

Abide

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Putting Down Roots into the
Word of Life

Happy and blessed. That's what the Bible says marks the lives of those who meditate on the Bible. Bible meditation is a way of relating to God while pondering Scripture. In this book, you will see what Bible meditation involves and what sets this meditation apart from other types of meditation. When you meditate on the Bible, you can enjoy the company of Jesus. Like Mary, "who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said," we listen to the voice of God, in God's presence, through Scripture, to hear and obey and to experience God's caress.

James C. Wilhoit taught at Wheaton College for four decades, primarily teaching courses on spiritual practices, including biblical meditation. He has seen firsthand how meditating on Scripture can be a means of receiving God's restoring grace and renewing one's thinking. He has written over a dozen books, including *Spiritual Formation as if the Church Mattered* (Baker) and, with Evan B. Howard, *Discovering Lectio Divina: Bringing Scripture into Ordinary Life* (IVP). He is an ordained Presbyterian minister (EPC) and serves as a spiritual director.

Wilhoit

James C. Wilhoit

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Meditation and Jesus’ Spiritual Formation

When we meditate on a saying or scene of the Gospel, we do not meditate on a text but on him of whom the text treats and to whom it points: the person of Jesus Christ.

Hans Urs von Balthasar

In an inauspicious house in Caesarea, the church underwent a dramatic change. Cornelius, a Roman soldier, and his household were converted, becoming the first Gentiles in the church. Their conversion was not a quiet affair but dramatic—the Spirit came upon them, and they spoke in tongues just as the apostles had done on Pentecost. Peter explained to those gathered that, “God plays no favorites” (Acts 10:34 MSG). This means that no ethnic, cultural, or geographic barriers stand in the way of anyone receiving forgiveness and new life in Christ. After Peter announced the expansiveness of the Gospel, he gave a concise summary of Jesus’ life and ministry.

He Went Around Doing Good

“You know what has happened throughout the province of Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached—how God anointed Jesus

Meditation is the intensification... of the Word. It is like bringing the diffused rays of the sun to a focal point with a convex lens so that the heat can be felt in all its intensity.

Simon Chan

of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him” (Acts 10:37–38 NIV).

In his summary, Peter gave a thumbnail sketch of Jesus’ life and ministry. He tied Jesus to the ministry of John the Baptist, suggesting they were both part of a single effort by God to reach his people. Then he told how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth for his work as the Messiah, not with oil like the kings of Israel and Judah (think of Samuel anointing David) but with the Holy Spirit and power.

Thus anointed, Jesus went around doing good and healing many who were tyrannized by the devil. Peter summarized Jesus’ death and resurrection by saying, “They killed him, hung him from a cross. But in three days God had him up, alive, and out where he could be seen” (Acts 10:39–43 MSG).

Jesus grew into the kind of person whose life could be captured by saying he went about just naturally doing good. Jesus was the Son of God, and as the Nicene Creed says, he was “very God of very God” and “of one substance with the Father.” He possessed the divine nature fully and lived a sinless life. It is natural, then, to wonder in what sense Jesus “developed” in his spiritual life. Luke tells us that “Jesus grew in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and all the people” (Luke 2:52 NLT). Through Jesus’ constant prayer, patient suffering, meditation, and obedience to Scripture, God gave him a growing spiritual life, so that the New Testament says of him that he “learned obedience from what he suffered” (Heb. 5:8 NIV). His perfect obedience and wise living did not eliminate

growth, but it seemingly accelerated it.

Jesus' Spiritual Formation

In thinking about Jesus' spiritual formation, we need to begin with the family in which God, in his providence, placed him. The Gospels portray Mary and Joseph as faithful and pious Jews. When Gabriel visits Mary to announce that she will be the mother of the Messiah, he tells her that she is highly favored and that the Lord is with her. He also tells her not to be afraid because "you have found favor with God" (Luke 1:30 NIV).

After Gabriel told Mary that she was going to bear the Messiah, she traveled to spend time with her relative Elizabeth, who was pregnant with John the Baptist. Elizabeth praised Mary for her faith, and Mary responded with what is now known as the Magnificat, "My soul doth magnify the Lord" (Luke 1:46 KJV). A table in the appendix (page 136) shows clear relationships between Mary's Song of praise (Luke 1:46-55) and the Old Testament, especially the Psalms. There are a couple dozen clear connections between her song and the Old Testament. In her song, Mary revealed herself to be a woman soaked in Scripture, and presumably she had meditated on the passages she alluded to. It is also noteworthy that Mary knew the Psalms deeply. It was the Old Testament book Jesus quoted most often and the book he prayed when he was on the cross. As Peter Williams observed, Mary was a woman of the Book. "The mother that God chose for Jesus was immersed in the Scriptures."

