

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

**PayPal**

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *Theological Students Fellowship (TSF) Bulletin (US)* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_tsfbulletin-us.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_tsfbulletin-us.php)



# BULLETIN

THEOLOGICAL STUDENTS FELLOWSHIP

MARCH-APRIL 1985

Vol. 8, No. 4

\$3.50

### EDITORS

Mark Lau Branson  
Thomas H. McAlpine

### ADVISORY EDITORS

Clark H. Pinnock, McMaster Divinity College  
Paul A. Mickey, Duke Divinity School

### ASSOCIATE EDITORS

Ray S. Anderson, *Systematic Theology*  
Fuller Theological Seminary  
Stephen T. Davis, *Philosophy*  
Claremont McKenna College  
Donald Dayton, *News Analysis*  
Northern Baptist Theological Seminary  
Roberta Hestenes, *Christian Formation*  
Fuller Theological Seminary  
Robert L. Hubbard, *Old Testament*  
Denver Seminary

Stephen C. Mott, *Ethics*  
Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary  
Mark Noll, *Wheaton College*  
Church History

Grant R. Osborne, *New Testament*  
Trinity Evangelical Divinity School  
David Lowes Watson, *Evangelism & Missions*  
UMC Board of Discipleship

### PERSPECTIVES EDITORS

Keith Bolton, Fuller Theological Seminary  
Luis Cortes, Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary  
Thomas F. Stransky, Mt. Paul Novitiate  
Sze-kar Wan, Harvard University

### FACULTY CONTRIBUTORS

Bernard Adeney, New College, Berkeley  
Donald Bloesch, University of Dubuque Theological Seminary  
Geoffrey W. Bromiley, Fuller Theological Seminary  
Harvie M. Conn, Westminster Theological Seminary  
Charles Ellenbaum, College of DuPage  
Vernard Eller, University of LaVerne  
Elouise Renich Fraser, Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary  
David Gill, New College, Berkeley  
Larry Hurtado, University of Manitoba  
Susanne Johnson, Perkins School of Theology  
Richard Mouw, Calvin College  
Richard Lovelace, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary  
PHEME PERKINS, Boston College  
Bernard Ramm, American Baptist Seminary of the West  
Gerald Sheppard, Union Theological Seminary  
Charles R. Taber, Emmanuel School of Religion  
Keith Yandell, University of Wisconsin

An Evangelical Approach to Scripture  
Stephen Reid

2

Epistemological Foundations for Science  
and Theology

Paul Hiebert

5

Onesimus: A Study in Ethics  
Vernard Eller

10

Meditative Prayer

Richard Foster

13

Strategy for Urban Ministry  
Ray Bakke

20

### REVIEW ARTICLES:

Can Evangelicalism Resist Modernity?  
Gary Scott Smith

22

Some Recent Contributions to Biblical Linguistics  
Richard Erickson

23

Book Reviews and Comments (Itemized on Back Cover)

24

Without recourse to "Bishop Onesimus," I don't see that those questions are answerable. With "Bishop Onesimus," they become easy. If Onesimus is the collector of the Pauline *corpus*, he would, of course, be eager that "his" letter be part of it. Likewise, the Ephesian congregation would very much want *this* letter included, as a gesture of respect and gratitude—and a matter of record—regarding their own slaveboy bishop. Yes, the very presence of the letter within the New Testament canon may be the strongest proof that the Ephesian bishop of A.D. 110 is indeed the very same person as Philemon's slave.

Earlier—under the possibility that Onesimus actually was returned to slavery and executed—we portrayed the *minimum* of freedom, liberation and justice that might have resulted from his going back. Now—whether or not it is the *maximum*—we have portrayed just how incredibly far God may have taken that slaveboy's Christ-like decision to take up his cross and go back. And Onesimus' personal rise in equity from slave to bishop is only a starter. The Ephesian congregation seems to have received the godly leadership that not only made it a strong church but may even have spelled its survival into the second century (it is not evident that all Paul's congregations lasted so long). But most of all, it may be that God used Onesimus' going-back to give us the Pauline one-fourth of our New Testament and so preserve an understanding of the faith that has been of untold value in the life and history of the church to the present day. When God is in the picture, who's to say how "useful" one "Onesimus" can be?

But more! I am ready to say that—in a proleptic, representative way—the example of Onesimus marks the truer freeing of more slaves than all the Emancipation Proclamations ever proclaimed and all the class-warfare ever waged. In this one, indeed, God sounds the death knell of slavery (all sorts of slavery) for the whole of creation for all time. There is not the slightest doubt that the Christian church—the Onesmian church—went on to become the greatest force for freeing slaves that the world has ever seen. And it strikes me that the Onesmian method of ending slavery is the only sure method of doing so. The secular way of "revolutionary arky-contest" may be quicker and more spectacular; but it is also far less dependable, carrying all sorts of negative side-effects. Emancipation Proclamations and Civil Wars may create a degree of justice and eliminate some aspects of slavery. But they also create all sorts of animosities and hatreds, leave battlefields strewn with corpses, and take us out of slavery only to put us into Jim Crow.

