

to 'improve' or 'correct' a talk just given by a speaker we are in effect pretending to speak to God when we are really talking to our brethren and sisters. As the Law of Moses indicates, this is a sin.

The foregoing about not using prayers to teach others provides a contrast with singing hymns. As a browse through the hymn book will show, not all hymns are addressed primarily to God, although all should be sung to His glory. In some hymns we address each other. As such, hymns can be used to teach each other. As Paul wrote: "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs,

singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord" (Col. 3:16).

Conclusion

Although not speaking of prayers in Colossians 3:16, the command to "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom" also provides the foundation for praying in the ecclesia, as we have seen. The Word shows us what to pray about and how we should pray. To be able to see when offering the incense we must first attend to the lamps. These things in turn will enhance our fellowship, typified by the 'bread of the faces', or shewbread, as we meet face to face in the ecclesia.

Prayer and meditation

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What is meditation, and how might it help to make the disciple more spiritually complete? What should be meditated upon, and how might the skill be practised? To what end can it serve as part of the disciple's spiritual repertoire? This article seeks to answer these questions.

FIRST LET IT be acknowledged that meditation is certainly a Biblical topic. The English word and its derivatives occur around twenty times in the AV. But what does it really entail? It is best to start with some definitions.

In English, the word comes from a Latin root which means 'to contemplate'. It is not a common word any more, with contemporary civilisation being as hurried and superficial as it is. When the term is used, one might be more inclined to think of the Buddhist tradition than the Christian. For Buddhists, meditation is a core component of the path to Enlightenment. It involves self-discipline, a purification and expansion of the mind, according to which selfishness and ill-thought are purged away.

More importantly, there is a good Hebrew background to the concept. The Hebrew verb for meditation is the verb *hagah*, a word which in some contexts has to do with eating. It is used of a lion growling and drooling over its prey, and more generally of a rumbling, a groaning or even a sighing sound. This brings out the acts of reiteration and processing which accompany medi-

tation, along with the possibility that it may involve enunciation.

The cow and the lion

Before getting to the lion and its dinner, a helpful initial metaphor for meditation might come from thinking about the cow. A cow spends virtually its entire day engaged in the enterprise of ruminating (interesting that this very verb *ruminare* is used metaphorically in English to describe prolonged reflection); the Scriptures correspondingly speak of God's words as the believer's meditation "all the day" (Ps. 119:97). It is an analogy worth pressing, for a cow has no less than seven stomachs through which each mouthful of grass must pass before it may finally be absorbed into the system. Meditating is diametrically opposed to hurry. Whoever saw a cow racing through its daily diet? The image of the cow steadily working its way through the cud, and the elaborate digestive process which ensues, is a powerful one to keep in mind when thinking about meditation.

For captured in that very image is one of the great obstacles to meditation. We are not cows, and we lead far busier lives than our ruminant friends. When shall I find time to chew so slowly, to think so reflectively? How can I change the speed of the clock to find the space for those moments of careful thought? This is **the first challenge to meditation**.

As already mentioned, the verb *hagah* is used of a lion drooling over his prey, that moment of

anticipation in which appetite's call is compulsively obeyed. Who would be fool enough to attempt to come between the lion and the carcass at this moment? Such should be the dedication and the focus of the one who meditates. The lengthy process of carefully stalking the prey, the heated chase and the sudden conquest now finds its fulfilment in that exquisite moment when the lion settles down to savour the rewards of its efforts. (Or, to switch the figure, just think of the human stomach rumbling in anticipation of food.) Meditation is therefore to be a climactic activity, one of the disciple's crowning occupations. Meditation ought to be 'where it's at' for believers, just as tucking into the carcass would be for the lion.

The value of meditation

Those minutes of reflection on God in which we reposition our thinking towards Him and mentally re-situate ourselves can be the most precious of the entire day. We can accomplish more of real power and lasting value in those few minutes than in an entire day of meetings, conference calls, chores, errands and procedures. No one denies that it is tremendously hard to muster the discipline to find these moments of meditation, especially when a day's work is in progress or has already been done, but the more meditation is regarded as one of the disciple's crowning privileges and most powerful resources, the more natural it will become.