Simply meditate, as far as you are able, on the life and mysteries of Jesus Christ.

Jean-Pierre de Caussade

In his Gospel, Luke portrays Mary, the mother of Jesus, as a person who practiced the art of meditation. The Holy Spirit made her pregnant with Jesus when the angel spoke the Word of God to her. When she heard the Word of God, it did not go in one ear and out of the other. Instead, she truly heard it and kept it in her heart (Luke 2:19; cf. 11:28)...When the angel announced the conception of Jesus to Mary, she accepted the Word of God, even though she did not understand it. She trusted the will of God...This picture of Mary as a model of meditation is sketched out more fully in two other places. In 2:19 Luke tells us that Mary “treasured up” the words of Christ’s birth, “pondering them in her heart.” She realized that there was much more to the birth of her son than met her naked eye. She therefore kept puzzling over what had happened to her in the light of the shepherds’ report about the message from the angels. She tried to make sense of it for herself by mulling over it and reviewing the whole story in her mind. The same thing happened after Jesus had been left behind at the temple. Luke tells us that Joseph and Mary did not “understand” what Jesus had said about Himself then (2:50). Yet Mary sensed that it was a matter of great importance to her personally. So she “treasured up” these words “in her heart” (2:51). She kept recalling them and paid careful attention to them over a long period of time so as to clarify her relationship with this strange son of hers.

John Kleinig

Matthew describes Joseph as a “righteous man” (Matt. 1:19 NRSV). Jesus was born into a poor, pious family of royal lineage who brought him up “in the discipline and instruction of the Lord” (Eph. 6:4 NRSV). Spiritual formation begins in the home before children walk and talk. Jesus was raised in a godly home and was brought up in the synagogue, where he learned the Scriptures. His formation began in a faithful family and community where he learned the Scriptures and the path of righteousness.

The piety of Jesus’ parents expressed itself in action. To underscore the type of home in which Jesus was nurtured, Luke tells us that they participated in three Jewish ceremonies when Jesus was born. The first was Jesus’ circumcision on the eighth day (Luke 2:21). At his circumcision, he was given the name Jesus. The second was Mary’s purification, thirty-three days after his circumcision. The third ceremony was Jesus’ presentation in the temple. As Luke says, “Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord” (Luke 2:22 NIV). Mary also seems to have made a special offering of her child to God for his service, as Hannah had given Samuel to God at the tabernacle. It is during this visit that the two aged righteous ones, Simeon and Anna, blessed Jesus and prophesied concerning his mission and ministry.

Jesus was providentially placed in a home that took his spiritual growth seriously and used the ordinary means of grace (parental love, spiritual faithfulness, participation in the worshiping community) to foster his spiritual development. He learned the Scriptures and learned, as we will see, to meditate on them.

Through Scripture reading, we expose ourselves to the text. Through Scripture meditation, we allow the text to soak into us; we permit the influence or power of Scripture to act within. Isaiah proclaimed God's message: "My word...shall not return empty" (Is 55:10-11). Jeremiah pictured God's word as a "fire" (Jer 5:14; 20:9) and a "hammer that breaks a rock in pieces" (Jer 23:29). The psalmist speaks of it as warning a person (Ps 19:11). "The word of the Lord came to..." is a common biblical phrase that denotes that the word has become a powerful guiding reality in someone. Scripture meditation, then, is a way to cultivate an openness to the word so that "the word of the Lord comes" to you. This is perhaps akin to what the Virgin Mary did as she "pondered" in her heart the implications of Christ's incarnation (Luke 1:26-38).

James C. Wilhoit and Evan B. Howard

Evidence of His Formation

Another glimpse of Jesus' pious family came when he was twelve. Luke tells us, "Every year Jesus' parents went to Jerusalem for the Festival of the Passover" (Luke 2:41 NIV). Men were required to attend this festival, though it was a practice that had largely been abandoned in Jesus' day. The journey from Nazareth took four or five days in each direction, traveling in a caravan with family and friends. When the family headed back, Jesus turned up missing, and that resulted in a frantic multi-day search for Jesus.

