

Psalm 119:97-104 (*Mem*), No. 4

“Meditation”

September 27, 2015

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We introduced our sermons on Psalm 119 by considering its literary character, an acrostic poem the structure of which serves as an aid to memorization, and its function, along with the other psalms, as an instrument of enculturation, the fashioning of mind and heart by the deep impression of the Bible’s worldview upon the heart, by the deep penetration of the Word of God into thought and life. We then considered the nature of the psalm as a lament; not the way most readers of the psalm have thought about it, not the way I have always thought about the psalm, and how its nature as a lament changes our sense of its message. The man in the psalm was committing himself to the Lord throughout, in defiance of the circumstances of his life, and he was appealing to the Lord to honor that commitment. And then the last time, two Lord’s Day evenings past, we considered what the Psalm had to teach us about the nature of our relationship with God, its objective character, and its mediation through the Word of God. We know that God is with us not because we can necessarily *feel* his presence, because we often cannot, not because we can so easily see how the Christian faith lifts us above the struggles of life, because it does not, but because the Word of God teaches us that he is with us and will never leave us or forsake us.

Our lives are sustained by the Word of God and by the knowledge that we gain from the Word of God. This is true much more than we often realize. The Dutch New Testament professor, Seakle Greijdanus, once said,

“Apart from the Word I am nothing and can do nothing and know nothing.”

Exactly right. More than we often stop to think of it, that is the truth about our lives and about every Christian life. That statement also perfectly distills the attitude and the understanding of the author of Psalm 119. And that is way a man thinks and speaks who, as the Dutch theologian and preacher Klaas Schilder once said of Greijdanus, “*had crept through the New Testament.*” The author of Psalm 119 was like that. He had *crept through* the Word of God, mastering it book by book and passage by passage. If the Bible and its teaching, if what we read in the Bible and learn in the Bible is the foundation of our faith and life, the truth according to which we must think and behave, then obviously we must know that Bible, really know it, and have internalized its teaching. And that, very obviously, is what this man has done. Any reader of the psalm can tell that this man is talking about something he is thoroughly familiar with!

That is the sort of statement to which Christians nod their heads. Of course they agree with that. We are Bible people. We read our Bibles. We hear the Word of God preached in church. We study it in Sunday School. We buy heavy study bibles that include explanatory notes that enable us to understand the Bible better. We may even enter notes ourselves in the margins of our Bible, to retain some insight into its teaching that was new to us. But is it one thing to read the Bible, even to love the Bible in a way, and another thing to cherish it and listen to it as the very voice of God in one’s heart and life. We all know this from our own experience. We can read the Bible – though some of us would confess we don’t read it nearly as much as we should – even find real

interest in it, but can nevertheless come away from the experience having to confess that we didn't interact with the Word of God as if God himself were speaking to us. If we thought *that*, wouldn't it be the case that people would have almost to pry our Bibles out of our hands.

Many men impress us with their commitment to reading the Bible. William Gouge, the 17th century Puritan used to read fifteen chapters of the Bible every day. The late Anglican archdeacon, T.C. Hammond, used to read through the Bible four times a year. Many Christians through the ages and still today read through the Bible every year. But all of those men would admit that it is not only important *that* you read the Bible *but how you read it*. For thirty years now I have read the Bible through each year. But I am the first one to admit that when I read the Bible that way I am not pondering it carefully as I go along and I often am not conscious that I am actually, literally listening to the voice of God. Sometimes, but not usually. That is a very different kind of Bible-reading that what we are talking about tonight. That reading through the Bible has been immensely valuable to me through the years. It has given me a familiarity with the Word of God I would not otherwise have had. But it is certainly not meditation. No one can meditate his or her way through Holy Scripture in a year.

