

Let's keep our Bibles open right there at Psalm 119. A few weeks ago, Josh and I were talking about our shared desire that more people in our church would spend more time in God's Word. So, my aim this morning is to encourage you in that direction. Now, I'm sure that some of you read the Bible regularly. Maybe you even started a Bible reading plan at the beginning of the year, and it's the middle of April and you're still going. Well, I hope this will spur you on to keep reading! I'm also sure there are others of us who maybe started strong in January but lost steam, or who rarely pick up the Bible and read at all. Well, I hope this will motivate you to open the Bible up again (or even for the first time). Because—here is what we all must know—without the regular intake of Scripture, we will be spiritually malnourished. This is why God often refers to his Word as food for our souls.

As Deuteronomy 8:3 says, *Man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD* (Deuteronomy 8:3).

Or as the prophet Jeremiah says, *Your words were found, and I ate them, and your words became to me a joy and the delight of my heart* (Jeremiah 15:16).

If we want to grow in our faith, we must feed upon God's Word. This is why coming to a church that opens the Bible is so helpful. It's like going to a restaurant. And Josh or I or whoever is preaching, we're like the chef. We work hard to prepare the meal, to feed you God's Word, praying that it will nourish your soul. This is why joining a LIFE Group that opens the Bible is so valuable. It's like sitting down for a family dinner, passing the plates to one another. Only the food is the Word, and as you share your observations and insights, you nourish one another.

And this is why opening the Bible personally and regularly is so critical. Because as good as it is to worship once a week, and gather with a small group once a week, that's two meals. And if you only eat twice a week, you're going to be malnourished. So, in this message I want to encourage you to press on in personal Bible reading, or to begin personal Bible reading. And I want to show you a strategy God himself commends that will help you make the most of your Bible reading. It's called meditation. And with the rest of our time today, I want to answer two questions:

1. What is meditation?
2. How can we meditate?

First...

1. What is meditation?

Look at verses 15-16: *I will meditate on your precepts and fix my eyes on your ways. I will delight in your statutes; I will not forget your word* (Psalm 119:15-16).

In these verses, the Psalmist is talking about reflecting on God's word as a means of fostering delight in God's ways. The Christian life is not a life of mere obligation and duty. Yes, we are to do what God says. Period. But the Christian life is also a life of joy! Because we find delight in God and all that he says to us. And meditation is all about stirring up this kind of delight. This is very different than the kind of meditation that is growing in popularity today.

As I'm sure you're aware, various practices of meditation are on the rise in our culture. And like

everything else it seems, these practices are increasingly guided by apps on our phones. For example, recently I searched “Meditation App” on Google and ended up on an article from the NY Times titled, “The 3 Best Meditation Apps.” I downloaded the top recommendation, which has 438 thousand ratings on Apple’s app store, with over 30 million users. I opened the app, answered a few simple questions, and then received a promise. The app told me that if I followed its plan, I should experience a noticeable improvement in my life within three months! Three months to a better life. Sounds good! I then entered a library of guided meditation exercises offering to help me quiet my heart, grow in virtue, and manifest abundance.

No wonder meditation has become so popular. Who doesn’t want more peace, better character, and an increasingly abundant life? But here’s the issue: where do these things come from? The app kept telling me these things will come from within, that meditation would lead me into the depths of my own heart, mind, and soul, and that if I could just access my internal life, I would find everything that I’m looking for. But that is a recipe for disappointment. Because peace, character, and life are not things we find within ourselves. These are things we find in Christ, and in Christ alone.

If you’re not yet a Christian, you need to know that Jesus has what you are looking for! Jesus offers the most important kind of peace... peace with God! Because through his death, he cleanses us from all our sin. Jesus offers real change and growth in character, because through his Spirit, he transforms us as we follow him. And Jesus offers abundant life—eternal life—because through his resurrection (which we celebrated last Sunday) he gives us an unshakable future and hope. You see, many contemporary models of meditation invite us to look inward. But the biblical model of meditation invites us to look outward, to fix our eyes upon our great God and Savior, to find life in his name and to delight in his ways.

As Matthew Bingham puts it, biblical meditation involves, "directing one's attention toward God and his promises as revealed in Scripture with the aim of stirring up God-honoring affections... directing one's thoughts Godward so that we can grow in personal godliness."¹

And I love that phrase he used... stirring up God-honoring affections. It makes me think of a fire with a weak flame, but if you add fresh wood and stir up the embers that fire can burn brightly once again. We all know that our affections for God are sometimes far weaker than we wish they were, but the practice of meditation will help us stir up the embers, that we might delight in him more deeply and follow him more closely. This is why meditation is so helpful.

Now, next question...

2. How can we meditate?

In these verses, the Psalmist gives us an excellent example. He tells us how he seeks the treasures of truth found in Scripture, stores those treasures within his heart, and speaks to God and others in response to all he has seen. If you want to learn how to meditate, this is a great model. Learn to seek, to store, and to speak. Let’s take those words one at a time. First...