Mary and Joseph found Jesus in the temple, sitting at the feet of the teachers. He assumed the posture of a student and a listener; he entered into a discussion with the teachers. This is the only place Luke portrays Jesus as receiving instruction from Jewish teachers. Luke tells us, "Everyone who heard him was amazed at his understanding and his answers" (Luke 2:47 NIV). He sat with the intelligentsia of his day, Jerusalem's PhDs, for three days, and they were impressed. What were they impressed with? They marveled at "his understanding and his answers," which hints at his practice of meditation. He knew Scripture well and had a profound grasp of its message. The teachers were amazed; they did not dismiss his handling of Scripture. "Their amazement must relate to his deducing things from scripture which they had never found before."

Jesus' Practice of Meditation

We can infer that the adolescent Jesus was already practicing meditation, which gave him a remarkable functional grasp of Scripture and predisposed him

According to Psalm 1, meditation promises at least three things. The first is stability. The person experienced in meditation is like a tree rooted so that wind cannot blow it away. Notice that this tree is planted by streams of water. Trees by streams do well even if there is little rain. This is an image of someone who can keep going in hard, dry times. We need to have the roots of our heart and soul in God at such times, and meditation is the way to do that. The streams of water represent the “law of the Lord,” the Word of God, and to put roots into the water is a metaphor for meditation. Meditation, then, is what gives you stability, peace, and courage in times of great difficulty, adversity, and upheaval. It helps you stay rooted in divine “water” when all other sources of moisture—of joy, hope, and strength—dry up.

Tim Keller

to obey Scripture. One commentator writing on this visit to the temple suggested what Jesus’ mastery of Scripture shows us.

...The understanding with which his mind grasped and combined thoughts and thus his “answers” with which he replied to the questions addressed to him, which revealed this inner grasp of the truth. These rabbis had never met such a boy. This was...a mind that was filled with the heavenly wisdom of God’s Word and truth beyond that of these learned rabbis, yet all unassuming and only eager to learn.

Jesus and his family showed a pattern of obedience to the Law. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said that his mission was not to set aside the Law; rather, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them” (Matt. 5:17 NIV). Since the Law contains a command to meditate on the Law itself (Josh. 1:8; Deut. 6:5–9), we can assume meditation was something Jesus practiced and was part of his home life. We know of his mother’s meditation on the events of his life: “And his mother stored all these things in her heart” (Luke 2:51 NLT). As noted earlier, Mary also appears to have had a deep understanding of the Bible, especially the Psalms.

The four Gospel accounts do not record other events of Jesus’ adolescence and young adulthood, so we do not know the specifics of Jesus’ life during these years. We can infer that the skills, spiritual practices, and character traits he brought into his ministry were developed during this time. When he entered his public ministry, he had a remarkable command of Scripture.

...in informational reading we seek to grasp the control, to master the text... formational reading: it is to allow the text to master you. In reading the Bible, this means we come to the text with an openness to hear, to receive, to respond, to be a servant of the Word rather than a master of the text...Formational reading, however, requires time to "center down," to use the old Quaker phrase, to become still, to relinquish, to let go of your life in the presence of God.

Robert Mulholland

The Old Testament was seemingly at his fingertips, ready for use. He used seventeen Old Testament stories to illustrate his teaching and to bolster his arguments. His teaching is filled with allusions to the Scriptures; he quotes from memory eighteen different Old Testament passages from fourteen different books; 10 percent of his recorded teachings are either Old Testament quotations or allusions. Kimball notes how his vast grasp of the Hebrew Bible enriched his teaching:

"Yet he frequently offered interpretations of Scripture that were radically different from the other teachers of his day because of his superior understanding of Scripture...he expounded the OT with an authority that impressed even his religious opponents, the trained Bible teachers of his day."

Joachim Jeremias, in his comprehensive portrayal of Jesus in his *New Testament Theology*, wrote about the role of the Old Testament in Jesus' discipleship: "Jesus lived in the Old Testament. His sayings are incomprehensible unless we recognize this. His last word, according to Mark, was the beginning of Psalm 22, prayed in his Aramaic mother tongue... Numerically, literal and free quotations from the Psalter predominate on the lips of Jesus, and this was evidently his prayer book." The fact that he "lived in the Old Testament," and that the Psalter "was evidently his prayer book" points to the meditation-based spiritual formation he underwent.