Sometimes the choice might even be made to forego some sleep, as Jesus did, so that time might be spent in meditation; there are a number of passages which speak of night-time reflection.¹ This sounds like drastic stuff, and indeed it is. The Lord Jesus spent the whole night in prayer, and it is not to be imagined that this was because he was not tired. He recognised that he needed to spend time in mental communication with his Father, and, since the day was so intensely busy with flocking crowds and questioning disciples, if sleep must be sacrificed to pursue that relationship with God then so it must be. It is all a question of how much of a premium we place upon that relationship. There is nothing wrong with being radical as long as long-term health is not seriously compromised. One option would be to get up early before work, even if it is only one day a week, for some meditation; or resolving to take a few minutes at some convenient time during the day or after a meal. There would appear to be no substitute for discipline here.

Unlike the lion with his prey, the believer's meditation does not necessarily have to come at the end of the chase; it can precede it. Courses for senior management emphasise the value of a few moments' quiet reflection before tackling a difficult phone call or meeting. The challenging scenario is run through in the mind before it takes place, and the desired outcome envisaged. If this has been proven as an effective technique in a worldly context, how much more so if our few minutes are spent reflecting on our role of discipleship and on the watchful eyes of our heavenly Father? The key is to make time to prioritise and value the activity of meditation. It does not have to take long to stop and focus the mind in this way, but it *is* important.

So far, the lion and the cow have brought a number of points to light with respect to meditation, but it is interesting that even in English the parallel between eating and reflective musing and concentration seems to carry across. We speak of *chewing over* a problem, and even of *stewing* on something. This is not the language of a hasty meal thrown together and gobbled down so as to move on as soon as possible to the next task.

The mind—and what to feed it

The mind is indescribably powerful, more so than even the most advanced neurologists and phrenologists conceive. It can be trained to perform amazing feats; consider the yogi who are able to train themselves to anaesthetise parts of their body at will. It is the most powerful weapon for good and ill in the human arsenal. 'Mind over matter' has become humdrum as a concept, yet the truth of what it conveys remains intact. We might analogise a religious version: 'spiritual over natural' or 'spiritual over carnal', conveying both the fact that what is spiritual is more important than what is earthy, but also that it is more powerful and is able to conquer if we only allow it.

So to what end will we use our minds? What will we allow our mental energies to drive us to achieve? The contrast of what is possible is illustrated powerfully in the pair of psalms which open the Psalter. Psalm 1 describes the righteous

1. See Genesis 24:63; Joshua 1:8; Psalm 1:2; 63:5,6; 119:148. It misses something of the point to say that 'day and night' in Joshua 1 and Psalm 1 is merely an idiom for 'continually', as the other references and the example of Jesus show.

man who refuses the compromises of wickedness and finds his pleasures elsewhere: "But his delight is in the law of the LORD; and in His law doth he meditate [*hagah*] day and night" (v. 2).

The opening words of Psalm 2 illustrate by way of contrast what the wicked get up to: "Why do the heathen rage, and the people imagine a vain thing?". The word translated 'imagine' here is again our old friend *hagah*, 'meditate', 'growl', 'rumble', 'mutter', 'reiterate'. This juxtaposition of two potential uses of the mental faculties is important. Society at large concentrates its faculties on vanity, spending its collective mental energy on going nowhere and delighting in that which is vapid. Worse, human ingenuity is often bent on ignoring or overthrowing the reign of God, as is the case in Psalm 2. The mind is able to devour, and can indeed be devoured by, wrong ambition and self-serving obsession. Our **second challenge to meditation** is to divert our minds and our concentration from the useless pursuits of godlessness. The world has its ways of magnetising our intellect and mental energies; there needs to be conscious disengagement to pursue a higher goal.

What sort of thought?

Granted that meditation is a good idea, the next question is: So how to think? There is an issue to be tackled here, for the Western intellectual tradition and modern educational theory conspire to make their children think in particular ways. In academia the prevailing mood is a love of formulae and conclusions. If solutions to problems can be formulated then one can move on to new challenges. The scientific method is also frequently accompanied by enormous intellectual arrogance. In education and in business, on the other hand, knowledge is increasingly 'packaged' and 'friendified' through the bullet point, the chart, the sound-bite, and the PowerPoint presentation. In communication, both written and oral, there is an increasing tendency to dumb-down and perhaps to oversimplify.

Each of these tendencies presents a danger to the would-be meditator and helps illustrate why meditation is a scarce skill in modern society. If we think we have all the answers and can explain everything (as a general attitude, and in relation to specific religious issues and Scriptural passages also) we shall move on; after all, if a problem has been solved, why waste more time thinking about it? It may also turn out that our understanding was pretty superficial. There

can be a spiritual version of intellectual arrogance which becomes a barrier to further spiritual exploration.