The Onesmian approach is much more powerful. It may take a while, but no slaveholder can forever hold out against the loving persuasions of a Paul, the loving self-sacrifice of an Onesimus, or the loving Spirit of an Almighty God. That owner actually has a much better chance of resisting political pressure and the violence of class warfare. Moreover, the Onesmian way, rather than demanding the denunciation and destruction of the moral dignity of the slaveholder, offers him a gracious way out. Onesimus was lib-

erated without Philemon's having to be demeaned in the process. And best of all, of course, to go Onesmian leaves everyone involved—slave, owners, and apostle—as brothers in Christ. The side-effects are all positive, without a trace of contention's negativity.

Yet the most essential distinction, I suggest, is this: The political struggle for liberation is posited wholly on human wisdom, idealism, and moral ability. It thinks there is only one way . . . It operates in a closed system that neither seeks nor expects anything more than its human methodology can be calculated to achieve—though seldom do the final results come to even that much. Human beings (and especially well-intended doers of good) are noted for overestimating the power of their own piety.

But with Onesimus, things are quite otherwise. Because his was a theological action taken at the behest of *God*, in the service of *God*, through the Spirit of *God*, with the enablement of *God*, and to the glory of *God*—this action invited God in and urged him to make of it what he would. And the results? Completely incalculable—even to the preserving of the Pauline gospel for the ages. There is absolutely no telling how much good, how much social change, how much freeing of slaves, how much gospel, how much kingdom, might follow from an Onesmian laying down of one's life for God.

Finally, then, consider how totally Onesimus' was "Another Way"—an anarchical way bearing no likeness at all to the accepted arky-method of skinning cats. Not one of the characteristics of arky-faith is to be found.

To be sure, slaves are freed and the classless society is formed. Yet, throughout, each of the principals (slave, owner, and attendant theologian of liberation) acts and is acted toward simply as the human individual he is—brothers three, only that and nothing more. No one (least of all the theologian directing the action) tries to use Onesimus as symbol of "the oppressed but righteous poor" whose consciousness of injustice must be raised to the point that he will join the class-struggle. Paul, rather, convinces him to quit "fighting it" and go back—even into slavery. No one (least of all the theologian directing the action) tries, conversely, to use Philemon as symbol of "the evil, oppressing, slaveholding class," exposing his injustice as a means of recruiting class-warriors to fight against him. No one (least of all the theologian directing the action) has any interest in anybody's fighting anybody, in even seeing the matter as an adversary alignment.

The problem of human slavery is, of course, a *political* one. But our "theologian of liberation," being truly a *theologian*, says, "There just has to be more than the one *political* way of skinning this cat (i.e., the way that is limited to human probabilities and possibilities). Let us act *theologically* (i.e., in a way that both obeys God and, at the same time, invites him into the action). Let's try it that way—and see where God chooses to take it."

So they did. And so He did. And just see how far it went. You know, it's true: There actually is more than one way . . .

CHRISTIAN FORMATION

## Meditative Prayer

by Richard J. Foster

Jesus Christ is alive and here to teach his people himself. His voice is not hard to hear; his vocabulary is not hard to understand. But we must learn how to hear his voice and to obey his word. It is this ability to hear and obey that is the heart and soul of Christian meditation. In this article we will seek to understand the biblical basis and the purpose of meditative prayer. We will discover how the imagination can aid us in our task and consider the three major steps into meditative prayer. We will see how learning to read with the heart can draw us into the love and life of God, and, finally, we will consider seven common problems in the practice of meditative prayer.

Richard J. Foster is associate professor of theology and writer in residence at Friends University, Wichita, Kansas.

### The Biblical Basis for Meditative Prayer

The biblical basis for meditation is discovered in the great reality of the speaking, teaching, acting God which lies at the heart of the scriptural witness. God brought the universe crashing into existence by the word of his command. In the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve talked with God and God talked with them—they were in communion. Then came the Fall, and in an important sense there was a rupture of the sense of perpetual communion, for Adam and Eve hid from God. But God continued to reach out to his rebellious children, and in stories of such individuals as Cain, Abel, Noah and Abraham we see God speaking and acting, teaching and guiding.

