's language and then pray.

*"We should listen, study, think, reflect, and ponder the Scriptures until there is an answering response in our hearts and minds. It may be one of shame or of joy or of confusion or of appeal - but that response to God's speech is then truly prayer and should be given to God."*<sup>7</sup>

- k. Where most people fail is that they attempt to pray using their own language, words, and feelings. However, this does not work. If God is not our starting point in prayer then we will misjudge everything. We will misinterpret ourselves and our circumstances, we will misconstrue what we believe God is telling us, and we will misjudge the world around us.
- l. For prayer to be lasting and enjoyable God must be the beginning point. If God is not our reference point for prayer we will always make ourselves, our feelings, needs, and our emotions, the reference point for our prayers. When this happens prayer becomes nothing more than talking to ourselves.

*"Left to ourselves, we will pray to some god who speaks what we like hearing, or to the part of God we manage to understand. But what is critical is that we speak to the God who speaks to us...What is essential in prayer is not that we learn to express ourselves, but that we learn to answer God."*<sup>8</sup>

- m. What is needed to effectively pray is to submerge ourselves in the Scriptures. The more the Bible gets into us, the more we will have to release out of our hearts and mouths of eternal value and divine power.

## 5. Practical Steps to Biblical Meditation

*"Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor stands in the path of sinners, nor sits in the seat of the scornful; but his delight is in the law of the Lord, and **in His law he meditates day and night.**" - Psalms 1:1-2*

- a. The best way to plunge yourself into the sea of God's language is through reading and meditating on Scriptures. We have already loosely defined meditation as the pattern of listening and responding to God through His word. The word "meditating" is defined as "pondering by speaking to oneself".<sup>9</sup>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.vox.com/2014/6/14/5804858/how-dads-improve-their-kids-lives-according-to-science>

<sup>7</sup> Timothy Keller: "Prayer", p. 55

<sup>8</sup> Eugene H. Peterson: "Answering God", p. 5-6

<sup>9</sup> Corey Russell: "Ancient Paths", p. 86

- i. Restated, meditation is taking a portion of Scripture into your mind, feelings, heart, and soul and then speaking it out (verbally) until the passage begins to form within your heart and mind.
- ii. Defined another way meditation is listening to God's word in your heart and mind and then speaking it out loud until what you ponder and speak begins to form truth in you.

*"Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom..." - Colossians 3:16*

- b. There are numerous ways to go about this cyclical process of thinking/speaking a truth out until it comes back within. The key to each of these is to actually speak out loud. Although silence before the Lord can be refreshing, prayer is primarily spoken of in the Bible in terms of verbalizing and speaking aloud.
  - i. I have found this to be one of the simplest yet most profound ways to see breakthrough in meditation and prayer in general.
  - ii. There is something dynamic and powerful about taking the words of the Bible thinking them through and then speaking them aloud as you process what is being said in the passage. What slowly happens is the words of the Bible become your own words, you begin to own them for yourself. David's prayers in the Psalms slowly becomes your prayers as you make David's words your own words.
  - iii. Again, there is a place for silent prayer but far too often that becomes a crutch for people simply not knowing what to say. When we take the Bible and actually fill our mind and mouth with it our hearts are impacted in a more powerful and profound way.
- c. Listed below are a few of the methods that you can implement to begin meditating on the Bible and turning the Bible into your prayer language.
  - i. The power of using some sort of method or structure in your meditation time is that it gives you a roadmap to where you are going. One of the biggest mistakes people make when it comes to Bible study and prayer is that they don't have a plan, they don't know where they are going.
  - ii. Having some sort of guide or structure does not take away from the Spirit's ability to speak to you or touch your heart it actually increases it because you are able to more easily think and pray through a passage.
- d. **Luther's "A Simple Way to Pray"**
  - i. Instruction - The first step Luther advises is taking a portion of Scripture and asking the question, *"What is the Bible telling me to do or believe in this particular passage?"* By doing this Luther says we turn the Bible into a type of "school book".
    1. If you don't know that answer to this question then take some time to study the text until you find out. There are a number of online resources or books you can get to do a basic study of a passage.