When John Duncan, the celebrated "Rabbi" Duncan of 19th century Scottish Presbyterian, was a missionary to Jews in Budapest, he had a daily Bible study with some Jewish students, one of whom was Alfred Edersheim, who would become the celebrated biblical scholar and author of *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, a large book that has been continuously in print now for 160 or 170 years. Edersheim was one of Duncan's first converts. Rabbi Duncan would later say of those young men, "They used to read day after day the Epistles of Paul, as if they had been letters that had come by that morning's post." [Cited in Moody Stuart, *The Life of John Duncan*, 71] *That kind of reading* is closer to what this author means by meditation, but I'm not sure that *it* is yet meditation.

Thomas Goodwin, the celebrated Puritan preacher and theologian of the mid-17th century, and one of the divines of the Westminster Assembly, the body that produced our *Westminster Confession of Faith*, recollected once going to hear, sometime in the 1620s, John Rogers of Dedham, an early Puritan son of thunder.

"Mr. Rogers was...on the subject of...the Scriptures. And in that sermon he falls into an expostulation with the people about their neglect of the Bible.... He personates God to the people, telling them, 'Well, I have trusted you so long with my Bible; you have slighted it, it lies in such and such houses all covered with dust and cobwebs; you care not to listen to it. Do you use my Bible so? Well, you shall have my Bible no longer.' And he takes up the Bible from its cushion, and seemed as if he were going away with it and carrying it from them; but immediately turns again and personates the people to God, falls down on his knees, cries and pleads most earnestly, 'Lord, whatever thou dost to us, take not thy Bible from us; kill our children, burn our houses, destroy our goods, only spare us thy Bible, only take not away thy Bible.' And then he personates God again to the people: 'Say you so? Well, I will try you a while longer; and here is my Bible for you. I will see how you will use it, whether you will love it more...observe it more...practice it more, and live more according to it.' By these actions...he put all the congregation into so strange a posture that...the place was a mere Bochim, the people generally...deluged

with their own tears; and [Goodwin himself said] that he himself, when he got out... was fain to hang a quarter of an hour upon the neck of his horse weeping before he had power to mount..." [Cited from John Howe in Packer, *Quest for Godliness*, 97-98]

We read Psalm 119, verse after verse, and we know we are in the presence of someone who thought about the Bible in *that way, treasured it in that way*. He *loved* the Bible and he *knew* the Bible, or at least as much of the Bible as existed in his time. He had, as we said, probably committed vast sections of it to memory. But more than accumulate the knowledge of what the Bible contains, this man pondered what he found there, he mulled it over in his mind, he was constantly at work figuring out what it means by what it says and how its meaning ought to shape his thinking and living day by day. In trouble he turned to it, in times of blessing he remembered what it says about where blessings come from and what believers are to do with them. In times of darkness he looked in it for light; in times of confusion he searched it, looking for some direction. If there was an answer to a life-question he had, he knew he would find it there. If there were no answer, he knew he would nevertheless find in the Bible the encouragement and guidance he needed to move forward in the darkness.

And under his inspiration Christians have done the same and encouraged others to do the same thing: make Holy Scripture our conversation partner in life. Here is John Chrysostom, the great preacher of early Christianity.

"Listen carefully to me, I entreat you... [P]rocure books that will be medicines for the soul... At least get a copy of the New Testament, the Apostle's epistles, the Acts, the Gospels, for your constant teachers. If you encounter grief, dive into them as into a chest of medicines; take from them comfort for your trouble, whether it be loss, or death, or bereavement over the loss of relations. Don't simply dive into them. Swim in them. Keep them constantly in your mind. The cause of all evils is the failure to know the Scriptures well." [Cited in C. Hall, *Reading Scripture with the Church Fathers*, 96]

Now, we can easily enough agree with that, but really to dive into the Scriptures and swim in them is not as easy as it sounds, is it? We face real problems.