¹ Bingham, *A Heart Aflame*, 131

A. Seek

Look at verse 9: *How can a young man keep his way pure? By guarding it according to your word* (Psalm 119:9).

The Psalmist specifically addresses young men here, but what he says can apply to anyone, regardless of your age or your gender. If you want to keep your way pure, if you want to walk in holiness, you must allow the Word of God to guide your life.

I love GPS. I use it constantly, even when I am driving somewhere I've been hundreds of times before. Part of this is my life-long fascination with maps. Part of this is my deep desire to avoid traffic. But I am glad to entrust my drive to my phone. I let it tell me where to go, and I let it tell me where *not* to go. And as Christians, this is how we want to relate to the Bible. We want to submit ourselves to the authority of Scripture, letting God guide our way, showing us what is true and beautiful and good, and what is not. We want to allow his Word to guide our actions, our thoughts, our desires. And the practice of meditation will help us fill our lives with God's Word that he might lead us. Because when we meditate, we don't skim. We seek the riches of wisdom and truth found in the Scriptures.

Look at verse 10: *With my whole heart I seek you; let me not wander from your commandments!* (Psalm 119:10).

As one author put it: When we open the Bible, we don't want to zip along the surface like a guy on a jet ski, we want to plunge into the depths like a scuba diver.²

And there are multiple ways to go deep in our Bible reading. One way, of course, is to engage in in-depth study of the original language with the support of concordances, commentaries, and other reference books. But, and I hope this will encourage you; that's not the only way to dive deep into God's Word! You don't need a seminary degree to mine Scripture for treasures of truth. All you need is a hungry heart, eager to seek what God has revealed in his Word, and the willingness to read with patience, persistence, and passion. This does not come naturally to most of us.

As John Piper writes, "Most people read half asleep. We read the Bible pretty much like we watch television—passively... we expect the TV program to affect us. Entertain us, or inform us, or teach us." But, Piper says, to read well "You have to... look! Listen! Think about what you are seeing. Spot clues. Be aggressively observant. Be unremitting in your attentiveness. Be unwaveringly watchful."³

Piper then illustrates this principle with the story of a 19th century Harvard zoology professor and one of his students. Upon meeting this eager student, the professor gave him an assignment. He gave the student a dead fish, preserved in alcohol, and told him, "Take this fish and look at it... [and from time to time] I will ask you what you have seen." Then, the professor left. The student was surprised by the assignment, and a little annoyed. After a few minutes the student concluded that he had seen all he could see. But

² Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows*, 7.

³ Piper, *Reading the Bible Supernaturally*, 327.

the professor had not come back. And he did not return for several hours. During those hours, the student stared at this dead fish in frustration, but slowly, he noticed things he had not seen at first.

When the professor returned that afternoon, the student had a long list of observations to share, but the professor was not impressed. "Look again; look again!" he said... and he made the student keep looking for 3 days! But, after those 3 days, the student had learned far more about this fish than he could have possibly imagined. And reflecting on the experience, he wrote, "This was the best... lesson I ever had... a legacy of inestimable value." You see, the student learned to look! To patiently, persistently, and even passionately seek the meaning of what was in front of him. He meditated on that fish!

And if we will take the time to slow down, and meditate on the Word, by seeking what is there through careful observation and reflection, we will see more than we could have possibly imagined. One very practical way to do this is with a journal. I have found that simply writing a passage down on paper causes me to see things I did not notice at first. Then, jotting down observations, connections to other passages, and applications takes me deeper still. You may not have 3 whole days to do this! But you'll be amazed at what you'll see if you give even 15 minutes to meditate on the meaning of a single verse that would have taken you 15 seconds to simply read. And as you seek the treasures of truth found in the Scripture, store those treasures up in your heart. Look at verses 11-12...

B. Store

I have stored up your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you. Blessed are you, O LORD; teach me your statutes! (Psalm 119:11-12).

Scripture memorization is a great way to practice biblical meditation. We live with amazing technological advancements which allow us to carry God's Word wherever we go and search it with speed and ease. And believe me, I'm grateful for this. But good as it is to have the Word in print and on our phones, there's no substitute for storing up the Word within our own hearts. Scripture memorization makes the Word of God readily available to us at any time in any place. And notice, the Psalmist describes one key situation when this is especially helpful: in times of temptation.

He says, *I have stored up your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you.* When Jesus was tempted by the devil, do you remember how he responded? With the Word! In each instance, when Satan enticed him to turn away from the Father's will, Jesus responded, "It is written..." The Word of God is like a sword to fight the lies of the enemy. It is like a light, which will shine in our darkest moments. Therefore, storing the Word up in our hearts is one of the most effective strategies in our battle against sin and temptation.