- ii. Thanksgiving - Once you have identified the instruction within the text then we ask, “*How does this particular passage/teaching lead us to praise and thank God?*” Use the passage to turn the Bible into a “songbook” and begin to worship God by turning the Scripture into a song/melody.
  - iii. Confession - Based on what the passage has instructed you to do or believe and how it has led you to worship and praise God you can then ask, “*What part of my life does not line up with this Scripture? What sin must I confess and repent of based on this passage?*” By repenting of our sin we align our hearts and minds with the word and therefore we are aligning ourselves with God.
  - iv. Prayer - Finally, once you have repented of your sins, begin to examine the people and world around you and ask, “*How does God desire to touch and shape the world around me through the truths revealed in this Scripture?*” You have now entered the place of intercession where you begin to bring the needs of other people before the Lord and pray for them based on God’s own word.
- e. **Questions to Ask While Praying/Reading the Bible** <sup>10</sup>
- i. What does this teach me about God and His character?
  - ii. What does this teach me about human nature, character, and behavior?
  - iii. What does this teach me about Christ; His grace and salvation?
  - iv. What does this teach me about the church, life in the people of God, or in the world?
  - v. Who? What? Where? When? Why? How?
- f. **Word Emphasis**
- i. In this approach you simply take a shorter passage (a verse or two) and dissect each word. By isolating each word individually you begin to get a clearly picture at what the passage is trying to say and what implications it has on you.
  - ii. When God highlights a word to you within a particular text this is a great time to ask questions and think through the implications of the particular word or phrase.
- g. **Memorization**
- i. Simply memorize and recite passages of Scripture out loud. This used to be one of the primary ways people learned the Bible.
  - ii. By taking a particular passage rereading it aloud and repeating it word for word back to God we allow the language of God to penetrate our ears and minds.
- h. **Singing the Scriptures**
- i. Another powerful way to take the Bible and turn into conversation with God is to turn a passage into a song. By simply singing the Scriptures it helps you both memorize the passage while also going deeper into the meaning of the passage.
    - 1. This truth can easily be seen when a song from our childhood comes on the radio. We remember all of the words are immediately rushed into the euphoric state as we are ushered back into the joy of our childhood.

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<sup>10</sup> Timothy Keller: “Prayer”, p. 153

## 6. Conclusion

- a. Prayer is simply our responding to a conversation that God has already initiated. He has revealed Himself through His Son who is the Word of God made flesh. In order for us to pray with power, joy, and endurance we must then learn the language of God and bring His word back to Him.
- b. The frustration believers feel in prayer is due to their lack of knowledge and understanding of the word. Their prayer lives are based largely on their own needs, wants, and feelings rather than on God, His character, and His word.
- c. To grow in prayer we must therefore grow in our knowledge of the word. Meditation is the best way to grow in biblical knowledge and revelation. By meditating on the Bible we saturate our hearts and minds in the words of God.
- d. There are a number of methods to meditate on the Bible and all of them will allow the Lord to speak to you and breathe new life upon your heart.

*\*\*\*For even more reading on biblical meditation and how the Bible is instrumental to a life of prayer I highly recommend Timothy Keller's book "Prayer: Experiencing Awe and Intimacy with God" and Corey Russell's book "Ancient Paths: Rediscovering delight in the Word of God".*

## Meditation Exercise

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*“I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit. You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you. Abide in Me, and I in you. As a branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me. I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit, for without Me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in Me, he is cast out as a branch and is withered; and they gather them and throw them into the fire, and they are burned. If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you. By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit; so you will be My disciples.” - John 15:1-8*

Instruction:

Thanksgiving:

Confession:

Prayer:

**4 Prayer Questions to Meditate on the Word**

What does this teach me about God and His character?

What does this teach me about human nature, character, and behavior?

What does this teach me about Christ; His grace and salvation?

What does this teach me about the church, life in the people of God, or in the world?