Conversely, if we are in the habit of reducing everything in our thinking to a few simple bullet points then we may one day find that our thinking has been correspondingly reduced. There are deep truths in the Scriptures, and they cannot all be comprehended in a few well-chosen words, or in a flowchart of pithy points.

Meditation is about mulling over, musing, exploring, pondering, savouring. It is not about solving or reducing—and it certainly has nothing to do with the pride which so often accompanies modern thought. Laying aside the baggage of Western mental habits is **a third challenge to meditation**.

How to read and why²

What are we to meditate about? For this we can return to Psalm 1: "his delight is in the law of the LORD, and in His law doth he meditate day and night". Meditation on God's law is a consistent theme in the book of Psalms, but one which goes right back to Joshua, as God instructed him on the brink of the Promised Land: "This book of the law shall not depart out of thy mouth; but thou shalt meditate therein day and night, that thou mayest observe to do according to all that is written therein: for then thou shalt make thy way prosperous, and then thou shalt have good success" (Josh. 1:8).

The laws of God are not to depart from the mouth. This must mean that followers of God are to communicate with one another about them, or even that they are to be recited; another meaning (perhaps the root meaning) of *hagah* is 'to mutter', 'to say something over'. The laws of God must be reiterated, as is done through daily reading, exhortation and so forth (there is also good precedent here for reiteration and recitation with children). They must be on the tip of the tongue, a ready topic of conversation.

Second, meditation upon the laws of God will lead to carrying them out: "[in order] that thou mayest observe to do". If we want to do the commandments of God then we had better meditate on them first of all, that we may be able to do them. The reason why this is the case is that, after simply reading the commands, we may 'know' them and be able to take off the surface

2. This heading is borrowed from the title of a book by literary critic Harold Bloom.

meaning of how to apply them in the most obvious situations. But until we have meditated and explored we shall be unlikely to have perceived how deep the commands go, and into how many spheres of circumstance and behaviour they penetrate.

In this way God's commands are like a chain of corridors. We pass through the first corridor and think that we have just about mastered what the command is about when we notice that there is a door at the bottom. We go through and find ourselves in another corridor in which there is a whole new dimension to the command of which we had previously been ignorant. So we try to take the command to a new level, only to discover that there is *another* door at the bottom and that the command is even deeper than we knew, penetrating even to the ground of our being. This is why meditation in God's laws (and in the Scriptures more generally) is key.

If we are not used to meditation it can seem rather intimidating to sit down quietly in a room and just think, even if only for ten minutes. What do we think *about*? How do we stop our minds wandering off aimlessly into some reverie? It is far from easy. This is why meditating upon a Bible passage is particularly helpful; it provides a focus for thought, something infinitely precious and deep to meditate *upon*. This would seem to be a mistake of the Buddhist approach, in which initiates are encouraged to empty their minds completely and exist in a state of mental suspension, as it were, before positive thought can begin. Although their powers of concentration and the concept of purging out ill-thought are to be admired, far better to have something positive to concentrate upon which can drive the ill away.

The kind of meditative reading envisaged here is neither the 'doing the readings' variety nor the 'look up every word' style which some would use as a method of Bible study. Instead it involves a slower, reflective reading in which words, implications and underlying concepts are turned over in the mind. Why does it say that? Why is that phrase chosen and what are its implications? What did God mean by acting so? Why would someone respond in that way? What does this show about human nature and about God? When have I shown that tendency? Why is this recorded in the Bible at all? What needs changing for me as a result of this?

Personally I find that a pen and paper are an enormous help in controlling the fleeting mind

and reflecting on such questions. I like to print out a short piece of Bible text on the computer with lots of white space around and simply scribble musings and wonderings by the side. No doubt we all have our idiosyncratic methods.

All kinds of passages might be chosen, depending on how long we have to meditate: a portion of narrative, perhaps, or a few of the laws from the Pentateuch. Or how about a proverb a day (starting at chapter 10 there is roughly one a day for a year), or a psalm? The psalms are a particularly fruitful area because many of them are themselves self-conscious meditations or reflections on God and on the trials and joys of the life of faith. They express, with great eloquence, what we so often feel yet find hard to express. They help us with our prayer-life, as well as to crystallise our experiences of God and of discipleship.