Moses learned, albeit with many vacillations and detours, how to hear God's voice and obey his word. In fact, Scripture witnesses that God spoke to Moses "face to face, as a man speaks to his

friend" (Ex 33:11). There was a sense of intimate relationship, of communion. As a people, however, the Israelites were not prepared for such intimacy. Once they learned a little about God, they realized that being in his presence was risky business and told Moses so: "You speak to us, and we will hear; but let not God speak to us, lest we die" (Ex 20:19). In this way they could maintain religious respectability without the attendant risks. This was the beginning of the great line of the prophets and the judges, Moses being the first. But it was a step away from the sense of immediacy, the sense of the cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night.

Under Samuel the people clamored for a king. This disturbed Samuel greatly, but God told him not to be discouraged, "for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them" (1 Sam 8:7). Under Moses they rejected God's immediacy; under Samuel they rejected God's theocratic rule. "Give us a prophet, give us a king, give us a go-between, so we do not have to come into God's presence ourselves." And we do not have to look at religion in America very deeply before we see that it is saturated with the dogma of the mediator. "Give us a pastor, give us a priest, give us someone who will do it for us, so that we can avoid intimacy with God ourselves and still reap the benefits."

In the fullness of time Jesus came and taught the reality of the kingdom of God and demonstrated what life could be like in that kingdom. He showed us God's yearning for the gathering of an all-inclusive community of loving persons, with himself as its prime sustainer and most glorious inhabitant. He established a living fellowship that would know him as Redeemer and King, listening to him in all things and obeying him at all times. In his intimate relationship with the Father, Jesus modeled for us the reality of that life of hearing and obeying. "The Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever he does, that the Son does likewise" (Jn 5:19). "I can do nothing on my own authority; as I hear, I judge" (Jn 5:30). "The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own authority; but the Father who dwells in me does his works" (Jn 14:10). When Jesus told his disciples to abide in him, they could understand what he meant for he was abiding in the Father. He declared that he was the good Shepherd and that his sheep know his voice (Jn 10:4). He told us that the Comforter would come, the Spirit of truth, who would guide us into all truth (Jn 16:13).

Luke in his second volume clearly implies that following the resurrection and the ascension Jesus continued "to do and teach" even if people could not see him with the naked eye (Acts 1:1). Both Peter and Stephen pointed to Jesus as the fulfillment of the prophecy in Deuteronomy 18:15 of the prophet like Moses who is to speak and whom the people are to hear and obey (Acts 3:22; 7:37. See also Deut 18:15-18; Mt 17:5; Jn 1:21; 4:19-25; 6:14; 7:37-40; Heb 1:1-13; 3:7-8; 12:25). In the book of Acts we see the resurrected and reigning Christ, through the Holy Spirit, teaching and guiding his children: leading Philip to new unreached cultures (Acts 8), revealing his messiahship to Paul (Acts 9), teaching Peter about his racism (Acts 10), guiding the church out of its cultural captivity (Acts 15).

This, in brief, forms the biblical foundation for meditation, and the wonderful news is that Jesus has not stopped acting and speaking. He is resurrected and at work in our world. He is not idle, nor has he developed laryngitis. He is alive and among us as our Priest to forgive us, our Prophet to teach us, our King to rule us, our Shepherd to guide us.

All the saints throughout the ages have witnessed to this reality. How sad that contemporary Christians are so ignorant of the vast sea of literature on Christian meditation by faithful believers throughout the centuries! And their testimony to the joyful life of perpetual communion is amazingly uniform. From Catholic to Protestant, from Eastern Orthodox to Western Free Church, we are urged to "live in his presence in uninterrupted fellowship." The Russian mystic Theophan the Recluse said, "To pray is to descend with the mind into the heart, and there to stand before the face of the Lord, ever-present, all seeing, within you." The Anglican divine Jeremy Taylor declared, "Meditation is the tongue of the soul and the language of our spirit." And in our day Lutheran martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer, when asked why he meditated, replied, "Because I am a Christian." The witness of Scripture and the witness of the de-

votional masters are so rich, so alive with the presence of God that we would be foolish to neglect such a gracious invitation to experience, in the words of Madame Guyon, "the depths of Jesus Christ."

### The Purpose of Meditative Prayer

In meditative prayer we are growing into what Thomas à Kempis called "a familiar friendship with Jesus." We are sinking down into the light and life of Christ and becoming comfortable in that posture. The omnipresence of the Lord moves from a theological dogma into a radiant reality. "He walks with me and he talks with me" ceases to be pious jargon and instead becomes a straightforward description of daily life.

Please understand me: I am not speaking of some mushy, giddy, buddy-buddy relationship. All such insipid sentimentality only betrays how little we know, how distant we are from the Lord high and lifted up who is revealed to us in Scripture. John tells us in his Apocalypse that when he saw the reigning Christ he fell at his feet as though dead, and so should we (Rev 1:17). No, I am speaking of a reality more akin to what the disciples felt in the upper room when they experienced both intense intimacy and awful reverence.

