

# THE DUTY OF MEDITATION

**By John Angell James**

The subject I call you now to consider is *the duty and benefits of* MEDITATION. This is frequently either alluded to, or enjoined in the Scriptures. In describing the good man, David observes, that "his delight is in the law of the Lord, and in his law does he meditate day and night," Psalm 1:2. In giving his instructions to Joshua, Jehovah thus addressed him: "This book of the law shall not depart out of your mouth; but you shall meditate therein day and night, that you may observe to do according to all that is written therein," Joshua 1:8. What was Joshua's duty is ours: the very possession of the Scriptures implies an obligation, not only to read them, but to meditate upon them. Meditation means close and continuous thought upon some selected subject. It is much the same as contemplation, musing, or what, in popular language, is called turning over a subject in our mind. Pious meditation, then, is a devout pondering upon some religious topic. This, it must be at once confessed and lamented, is in exercise of religion, to which, however important it may be, few addict themselves.

"And it is a very great cause of the dryness and expiration of men's devotion, because our souls are so little refreshed with the waters and holy dews of meditation. We go to our prayers by chance, or order, or by determination of accidental occurrences; and we recite them as we read a book, and sometimes we are sensible of the duty; and a flash of heavenly light makes the room bright—but our prayers end, and the light is gone, and we are as dark as ever. We draw our water from stagnant pools, which never are filled but with sudden showers, and therefore we are dry so often; whereas, if we would draw water from the fountains of our Savior, and derive them through the channel of diligent and prudent meditations, our devotion would be a continual current, and safe against the barrenness of frequent droughts."

Meditation may be considered as either occasional, habitual,

or deliberate. By **OCCASIONAL**, I mean that turning of the mind to religious topics, and indulgence of pious reflection, which is awakened by some subject that has produced unusual impression upon the mind. Even this, though it be but rarely indulged, is better than absolute thoughtlessness, as it may end, and does end in some cases, in permanent attention to eternal realities. It is to be regretted that many professors of religion have little more than these rare and infrequent seasons of holy contemplation.

**HABITUAL** meditation means a prevailing and abiding disposition to seize all occasions, to avail ourselves of all opportunities, and to employ all means to keep up a train of pious thoughts and emotions in the mind. In this view of it, there is a close affinity to spirituality of mind. It is a blessed art, thus to use the soul as a mental storehouse, and by a kind of spiritual chemistry, to extract the spirit of devotion from all we meet with in our daily experience. Our Lord, when he came upon earth, spiritualized upon almost everything that came before him, and founded most of his parables and discourses on passing occurrences and surrounding scenes. It is the mark of a renewed mind to see God in everything, and trace up everything to God. The scenes of nature may thus become, and should become, the occasion of frequent, devout reflection. Who can look on "the spangled heavens," or on this variegated earth, without feeling invited to indulge in meditation upon the wisdom, power, and goodness of God? It was in reference to these that David exclaimed, "O Lord, how manifold are your works! in wisdom have you made them all: the earth is full of your riches. My meditation of you shall be sweet."

We should look upon the wondrous fabric of **creation**, not merely with the eye of a poet, or philosopher—but of a Christian. And as we gaze upon the scenes of creation, we should worship God in the temple of nature. Meditate, my friends, on his glories, until in the deep, warm musings of your thoughts, the fire of devotion kindles, and your love and adoration go up like a stream of incense before his throne. Let every stroll into the country be a walk with God, an ordinance of religion, a means of grace, and an aid to piety. Every excursion amidst the scenes of nature, if thus pursued, would begin with admiration, be continued with

delight, and end with praise.

