

## Chapter 1

### WHY MEDITATE?

#### *A Path to Spiritual Transformation*

As I walked through the church parking lot to my car, I wanted to scream. I could hear the voices of two couples discussing an upcoming vote within the church and they were attacking those who disagreed with them. How could they do this? They had just participated in a class where we had seen from Scripture that the most important issue is whether people love each other. I'd even commented that our choice to love each other was more crucial than the outcome of the vote. I'd challenged them, asking, "Would we behave like disciples of Jesus in the midst of disagreement? Would we speak the truth in love? Would we listen and be present to each other or would we pigeon-hole folks, call each other names, and look for ways to manipulate the undecided?"

I tried not to listen, but now they'd begun skewering a certain person and grilling her until charred. I got in my car, laid my head on the steering wheel, and wept. Why is it that we know the facts of Scripture so well but do not put them into practice?

But as I drove home I thought, *Why am I surprised?* After all, I was asking them to look within their hearts. That's difficult work. A class discussion about love does not transform us into people who love. At first, I had felt as agitated as they were. But when I asked God how I should vote and meditated on Scripture, I sensed God coaxing me, *Don't forget to love*. I realized that I needed to listen and love rather than insist everyone look at it my way. I needed to discuss the issue without being rude or irritated (1 Cor. 13:5). This situation was testing me as a person and giving me an opportunity to taste and see what it's

like to love folks when I disagree with them. My change of heart and behavior occurred because I'd heard from God myself. That's what transforms people – not being told what to do.

Besides, the gap between what we say and how we behave is enormous. I say I believe in telling the truth, but I exaggerate to impress someone. I say I have faith in God, but my confidence in God is shaken when people fail and I try to rescue them.

These faithless behaviors flow from stubborn habits and ingrained character flaws that we can't seem to get rid of. Many Christians lament that they can't overcome tendencies to criticize, complain, and procrastinate. For myself, my common flaws are grouchiness and laziness.

The stubbornness of these entrenched attitudes makes us wonder how God changes people at all. We tell new Christians that the Holy Spirit will change them, but we don't say how. They become discouraged when they don't see it happen.

As a result, I've spent years trying to discover how God changes people. I'm haunted by the man James described who looked in the mirror, walked away, and forgot what he looked like (Jas. 1:22-25). In the midst of sermons, Bible studies, and others' pointed comments, we look in the mirrors of our lives and see valleys of failures. We promise God we'll change. But so often we don't.

We think we'll change if we're taught better. So we look for the best teachers. I've spent twenty years writing adult Bible study sessions, specializing in insightful application activities. I've prayed that the teachers using the materials I've written will never be the same after preparing the lesson, and that their students will see it and be changed too. But I'm also an avid churchgoer, the wife of someone who has been a pastor. I know the dull truth: many

of us use God to gain a better life, but our character changes very little. I've watched new Christians encounter God in a deep way only to graduate to a life of non-stop church activity. All that activity can become a substitute for a life lived in union with God. When people do not arrange their life around cultivating their interior life with God, they tend to become only a vaguely nicer version of who they used to be.

It's true that those who participate in Bible studies may begin to form an interactive life with God, but too often they switch the focus to correctly filling out the answers to the study questions, participating well in discussion, or listening to others' inspiring stories. None of those things are wrong – they're just not the point: knowing God. Or Christians read through the Bible in a year, which can be helpful, but if they do it to fulfill a daily obligation instead of to interact with God, they miss the point. Each day that they find themselves caught up with the reading schedule, they feel good about their Christian life. After all, they're achieving something! If you ask them if the reading is nourishing their inner life with God and transforming their soul, they're not sure how to respond. When achievement based, even these beneficial activities do not nourish a relationship with God. Instead, they tend to create a self-satisfied sense of having accomplished something “spiritual.”

