

The following is an excerpt from a small book called “The Way of a Worshiper” by Buddy Owens, ©2002, Maranatha!, pages 121-133. As far as I can tell, it is now out of print. You may find it helpful in learning to integrate your habits of prayer and Bible reading.

Chapter Fifteen: Reading God’s Mind, Praying God’s Thoughts

Approach the Bible not only as a book which was once spoke, but book which is now speaking. God’s speaking is in the continuous present. – A.W. Tozer (1897-1963) ¹

Reading the Bible is reading God’s mind. The Bible is a personal letter from God to you. It reveals his deepest thoughts and feelings about you.

You can be absolutely confident that he cares about you, because you have his Word on it.

You can know without a doubt that he has a plan for your life, because you have his Word on it.

He knows your struggles, he feels your heartache, he hears your prayers, he shares your joys, he takes great delight in you—you have his Word on it.

God has given us the Bible as a means of knowing him and enjoying his presence. It is a catalyst for worship. The Scriptures tell us not just what God did but how God

¹ A.W. Tozer, from *The Pursuit of God*, 1942, 1982 Christians Publications

does things. They are the primary means of hearing his voice and discovering his will. They reveal to us his unchanging nature and character.

The Scriptures are the starting points of our conversations with God. So how do you let the Bible direct your prayer life?

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Let me suggest a method:

Read for depth, not for distance.

Reading the Bible for distance is like skipping a stone across the surface of the stream behind Sutter's Mill. It's fun to impress ourselves or our friends with how far we can skip the stone, but we never stop to explore anything beneath the water's surface. We fail to recognize just how deep and clear the water is. We don't see the life teeming in its depths. And we miss out on the gold nuggets lying in the streambed.

But reading for depth instead of distance gives us the opportunity to search for and discover the untold riches that await us. The longer we look beneath the surface, the more we see, and the more we see, the richer we become.

In *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, Don Whitney says that reading the Word is like making a cup of tea: You are the cup of water and the Word is the tea bag. Reading the passage once is like dipping the tea bag into the water one time. Not much happens to the water. But if you immerse the bag and let it steep in the water, the water will soon absorb all of the flavor and aroma and color of the tea.

This kind of reading is called "meditative reading" of Scripture. Meditative Scripture reading is reading for depth, not for distance.

To a lot of people, meditation sounds strange and New Age-y, like something “those people” in California would do, probably in groups—empty their minds, twist their bodies, and get in touch with some kind of cosmic weirdness.

But true Biblical meditation means to think deeply on a passage of Scripture, to fill your mind with it, to look at it from different angles, like a jeweler examining the various facets of a stone.

When I started to read the Bible meditatively, I began to experience tremendous changes in my life:

- *My thought life changed.* I struggled far, far less with lust and temptation.
- *My passions changed.* I found myself becoming more patient and compassionate.
- *My outlook changed.* I began to see circumstances, challenges and opportunities through a lens of Scripture. I found that the Scriptures were taking root so deeply in my soul through meditative reading that they became the filters for my point of view.
- *My prayer life changed.* It became conversational, rather than one sided. I let God start the conversation through his Word, and prayed according to what I heard him saying in the Scriptures I was studying.
- *My values changed.* I found that I was developing an insatiable appetite for the Word of God. I turned off the TV. I put away the novels and the news magazines. I even turned off the car stereo and devoted all of my spare time to conversation with God. My car became a private sanctuary of prayer and worship.
- *My motivation changed.* This may sound funny, but I stopped trying to *do* something and simply began to *be* something—or perhaps I should say, “someone.” I stopped reading and praying for the sake of duty to God, and instead began

reading and praying for the sake of friendship with God. I found myself, as John Piper says, “wasting time with God.”

And herein lay the greatest surprise of all: what used to be minutes that seemed like hours, now became hours that seemed like minutes. I lost all sense of time when I lost myself in meditative reading and prayer.

I am a very different person today than I was just a few short years ago, and the primary cause of the change has been the meditative reading of Scripture.

Perhaps I can best explain my process of meditative Scripture reading with a word picture. One of my favorite things to do on a beautiful, sunny, Southern California day is to go for a long drive, often with no particular destination in mind. I generally find myself navigating toward either the coastline or the mountains. In any event, the purpose of the drive is to immerse myself in my surrounding and forget about everything else.

