

# Scriptural Meditation: Welcoming GOD Each Time

*Jan Johnson*

For years I've been practicing and teaching the familiar styles of Scripture meditation, but it seems that only recently I've begun to grasp this basic point: each time I approach the Scripture, I need to deliberately and submissively give God permission to speak to me through those Holy-Spirit-breathed words. It's actually a prayer of request: *Veni, Spiritus Sancte* (Come, Holy Spirit). Maybe because I've let my mind wander so often, I now understand I need to preface any meditative interaction with Scripture by asking with a sincere, searching heart for the Holy Spirit to speak to me today. I don't find this to be a formality or a checklist task, but a moment filled with the dearness of an older couple who have asked each other the same question every day of their lives: How was your day? They still mean it when they ask, and each still listens for the other's answer.

Once I began making this

request, I thought I'd somehow get past needing to do it, but this invitation/request/submission of self never gets old, nor do I ever stop needing to do it. Those of us who have preached and taught classes and Bible studies are always susceptible to manipulating the message to make it come out right. To be completely open to what God would say to me today leaves me vulnerable and teaches me to trust God on deeper levels.

For example, when I used to read 1 Corinthians 13:4-8, I would often resort to turning it into an exam that I would flunk. Was I patient? No. Was I kind? No. Did I envy? I could not pass the test. But while I was meditating on the passage, it occurred to me that since God is love, the descriptions of love were also descriptions of God. Because God is love, God is then patient and kind. God does not envy or boast. God is not proud or rude or self-seeking or

easily irritated. God doesn't keep a record of wrongs. God doesn't delight in evil, but rejoices in truth. No matter what, God always protects, always trusts, always hopes, and always perseveres. God never fails.

As I tasted these words over and over, I became so grateful that God doesn't keep a record of *my* wrongs, that God isn't rude to me, no matter how discourteous or braggadocious my behavior. I felt such love for this God who always protects, always trusts, always hopes, and always perseveres. I am often cynical, but God always hopes. I am suspicious, but God always trusts. I learned to luxuriate in the deep goodness of God's love.

Each time I meditated on it, different phrases stood out, or the same phrase implied different things for me. I had to keep pondering what God was saying to me *today*. I found it worked better not to make it a project or try too

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hard. Thus I was not surprised one day when, after a long hike during which I spent most of the time pondering the chapter, I made what seemed like an inconsequential decision not to “have a talk” with my then 21-year-old son about a rude remark he’d made. I knew I couldn’t do it with a heart of love, so I set the matter aside. I decided that I would instead continue to love and encourage him. (I did ask God to send someone else to talk to him about the related character fault!) For a recovering controller like me, that was a big deal.

I kept quiet, and a few days later, when he and I were joking around, the opportunity arose to mention—lightly and casually—the more desirable behavior. He smiled and said, “Oh. Okay.” How different our interchange was because I’d spent a few moments being intrigued by God’s personality of love that is not pushy or rude!

Transformation into Christlikeness occurs as we leave ourselves open to the words or phrases God highlights today. As

we regularly meditate on God’s genuine goodness, something changes inside us, and we naturally become careful to do the wise, good things described in Scripture (Joshua 1:8). In fact, we *want* to do those things. Goodness flows instead of being forced.

But the secret is to approach the Scripture continually in a non-controlling manner, to “welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls” (James 1:21, NRSV). The word can more fully implant itself—get itself wrapped around our hearts and wills—as we read the Scripture with a submissive attitude. We surrender all we are: plans, opinions, possessions, and roles. A.W. Tozer advised, “[The Bible] is not only a book which was once spoken, but a book which is *now speaking*.... If you would follow on to know the Lord, come at once to the open Bible expecting it to speak to you. Do not come with the notion that it is a thing which you can push around at your convenience.”<sup>1</sup>

## Children of Modernity

But many of us would frankly like to control what God would say to us today. Meditation seems at odds with the views of modernity (the ideas and events permeating roughly AD 1500 to 2000), which has largely been about conquest and control. In this modern period, we conquered, for example, two continents and numerous diseases. Through the development of the machine, we’ve found efficient ways to get things done. In this age of analysis, we’ve dissected and examined matter and ideas endlessly. All this progress has created an infatuation with newness, so we routinely throw off old ideas, thinking that newer ones are usual-

ly better. Such “progress” also makes us extremely objective, so that we replace “mysteries with comprehension, ignorance with information.”<sup>2</sup>