This lack of intimate connection with God in the midst of spiritual activity explains the entrenchment of our Christless habits. When our interior life with God languishes, we will not be transformed. Instead, we can only *try to be good*. But as unregenerate human beings, we don't naturally long to be the kind of person described in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount: those who have a heart for their enemies, who speak simply instead of defending themselves, who gladly go the extra mile instead of complaining about the person who dares to ask.

## WHAT DOES SEEKING GOD LOOK LIKE?

Try this question on the ordinary people who attend your church or small group: How are you seeking God?

Does this question baffle them or do their faces light up as they explain the latest exchange in their rich relationship with God? The point of our discipleship is “to know Christ and the power of the resurrection,” but few of us know how to help that happen. We know we need to seek God, but do we know what seeking God looks like in the life of someone with our temperament and daily routines?

If we offered these ordinary folks some ideas for how to seek God, what would we offer them as patterns? From the Scripture itself and from the experiences of those who have sought God throughout the ages, we have heard about spiritual disciplines or exercises or strategies, whatever we wish to call them. As we put them into place in our lives, they help us connect with God day in and day out. For example, we *pray* in ways that connect us with God in all of life, because we have experimented with what works and does not work for us. We *interact with Scripture* in ways that help us know God, not simply know about God. We *serve* with a conscious awareness of God’s presence so our service is permeated with back-and-forth communication with God.

Such exercises or strategies focus us on God in all of life. Then when calamities and chaos smack us front and center, we are not derailed. Instead, we seek God through these disciplines we are so familiar with. We may wobble, but we are so centered in God that we’re less likely to fall into despair and harm others with our discouragement, disgust, or anger.

These disciplines or exercises help us connect with God so that the Holy Spirit can work within us to transform our soul. They are not advanced options just for the “elite”

Christian; they are essential paths for us to live in intimate union with God while breathing on this planet.

Scripture meditation as a spiritual discipline is soul-transforming. As we sit in Scripture and ponder it (instead of skimming over it or limiting our interaction with it to study), all parts of ourselves are fascinated by the ways and doings of God. We begin to long for more of God in our life. As C. S. Lewis wrote, we experience “the scent of a flower we have not found, the echo of a tune we have not heard, news from a country we have never yet visited.”<sup>1</sup> God implants in us a desire for a far-off country, which is God’s own self.

The more we experience God this way, the more eagerly we carve out moments of solitude with God. This interaction with God affects us so deeply in our core that we become much more likely to respond to people with a quiet presence, a readiness to listen, and a desire to love them. When we connect with God through such strategies, the gap between our belief and our behavior shrinks. We obey in a more natural, automatic way because our heart has been transformed.

For example, in a meeting with my spiritual director, I mentioned something I’d done that was unusually wise and obedient for me. I’d found myself in a slippery place of temptation and without thinking, I turned away from it even though it made me appear less congenial. Not until later did I realize I had steered myself out of the way of temptation. I looked at my spiritual director in bewilderment and said, “How did I do that? Whatever I did, I need to keep doing it!” His question answered my question: “What have you been meditating on?” I laughed. I’d been living in the words and phrases of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5) for about a year. My unJanlike, upright behavior had automatically

reflected that passage. This is how spiritual formation works. You do the connecting with God, and God does the perfecting in you.

## **INTERACTING WITH GOD THROUGH MEDITATION**

*The Looking Good Kid.* This is the part of your unregenerated self that desperately wants to be loved and valued. He or she works hard to be admired out of fear of not being good enough. If you've been rejected before, this committee member makes sure it won't happen again. If you think you hear God saying: "Be perfect! Get it right Don't make any mistakes--then I'll be proud of you!" this is not God, but your looking good kid. It sabotages every Scripture passage, making it seem to be about being better and working harder.

*The Kickback Kid.* This part of you is afraid you'll be forgotten! So he or she entertains others in order to feel loved. He thinks of something fun you could do instead of meditate. She is usually afraid of success because that would mean buckling down and being responsible. The primary thought is, *If I don't ever try, I won't ever fail.*

*The Rescuer.* This committee member is the broken part of you that also wants to be loved and valued so he or she *helps* others so much that they *have* to love you. As a result, busyness is next to godliness. If you think you hear God saying in every passage, *Help people till it exhausts you. Make people happy*, that is not God but your rescuer sabotaging your meditation.

