



Resources for *Drawing Near*

What does it mean to draw near to God in Scripture?

Drawing near involves *seeing* God in Scripture and *savoring* Him so that we *encounter* Him.

Seeing + Savoring → *Encountering*

This handout includes quotes and summaries from some of the best resources available on how to see and savor God in Scripture.

Seeing God in Scripture

Understanding Scripture

You can't reflect on or enjoy what you don't understand. To understand a section of Scripture means answering two basic questions about it. First, what did the original author intend to convey to his readers in this passage? Second, what role does the text play in the whole Bible; how does it contribute to the gospel message and move along the main narrative arc of the Bible, which climaxes in the salvation of Jesus Christ? ...Unless you first do the hard work of answering those questions about a text, your meditation won't be grounded in what God is actually saying in the passage. Something in the passage may "hit" you—but it may hit you as expressing almost the opposite of what the biblical author, inspired by the Spirit, was saying. When that happens, you are listening to your own heart or to the spirit of your own culture, not God's voice in the Scripture.¹

¹ Timothy Keller, *Prayer: Experiencing Awe and Intimacy with God*, 148-149.

Reading and Thinking in Order to See

Over the long haul, strong Christians are created not by sermons and by books alone, but by a personal encounter with the Word of God, the Bible itself. I want to encourage people to linger long enough over the Scriptures themselves and ask enough questions and look at things from other angles and spend enough brainpower and pour out enough prayers that they make amazing and true discoveries for themselves from the text. This is what makes spindly cattail Christians into oaks of righteousness. It sends our roots down into the granite foundations of biblical truths so that we stop being flip-floppy, blown-around-in-the-wind kind of Christians, who are always learning and never coming to knowledge of the truth (see 2 Timothy 3:7). It turns them into oaks of righteousness, because they can see, they can see for themselves what's really there in the precious, inspired word of God.²

Asking Questions While You Read

I think very often we are using, even commentators are using biblical words and phrases as if we know what we're talking about when we haven't really paused to ponder very deeply, What's the *reality* of the words and phrases? What are we referring to? I'll give you an example.

First Peter 2:1 goes like this: 'Put away all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander.' Now, the average commentary moves fairly quickly over these five realities: malice, deceit, hypocrisy, envy, slander. In my way of looking at the Scriptures, each one of those requires hours of reflection about the very nature of the experience in the human heart:

- *What is malice?*
- *Why is it something that's malicious? That is, why is something malice?*
- *How is it different from the others in the list?*
- *How does it relate to God?*
- *How does it relate to the devil?*
- *How does it relate to my personality?*
- *Is it present in people who are genetically nice?*
- *Is it a serious problem if people never act on it?*
- *How does it fit in the list?*
- *Why is it listed first?*

And on and on and on. ...I'm just pleading with people to ask reality questions and to take a pen in hand or get on the computer and start mulling and pondering and asking and thinking to go down into reality.³

² John Piper, "Ask Pastor John Ep. 1045." To read or listen to this full episode go here: <http://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/will-you-ever-write-a-piper-bible-commentary>

³ Piper, "Ask Pastor John Ep. 1045."

Savoring God in Scripture

In all our effort to see more and more of the glory of God, we are aiming, by that seeing, to savor the God we see. That is, we are always aiming to experience spiritual affections in our heart wakened by the spiritual sight in our minds.⁴

It is not right to settle for mere mental assent to doctrines about Jesus, because that does not honor him. There should be love, trust, delight, and longing after the full enjoyment of him. The only way to get that is to study the Word, meditate to the point of delight, and then experience inward love and joy and also life-change.⁵

What is Meditation?

“Meditation” can be a confusing word because of the way it’s used in our culture and in Eastern religions. But Biblical meditation is not a mantra. It is not emptying your mind of thought but *filling* your mind with big thoughts about God, and then taking those thoughts into your heart (Heb. 4:12).