It makes me think of Frodo, in the depths of Shelob's lair, in *The Lord of the Rings*. If you haven't read the book or seen the movie, Shelob is this enormous, evil, spider. And as Frodo passes through the caverns where she lives, Shelob approaches, and plans to eat him alive. But within his cloak Frodo has two weapons. A sword and a little piece of glass which can shine a brilliant light. And with the sword held high, and the light burning

brightly, Frodo drives Shelob back into the darkness.

Friends, on our own, sin will eat us alive. But if we keep the Word of God close at hand—within our hearts—we will be able to drive back the darkness. This is one of the most powerful outcomes of meditation. As you seek the treasures of truth in what God has written, allowing his Word to move from your mind into your heart, you'll be well-equipped in times of temptation. Let me give you an example of what this might look like.

Maybe you're reading the story of Abraham, and you are struck by Genesis 15:6, when God promises Abraham the seemingly impossible, that he will have a child in his old age. But you read how Abraham *believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness*. And you meditate upon that verse. You copy it down into a journal. And then write a few reflections. Abraham had no evidence that God would fulfill this promise other than the promise itself. He was so old, and so was his wife, but God spoke and this was enough for him.

I can take God at his Word! I can believe, even when I cannot see. And then you think, what do I believe that I cannot see? And you jot down a few more thoughts:

- I believe God made this world.
- I believe God stepped into this world in the person of Jesus Christ.
- I believe Christ died for my sins and rose again.
- I believe he will bring me through this life and into his presence.

And through this short but profound reflection—maybe it only took 15 minutes—you find that Genesis 15:6 has made its way into your heart. Then, later that day, the enemy fires some arrow of doubt into your mind. Something threatens to disturb your trust in your God, but as you wrestle with that thought, the words come to you... *Abraham believed the Lord!* Abraham had nothing to go on, other than the word of God, and he believed! And you pray, "Lord give me that kind of faith!" And you press on.

Brothers and sisters, we can do that with doubt, anger, lust, greed, and any other temptation. We can take up the Word of God and fight! Meditation will help us to do this, as we store up the treasures of his truth within our hearts.

What does biblical meditation look like? How can we do it? Seek. Store. And lastly...

C. Speak

In Psalm 119, the outcome of seeking and storing is speaking. Look at verses 13-14: *With my lips I declare all the rules of your mouth. In the way of your testimonies I delight as much as in all riches* (Psalm 119:13-14).

Christopher Ash writes, "where the word of God is really in the heart it will also be found on the lips."

We cannot help but speak about the things we truly love. And speaking about the treasures we discover in God's Word is a wonderful way to continue meditating upon

God's Word. Meditation is not only the quiet reflection of the mind and heart. It can also include speaking to God in prayer and sharing the treasures of his Word with others. In fact, the word translated "meditate" in verse 15 refers to an audible form of meditation.

As one commentator writes, it can even describe "loud, enthusiastic, emotion-laden speech... a... celebration of the precious words of God."⁴ Again, that celebration might be in the form of prayer. In many ways, prayer is the logical outcome of reading Scripture and meditating upon Scripture. With God's word on our minds, and in our hearts, we turn to him in prayer. We pray with our Bibles open, letting God's words guide what we say, continuing our meditation on what he has said. And then, when we finish talking to God, we look for opportunities to share his Word with others. And the Word continues to drive its way deeper into our hearts.

I find that I am much more likely to remember something I have seen in Scripture if I share it with someone else. That's one of the reasons I love preaching! Preaching, at its best, is a pastor's public meditation upon the Word! But you don't have to be a preacher to do this. You can take what you've read, and reflected upon, and prayed over, and share it with your family at breakfast, your friends in a text thread, your LIFE Group when you gather, and so on. Some of you will have heard Pastor Colin's illustration of approaching the Word like a mother bird looking for a worm. She finds the worm, eats some to nourish herself, and carries the rest back to the nest to feed her chicks. That's a beautiful way to think about your personal time in God's Word. Open the Bible to nourish your soul through reading and meditating. And then, bring what you have found to others.

This is how to meditate: we seek the treasures of truth found in Scripture, store those treasures within our hearts, and speak to God and others in response to all we have seen.

Conclusion

Reading the Bible is very good, but only if the Word makes its way through our minds and into our hearts. And that is where meditation will take us. Meditation involves reflecting upon God's Word as a means of fostering delight in God's ways. So, let me offer a simple challenge for the week ahead: commit to reading some portion of Scripture every day, and commit to meditating as you do. If you don't own a Bible, take one of the church Bibles. It's a gift!

If you don't know where to start, pick one of the Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke or John). And read a little about Jesus each day. Ask God to open your eyes to see wonderful things as you open his Word. And as you read, pick a verse, or even just a phrase. Take hold of something that stands out to you, and let it fill your mind... until it fills your heart.

⁴ Christopher Ash, *Psalms*.