What happens in meditative prayer is that we create the emotional and spiritual space which allows Christ to construct an inner sanctuary in the heart. The wonderful verse "I stand at the door and knock . . ." was originally penned for believers, not unbelievers (Rev 3:20). We who have turned our lives over to Christ need to know how very much he longs to eat with us, to commune with us. He desires a perpetual Eucharistic feast in the inner sanctuary of the heart. Meditative prayer opens the door and, although we are engaging in specific meditation exercises at specific times, the aim is to bring this living reality into all of life. It is a portable sanctuary which is brought into all we are and do.

Inward fellowship of this kind does two things. First, it transforms the inner personality. We cannot "burn the eternal flame of the inner sanctuary" and remain the same, for the Divine Fire will consume everything that is impure. Our ever-present Teacher will always be leading us into "righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (rom 14:17). Everything that is foreign to his way we will have to let go. No, not "have to" but "want to," for our desires and aspirations will be more and more conformed to his way. Increasingly, everything within us will swing like a needle to the pole star of the Spirit.

Second, meditation will send us into our ordinary world with greater perspective and balance. As we learn to listen to the Lord, we gain new practical handles on life's ordinary problems. William Penn observed, "True godliness does not turn men out of the world, but enables them to live better in it and excites their endeavors to mend it." Somehow we have new eyes to see and new ears to hear. We develop a truer sense of proportion so that we are able to distinguish the significant from the trivial. We discover a new serenity, an unshakableness, a firmness of life orientation. We come to live out the demands of our day perpetually bowed in worship and adoration.

### Sanctifying the Imagination

We can descend with the mind into the heart most easily through the imagination. Perhaps some rare individuals can meditate in an imageless void, but most of us need to be more deeply rooted in the senses. We must not despise this simpler, more humble route into God's presence. Jesus himself taught in this manner, making constant appeal to the imagination, and many of the devotional masters likewise encourage us in this way. St. Teresa of Avila said, "As I could not make reflection with my understanding I contrived to picture Christ within me. I did many simple things of this kind. I believe my soul gained very much in this way, because I began to practice prayer without knowing what it was." Many of us can identify with her words, for we too have tried a merely cerebral approach and found it too abstract, too detached. Even more, the imagination helps to anchor our thoughts and center our attention. Francis de Sales noted that "by means of the imagination we confine our mind within the mystery on which we meditate, that it may not ramble to and fro, just as we shut up a bird in a cage or tie a hawk by his leash so that he may rest on the hand."

Some have objected to using the imagination out of concern that it is untrustworthy and could even be used by the evil one. There is good reason for concern, for the imagination, like all our faculties, has participated in the Fall. But just as we believe that God can take our reason (fallen as it is) and sanctify it and use it for his good purposes, so he can sanctify the imagination and use it for his good purposes. Of course, the imagination can be distorted by Satan, but then so can all our faculties. God created us with an imagination, and as Lord of his creation he can and does redeem it and use it for the work of the kingdom of God.

To believe that God can sanctify and utilize the imagination is simply to take seriously the Christian idea of incarnation. God so accommodates, so enfleshes himself into our world, that he uses the images we know and understand to teach us about the unseen world of which we know so little and which we find so difficult to understand.

As we enter more and more into God's way—thinking his thoughts after him, delighting in his gracious presence—we experience God more and more, utilizing our imagination for his good purposes. If we truly delight in him, our desires will please him, which is why they will come to pass (Ps 37:4). And, in fact, the common experience of those who walk with God is that of being *given* images of what could be, not straining to concoct them. So may I encourage you to allow the Lord to give you many delightful images and pictures. You may well discover, as I did, that it is the first step to believing that it could be so.

### Steps into Meditative Prayer

While in biblical times people were well versed in how to meditate, today there is an abysmal ignorance of even the most basic elements. Hence, many of us are helped immensely by a simple description of the three basic steps into meditative prayer.

**Centering down.** The first step is sometimes called "centering down." Others have used the term *re-collection*; that is, a re-collecting of ourselves until we are unified or whole. The idea is to let go of all competing distractions until we are truly centered, until we are truly present where we are.

Begin by seating yourself comfortably, and then slowly and deliberately let all tension and anxiety drop away. Become aware of God's presence in the room. Perhaps in your imagination you will want to visualize Christ seated in the chair across from you, for he is truly present. If frustrations or distractions arise, you will want to lift them up into the arms of the Father and let him care for them. This is not suppressing our inner turmoil but letting go of it. Suppression implies a pressing down, a keeping in check, whereas in centering down we are giving away, releasing. It is even more than a neutral psychological relaxing. It is an active surrendering, a "self-abandonment to divine providence," to use the phrase of Jean-Pierre de Caussade.