We were made to meditate. God designed us with the capacity to pause and ponder. He means for us to not just hear him, not only to read quickly over what he says, but to reflect on what he says and knead it into our hearts. It is a distinctively human trait to stop and consider, to chew on something with the teeth of our minds and hearts, to roll some reality around in our thoughts and press it deeply into our feelings, to look from different angles and seek to get a better sense of its significance.

The biblical name for this art is meditation, which Donald S. Whitney defines as “deep thinking on the truths and spiritual realities revealed in Scripture for the purposes of understanding, application, and prayer.”⁶ It is a marvelous means of God’s grace in the Christian life—perhaps the most misunderstood, and most underrated, of the disciplines in the church today. And it is the high point of receiving God’s word.⁷

Meditating means reflecting on the *significance* of what you’ve understood Scripture to mean. That’s why it’s so important first to read the Bible accurately. Once you’ve *seen* what God is saying in Scripture, you then *savor* it through meditation.

Meditation is spiritually ‘tasting’ Scripture—delighting in it, sensing the sweetness of the teaching, feeling the conviction of what it tells us about ourselves, and thanking God and praising God for what it shows us about him. Meditation is also spiritually ‘digesting’ the Scripture—applying it, thinking out how it affects you, describes you, guides you in the most practical way. It is drawing strength from the Scripture, letting it give you hope, using it to remember how loved you are. To shift metaphors, meditation is taking the truth down into our hearts until it catches fire there and begins to melt and shape our reactions to God, ourselves, and the world.”⁸

⁴ John Piper, *Reading the Bible Supernaturally: Seeing and Savoring the Glory of God in Scripture*, 102.

⁵ Keller, 159.

⁶ Donald S. Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, 46.

⁷ David Mathis, *Habits of Grace: Enjoying Jesus Through the Spiritual Disciplines*, 55.

⁸ Keller, 151.

Why is Meditation Necessary?

“Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; 2 but his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night. 3 He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers. 4 The wicked are not so, but are like chaff that the wind drives away.” (Psalm 1:1-4)

Stability

According to Psalm 1, meditation promises at least three things. The first is stability. The person experienced in meditation is like a tree rooted so that wind cannot blow it away. Notice that this tree is planted by streams of water. Trees by streams do well even if there is little rain. This is an image of someone who can keep going in hard, dry times. We need to have the roots of our heart and soul in God at such times, and meditation is the way to do that. ...Meditation, then, is what gives you stability, peace, and courage in times of great difficulty, adversity, and upheaval. It helps you stay rooted in divine ‘water’ when all other sources of moisture—of joy, hope, and strength—dry up. By contrast, chaff—the husk around the seed or the kernel in grain—is very lightweight and in any little puff of breeze just blows away. Anything can move it. The way to avoid being chaff rather than a tree is through meditation on God’s Word.⁹

Substance

Meditation also brings the promise of substance, of character. Chaff cannot produce anything, while the tree can produce fruit. The reason for the difference is that the tree is a growing thing, and the chaff is not. Persons who meditate become people of substance who have thought things out and have deep convictions, who can explain difficult concepts in simple language, and who have good reasons behind everything they do. Many people do not meditate. They skim everything, picking and choosing on impulse, having no thought-out reasons for their behavior. Following whims, they live shallow lives. The people who meditate can resist pressure—but those who do not go along with the throng, chafflike, wherever it is going.¹⁰

How do I Meditate?

Meditation involves both a considering of *God* and His truth and an honest consideration of *ourselves* and how we are in need of it:

Another way of discerning how a truth can change you is to look more deeply at yourself. Ask yourself what wrong thoughts result in you when this truth is forgotten. Then consider the excessive and

⁹ Keller, 147.