1. First, the Bible is a very big book. It takes a lot of reading. You almost never hold in your hand a book that was intended to be read – as opposed, for example, to an encyclopedia intended to be consulted – that is longer or anywhere near as long as the Bible.
2. What is more, the Bible was written a very long time ago. It reads differently than a modern book. It is composed of very different kinds of writing, some particularly challenging for a modern reader. It has parts that are challenging for other reasons: think of the genealogies, or the liturgical regulation of Leviticus, or the oracles of judgment one after another in Jeremiah or Isaiah or Ezekiel, or in the prophets or the apocalyptic prophesies of Daniel and Revelation.
3. For this and other reasons we have a sinful tendency to find reading the Bible boring, especially if we have read it many times and feel that we already have more knowledge of its teaching than most people do. After all, if Paul's letters were first sent through the post, we've got the same letter in the mail now many times over. It can't be brand new information forever! I

know that is true of me. It is a temptation to skim when I am reading because I know what the text contains; I've read it many times before.

4. In other cases we find our reading of the Bible not boring but difficult, even frustrating. We read but aren't really sure we understand what we are reading. Oh, we get the main points, but even Peter admitted that reading Paul was no walk in the park! And if Paul isn't, what about Ecclesiastes or some of the Psalms or many passages in the prophets. After all, why do we find it so fascinating when someone explains a biblical text to us that we hadn't understood very well before? The Bible is scintillating; but only if you understand what it is saying.

5. But, beyond such difficulties as those, we have another: we like our sins and don't want them exposed. We like living by sight and don't want to be rebuked for our failure of faith. And we are content with our lives in many ways that the Bible will expose and condemn. The Bible is a book that in some ways is dangerous to our peace and comfort, to our comfortable illusions about ourselves, no matter that no other book can bestow such true peace and true comfort. A superficial reading of the Bible serves, then, to console us with the evidence of our faithfulness without forcing us to reckon with what careful attention to the words we are reading might reveal about ourselves.

Alexander Whyte reminds us that "There is no book in all the world that demands such a combination of mental gifts and spiritual graces to understand it aright as the Bible." [*Samuel Rutherford*, 21] And that is true. Of what other book might we say that someone who devotes his entire life, even his entire professional life to its careful study may very well entirely miss its meaning? But that happens all the time. There are professors of biblical study who know more about the Bible than I do, who can read it comfortably in its original languages, but who do not really understand it, do not hear God's voice speaking in it and so do not revere it as the Word of God, and have no interest in hiding it in their hearts, as did the author of Psalm 119. They read its laws, but they don't realize how crucial, how important it must be for any human being to keep them. Indeed, such is the place of the Bible in human life that it continues to attract students who have virtually no idea what it is that they actually hold in their hands!

But, admitting that the careful, intentional, serious, honest engagement with the text is hard work for us is not the same thing as saying that such a reading of the Bible is not necessary, not the way forward in the Christian life, not the honor that the Bible deserves from us, and not, in fact, what every true Christian, down deep, wants for himself or herself. As Amy Carmichael reminds us:

"The amazing thing is that everyone who reads the Bible has the same joyful thing to say about it. In every land, in every language, it is the same tale: where that Book is read, not with the eyes only, but with the mind and heart, the life is changed. Sorrowful people are comforted, sinful people are transformed, people who were in the dark walk in the light. Is it not wonderful to think that this Book, which is such a mighty power if it gets a chance to work in an honest heart, is in our hands today? And we can read it freely, no man making us afraid." [*Thou Givest... They Gather*, 7]

That reading of the Bible *with mind and heart*, is what is meant, I think, by the author's use of the term "meditate," a word we find in vv. 97 and 99. It appears in either noun or verb form (שׁיח; שׁיחה) eight times in the Psalm. The idea is expressed, however, in many other ways in the psalm, as, for example in v. 103 where the image is of eating the Word of God, a metaphor that also occurs several times in the Bible. The obvious idea of that metaphor is that of taking the Bible, digesting it, making it a part of one's self. Meditation gets at the same idea more literally.