Precisely because the Lord is present with us we can relax and let go of everything, for in his presence nothing really matters, nothing is of importance except attending to him. We allow inner distractions and frustrations to melt away before him as snow before the sun. We allow him to calm the storms which rage within. We allow his great silence to still our noisy heart.

Let me warn you at the outset: this centeredness does not come easily or quickly in the beginning. Most of us live such fractured and fragmented lives that collectedness is a foreign world to us. The moment we genuinely try to be centered we become painfully aware of how distracted we are. Romano Guardini notes, "When we try to compose ourselves, unrest redoubles in intensity, not unlike the manner in which at night, when we try to sleep, cares or desires assail us with a force that they do not possess during the day." But we must not be discouraged at this. We must be prepared to devote all our meditation time to this centeredness without any thought for result or reward. We willingly "waste our time" in this manner as a lavish love offering to the Lord. For God takes what looks like a foolish waste and uses it to nudge us closer into the holy of holies. Perceptively Guardini comments, "If at first we achieve no more than the understanding of how much we lack in inner unity, something will have been gained, for in some way we will have made contact with that center which knows no distraction."

Several things occur in the process of centering down. First, there

is a glad surrender to him "who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty" (Rev 1:8). We surrender control over our lives and destinies. In an act of deliberate intention we decide to do it not our way but God's. We might even want to visualize our bodies being lifted into the intense light of God's presence that he may do with us as it pleases him.

We surrender our possessiveness and invite him to possess us in such a way that we are truly crucified with Christ and yet truly alive through his life (Gal 2:20). We relinquish into his hands our imperialist ambitions to be greater and more admired, to be richer and more powerful, even to be saintlier and more influential.

We surrender our cares and worries. "Cast all your anxieties on him, for he cares about you," said Peter (1 Pet 5:7). And so we can, precisely because we sense his care. We can give up the need to watch out for number one because we have One who is watching out for us. I sometimes like to picture a box in which I place every worry and every care. When it is full I gift wrap it, placing a lovely big bow on top, and give it as a present to the Father. He receives it, and once he does I know I must not take it back, for to take back a gift once given is most discourteous.

We surrender our good intentions and high resolves, for even these can harbor the seeds of pride and arrogance. Mother Teresa of Calcutta said, "Pray for me that I not loosen my grip on the hands of Jesus even under the guise of ministering to the poor." For if we "loosen our grip on the hands of Jesus," we have lost everything. And so we are to surrender all distractions—even good distractions—until we are driven into the Core.

A second thing which occurs within us as we are learning to center down is the rise of a spirit of repentance and confession. Suddenly we become aware—keenly aware—of our shortcomings and many sins. All excuses are stripped away, all self-justifications are silenced. A deep, godly sorrow wells up within for the sins of commission and of omission. Any deed or thought that cannot stand in the searching light of Christ becomes repulsive not only to God but to us as well. Thus humbled under the cross we confess our need and receive his gracious word of forgiveness.

We may want to picture a path littered with many rocks. Some are small pebbles, others are quite large, and still others are almost completely buried so that we cannot know their size. With compunction of heart we invite the Lord to remove each stone, for they do indeed represent the many sins littering our lives. One by one he picks them up, revealing to us their true character and offensiveness. To our eyes some look big and others small, but the Lord helps us to understand that when lifted the smallest pebble has the same weight as the largest boulder. Some rocks need to be dug out of the ground, and while this is painful it also brings healing. When we see the path completely clear we rejoice in this gracious work of the Lord.

A third reality which works its way into our hearts as we are being more and more centered is an acceptance of the ways of God with human beings. We are acutely aware that God's ways are not our ways, that his thoughts are not our thoughts (Is 55:8). And with an inner knowing born out of fellowship, we see that his ways are altogether good. Our impatience, our rebellion, our nonacceptance give way to a gentle receptiveness to divine breathings. This is not a stoic resignation to "the will of God." It is an entering into the rhythm of the Spirit. It is a recognition that his commandments are "for our good always" (Deut 6:24). It is a letting go of our way and a saying yes to God's way, not grudgingly but because we know it is the better way.

We might want to visualize ourselves on a lovely beach somewhere observing the footprints of God in the sand. Slowly we begin to place our feet into the prints. At some places the stride looks far too long for our small frame; at other places it looks so short that it appears childlike. In his infinite wisdom God is stretching us where we need to be on the edge of adventure, restraining us where we need greater attentiveness to him. As we follow his lead we enter more and more into his stride, turning where he turns, accepting his ways and finding them good.