¹⁰ Keller, 147.

hard-to-control feelings that result when it is not fully believed and embraced. Ask how a loss of orientation to this truth may lead to inordinate hopes for something else to give you what only God can give you. Consider what actual sins and wrongdoings might result from a failure to grasp and appreciate this truth. Be concrete—Is there something you must stop doing because of it? Is there something you should start doing? A final way you can discern how a scriptural truth should change you is by considering the timing of your insight. Why might God be showing this to you *today*? What is going on now in your life to which this would be relevant?¹¹

Here is a summary of the approaches and questions for meditation that Keller recommends in his book:

Ask yourself about the truth that the Scripture is presenting:

- What is this text calling me to believe or to do?
 - Are there personal examples to emulate or avoid?
 - Are there commands to obey?
 - Are there promises to claim?
 - Are there warnings to heed?
- Am I living in the light of this? Am I taking this seriously?
- What difference does this make? If I believed and obeyed this, how would it change things in my life?

Ask yourself what wrong thoughts arise when the truth that you learned in a certain section of Scripture is forgotten:

- “When I forget I am justified by faith alone—I give place to guilt and regret about the past. I therefore live in bondage to idols of power and money that make me feel better about myself.”
- “When I forget I’m being sanctified through the presence of God’s Holy Spirit—I give up on myself, stop trying to change.”
- “When I forget the hope of my future resurrection—I become afraid of aging and death.”
- “When I forget my adoption into the family of God—I become full of fears. I don’t pray with candor. I lose my confidence. I try to hide my faults from God and myself.”

When you are reading Scripture, try to answer these 4 questions:

- What does this teach me about God and His Character?
- What does this teach me about human nature, character, and behavior?
- What does this teach me about Christ and His Salvation?
- What does this teach me about the church, or life in the people of God?

Another approach to meditating on the Scriptures, especially with a shorter passage, is to take one crucial verse and think through it by emphasizing each word. Ask what each word uniquely contributes to the meaning of the text, or what meaning would be lost from the statement if that particular word were removed.

¹¹ Keller, 158-159.

You can also try to paraphrase a verse in your own words.

- Read a verse.
- Close the Bible and try to restate it.
- Look back and see what you missed.

And you can also memorize Scripture verses. Memorization forces you to focus on and remember the exact words, and memorized texts can come to you spontaneously during the day. “Learn it by heart”!

Ask the Holy Spirit to impart specific thought and direction to you for your life. Make room for listening to the Holy Spirit’s promptings. What is He bringing to mind? What subjective sense is He awakening in you for you to continue to pray through?

Here are some other things to consider, provided in our “**Drawing Near Field Manual**”:

- How does this passage convict me or instruct me or enlighten me?
- How is faith stirred in my heart?
- How do I feel the love and nearness of God?
- How is hope awakened in me? How does that touch my future, my fears, my plans, etc.?
- How am I encouraged?
- How does this speak to my priorities, my ambitions, my cravings?
- Is there something I should stop doing or start doing in light of this passage?

Encountering God

Coming to the Bible to be Astonished

As John Piper says, “A godly life is lived out of an astonished heart—a heart that is astonished at grace. We go to the Bible to be astonished, to be amazed at God and Christ and the cross and grace and the gospel.” The kind of application most important to pursue in encountering God’s word is such astonishment. Press the Scriptures to your soul. Pray for the awakening of your affections. Bring the Bible home to your heart. It’s really just another way of commending meditation.

As we’re freshly captivated by the grandeur of our God and his gospel, we become what we behold: “We all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another” (2 Cor. 3:18). And so we come away from our Bible intake with a more satisfied soul, which imparts a flavor and demeanor to our lives and decision-making that affects everything.