There are six simple steps for this kind of drive:

1. **Fill your tank.** You can't make the trip if you're out of gas.
2. **Choose your road.** It may be an old favorite that you've traveled many times. Or it may be a new road that you never noticed before.
3. **Slow down and take in the beauty of your surroundings.** What colors do you see? Look at the plants and wildlife. Smell the air. Listen.
4. **Pull off the road at a scenic viewpoint.** Stop the car, step into the scene, and take a look around.
5. **Take a picture of yourself.** How do you look in this setting?
6. **Send home a postcard.** Tell the family where you went today—what you saw, what you heard, what you learned.

This is how it applies to meditative reading:

1. Fill your tank. Before you open your Bible, take a moment to open your heart and ask God to fill you afresh with his Holy Spirit. The Bible says that God’s thoughts can only be understood by God’s Spirit. It is the Spirit of God abiding in you that makes his Word come alive to you.

No one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us... The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned... But we have the mind of Christ. — 1 Corinthians 2:11-12, 14, 16

Now you are ready to listen. You can open your Bible in faith, believing that God will speak to you from his Word.

2. Choose your road. Select your passage. It may be an old favorite that you’ve read many times. It may even be the passage you read yesterday. Or it may be a new “road” you’ve never explored before. I’m not suggesting that you simply open your Bible at random with your eyes closed and drop your finger on the page. Give it more thought and prayer than that. Consider, instead, working your way through a book of the Bible, or re-reading the chapter from which your pastor preached last weekend.

3. Slow down and take in the beauty of your surroundings. If you drive too fast, you will miss out on a lot. This drive is not a race—it’s an exploration. Remember, you’re reading for depth, not for distance. So take your time.

As you read your passage of Scripture, slow down and enjoy the “scenery”. What else is going on in the surrounding verses? What are you discovering about God’s nature in

the text? What are you seeing that you may have not seen before? What is the Author's train of thought? What is the significance of the words he used?

Go slower.

You might even want to turn around and drive back up the page to get a closer look at something you missed the first time you passed by.

Read the passage as though you were writing it. How long would it take you to write those words by hand? Read them that slowly, out loud to yourself. Romans 10:17 says that faith comes through hearing the word, so "read with your ears" and hear the word of the Lord.

Martin Luther said:

I study my Bible as I gather apples. First, I shake the whole tree that the ripest might fall. Then I shake each limb, and when I have shaken each limb, I shake each branch and every twig. Then I look under every leaf. ²

That is how to read the Bible.

4. Pull over at a scenic viewpoint. For example, consider this scenic viewpoint in Colossians chapter 3 verse 16:

"Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly..."

Stop and focus on the words for a while. Read the phrase several times and emphasize the words differently each time you read them. For instance, you might read the verse

² Martin Luther, Quoted from *The Classics Devotional Bible*, pg. 241; Zondervan

this way: "LET the word of Christ dwell in you richly..." By emphasizing "let" you realize that you have a definite choice in the matter. It's as though the Word of Christ were waiting for your permission to enter your heart. So open your heart and invite the Word to do its work in you.

Next you might read it: "Let the word of Christ DWELL in your richly..." Dwell, not just visit, or stop by for a quick "hello," but let it dwell in you, take up residence, make itself at home.

Then you might read it: "Let the word of Christ dwell in you RICHLY..." Richly is a meaningful word here. It takes my mind back to the tea illustration. The longer the tea bag "dwells" in the water, the richer the tea becomes, until the water finally absorbs all of the flavor and aroma and color of the tea. Each time you read the verse, or even a phrase, it takes on a deeper, richer meaning.

After you've read the verse or phrase with different emphases, try to put it into your own words. Don't worry, this is not heresy. You are simply letting God know that you are listening by telling him what you just heard him say.

I confess that I tend to be a speed-listener. Unfortunately, the person most often victimized by my reckless listening is the person I live the very most—my wife. Lynnda is a delightful conversationalist. She absorbs herself in the person she is talking to. She hears every word; she catches every nuance. I, on the other hand, want to skip over the details and get to the point. The result, as you can guess, is disastrous.

Listening too fast, like driving too fast, can cause serious accidents and leave innocent victims scattered along the roadside. Speed-listening puts my life and relationships at risk. So I am trying to learn to slow down and listen carefully, thoughtfully, and sensitively. I've found it to be most helpful if I make it clear that I am listening by summarizing or restating to Lynnda in my own words what Lynnda has said to me. Just knowing that I am going to do that makes me listen all the more closely.

I often take this same approach as I read the Scriptures. I will say back to God in my own words what I heard him say to me through his. For example, I might rephrase Colossians 3:16 this way:

Permit, allow, make room for and welcome the Word of Christ to set up its residence in you—a beautiful, fully equipped, permanent home filled with the texture and color and aroma of the Word itself. Let it dwell in you richly, deeply, profoundly, abundantly.