**Beholding the Lord.** As we learn to center down we begin to move into the second step in meditative prayer, which is "beholding the Lord." What do I mean? I mean the inward steady gaze of the heart upon the divine Center. We bask in the warmth of his pres-

ence. Worship and adoration, praise and thanksgiving, well up from the inner sanctuary of the soul. The fourteenth-century mystic Richard Rolle witnessed that, as he learned the gaze of the heart, he experienced real warmth around his heart as if it were actually on fire. He was so surprised at this phenomenon that he had to keep feeling his chest to be sure there was no physical reason for it. Instead of fear, as we might expect, this unusual sensation brought him "great and unexpected comfort." Fortunately for all of us, he has recorded the insights of those experiences in *The Fire of Love*.

Few if any of us will have the physical sensations that Rolle experienced, but we all can learn the gaze of the heart. There is a lovely little chorus which is popular these days, the first line of which says, "Set my spirit free that I may worship thee." And that is the yearning of our hearts as we behold the Lord. We love him, we worship him, we adore him. There are inward whisperings of devotion and homage, and perhaps outward shouts of praise and thanksgiving.

Often it seems that music is the language of beholding. "Psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with all your heart" is the way the apostle Paul described it (Eph 5:19). And who can hinder the spontaneous outbreak of adoration and praise? The great hymns of the church aid us in our beholding, for in an important sense they encapsulate for us the beholding of faithful Christians throughout the centuries. As we sing the great hymns we enter the communion of saints.

Many times we enter experiences of beholding that go deeper than human words can express. St. Paul tells us that the Holy Spirit intercedes for us "with sighs too deep for words" (Rom 8:26). And often there are inward yearnings and aspirations that cannot quite be caught in human language. At times the gift of tongues, or glossolalia, becomes a channel through which the spirit may behold the Holy One of Israel. At other times one experiences what St. Teresa of Avila called "the prayer of quiet," where all words become superfluous. In silence we behold the Lord, for words are not needed for there to be communion.

Often a brief passage of Scripture will aid us in our beholding. We may be drawn to the great vision of the Lord high and lifted up recorded in Isaiah 6:1-8. Or perhaps we will want to meditate on John's vision of the reigning Christ in Revelation 1:12-18 or even in Revelation 19:11-16. We may be directed to behold the Savior cradled in the manger or dying upon the cross.

Most of all, we sense his nearness and his love. Father James Borst said, "He is closer to my true self than I am myself. He knows me better than I know myself. He loves me better than I love myself. He is 'Abba,' Father, to me. *I am* because HE IS."

Does all this lofty talk of communion with God discourage you? Do you feel miles away from such experience? Rather than attempting to scale the heights of spiritual ecstasy, are you just hoping to make it through the week? If so, don't be disheartened. Many times we all fail miserably short of the goal. Often our meditations never seem to get past our frustration over the unwashed dishes in the sink or the philosophy exam next week. But the little we have experienced reminds us that at the heart of God is the desire to give and to forgive, and we are encouraged to go deeper in and higher up.

**The prayer of listening.** As we experience the unifying grace of centering down and the liberating grace of beholding the Lord, we are ushered into a third step in meditative prayer, which is the prayer of listening. We have put away all obstacles of the heart, all scheming of the mind, all vacillations of the will. Divine graces of love and adoration wash over us like ocean waves. And as this is happening, we experience an inward attentiveness to divine motions. At the center of our being we are hushed. The experience is more profound than mere silence or lack of words. There is stillness to be sure, but it is a listening stillness. We feel more alive, more active, than we ever do when our minds are askew with muchness and manyness. Something deep inside has been awakened and brought to attention. Our spirit is on tiptoe, alert and listening.

On the Mount of Transfiguration the words of the Lord came out of the overshadowing cloud saying, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him" (Mt 17:5). And so we listen, really listen. We do not do violence to our rational faculties,

but we listen with more than the mind. We bring the mind into the heart so that we can listen with the whole being.

François Fénelon said, "Be silent, and listen to God. Let your heart be in such a state of preparation that his Spirit may impress upon you such virtues as will please him. Let all within you listen to him. This silence of all outward and earthly affection and of human thoughts within us is essential if we are to hear his voice." As I have noted before, this listening does indeed involve a hushing of all "outward and earthly affection." St. John of the Cross used the graphic phrase "my house being now all stilled." In that single line he helps us see the importance of quieting all physical, emotional and psychological senses.

As we wait before the Lord, graciously we are given a teachable spirit. I say "graciously" because without a teachable spirit any word of the Lord which may come to guide us into truth will only serve to harden our hearts. We will resist any and all instruction unless we are docile. But if we are truly willing and obedient, the teaching of the Lord is life and light.