The dispensations of **Providence** are another appropriate subject of habitual meditation, whether they relate to the government of the universe at large, to the history of our globe, to the destinies of our nation, or to our own individual concerns. Let all that we read, hear, think, or observe of the ways of God to man—lead to pious reflection. Let us hear the voice, observe the hand, trace the footsteps, wait for the decisions, and admire the schemes of the Almighty Ruler of nations. **There is providence in everything, chance in nothing.** In reading newspapers, listening to reports, noticing the occurrences which are perpetually transpiring on the great stage of our country's or the world's affairs, let it not be as politicians merely, to see who will be uppermost in the struggle of parties; nor as merchants, to see how the tide of commerce flows; nor as philosophers, to mark the progress of science; but as Christians, who know that Christ is head over all things to his church, and who are watching the development of all the scenes of the mighty drama of this earth's moral history.

Christians, be meditative men. Look, I repeat, for God in everything. Listen for heavenly voices and divine lessons. Amidst the clamor of parties, the strife of tongues, the confusion of conflicting passions, often retire from the arena to solitude, and give yourselves to silent meditation. Ponder all these things in your heart. Let the ear of contemplation hearken for the still small voice that speaks from heaven.

But I now direct your attention to **DELIBERATE**, *set*, and *solemn meditation*, as a duty of the closet—as connected with reading the Scriptures, and as an act of devotion. The subjects of meditation in this view of it are twofold—

First, OURSELVES. "Commune with your own heart upon your bed, and be still," Psalm 4:4. Next to communion with God, the most profitable communion is with ourselves. We should often be alone with ourselves, making our own heart, and all its contents, the object of our serious contemplation. Our past history, our present state, our future hopes and prospects; our sins, our temptations, our afflictions, our escapes, our dangers—should all be the subjects of

frequent, fixed, and devout thoughtfulness. This is what the worldly man cannot endure: like the fable of the basilisk which is said to die, by seeing his image reflected from a glass; such a man cannot endure to behold his soul as it is seen in the glass of the mind. His object is not to see himself, nor to be alone with himself, nor hear the voice of his own conscience speaking to himself—all this he dislikes and dreads, and, therefore, he runs to company, to hide himself *from* himself. But you, as professing Christians, must be much engaged in the business of contemplation. It is useful, and it is necessary.

SECONDLY, You are to meditate upon *the Scriptures*—and this is the chief matter and subject of the whole duty. Meditation is more than reading, it is pondering—it is somewhat different even from studying, for this means simply knowing; whereas meditation means pondering what we *do* know, to apply it to the purposes for which it is communicated; it is the prolonged devotional attention to the sacred volume, as either read by ourselves, or explained by others.

I must say something of the **SEASONS** of meditation. It is a part of our *closet* exercises, an accompaniment of our private prayer. Every believer ought to find *some* time for it. Of course the length and frequency of that time must depend in a great measure upon circumstances. How appropriate an exercise is it for those who are called to long periods of *solitude*—how would it beguile their dreary hours, to fix upon some portion of Holy Scripture, and let their thoughts dwell upon it, turning it over and over in their minds, and looking at it in every aspect in which it can be contemplated. Such thoughts would often prove more instructive, and perhaps more agreeable, than company.

How fit a season are *the wakeful hours of night*. To repeat the passage already quoted, "Commune with your heart upon your bed, and be still." When the curtains of darkness are drawn around us; when the busy noisy world is still; and everything invites to contemplation, how profitable and solemn might be our meditations upon the word of God.

A season of **sickness**, when the pain, or languor, is not so

great as to distract and disturb our thoughts—is eminently appropriate to this sweet and soothing exercise. How delightful is it to have the sick chamber, and the hours of lonely woe, cheered by the presence and the heavenly music of this "cherub contemplation," as one of the poets calls it. By the means of holy meditation, martyrs have rode upon this cherub's wing to heaven, and have seemed to drop their chains upon earth; or have paced their dungeon as though it were the bowers of paradise. And how many of the suffering children of God, shut in by disease from the outer world of sense, are by this means dwelling in the regions of faith and hope; and when deprived of the society of earthly friends, do thus come, to "the innumerable company of angels, the spirits of just men made perfect, to God the Judge of all, and to Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant."