While many features of modernity have helped us, they have also invaded and shaded the biblical view of faith. Spirituality is now about conquering and efficiency. We pray in order to get results, forgetting that prayer is about getting more of God within ourselves. We search for machine-like ways to make our “time with God” productive. The mysteries of God are solved in apologetics books. The subjective parts of Scripture—the imagery of the poets and prophets—are less easily charted, so we don’t read them as much. Yet God allowed much of Scripture to be written in poetic, mysterious terms. Even Paul’s epistles include paradoxes such as this one: “to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge” (Ephesians 3:19, NAS). If this love surpasses knowledge, it cannot be known. So why bother “knowing” unknowable love? Yet grasping this unfathomable love of God is the main point of the prayer.

The products of meditation (hearing God and transformation into Christlikeness) are not precise and are, therefore, difficult to grade ourselves on. Simply letting the Scripture text speak is not quick. It involves waiting, an honored activity in Scripture, but shunned by us productive moderns.

That is why it helps us to pause before approaching the Word and pray that the Holy Spirit will speak. Parts of our mind are very creative in trying to speak for the Holy Spirit. On days when I can tell my inner self is particularly wily in this regard, I turn to this quote by Dietrich Bonhoeffer and read it aloud:

In our meditation we ponder the chosen text on the *strength*

*of the promise that it has something utterly personal to say to us today and for our Christian life, that it is not only God's Word for the Church, but also God's Word for us individually. We expose ourselves to the specific word until it addresses us personally. And when we do this, we are doing no more than the simplest, untutored Christian does every day; we read God's Word as God's Word for us. (emphasis added)."*<sup>3</sup>

## Quieting Selves

Perhaps we're sloppy about inviting God to speak because we often have such trouble quieting ourselves. Most people in our culture are plugged into headphones, tuned into the radio, transfixed with a book, or mesmerized by a television show. Not so with meditation. Meditation thrives on silence. That takes some adjustment.

Being creatures of such a culture, we usually find one of two things happening to us when we sit quietly. One is that we fall asleep. I always tell group participants that if this happens to them, God bless them in that time of rest. They must need it. Hurried, stressed-out folks in our culture need sleep.

The other common thing that happens is that our minds race, making lists of things we have to do and people we have to contact. I keep a yellow writing pad next to the place where I meditate each day and when details nag at me—errands to run, people to call—I jot them down on the pad and consciously release them to God. Then I set the pad behind me in a deliberate way, almost out of reach, as a way for my body to

say it's ready to set aside my agenda and hear God. It's safely written down, so I can focus again. (Often such scribbling creates a helpful "to do" list for the day.)

It works better not to be annoyed when our minds wander this way, but to expect this as part of learning the skill of letting go. Madame Guyon advises, "Do *not* become distressed because your mind has wandered away. Always guard yourself from being anxious because of your faults."<sup>4</sup> Dallas Willard puts it this way: "Nine-tenths of meditation is ignoring things, letting stuff go. It's the art of purposefully allowing stuff to drop off."<sup>5</sup> Such letting go helps us welcome God to speak into our lives. It trains us in the transforma-

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tive task of relinquishing to God things we cannot control. As we learn inner quiet, we're free in all of life to truly focus on the persons in front of us speaking to us, instead of hurrying and being distracted by urgent tasks. We love others better because we focus on them instead of worrying about saying the right thing or winning someone to our side. In silence, we learn to set our minds and hearts on God, to become fully preoccupied with God.

If a detail keeps coming back to my mind, I pick up the yellow pad and start praying over the matter. Maybe there's something I need to know. Bonhoeffer sympathizes:

Much as this [mind-wandering] may distress and shame us again and again, we must not lose heart and become anxious, or even conclude that meditation is really not something for us. When this happens it is often a help *not* to snatch back our thoughts convulsively, but quite calmly to incorporate into our prayer the people and events to which our thoughts keep straying and thus in all patience return to the starting point of the meditation (emphasis added).<sup>6</sup>

For example, one morning I was plagued by the need to tell a friend where I really stood on an issue. I felt as if I were deceiving him by not speaking up. (The night before, in a meeting when it had been my turn to speak, time was suddenly up—saved by the bell!) After my time of meditation, I kept explaining to God why I must do this.