*The Attitude Police.* This committee member wants everything done right! He or she evaluates, criticizes, and ruins your attempts to focus on God. The attitude police sabotages your meditation so that every passage is a correction of you or of someone else.

*The Grouch.* This is the part of you that feels sorry for yourself and demands the attention of others. It infiltrates the Scripture to say: *You blew it again! Get with it! Nothing is ever going to work for you.*

Your committee may also include a proud and tyrannical parent, an overbearing boss, a clown, a daredevil, a promiscuous flirt, or a maverick intellectual. It's important to name your committee members before God so you can surrender these false or broken parts of yourself. They are the parts of your soul not yet transformed, deeply influenced by the enemy of your soul.

Without personal strategies for connecting with God, our daily agendas tend to become: I must have . . . I must be . . . I must achieve . . . But exercises such as Scripture meditation *cultivate* the heart and guard it from those stubborn habits (Prov. 4:23; 23:19). Having a cultivated heart means that we become more and more inclined to look at life as Jesus did. As a result, we talk and serve and move more like Jesus. We react as Jesus did -- loving people and using things instead of loving things and using people. The Holy Spirit does the cultivating as we choose to meditate on God and God's ways.

Scripture meditation can even retrain the divided heart (Ps. 86:11). Most of the time the heart is torn between cooperating with God and getting needs met in destructive ways (or mediocre ways that substitute for seeking God). We want to humble ourselves, but we also want to show off; to submit to the other person, but also to have our own way; to respect others' choices, but also to force them to comply with ours. When living a life that involves little interaction with God, we find obedience to be a heavy burden that makes us feel weary about going to church.

But obedience doesn't have to be some unpleasant thing we have to pressure ourselves to do. When we routinely connect with God, we want to obey. Or we at least *want to want to* obey. The burden is lighter. The yoke of obedience is actually the easier way to live life.

This truth – that connecting leads to perfecting – is detailed in the text of Joshua 1:8: “Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, *so that you may be careful to do* everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful” (italics mine). When we regularly meditate on God's laws of goodness, something changes inside us and we more naturally become “careful to do” them. We want to do them. Goodness flows instead of being forced.

As God speaks to us in our Scripture meditation, we come to love God more, which helps us see the true goodness of obedience (John 13:34-35; 14:21). We trust God more and have more confidence in the ways of God. We believe that if we follow God, we won't have a boring life, but one full of intriguing moments and unexpected adventures.

Having words, phrases, and images of Scripture dancing in our heads keeps us so connected with God that we are changed at the heart level. We actually *want to* be humble or love our enemy. Exercises such as meditation allow God to ravish us with the divine personality and draw us toward the kingdom life that understands that humility makes life so much easier, so free of striving, competing and proving ourselves.

Practicing the specific skills of meditation (which I'll explain later) help us in all of life. They teach us to have a listening heart, which opens us up to God through these inner attitudes, wrote Quaker author Douglas Steere:<sup>2</sup>

- *vulnerability*: I can open my truest feelings, motives and thoughts to God.
- *expectancy*: I can expect God to meet my needs in this space of time.



- *acceptance*: I can accept whatever happens in this quiet time.
- *constancy* (the Latin and Greek word meaning to "stand with" or to "stay with"): I can rely on God to stand with me, to keep watch on my soul, not to get fed up with me.

Meditation retrains our mind to have the mind of Christ. For example, while practicing *lectio divina* (pronounced *LEX-ee-oh dih-VEE-nuh*),<sup>3</sup> a method of Scripture meditation described in chapter 6) in Ezekiel, I was surprised that God told Ezekiel to: “look closely and listen attentively and set your mind upon all that I shall show you” (Ezek. 40:4, NRSV). As I read, I wondered why God would give such elementary instruction to someone as faithful as Ezekiel (as I’d noted in the previous thirty-nine chapters). Yet God thought it was important to command this devoted prophet never to waver from paying attention and listening. If Ezekiel needed to hear these words, I certainly did too.