The **sabbath** is a season for this holy exercise; a season of which every Christian should eagerly avail himself. It is this which causes him to be in the Spirit on the Lord's Day. The sabbath is the liveliest type of heaven—a short abridgment of the everlasting rest which remains for the people of God. Now the work and employment of heaven, is a sweet mixture of contemplation and praise. Imitate the blessed in heaven, then, who in silent adoration gaze upon the matchless glories of Jehovah, and thus give new tone to their praises, when in choral anthems they magnify his holy name; and then retire again to enjoy, in solitary ecstasy, what they have seen and heard in company around the throne. How precious a means does the day of rest afford for lengthened pious reflection. The alternation of services from public to private, and from private back again to public, prepares for this exercise, and assists its performance; the sanctuary furnishing topics for reflection in the sermons which are preached, and the closet giving opportunity to remember, to review, and apply them by meditation. Oh, let not even the fragmental portions of the sacred day be lost, but let all be gathered up and appropriated to this occupation. Let every part of this consecrated season which is not given to the public worship of God's house, be devoted to private meditation upon his word. Waste not those solemn, precious, and important hours in sleep, in worldly conversation, or in the pleasures of the dining table.

I will now lay down a few **RULES** for your direction in the performance of this duty. Some things are necessary to dispose and enable you to engage in it.

**Maintain a good conscience**—a conscience cleared from the guilt of sin. Be at peace with God, through faith in the blood of Christ. "If our heart condemns us not, then have we confidence towards God." If we have not the testimony of our conscience in our favor, meditation will be no pleasure. They tell us, that when the elephant comes to the water to drink, he muddies the stream, that he may not see his own image reflected—thus it is with guilty consciences, they cannot bear to look in the clear waters of meditation, lest they should see their own native form reflected.

**Labor after great purity of heart.** Not only seek to have the conscience kept clear from the guilt of sin, but the heart from its defilement. "A soiled glass yields no clear representation of things—so when the heart is polluted with the filth of sin, it is not fit for this duty." it is the holy soul, which loves to converse with a holy God, through the medium of his holy word; and the holier that soul is, the sweeter will be its reflections upon the topics of Divine truth. Sin corrupts the taste, and produces a vitiated appetite. So that the word, though sweeter than honey and the honeycomb, to the pure mind; is nauseous and sickening to the corrupted palate—and such a palate loves not to ruminate in silence upon holy truth.

**Treasure up in your mind a good store of spiritual truths.** Commit much Scripture to memory. Have the Bible in your mind, as well as in your hand—it will help your meditations. Acquire correct theological views of Divine truth; for, as Bates says, "Truths in the soul are like gold in the ore; meditation coins the gold, and brings it forth in holy discourses and pious actions. Whereas, where there are no spiritual mines in the soul, it is no wonder the thoughts coin dross and vanity."

**Keep down worldly-mindedness,** and that engrossing power of the world which would take all your time from devotion—to give it to business. If you *will* give your whole heart and your whole day to the world, it is an obvious

truism, there can be nothing left for meditation.

**Cultivate habitual spirituality of mind;** this is the parent of which meditation is the offspring.

**Endeavor to acquire a greater command and control over your thoughts.** The difficulty which many find to fix their thoughts, may be lessened by practice.

In this way *prepare* for the blessed exercise of meditation. And then take the following directions for its actual performance of meditation—

As to the *end* and *object* of meditation, let this invariably be *practical*. I am not recommending mere religious reverie. Some minds are delighted to let their thoughts flow on, unchecked and uncontrolled, without order and without coherence, and gratify themselves with this wild music of the fancy. *This* is not what I mean—there is much time wasted by Christians, in such loose, rambling, and unconnected reflection on divine things. Nor do I mean the mere reading of the Scriptures in order to know their meaning. This I allow is it duty, and an important one too, but it is not *the* duty I now enjoin. Study, is to find an unknown truth; meditation, is to ponder on what is already known. The end of study is information. The end of meditation is feeling or practice. Study, like a winter's sun, gives light, but little heat; meditation is like blowing up the fire, when we want not the blaze simply, but the heat. In study we acquire spiritual wealth; in meditation we enjoy its benefits.