But there on my bed sat my Bible open to Psalm 4, the passage on which I'd just meditated: "In your anger do not sin; when you are on your beds, search your hearts and be silent" (v. 4). Be silent? I picked up my Bible and reread it (Did I think "be silent" might disappear?) I explained again to God that I was lacking integrity by not speaking up. Be silent? Why?

So I sat back down and quieted myself. I released all agendas and pondered what it would look like to "be silent." Finally, as I finished getting ready for the day, I found myself wondering if God were doing something in my friend's heart that was bigger than I could imagine, and my telling him

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where I stood would be a distraction. I began to sense that my speaking up would interfere with God's work in this person's life.

I searched my heart and saw that my desire to live out my trademark transparency and authenticity overshadowed anything God might be doing in my friend's life. Back to prayer. In distress I asked God what I was to do if not speak up. One of my "rules" of life came to me immediately: I asked myself, *What would it look like to love the person in front of me?* "Okay," I told God, "I will love this friend." I would wait to speak up until I believed God was saying it was an appropriate time. The passage of time revealed that this was exactly the right course to take.

If you're plagued by distracting thoughts, you might want to journal about them so you can examine what's behind them. Write honestly: Here's what I'm afraid of today. Here's what I feel incapable of tackling today. Here's an upcoming event that I would rather skip—here's why. The Psalmist did this: "Every morning you'll hear me at it again. Every morning I lay out the pieces of my life on your altar and watch for fire to descend" (Psalm 5:3, *The Message*). In all these cases, you are inviting God to speak to you today even if

it pulls you away from your normally prescribed method of meditation.

On the other hand, bringing stability into your practices keeps you from being distracted. It helps, for example, to have a regular time and place to look at Scripture, and to have a plan for reading so you aren't distracted by hunting to discover the text for the day. You may use a recommended list (such as a lectionary, which contains the Scripture texts used each week in church services of certain denominations around the world) or stay with a theme (Jesus' healings) or simply work through a book of the Bible. Ten verses or less per day is sufficient. Your goal is not to get through the book, but to interact with God. In fact, you may find yourself so drawn to a passage that you stay in it for several days. Bonhoeffer advised his seminary students at Finkenwalde that "in our personal meditation we [should] confine ourselves to a brief selected text, which possibly may not be changed for a whole week."<sup>7</sup>

However, welcoming God's leading with meekness may mean being open to shifting plans now and then. For 2 years, I worked through Old Testament prophets with great joy. But the summer my mother died, I switched to meditating through the Gospel of Mark. I needed familiar passages that kept me close to Jesus. Later I went back to the prophets. If you've just read or heard riveting teaching about a passage, you may wish to switch to it for a day or two. That happened to me recently with Song of Songs and later with Psalm 119. I spent a few weeks in each and then went back to my plan.

In the beginning, it helps to choose texts that answer the conscious needs of your soul, espe-

cially your places of brokenness. For example, those sensing they don't truly believe God loves them may want to meditate on passages that mention God delighting in us: "The Lord your God is with you, he is mighty to save. He will take great delight in you, he will quiet you with his love, he will rejoice over you with singing" (Zephaniah 3:17, NIV). "He brought me out into a spacious place; he rescued me because he delighted in me" (Psalm 18:19, NIV).

If you have been a people-pleaser for years, doing what others want you to do while giving little attention to God's call on your life, you might meditate on Matthew 10:26–31. In this passage, the phrase "do not be afraid" occurs three times. Each occurrence deals with being afraid of what others think. Focus also on the second part of verse 28, in which Jesus spoke of being afraid of God. What does it mean to have a holy, healthy fear of God? Isn't it silly *not* to tremble before the creator of the universe? If we have such a healthy fear of God, how does that affect our thoughts about pleasing others? Won't others' opinions cease to matter as much when God becomes the object of our longing? How would it feel to have this holy, healthy fear of God?