The goal, of course, is to bring this stance of listening prayer into the course of daily experience. Throughout all life's motions—balancing the checkbook, vacuuming the floor, visiting with neighbors or business associates—there can be an inward attentiveness to the divine Whisper. The great masters of the interior life are overwhelmingly uniform in their witness to this reality. This is represented so well in the famous words of Brother Lawrence, "The time of business does not with me differ from the time of prayer; and in the noise and clatter of my kitchen, while several persons are at the same time calling for different things, I possess God in as great tranquillity as if I were upon my knees at the blessed sacrament." We bring the portable sanctuary into daily life.

To describe our movement into meditative prayer as steps may be misleading. The word may imply something a little too clear-cut, as if each step could be sharply distinguished from the others. Such, however, is not the case. All these movements interrelate and often splash over into each other. It is a living experience we are describing and, like all living experiences, cannot be defined too rigidly. The Lord is the Creator of infinite variety, and at times he may turn our little steps into one giant leap or teach us to skip or hop or run or even stand still. In all things and at all times we are to obey him.

### Reading with the Heart

One of the chief aids to meditative prayer is what is often called the *lectio divina*, or "divine reading." It is a kind of meditative spiritual reading in which the mind and heart are drawn into the love and goodness of God. Henri Nouwen recently showed me a lovely picture hanging on his apartment wall. It depicted an individual holding an open Bible, but the person's eyes were lifted upward. The idea is that in *lectio divina* we are doing more than reading words, we are listening with our heart to the Holy within. We are pondering all things in our heart as Mary did. We are entering into the reality of which the words speak, rather than merely analyzing them.

It goes without saying that Holy Scripture is the first and purest source of *lectio divina*. Suppose we want to meditate upon Jesus' staggering statement, "My peace I give to you" (Jn 14:27). Normally we would study the context of the statement—who said it, when it was said, the teaching surrounding it. We might try to reconstruct the upper-room scene. We might consider the cost at which our sacrificial Lamb is able to offer us peace. We might even resolve to face a difficult encounter with our employer or with a professor in a peaceful manner. And all these things are good to do, but note how in each case we are scrutinizing rather than entering into the experience.

In *lectio divina*, however, we are initiated into the reality of which the passage speaks. We brood on the truth that he is now filling us with his peace. The heart, the mind and the spirit are awakened to his inflowing peace. We sense all motions of fear stilled and overcome by "power and love and self-control" (2 Tim 1:7). Rather than dissecting peace we are entering into it. We are enveloped, absorbed, gathered into his peace. And the wonderful thing about such an experience is that the self is quite forgotten.

We are no longer worried about how we can make ourselves more at peace, for we are attending to the impregnation of peace in our hearts. No longer do we laboriously think up ways to act peacefully, for acts of peace spring spontaneously from within.

So many passages of Scripture provide a touchstone for meditative prayer: "Abide in my love." "I am the good shepherd." "Rejoice in the Lord always." In each case we are seeking to discover the Lord near us and longing to encounter his presence.

While we always want to affirm the centrality of Scripture, *lectio divina* includes more than the Bible. There are the lives of the saints and the writings which have proceeded from their profound experience of God. Humbly we read these writings because we know that God has spoken in the past. We read Augustine's *Confessions* and A. W. Tozer's *The Pursuit of God*, St. Teresa of Avila's *Interior Castle* and Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *The Cost of Discipleship* because we know that they walked with God, and we can learn from their experience. It is no accident that the rule of St. Benedict made *lectio divina* an integral part of daily life. This prayerful reading, as we might call it, edifies us and strengthens us. Whether we are reading about St. Francis of Assisi or Watchman Nee of China, we are encouraged in the life of faith.

### Seven Practical Problems

Over the years I have noticed that several practical concerns always seem to surface when we consider implementing meditation.

By far the most commonly asked question is what to do about a wandering mind. This no doubt reflects the fracturedness of modern society. We are bombarded by so many stimuli and our schedules are piled so high with commitments that the moment we seek to enter the creative silences every demand screams for attention. We have noisy hearts. We begin to deal with a wandering mind by understanding that the inner clatter is telling us something about our own distractedness, and it is not wrong to give the whole duration of our meditation to learning about our inner chaos. Also, I have often found it helpful to keep a things-to-do pad with me and simply jot down the tasks that are vying for my attention until they have all surfaced. Beyond this, we need at times to gently but firmly speak the word of peace to our racing mind and so instruct it into a more disciplined way. Finally, if one particular matter seems to be repeatedly intruding into our meditation, we may want to ask God if he wants to teach us something through the intrusion; that is, befriend the intruder by making *it* the object of our meditation.