Nor do I mean that enthusiastic state of mind, which some mystics call contemplation; meaning thereby something distinct from thinking upon God and Christ, holiness and heaven, as they are revealed in the Scriptures—a kind of vision or intuition, an immediate entry into the orb of God, which is carried on to ecstasies, raptures, suspensions, elevations, and abstractions. It was, therefore, an excellent desire of Bernard's, who was as likely as any to have such altitudes of fantastic speculations, if God really dispensed them to people—"I pray God to grant me peace of spirit, joy

in the Holy Spirit, to compassionate others in the midst of mirth, to be charitable in simplicity, to rejoice with those who rejoice, and to mourn with those who mourn; and with these I shall be content—other exaltations of devotions I leave to apostles and apostolic men. The high hills are for the harts and the climbing goats; the stony rocks and the recesses of the earth for the conies. It is more healthful and nutritive to dig the earth and eat of her fruits, than to stare upon the glories of the heavens, and live upon the beams of the sun. So unsatisfying a thing are rapture and transportations to the soul—it often distracts the faculties, but seldom does advantage to piety, and is full of danger in the greatest of its luster. If ever a man be more in love with God by such instruments, or more endeared to virtue, or make more severe and watchful in his repentance—it is an excellent gift and grace of God; but then this is nothing but the joys and comforts of *ordinary* meditation—those *extraordinary*, as they have no sense in them, so are not pretended to be instruments of virtue, but are like Jonathan's arrows, shot beyond it, to signify the danger the man is in to whom such arrows are shot. But if the person be made unquiet, inconstant, proud, arrogant, of high opinion, pertinacious, and confident in uncertain judgments—it is certain they are temptations and illusions. So that as our duty consists in the way of repentance, and acquisition of virtue, so there rests our safety, and by consequence our solid joys; and this is the effect of ordinary, pious, and regular meditations."

This is as true as it is beautiful, and the state of mind thus caused, is altogether different to what I am now recommending, which means nothing more than the exercise of the understanding upon Divine truths, as they are revealed in the Scriptures, and for the express purpose of having the heart impressed, the will subdued, and the life governed by them—in short, of being made holy by them. **Every part of Divine truth is revealed to make us holy. There is nothing purely speculative, or merely scientific in the Bible—all is granted to produce in us the fruits of righteousness**, which are through Christ unto the glory of God; and we must be careful to fall into this design, in the use we make of it. We must meditate upon Divine truth, not as a traveler who is passing through a

beautiful country would contemplate its splendid scenery, merely to delight his eye and gratify his taste; but as an artist would, who, in addition to the pleasure which he finds in surveying the prospect, is employed to make a drawing of the whole.

In meditating upon the glories of **God**, we are to seek to be changed into his image. In meditating upon the work of **Christ**, we are to believe, and trust, and love him. In meditating upon the evil of **sin**, we are to hate it. In meditating upon the beauties of **holiness**, we are to acquire them. In meditating upon **heaven**, we are to grow fit for it. In meditating upon the **promises**, we are to believe them it. In meditating upon invitations, we are to accept them it. In meditating upon threatenings, we are to tremble at them it. In meditating upon consolations, we are to receive them it. In meditating on commands, we are to obey them. Mere admiration, however ecstatic; or mere knowledge, however clear; or mere soarings, however lofty—are not enough—there is something to be *done*. "Meditation is the searcher out of all instruments to a holy life, a devout consideration of them, and a production of those affections, which are in a direct order to the love of God, and a pious conversation. It is to all, that great instrument of religion, whereby it is made prudent, reasonable, orderly, and perpetual."