## Putting Words in God's Mouth

One of the roadblocks to welcoming with meekness God's implanted word is making it up ourselves. We may even wonder, *Am I putting words in God's mouth?* For example, your friend keeps telling you to be more patient so you "hear" that



message in every Bible narrative. Yes, it's good to be patient, but perhaps God has something else to say to you today. If you are utterly surprised by it, that's a good sign it's from God. It will be an adventure.

An important step in this process is to be aware of the routine tapes running in your head that you might mistake for God's voice. My spiritual director has helped me recognize that I have rooms to which I regularly return when I really need to stay more open to what I need to know. These rooms reverberate with thoughts such as, *That's me being negative again* or *There goes my pride again*. If you see yourself as needing to talk less, that's probably important, but is there anything else you need to know today? Is God truly free to speak to you, or are you handing God a script? It's an exciting adventure into real interaction with God, and "we will never be 'in charge' in prayer if it is real."<sup>8</sup>

Some of us have such routine tapes going that it's as if they have personalities of their own (actually our own). At the risk of repeating what I've previously written for *Conversations*, I mention again how these thought patterns can become the "committee members" that live in our heads. These yet unregenerate parts of our soul make us groan with the Psalmist, "How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and every day have sorrow in my heart? How long will my enemy triumph over me?" (Psalm 13:2, NIV). My committee members argue about what God is saying, turning my mind into a courtroom battleground. The *looking-good kid*, who desperately wants to be perfect and admired by all, drives me to think every passage is saying that I should be better and work harder. My *kick-back kid* argues back that every passage is leading me to chuck everything and take time off. My *rescuer* (so

superior because she's thinking about others) argues that this passage is saying I need to overextend myself to meet the needs of everyone in sight—so get going, girl! Now and then, my childhood voice of despair, the *victim* (or *grouch*) sneaks up with the broken record of "Nothing is ever going to work for you."

It's important to name committee members before God so we can recognize when they are imitating God's voice in our heads. (Other committee members may include such characters as a proud and tyrannical parent, an overbearing boss, a clown, a daredevil, a promiscuous flirt, or a maverick intellectual.) Then we can set them aside and ask, *What else might God be saying to me today?* (Also, look for passages that speak to these broken parts of your soul. Let Scripture say to your *looking-good kid*, "God sees your failures and works through them"; to your *kick-back kid*, "God gives courage and confidence"; to your *rescuer*, "God shows up in every catastrophe; sometimes God asks you to come along; other times, you stay put"; to the *victim*, "God loves you, no matter what; God never gives up on you.") Part of how you "guard yourself from being anxious because of your faults" is to refuse to give these committee members too much airtime. As Dallas Willard often reminds us, our first freedom is where we put our minds. Today, I choose God and God's kingdom.

When we put words in God's mouth, we replace an encounter with the living, productive, penetrating Word of God with our own ideas. We sacrifice relationship with God and settle for the mechanical thought patterns of our culture or our still-being-transformed selves. How much more exciting it is to be alert to the

dramatic unfolding of "the life that really is life" by welcoming the influx of God's life into our own (1 Timothy 6:19, NRSV)! This interactive life with God increasingly occurs as I become open to what God would say to me today. Why would I choose to live any other way?

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> A.W. Tozer, *The Pursuit of God*, (Camp Hill, PA: Christian Publications, Inc., 1982) 81–82.

<sup>2</sup> Brian McLaren, *A New Kind of Christian*. (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Inc., 2001) 17.

<sup>3</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*. (New York, NY: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1954) 82.

<sup>4</sup> Jeanne Guyon, *Experiencing the Depths of Jesus Christ* (Beaumont, TX: The SeedSowers, 1975) 83.

<sup>5</sup> Interview with Dallas Willard, July 31, 2002, Chatsworth, CA.

<sup>6</sup> Bonhoeffer, 85

<sup>7</sup> Bonhoeffer, 82.

<sup>8</sup> Thelma Hall, *Too Deep for Words: Rediscovering Lectio Divina*. (New York: Paulist Press, 1988) 32.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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