The Hebrew word seems to suggest *the rehearsal of a matter in one's mind*. But the interesting wrinkle is that while in our Western culture we expect to do this privately in our heads, in Hebrew culture it might be done just as well out loud, in oral recitation, or in conversation with someone else or among a group of people. So the verb "to meditate" in the Hebrew Bible can also mean "to speak." Interestingly, if the subject is painful, the verb can also be translated "to complain." This collection of possible translations for the same word is instructive. In Proverbs 6:22, for example, we read that if the son binds his father's teaching to his heart, that teaching *will talk to him*. The verb translated "talk" is our verb "to meditate." The idea is that as we internalize the Word of God, ruminate over it, consider what it means, and apply it to our lives, that truth will "speak up" as it were when we need it.

What is clear is that meditation is not the same thing as simply hearing or reading. One can read a great deal and never meditate on anything he or she has read. Meditation comes after hearing or reading. You rarely meditate on the narrative of a detective story or adventure novel you are reading simply for pleasure. Meditation is the work of reflection, consideration, of pondering what one has heard or read and of applying its truth to the issues of life. This is, by the way, another reason we find meditation difficult. Most of us haven't established the habit. Our ordinary practice is to read without meditation. We read something and instantly move on both mentally and spiritually. It is a habit hard to break.

So how is such meditation done? If we are to meditate on the Word of God, precisely how are we to do that? In Dietrich Bonhoeffer's clandestine seminary before the Nazis closed it down, the German theologian had developed a routine he expected all his students to follow. One part of that routine was meditation on a single verse of the Bible for an entire week, half an hour each day. They weren't allowed to consult commentaries or to read the verse in its original Hebrew or Greek. They had to deal with the verse as God's word to them personally. The famous Swiss theologian, Karl Barth, when he heard about this practice, expressed his displeasure to Bonhoeffer. To him, he said, it smacked of monasticism, as if the mere exercise in and of itself had some merit.

I mention this only to say that precisely *how* one ought to meditate on the Word of God is not easy to say. People have tried to devise a *method*, they have devised many methods in fact, but one person's method may be another's bondage to a dull routine. What is more, for many of us, myself included, we may find that half an hour a day brings us very quickly to the end of any useful thought about some verse of the Bible.

So *that* we should meditate on the Word of God is clear enough. *How* we ought to do that is a not so clear. And perhaps that opens the way for us to realize that meditation can be many things.

1. If you find that you don't understand what is being said in any portion of God's Word, studying it until you do – perhaps with the use of a study Bible or a commentary – is a form of meditation. Indeed, listening carefully to a sermon and taking care to take note of new understandings of a biblical text can be meditation.
2. Praying over a text and asking God both to teach it to you and to help you apply it to your life is a form of meditation.
3. Talking a biblical statement over with others is a form of meditation. Others can help us to see what we never saw before or to realize how the truth might be applied in ways we never considered before. I cannot tell you how many times this has happened to me. I have heard another Christian speaking about the meaning or the practical import of a statement of the Word of God and the light has gone on in my head.
4. Meditation can be the recitation of Holy Scripture, at least if it is done with real intention. Whether or not a light goes on, the Word is being hidden in the heart, there to rest until it is required, there to rest until it can speak up when we need it.
5. Then, of course, meditation can be simply stopping to ponder what the Bible says, to think hard about what we have read, perhaps especially concerning those things we know very well that are taught in the Bible, those things we can so easily take for granted because we are familiar with them. Luther is supposed once to have sat for an hour trying to understand the Lord's cry from the cross "My God, My God, Why have you forsaken me?" only to give up mystified. Whether or not that is a true story – Luther is supposed to have said and done many things he never said or did – surely there are many such statements in the Word of God that deserve our careful reflection, putting questions to the text and seeking their answer.

Take for example the fundamental facts that you were a willing sinner, a rebel against God by nature, and would have been entirely willing as people you know are, as members of your family may be, to walk the broad road that leads to destruction right off the cliff, but, in the nick of conversion you were placed instead on the narrow road that leads to life and, you are going to spend eternity in the world of joy when you could have, and left to yourself would have so easily gone instead to hell. We can go for days on end without thinking a serious thought about that magnificent yet chilling reality. Here is Charles Simeon, the great Anglican minister of the 18th and 19th centuries, an acknowledged expert on the Christian life.