A second and closely related question concerns the problem of falling asleep. It is a tragedy that so many of us live with the emotional spring wound so tightly that the moment we begin to relieve the tension, sleep overtakes us. The ultimate answer to this problem is to learn better how to get in touch with our bodies and our emotions. We need to learn that fully alert and fully relaxed are completely compatible states. I find, however, that most of us cannot learn this in an instant. And so I would counsel you that if at times you find yourself falling asleep when you are trying to meditate, rather than chide and condemn yourself you accept the sleep gratefully, for no doubt you need it. And you can invite the Lord to teach you and minister to your spirit while you sleep. In time you will discover that the problem will recede into the background.

A third major concern is the fear of spiritual influences that are not of God. It is a good fear to have, for Scripture is quite clear that there are spiritual forces which wage against our soul. But the fear does not need to paralyze us, for "greater is he who is in you, than he who is in the world" (1 Jn 4:4 KJV). While evil powers are great, Christ's power is greater still. And so before every experience of meditation I pray this simple prayer of protection: "I surround myself with the light of Christ, I cover myself with his blood, and I seal myself with his cross." I know that when I do this no influence can harm me, whether emotional, physical or spiritual, for I am protected by the strong light of Christ.

A fourth common and practical question relates to the place for meditation. To this I would like to make three observations. First, every place is sacred in the Lord, and we need to know that wherever we are *is* holy ground. We are a portable sanctuary and by the power of God sanctify all places. My second observation is, however, a bit antithetical to the first, for most of us find certain

places more conducive to meditative prayer than others. We do well to find a place of beauty that is quiet, comfortable and free from emotional and physical distractions. With a little creativity most of us can arrange such a place (and space) with minimal effort. Third, I have discovered that certain activities are particularly conducive to meditative prayer. Swimming and jogging are singularly appropriate for this interior work. A brisk walk is often enhanced by whispering the Jesus Prayer ("Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy upon me") in tune to your stride. Some have found gardening a happy time to know "the LORD, who made heaven and earth" (Ps 124:8). Recently I have been enjoying periods of meditation while riding the bus; while it takes a little practice to disregard the ordinary commotion, it soon becomes a wonderful place of solitude.

A fifth question which often surfaces has to do with the length of a meditation. For the most part this is a matter of one's past experience and internal readiness. Some have lived so frantically that five or ten minutes of quietness stretches them to the limit. But in time thirty to forty minutes should feel comfortable. I would not recommend longer than one hour at any given time. Let your own needs and abilities determine your schedule. It is better to take small portions and digest them fully than to attempt to gorge yourself and get indigestion from it. I have often found it most helpful to have a longer meditation on Monday to begin the week (say thirty to forty minutes), followed by shorter morning meditations for the rest of the week (maybe fifteen to twenty minutes) and sprinkled through with brief centering meditations (no more than five minutes).

A sixth question asks what time is best for meditation. The answer to that varies from person to person and often is different for any individual at different points in his or her life. For example, in my high-school years the morning hour was especially valuable; as a college student a free hour just before lunch met my needs better; in graduate school less frequent but more extended periods were most helpful; and in more recent years the morning time again seems best. You will find your own rhythm. Find the time when your energy level is at its peak and give that, the best of your day, to this sacred work.

The seventh questions ask about posture. Again the answer lies in what fits best for you, with this one qualification. Most of us fail to understand how helpful the body can be in spiritual work. For example, if we feel particularly distracted and out of touch with spiritual things, a consciously chosen posture of kneeling can help call the inner spirit to attention. The hands outstretched or placed on the knees palms up gently nudges the inner mind into a stance of receptivity. Slouching telegraphs inattention; sitting upright telegraphs alertness. I suggest sitting in a comfortable but straight chair with the back correctly positioned and both feet flat on the ground. Richard Rolle said that in "sitting I am most at rest, and my heart most upward."

### The Wellspring of Meditation

May I call us all to the adventure of the inner sanctuary of the soul. Our world desperately needs people who have dared to explore the interior depths and can therefore lead us into richer ways of living. The Japanese Christian Toyohiko Kagawa invites each of us to experience deeply the One who offers living water: "Those who draw water from the wellspring of meditation know that God dwells close to their hearts. For those who wish to discover the quietude of old amid the hustle and bustle of today's machine civilization, there is no way save to rediscover this ancient realm of meditation. Since the loss of my eyesight I have been as delighted as if I had found a new wellspring by having arrived at this sacred precinct."

*Originally published by InterVarsity Press as Meditative Prayer by Richard J. Foster, ©1983 by InterVarsity Christian Fellowship of the USA and used by permission of InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL 60515. Meditative Prayer is available in booklet form from IVP for 75 cents.*