5. Take a picture of yourself before you move on. The Bible tells us that the Word of God is, among other things, both a mirror and light for our souls. So before I leave this Colossians passage, I ask myself, “What do I look like in this mirror? In the light of this verse, what faults or flaws are being revealed to me that were once hidden in darkness?” Or to get back to our word picture, what do I look like in this setting? Does the Word of Christ actually dwell in me richly, deeply, profoundly, abundantly? Or is it poverty stricken and neglected in my life—or worse yet, have I left it shivering on the back porch?

Taking a picture of yourself will help you remember what you experienced on your drive. And it will serve as a great conversation started with other people who have visited the same road, or even with those who have never been there at all.

6. Send home a postcard. This is your prayer. Tell the Father where you were today, what you saw, what you heard, what you learned. It’s at this point that my reading begins to turn to deep and serious prayer. Sometimes it is a prayer of confession. Sometimes it is a prayer of thanks. It might be a prayer of intercession for someone else. Or it might be a sung prayer of praise to God.

The point is that God is leading me in prayer. He is directing the conversation. By praying through the Scriptures, I am now praying God's thoughts back to God. I am, in a very real sense, agreeing with God in prayer.

You may find it helpful to write your prayers in a journal or even in the margin of your Bible. If you write your prayers, you might also want to date them. In this way, your written prayers will serve as memorials to your walk with God. They will be permanent reminders of when and how you encountered God, and how you responded to him in worship.

Some days my "drive" through the Scriptures may only cover a few verses. Other days, I make it through a few chapters, reading, thinking and praying as I go. But always I find that my memories of the "drive" stay with me for the rest of the day. They are not distant or vague memories that quickly fade; rather, they become continual impulses to talk with God.

My prayer life, then, is no longer boxed in to a specific, limited time frame. Instead, I find myself drawn into deeper conversation with God throughout the entire day. My prayers are not prayed out loud, unless I'm alone. Usually, they aren't more than a whisper. But I am conversing with God, nonetheless.

Thomas de Witt Talmage wrote:

God just his ear so closely down to your lips that he can hear your faintest whisper. It is not God away off up yonder; it is God away down here, close up—so close up that when you pray to him, it is more a kiss than a whisper. ³

³ Thomas de Witt Talmage, Quoted from *The NIV Worship Bible*, Pg. 656; Maranatha! Publishing/Zondervan

My conversations with God make me more aware of his continual presence. I have begun to experience and understand what Brother Lawrence described over 300 years ago in *The Practice of the Presence of God*:

I keep myself in his presence by simple attentiveness and a loving gaze upon God—or to put it more clearly, an habitual, silent and secret conversation of my soul with God. ⁴

“An habitual, silent and secret conversation.” That is the way of a worshiper. And it is the secret to friendship with God.



Are you looking for God? God is looking for worshipers. His invitation to friendship is open and genuine. Will you take him up on his offer? Will you give yourself to him in worship?

Let’s take one more look at Romans 12:1-2, the scenic viewpoint of this book. This time, I’ve put it in my own words to let God know I am listening:

Therefore, keeping in mind that God is merciful—that forgiveness is his natural inclination—it is his “default setting”—tell God he can have your body to live in. Trade in your agenda for his. He has already made you holy—you are just what he is looking for. And don’t hold on to old thought patterns and habits. Let go of

⁴ Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection, from *The Practice of the Presence of God*, translated by John J. Delaney, 1977, Doubleday

worthless idols and distractions. Don't try to be like everyone else anymore. Instead, let God, who is predisposed to forgive, make a new person out of you by giving you a new way of thinking. Then you will be able to try out his will for your life—his way of doing things. You will start thinking like he thinks. And who you've tried it, you'll find that it is incredible—it's not just good, its more than pleasing—it's absolutely perfect!

Hear My Prayer

O Holy God, write Your Word on the tablet of my life. May it flood my heart and shine its light of truth into every dark corner of my conscience. May it enlighten my eyes and be the filter through which I see all things. May it fill my mind so that all of my thoughts will be captive to obedience to Christ. May it direct my steps into Your good, pleasing and perfect will. may it guide my hands into the work of the ministry. May it guard the doorway of my life so that all of my comings and goings may pass under the scrutiny of Your divine wisdom. may Your Word, O God, be the constant employer of my spirit, soul and body. Amen.

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⁵ This prayer is from *The NIV Worship Bible*, Pg. 238; Maranatha! Publishing/Zondervan