“By constantly meditating on the goodness of God and on our great deliverance from that punishment which our sins have deserved, we are brought to feel our vileness and utter unworthiness; and while we continue in this spirit of self-degradation, everything else will go on easily. We shall find ourselves advancing in course; we shall feel the presence of God; we shall experience his love; we shall live in the enjoyment of his favor and in the hope of his glory. Meditation is the grand means of our growth in grace; without it, prayer itself is an empty service. You often feel your prayers scarcely reach the ceiling, but... get into this humble spirit by considering how good the Lord is, and evil you are, and then prayer will mount on wings of faith to heaven.” [In Moule, 137-138]

How much have you and I recently meditated, pondered, mulled over in our minds the astonishing fact of our own salvation? In other words, there are many things in the Bible *we ought to think about*, mull over in our minds, until their truth is weighing on us in some way. Let me give you a few examples. But, before I do, let me set the context for our consideration of what it means for us to meditate on the Word of God and why it is so important for us to do this.

The sad fact of the matter is this: while we know very well that we ought *always* to be growing in the grace and knowledge of the Lord, while we ought to be putting our sins to death and acquiring new skills in living the Christian life and deeper motivations to do so, some of us are not growing spiritually, at least in any obvious way. And all of us, from time to time, pass through periods of living on a spiritual plateau, sometimes long periods of stasis rather than upward movement. There are many reasons for this. In some cases our indulgence of a particular sin has demoralized and paralyzed us spiritually. In other cases we have become weary of the fight. In still other cases long indulged habits have proved very difficult to break even though we want very much to break them. Perhaps in still other cases we simply don't know what to do, how we ought to proceed, what forward steps we ought to take in our walk with the Lord. I'm not saying that the Lord is not still at work in us and doing things in our hearts and lives, surely he is if we are his children; but it is not obvious to us that forward progress, or, better, upward progress is being made. *And at this point meditation on the Word of God can be of immense importance and perhaps the most important thing of all.*

1. Let's say that a man has an anger problem. It has been a besetting sin all his adult life. Too often he's angry with his wife or angry with his children. His anger is a dark cloud over their lives. While in the heat of the moment he may try to justify himself, he knows very well that he has no right to his anger and that it is both wicked and harmful. From time to time during his life he has made great efforts to put it to death and has had some success, but he still gives way to it far too often. I wish this were a rare thing, but you and I know it is not. Besides constant prayer to God for help in overcoming what is so clearly a sinful thing, a hurtful thing, besides humbling himself before others and seeking their help, what is required of that man?

Well, surely this: he must think carefully, long and hard, about what the Bible says about anger. Think of just one such a statement, the one in James 1:19-20:

“...let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, *slow to anger*; for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God...”

Now stop and think about that statement. That is what meditators do: they stop and they think. Anger is contrary to the purposes of God in your life. It is not only unrighteous in itself, it works against righteousness everywhere in your life and in the lives of others. My goodness, even the pagans knew this! Aristotle defined anger as “the desire to inflict retaliatory distress.” You want someone else to pay! How small minded! You're upset, so in a pique you say, “Well, I'm upset; let them be upset!” But how many thoughts and realizations that should set in train for a Christian.

1. Who are you to retaliate against others, when God has not retaliated against you *as he had every right to do and so well might have done!*

2. How little anger we see in Jesus even when he was genuinely and appallingly mistreated in ways you've never been mistreated. Do we love him so little that his example means nothing to us? And what sort of example are we setting for others when we behave in such a petty and selfish way, as angry people do.
3. What is anger, after all, but a lack of self-control – a particularly unmanly sort of moral weakness – and a self-centeredness that makes your own happiness the central issue of life for everyone around you? It is precisely the opposite of that humility and other-centeredness that is to be the mark of the man or woman in Christ.
4. What about all those commands: to turn the other cheek, to return blessing for a curse, to forgive as we have been forgiven, and on and on. Have you utterly forgotten them? They are supposed to be the behaviors that most dramatically distinguish the Christian from the non-Christian because they are the most Christ-like. And that's the behavior that's missing in your life!