Meditating on God’s words shapes our soul. Sometimes it yields immediate and specific points of application—embrace them when they come. But be careful not to let the drive for

specific actions alter the focus of our devotions from astonishment and seeking to have your soul happy in the Lord. Coming to the Scriptures to see and feel makes for a drastically different approach than primarily coming to do. The Bible is gloriously for us, but it is not mainly about us. We come most deeply because of whom we will see, not for what we must do. “Become a kind of person,” counsels Piper, “don’t amass a long list.”¹²

Result of Meditation: Enjoying or Crying Out

We could say that meditation before prayer consists of thinking, then inclining, and, finally, either enjoying the presence or admitting the absence and asking for his mercy and help. Meditation is thinking a truth *out* and then thinking a truth *in* until its ideas become ‘big’ and ‘sweet,’ moving and affecting, until the reality of God is sensed upon the heart.”¹³

The Light of Truth Shining in the Heart

Prayer is a conversation that leads to an encounter with God. ...In John Owen’s treatment of meditation, the third stage anticipates a character-forming experience of God’s presence and reality. ...We must not settle for an informed mind without an engaged heart.¹⁴

“For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, 15 from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, 16 that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, 17 so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, 18 may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, 19 and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.”
(Ephesians 3:14-19)

Why is Paul asking God to give to Christians things they must surely already have? There can only be one answer. At one level, Christians have these things. At another level, they haven’t experienced them. It is one thing to know of the love of Christ and to say, “I know he did all that.” It is another thing to *grasp* how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ. What Paul is talking about is the difference between having something be true of you in principle and fully appropriating it, using it, and living in it—in your “inner being” (Eph. 3:16) or “in your heart” (v. 17).¹⁵

Imagine you get a notice that someone left you some money, but for various reasons, you assume it is a very modest amount. You get busy and don’t get around to even checking on it for quite a while. Finally, you do so and are thunderstruck to discover it was a fortune, and you had not been doing anything with it. You were actually rich but had been living poor. This is what Paul wants his Christian friends to avoid, and only through encounter with God in prayer can they avoid it. This may be where you are. You are in him. You are adopted into the Father’s family. You have the very divine life in you, the Holy Spirit. You are loved and accepted in Christ. You know about these things, and yet at another

¹² Mathis, 64-65.

¹³ Keller, 162.

¹⁴ Keller, 165.

¹⁵ Keller, 167.

level you don't know them, you don't grasp them. You are still dogged by your bad habits, often anxious or bored or discouraged or angry. You may have many specific problems and issues that need to be faced and dealt with through various specific means. Yet the root problem of them all is that you are rich in Christ but nevertheless living poor.¹⁶

Paul's prayer [in Ephesians 3:16-19] suggests that Christians need the Spirit's "chemical treatment," a spiritual sensitizing, or the truths we mouth and assent to will make no real difference in how we live. If you are exposed to the 'light' of the Christian truth that God is holy, and if the Holy Spirit has sensitized your heart, then you not only respond with emotion—with tears or trembling or joy—but you permanently change the way you live and behave in the world. When your feelings and behaviors are affected, you have, to a degree, *grasped* a particular truth about God. The light comes in and makes permanent impressions.¹⁷

Our doctrinal and biblical knowledge cannot 'leave the affections behind.' If we believe with our minds that God is holy, we must also come to find his holiness enjoyable and satisfying just to praise it. If we believe the great God of the universe really loves us, it should make us emotionally unshakeable in the face of criticism, suffering, and death. In short, we must be able to existentially *access* our doctrinal convictions.¹⁸

Responding to God

Here is some direction provided in our "**Drawing Near Field Manual**":

- Let your heart overflow in prayer, adoration, worship, affection, song
- Express your joy or gratitude or celebration to God
- Confess how you are convicted;
- Yield to God in brokenness and surrender;
- Seek godly sorrow that stirs up repentance; express and walk in repentance;
- Write out a devotional thought from the passage; journal a thought that God gives you from your waiting on the Lord; re-write the passage in your own words
- Intercede for specific people God shows you, for the world, for the church, for God' mission
- Take steps of faith under the leading of the Holy Spirit
- Be sensitive to spiritual gifts like prophecy, faith, words of knowledge or wisdom, etc.
- Ask the Holy Spirit to lead you to other passages for further insights

¹⁶ Keller, 168-169.

¹⁷ Keller, 170.

¹⁸ Keller, 180.