Pondering this fresh insight, I prayed and asked God what it would look like today for me to look closely, listen attentively, and set my mind on God’s words and actions. I waited in silence. What came to me (I believe through the Holy Spirit) involved a posture or way of being I needed to cultivate: I needed to listen fully to the people around me, wide-eyed and closed mouth, instead of thinking of what I would say next. In conversations, I needed to ask God to show me how to be Jesus in these other persons’ lives rather than saying whatever came into my head. This is what I’d seen Jesus do in the Gospels. He was not a hit-and-run teacher or healer, but someone who was fully present to people – looking and listening and loving those with whom he interacted (Matt. 19:26; Mark 10:21; Luke 2:46; 20:17; John 1:42).

After such times of meditation, God’s phrases resonate in you. Your behavior is supernaturally transformed because it flows out of the mind of Christ.

## TRAINING, NOT TRYING

Connecting with God through spiritual disciplines (or exercises or strategies) is different from trying to be good. I remember how I used to read 1 Corinthians 13:4-8 and beat myself up. Was I patient? No. Was I kind? No. Did I envy? Yes. I failed the test nearly every time.

While meditating on the passage, it occurred to me that because 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, always perseveres. God never fails.

As I tasted these words over and over, I felt so grateful that God doesn't keep a record of *my* wrongs, that God isn't rude to *me*, no matter how discourteous or braggadociously I behave. I felt such love for this God who always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. I am often cynical, but God always hopes. I am suspicious, but God always trusts. I sensed my outlook shifting. After meditating on this passage one day (I was so familiar with it by this time I could meditate on it as I hiked), I decided not to *have a talk* with my then twenty-one-year old son about a rude remark he'd made. Instead, I would continue to love and encourage him. I followed through, and a few days later, 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 was so intrigued by God's personality of love.

If you will, go back over the second paragraph in this section that begins with, “While meditating on the passage . . .” Read it a few times. Sit in these ideas. Shut your eyes. What is

God saying to you today?<sup>4</sup> Don't worry at this point about whether you're doing this right. Just try it out.

**QUESTIONS and ACTIVITIES**  
**for INDIVIDUAL REFLECTION**  
**or GROUP DISCUSSION**

If you're reading this book on your own, go over these questions to turn the ideas of the chapter over in your mind. If you're part of a group reading the book, use these questions to discuss the ideas. Listen carefully to learn what you can from the insights of others.

1. What, if anything, was said in this chapter that has made you think?
2. What idea or phrase most resonates with you? Or agrees with what you believe God has been saying to you lately?

It's been said that many Christians have substituted the busyness of outward church activities for an inward life with God. Why do you think that happens?

4. Turn to 1 Corinthians 13:4-8. Close your eyes and ask the Holy Spirit to speak to you.

Then read the passage aloud and sit quietly for a while. What do you believe God is saying to you that you need to hear?

*Group Leader instructions for 4:* After a group member reads the passage aloud and the group waits in silence, then group members open their eyes and take turns *briefly* reporting what they believe God said to them. They should be careful not to interrupt each other or evaluate what others say. Just listen and pray for the person speaking.

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<sup>1</sup>C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1976), p. 31

<sup>2</sup> Summarized from Douglas Steere *On Listening To Another* edited by E. Glenn Hinson *The Doubleday Devotional Classics* Vol. III (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc, 1978), pp. 211-214.

<sup>3</sup> Norvene Vest, *Gathered in the Word* (Nashville, TN: Upper Room Books, 1996), p. 11.

<sup>4</sup> Another variation is to take the phrase “speak the truth in love” (Eph. 4:15) and substitute the words from 1 Cor. 13 for “love.” So ask God, what would it look like to speak the truth with patience? With kindness? Without rudeness? Without pride? Without keeping a record of wrongs? What if church leaders routinely did such a meditation before any meeting? What would change?