On five occasions in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus challenged his detractors with the question, "Haven't you read?" (see Matt. 12:3, 5; 19:4; 21:16,

Our anxieties and injuries, our aversions and haunting phobias occupy us and demand our attention. But, most of all, we are occupied with the things that we want for ourselves. And we dwell on them day and night. In his commentary on Psalm 1, Luther reflects that those who do not love God or desire His Word do not meditate on it. Instead, “they meditate on other things, namely, on things in which their delight is rooted, things they themselves desire and love, such as gold [money], honor, and flesh [sex].”

John Kleinig

42; 22:31 NIV). He followed this question by relating an Old Testament story or quotation relevant to the situation. When the Pharisees complained that his disciples were plucking grain on the Sabbath (Matt. 12:1–2), Jesus gave a twofold reply, first by asking, “Haven’t you read what David did when he and his companions were hungry?” (Matt. 12:3 NIV, referring to 1 Sam. 21:6), and then, “Or haven’t you read in the Law that the priests on Sabbath duty in the temple desecrate the Sabbath and yet are innocent?” (Matt. 12:5 NIV, referring to Num. 28:8, 10). Notice what Jesus was doing as he applied these Scriptures to the controversy at hand. He used an understanding of the passage that had come by careful thought about its context and meaning. He called his opponents to read and understand the Scriptures more fully. He demonstrated how the insight from meditating on, studying, contemplating, and pondering the Scriptures enables one to see its rich and life-giving message.

This grasp of Scripture came through his program of study and meditation on the Scriptures. John quoted Jesus’ opponents with apparent approval: “How does he know so much without being schooled?” (John 7:15 MSG). He engaged in debates with the intellectual leaders and had a deep knowledge of the Scriptures, which he could effortlessly access. Jesus could read Hebrew (Luke 4:17–20) and would have had access to the Scriptures in synagogues, but presumably he did not have his own copy. His quotations from Scripture were from memory and showed a depth of personalized understanding that is the unmistakable fruit of meditation.

... humbly accept the word
God has planted in your
hearts, for it has the power
to save your souls.

James 1:21 NLT

Jesus overcame the devil through his skillful use of Scripture. Luke tells us that Jesus, “full of the Holy Spirit” (Luke 4:1 NIV), was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, where the devil tempted him. For forty days, there was a spiritual battle, and it seems to have reached its climax in the three temptations: make bread out of stones; spectacularly jump from a pinnacle and rely on angels to break the fall; worship Satan in return for all the kingdoms of the world. Jesus answered these temptations with the bold use of Scripture.

One of the first things to note about Jesus is that he loved to minister to people, but he was distrustful of the praise of the crowds. He was constantly slipping away for prayer and solitude, not to check his phone or just chill. Luke sums up this tendency by telling us that the crowds were swarming, “But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed” (Luke 5:16 NIV). And when the Pharisees were furious with him, Luke says that Jesus’ response was to go out alone to the mountain to pray through the night (Luke 6:12).

It was his regular practice to attend the synagogue on the Sabbath (Luke 4:16), where he would no doubt join with the rest in the prayers and worship and hear the Scriptures read. He realized that his mission was given by the Father and was not to be found by listening to the crowds, so he was up early praying and meditating and constantly abiding with the Father.

Meditation Enabled Jesus Not to Waste His Trials

The author of Hebrews emphasizes Jesus’ formation through his suffering, which brought about his maturation. “Son though he was, he learned

There are not many rules, but one everlasting and unchangeable rule to live by. For this reason...David's statement that the life of a righteous man is a continual meditation upon the law [Ps. 1:2]...is just as applicable to every age, even to the end of the world.

John Calvin

obedience from what he suffered and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him” (Heb. 5:8–9 NIV).

Listen to how the Messiah is described in Isaiah 53: “He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief...he was despised, and we esteemed him not....Stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted....He was crushed for our iniquities.... He was oppressed, and he was afflicted” (Isa. 53:3–5, 7 ESV). Without bitterness or complaining, Jesus used his suffering for his maturation.