Now put a few such biblical texts together, like the one in James, that condemn anger and then mull them over. Not once, not twice, but day after day and week after week. Memorize them. *That* is meditation and it is how men and women who have surmounted their sins or, at least largely so, have put the Word of God to use. They have eaten it, digested it, and made it part of themselves by meditation. As a result the Word of God is speaking to them all the time. I'm glad to say that there are at least some things I know not to say and do that years ago I would have said and done, and all because I have thought enough about the Word of God now to know better. I need very much to add to that list!

2. Or, take a commandment such as we find in Ephesians 5. We've heard it a thousand times if we've been Christians any length of time: "Husbands love your wives as Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her." We nod our heads. My goodness, gentlemen, have you thought about that statement, *really thought about it*? A Christian marriage is one in which the husband's role resembles a crucifixion, in which loving self-sacrifice on behalf of his wife is the mark of his conduct as a husband.

Is that how you and I evaluate ourselves as Christian husbands? And since it is easy to nod one's agreement with such radical statements and then do little or nothing to put them into practice, mull over this question: precisely what does that mean to love your wife as Christ loved the church in practical terms – Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, etc., morning and evening, weekdays, weekends, Lord's Day – that I should love my wife as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her? Think of all that the Lord Jesus did and does for us and apply each one of those graces to your life in your marriage. *That's* meditation and that's how the teaching of God's word and the implications of that Word become a living power in your life.

It is one thing to believe that husbands must love their wives as Christ loved the church. It is another thing altogether to work out that truth, to practice it day by day, to make self-denial for the sake of someone else your immediate intention and purpose each day. Meditation cuts through the cant and makes us take the actual statements of the Bible as seriously as they ought to be taken!

3. Or, one more. When asked how many times we ought to forgive our neighbor, Jesus said “Seventy times seven.” And you know the role of the number seven. “Seventy times seven” is endlessly. I know people, Christian people, who are so used to carrying a grudge, nursing it, and refusing to let it go – so practiced at justifying this behavior – that they really don’t see, can’t be made to see the problem. But it is a huge problem! It is an attitude that strikes at the very root of the gospel of Jesus Christ. We who celebrate God’s willing forgiveness of our repeated sins *simply cannot hold grudges without utterly contradicting our profession of faith in Christ*. We say we love him for his grace and mercy and, like the servant in the Lord’s parable, turn around and refuse that grace and mercy to others because they have offended us in some so much smaller way. Oh, we will never put it that way, of course. We will insist that we have forgiven them. Our withholding our love and our acceptance is for other reasons; well, after all, we say, there are other issues here. Common on! Think! Meditate! Is that what forgiveness meant when Jesus gave it to you? Did he forgive you and then act as if he hadn’t?

How does Jesus forgive? He separates our sins from us as far as the east is from the west; he buries them in the deepest sea; he remembers them no more; he tramples them under his feet; he casts them behind his back. I know people who are absolutely sure that they have forgiven people who have sinned against them, but are constantly remembering those sins. They haven’t cast them behind their back. They’ve got them in their pocket so they can get them out and look at them anytime they want. Have we done *that* with the sins that have been committed against us, or what we have taken to be sins committed against us?

That question requires some meditation. Both pondering what the Bible actually says and how it says it, mulling over God’s forgiveness of us, and using all of that to hunt down the hypocrisy in our own hearts. The Bible does too little in our lives, so much less than it might do, because we don’t put it to use, wield it as a weapon, and force ourselves to face the implications of its teaching.

The Word of God is a phenomenal gift God has given us -- only one thing greater, that being himself -- and can be a phenomenal power if only we put it to use. That is what meditation is: putting the Bible to use and making the very most of it that we can. The result of that can only be good: a holier life, a life more useful to others, and a life more glorifying to God.

Think of it carefully,
 Study it prayerfully,
 Deep in your heart
 Let its oracles dwell.
 Ponder its mystery,
 Slight not its history,
 For none ever loved it
 Too fondly or well.