The works of God

The Scriptures consistently refer to two particular objects of meditation: the *Word* of God (as already considered) and His *Works*. The topic of God's works is a broad one, for it includes His actions in history (in particular, Biblical history, but in a wider sense also), as well as the discerning of His activities in the world today. It also includes observing and reflecting upon the wonders of creation (a topic of a whole sequence of psalms); there is no better way of engaging in *that* kind of meditation than leaving the city behind and going for a long walk or holiday in the countryside. But let it not be merely relaxation and indulgence, but also a trigger for deeper reflection on the majesty of God. This is a thoroughly good thing to do, one of those activities in which both the mind and body benefit. (Interestingly, long walks are often counselled as therapy for the mind for those who suffer from depression.)

Another sphere of God's work is in our own individual lives: "For we are His workmanship" (Eph. 2:10). This means that meditation on our own developing relationship with God and on the state of our walk before Him is entirely appropriate. It includes not merely a consideration of where we are and what might be incumbent upon us in the situation in which God has placed us, but also the development of an awareness of what must become in our characters and of what God would wish us to do. This is an individual matter initially, but the results of our deliberations ought then to be considered and discussed,

Meditation in the Psalms

“Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful. But his delight is in the law of the LORD; and in His law doth he meditate day and night” (Ps. 1:1,2);

“My soul shall be satisfied as with marrow and fatness; and my mouth shall praise Thee with joyful lips: when I remember Thee upon my bed, and meditate on Thee in the night watches” (63:5,6);

“I will remember the works of the LORD: surely I will remember Thy wonders of old. I will meditate also of all Thy work, and talk of Thy doings” (77:11,12);

“I will meditate in Thy precepts, and have respect unto Thy ways . . . My hands also will I lift up unto Thy commandments, which I have loved; and I will meditate in Thy statutes” (119:15,48);

“Mine eyes prevent the night watches, that I might meditate in Thy word” (v. 148);

“O how love I Thy law! it is my meditation all the day. Thou through Thy commandments hast made me wiser than mine enemies: for they are ever with me. I have more understanding than all my teachers: for Thy testimonies are my meditation” (vv. 97-99).

particularly with our spouses so that the family can move forward with a common and harmonious goal.

Techniques of concentration

A final topic: how does one concentrate the mind sufficiently to make any real progress with meditation? This is particularly difficult in a society where we are used to being entertained, and concentration spans are consequently very short. So many images and messages hurl towards the consciousness that to be away from them and to be left with our own thoughts, even for a brief time, can seem disconcerting, boring, stifling—or some combination thereof. This is a **fourth challenge to meditation**.

Practice makes perfect, or at least helps along the way. At first it helps to have a definite topic in mind or a Biblical text to use as a springboard. Writing things down can help give structure to thought and facilitate direction and conclusion-making. Being still and quiet will be important to most, though eventually it might be possible to shut out the outside world to a significant degree.

Of course it is possible to go further. There are deep-breathing exercises and particular body positions that can be adopted as an aid to concentration, and some have found such techniques most helpful. Being able to relax the body so that all the energies are directed to thought (rather than tensing up) can also be valuable. Fresh air and walking can be another stimulant, whereas others would prefer to close their eyes and be very still. Fasting is another possibility, and ought not to be dismissed out of hand. Most who have

engaged in the discipline will claim that it produces a remarkable clarity of mind, which is very hard to achieve through other means. A key point, if such methods are to be attempted, is to direct their use towards godliness, to resist fanaticism about a particular method, and to shun the assumption that what works for one should be rolled out across one's ecclesia!

One can become quite esoteric when discussing techniques of meditation, and it is to be suspected that even those individuals who have tried some of the methods above will have widely differing views on their relative merits. For in discussing this area we have gone beyond the remit of Scripture. One can explore apparatus and techniques indefinitely, but what is really crucial in the modern world is that we find time to stop and be with our God in whatever way that is. Our own personal method of doing this will be exactly that—personal—but the desire and the determination to explore the character and ways of our heavenly Father more deeply through meditation and quiet reflection must be universal.

It will make a difference

Does meditation work? Paul gives the answer when writing to Timothy. He tells the young man to give attention to reading, doctrine, exhortation and prophecy, and then issues the following command: “Meditate upon these things; give thyself wholly to them; *that thy profiting may appear to all*” (1 Tim. 4:15).

So you will profit. And others will see your profit. So don't let anyone tell you (least of all, yourself) that you haven't the time.