We know about Jesus' practice of voluntary spiritual disciplines (meaning disciplines he chose to do), like prayer, fasting, meditation, and worship. Perhaps as significant for Jesus' spiritual formation was his participation in what we might call involuntary disciplines (his wise response to trials). These would include responding wisely to criticism, opposition, betrayals, grumbling and plotting directed at him. Jesus did not waste his trials. Again, notice how the writer to Hebrews captures this: “During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears..., and he was heard because of his reverent submission” (Heb 5:7 NIV). Note the reality of the pain and suffering Jesus faced, shown in “fervent cries and tears,” and observe the evidence of his spiritual formation: “he was heard because of his reverent submission.” He was heard, but not simply because he was the Son of God and the Father had no choice but to listen to him. No, he had grown to the point that his approach to God could be called “reverent submission.”

As you move from reading to meditation, you are seeking to saturate and immerse yourself in the Word, to luxuriate in its living waters, and to receive the words as an intimate and personal message from God. The purpose of meditation is to penetrate the Scriptures and to let them penetrate us through the loving gaze of the heart.

Kenneth Boa

Why does this matter? The writer to Hebrews thought it was important for us to realize that Jesus faced struggles and temptations as we do. We all know the power of discovering that someone understands what we are going through, that someone knows the pain we are experiencing: facing the struggles of loving a mentally ill sibling, a betrayal by a close friend, the loss of a dream.

Jesus is not a porcelain figure with a painted-on perpetual smile. Here are a few of the things Jesus experienced: he was homeless; he experienced a sympathetic crowd turning on him and trying to kill him; his family said, “He is out of his mind” (Mark 3:21 NIV); he dealt with the death of close friends; he endured gossip and slander; his close followers didn’t understand his message; he endured separation from God. In whatever hard situation you find yourself—opposition, mental distress, interpersonal strife, or physical suffering—Jesus experienced these too, and he models how they can be used for our spiritual growth. So don’t waste your trials—your financial pressure, family pain, relational tension, or health challenge. Instead, learn from Jesus the power of involuntary disciplines. We have seen that Jesus used Scripture in his trials (such as his temptation and his crucifixion), and I believe his ability to use Scripture is the result of his meditation practice.

Psalm 119 focuses on the Word of God and clarifies that there is a deep connection between meditation and suffering, especially in the pain of interpersonal conflict. “May the arrogant be put to shame for wronging me without cause; but I will meditate on your precepts” (Ps. 119:78 NIV). “It was good for me to be afflicted so that I might learn your decrees”

In the timeless story of Mary and Martha, these sisters offer a poignant example of two styles of thinking: distraction versus attentive awareness. Martha, while preparing a meal for Jesus and his disciples, was “distracted by her many tasks,” while Mary “sat at the Lord’s feet.” Martha subsequently complained to Jesus: “Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself?” Her complaint seems fair, but Jesus surprisingly defended Mary: “Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her” (Luke 10:38–42). But here we see Jesus call us to also carve out time to sit quietly and listen, even when it seems there is no time for it. So often, our being, even more than our doing, is what connects us to the heart of God.

Irene Kraegel

(Ps. 119:71 NIV). Jesus showed a pattern of dwelling on God’s Word in the face of opposition and that contributed to his “reverent submission” to God.

Jesus’ Deep Working Knowledge of Scripture

After Jesus’ resurrection, he met two followers on the road to Emmaus. They were downcast because of Jesus’ crucifixion. Without revealing his identity to them, “Jesus took them through the writings of Moses and all the prophets, explaining from all the Scriptures the things concerning himself” (Luke 24:27 NLT). When Luke says that Jesus explained to them all the things about himself throughout the Bible, he means that Jesus gave them the through line, the whole story of redemption. “Then he started at the beginning, with the Books of Moses, and went on through all the Prophets, pointing out everything in the Scriptures that referred to him” (Luke 24:25–27 MSG). Jesus told the story of redemption in a way that captivated them. Afterward, they said to each other, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?” (Luke 24:32 NIV). He found learners eager to understand the events that had turned their world upside down. He did this from memory, without notes or a Bible, because he had meditated and memorized these portions of Scripture and knew them like the back of his hand, for they were deep in his heart. He pondered the Scripture that was read in public worship and that he read on his own, and he used it in his ongoing conversation with his Father. We can slip away to a quiet spot to pray and meditate and, in this way, imitate Jesus’ pattern.