A Prayer Life That Nourishes Your Relationship to God

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Every year I look forward to the slower pace of the summer months because of the opportunity it gives me to reinvigorate my prayer life. It's not that I don't pray during the year, but rarely, in the press of hectic scheduling, am I able to consistently devote the hours necessary to reawaken the intimacy with God that not only I crave, but which is my only defense against burnout.

Just as the old discussion of quality time versus quantity time with your family is a red herring (there IS no quality time, except that which occurs in the midst of a large quantity of time), so with God. The richness of my experience of God in prayer only occurs in the midst of much time set aside to be with him. That said, there are several other things I do which might be helpful to some of you who also will have increased flexibility of time in the coming months, and who want to connect with God in a deeper way.

The main way I do this is to seek an increase in the amount of my meditation. It is no accident that the first two Psalms in the Psalter are not prayers per se, but rather meditations. In fact the very first Psalm, the doorway into the prayer book of the Bible, is a meditation on meditation. Why? We are being taught that while it is certainly possible for deep experiences of the presence and power of God to happen in innumerable ways, the ordinary way for "going deeper" spiritually is through meditation. It is in meditation that we get into deeper self-surrender, then into higher, clearer faith-sights of his beauty, and finally into powerful, dynamic prayer for the world.

What is meditation? In most Protestant traditions, the "personal devotional" life consists of two parts: Bible study and prayer. But meditation is neither and both. The Puritan Richard Baxter wrote,

Solemn or stated meditation is distinguished from the study of the word, wherein our principle aim is to learn the truth; and also from prayer, whereof God himself is the immediate object. But meditation is the affecting of our own hearts and minds with love, delight and humility toward the things contained [in the Word].

An example of meditation is found in Psalm 103:1-2: "Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me bless his holy name. Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits." Notice that this is not the same thing as prayer. He is not speaking directly to God, though it is clear that David is extremely aware of

being in the presence of God. The object of the meditation is his own heart. David is "talking to himself" — to his soul. But the subject of the meditation is truth about God: "forget not all his benefits."

Obviously, David has not intellectually forgotten that God has forgiven his sins, redeemed his life, and so on (Ps.103:2). Rather, he is taking biblical truths and driving them into his own heart until it is affected, delighted and changed by them. Peter Toon has written that meditation is the descent of the mind with Biblical truth into the inmost heart until the whole being yearns for God.

The kind of meditation we see in the Psalms is neither the anti-rational "spirituality" of New Age religion, nor is it the over-rational "spirituality" of much modern evangelical religion. On the one hand, New Age religion takes its cues from Eastern philosophy and thinks of meditation as a calm, serene emptying of the mind of all rational thought. David's meditation, however, is furiously rational. "Why are you cast down, O my soul? And why are you disquieted within me?" he says in Psalm 42, literally arguing and reasoning with his heart. On the other hand, much evangelical religion is afraid of any mystical, experiential element. It conceives of a "devotional life" as only the study of the Bible and then prayer for the strength to practice it. David's meditation, however, is deeply mystical. "One thing … I seek: … to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord" (Psalm 27:4). He is looking for a transformation of the affections of his heart as he prays.

Jonathan Edwards speaks of this very thing in his own practice of meditation:

In reading [the Scripture] I seemed often to see so much light, that I could not get along in reading — almost every sentence seemed to be full of wonders. … I … found, from time to time, an inward sweetness, that used, as it were, to carry me away in my contemplations. I felt alone … sweetly conversing with Christ, and wrapped and swallowed up in God. The sense I had of divine things, would often of a sudden as it were, kindle up a sweet burning in my heart; an ardor of my soul, that I know not how to express. …

Notice how his meditation ("contemplations") on the Scripture led into a deep sense of intimacy in prayer. That is why a Psalm on meditation begins the biblical book on prayer.

How to meditate

Of course, the best way to learn to do anything is to watch a "master" at work. If you read Psalms 1, 42, 77, 103 and 119, you get this very thing. However, we all

need to begin as beginners. There is no better "Beginner's Guide to Meditation" than the model that Martin Luther gave in his letter "A Simple Way to Pray" written to his barber, Peter Beskendorf, in 1535. Luther directed that we should "warm the heart up" through meditation before we prayed. Based on Luther's insights, I use the following outline for a short (30 minutes or less) time of Bible reading, meditation and prayer. After reading a portion of the Bible slowly and choosing one or two things or insights that especially helped me, I take each insight and ask the following questions:

- **Adoration:** How can I love and praise God on the basis of this? What do I see here that I can praise him for?
- **Repentance:** How do I fail to realize this in my life? What wrong behavior, harmful emotions or attitudes result when I forget this?
- **Gospel thanks:** How can I thank Jesus as the ultimate revelation of this attribute of God (reflected upon in #1) and the ultimate answer to this sin or need of mine (reflected upon in #2)?
- **Aspiration:** How does this show me what I should or could be and do? How would I be different if this truth were powerfully real to me?

After I have thought out and at least sketchily written out answers to each question, then I proceed to pray my praises, confessions and supplications to God directly. Often, as you are meditating, or as you are praying, you may feel your heart warm or even melt with a spiritual sense of the reality of God. Sometimes, of course, nothing happens at all! And very rarely, you can have life-changing experiences of the presence of God that you never forget. The number and power of these encounters are completely out of your control. The Spirit blows wherever he pleases (John 3:8). But it has only been with the practice of meditation that my own experience of God's reality has become at all regular and progressively deeper.

"Blessed is the man … [whose] delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night" (Psalm 1:1-2).