As to the subjects of your meditation, let them be all in conformity with this design. Let your thoughts be engaged rather upon what is plain, simple, and practical—rather than upon what is lofty, difficult, and speculative. Do not attempt to soar into the clouds, or to plunge into the ocean. A disposition to scale the inaccessible heights of truth, manifests rather the promptings of curiosity, than the impulses of piety. The simplest truths of the gospel, like the plainest food for the body—are both the most digestible and the most nutritive. High speculations upon Divine things, resemble the cedars of Lebanon and their rocky heights, which are lofty but fruitless; while the fundamentals of Christianity are fertile as the valleys which are covered with the lowly grain, and creeping vine. Hence it is that many poor and simple Christians thrive more in holiness than some of more education; the former being content to

meditate upon subjects which are more profitable for practice, while the latter are intent upon those which only serve the purposes of speculation. An old writer has this remark, "That an old simple woman, if she loves Jesus Christ, may be greater than Bonaventura, who was one of the most learned of the schoolmen, and called the 'Seraphic Doctor.'"

Let your meditation be suitable to your circumstances at the time. When you set apart any *special* season for the purpose of contemplation, this is always to be borne in mind, and, indeed, so it ought to be generally. If you are in **trouble**, meditate on those abundant topics of consolation which are presented in the word of God. If burdened with a sense of **guilt**, meditate on the mediatorial work of Christ. If rejoicing in the assurance of **hope**, meditate upon the warnings against spiritual pride. If in **prosperity** and wealth, meditate upon the unsatisfying and uncertain nature of riches. If tempted, meditate upon the evil of sin, and consequences of committing it, and also on the intercession, power, and grace of Christ. If afraid of death, meditate upon the promise of Christ to meet you in the dark valley. It will always be profitable to let your meditations thus run in the channels of your condition.

And as a motive to this duty, think of its **ADVANTAGES**. In no other way could we discover the hidden beauties, taste the luxurious sweetness, or extract the nutriment of God's holy word. There are some people whose minds fly over this garden of the Lord, like the birds of the air, and are in no sense the better for what it contains. While others pause and ponder what they read, and are like the industrious bee, which extracts honey from each flower. It is thus all the graces are nourished. **Faith** is lean and weak unless fed by meditation on the promises. **Love** is lukewarm, unless kindled by meditation upon Divine mercy hope dull and lifeless, until it ascends by meditation to the top of Pisgah to survey the promised land. **Patience** becomes weary, unless by meditation upon the power of God, and the benefits of affliction, and the shortness of time, it is fortified. **Joy** is apt to sink, unless invigorated by meditation upon Christ. Filial **fear** is likely to grow careless, unless stimulated by meditation upon God's threatenings. **Zeal** becomes indolent,

unless roused by meditation upon the Divine commands. But all these graces are aided and strengthened by holy contemplation. And this which improves our graces, gives power and influence to all the ordinances of religion.

Without meditation, the reading of the word is likely to be unfruitful, and the hearing of it unprofitable. Why are professors so cold, wandering, and ineffectual in their prayers—but because they do not exercise themselves to holy thoughts? David associates prayer and this holy exercise, yes, seems almost to make them identical, when he says, "Give ear to my words, O Lord, consider my meditation," Psalm 5: 1. "Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in your sight," Psalm 19: 14; evidently implying that prayer is but the utterance of previous meditation. The Lord's supper is pre-eminently a season of meditation, for much of its time is spent in silent thought. And oh! what solemn and impressive musings are indulged, while thus gathered round the Lord's table.

Apply yourselves, then, my dear friends, to this delightful exercise. Do not allow politics or business, sloth or ease, company or recreations, to divert your attention from it. Remember how important a part of Christian duty is the right ordering of the thoughts, and the employment of the understanding. Do not allow the difficulty of the duty to deter you. All things become easy by practice—and this among the rest.

[HOME](#)

[QUOTES](#)

[SERMONS](#)

[BOOKS](#)