

# Introduction

I've been leading groups of people in meditating on Scripture for twenty years, helping them enter into the biblical text, notice what resonates with them and then reflect on that. People tell me they get a sense of hearing God speak to them in the group setting, but they struggle to do the same type of study and meditation on their own. The historical and cultural background I provide helps them, and I help them picture details of the scene for narrative passages. People seem to focus better when I ask them questions to guide them through the process of meditation.

This book does all those things, coming alongside to help people interact with the Holy Spirit as they meditate on Scripture passages.

Each session provides

- an introductory space of silence to help you relax and refocus, and an optional question or exercise if you need more help in settling in;
- the full text of a Scripture passage with explanations of unusual or important words;
- meanings of some important words in Hebrew or Greek (including the reference numbers for *Strong's Hebrew and Greek Dictionary*);
- questions to help you enter the text;
- questions about what resonates with you in the text, discerning what God's invitation might be (this is the *lectio divina* approach: read, reflect, respond, rest);

- cultural or historical background as needed;
- connections with other Scripture as needed;
- cues to help you picture how the story unfolds in narrative passages (an Ignatian approach);
- space to respond to God in prayer;
- space to prayerfully contemplate the ideas of the passage and the person of God; and
- an exercise to “try on” one of the main ideas of the passage later.

You may wonder whether all these helps might somehow interfere with or obscure what the Spirit is saying to you. I wondered the same thing myself, even though most people find that the helps clarify what the Spirit is saying. So I conferred with others who are well-practiced in leading Scripture meditation. They agreed that many Christians want to do this type of spiritual exercise but need some direction. One colleague urged me to write this book to provide “training wheels” to help people move into Scripture meditation.

### USING THIS BOOK ON YOUR OWN

You may use the forty meditation exercises in this book in any order you wish. They are organized by topic to help you choose the meditations that will best meet your needs. The eight sections address needs that most people experience. For example, I began meditating on Scripture many years ago because I sensed I had a “delight deficiency.” I did not *truly believe* that God delighted in me, so I meditated on passages that addressed that issue (see the meditation in this book titled “Knowing I Am Loved”).

When attempting any spiritual practice, it’s wise to consider how the Christian community throughout history has done it so that we can learn from them. For example, when you want to study a passage, you might have a look at Bible studies or commentaries that other Christians have written about the passage at different times and places.

At least since the fifth century, one of the primary ways Christians have meditated on Scripture is by reading a passage and then following the Jewish idea of “taking hold” and “keeping” God’s words (Proverbs 4:3-4). Christians began calling this process *lectio divina*, which is a Latin phrase for “divine reading” or “sacred reading” (from ecclesiastical Latin, pronounced *LEX-ee-oh dib-VEE-nuh*). The central idea of *lectio divina* is *invitation*. *Lectio divina* assumes that God is inviting us into interaction and conversation as we read Scripture.

There are four traditional steps in *lectio divina*—Read (*lectio*), Reflect (*meditatio*), Respond (*oratio*) and Rest (*contemplatio*). For these meditations I’ve added two more: Relax and Refocus (*silencio*), and Trying It On (*incarnatio*).<sup>1</sup>

**Relax and refocus (*silencio*).** Each exercise begins with brief guidance to slow down, quiet your inner self and let go of distracting thoughts. This is important because most people spend all day responding to stimuli—answering the telephone, following schedules and evaluating what needs to be done next. Even when they wake up the first thing they do is check their phone for messages. So when they try to meditate on Scripture, these activities become traffic in their heads that keep them from focusing on God.

A way to interrupt this traffic is to focus on being present in the moment by breathing in and out deeply—even overbreathing. It also helps to relax our body parts one by one: bending the neck, letting the arms go limp, relaxing the legs and ankles. Loosen each part from the inside out. This doesn’t mean you’re setting aside your mind—you’re re-directing your mind away from the busyness that often consumes you. Being present in the moment prepares you to wait on the still, small voice of God.

If you are distracted, you may want to try the palms up, palms down method. Rest your hands in your lap, placing your hands palms down as a symbol of turning over any concerns you have. If a nagging thought arises, turn your hands palms up as a “symbol of your desire to receive

from the Lord.”<sup>2</sup> If you become distracted at any time during meditation, repeat the exercise.

If you are new to Scripture meditation, a focus question or activity is provided to help you quiet yourself and let go of distractions. As you become more skilled at Scripture meditation you may not need to do this, or you may find that option intrusive, as if the instructions are circumventing something that the Spirit might suggest. In that case, feel free to skip this option.

You may want to develop your own simple “relax and refocus” practice to use each time. Singing a favorite song may be helpful—especially a quiet one, such as the old hymn, “Spirit of the Living God, Fall Fresh on Me.” Or you may want to read a good quote, such as this one from Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Say it aloud, slowly.

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 . . . We read God’s Word as God’s Word for us.”<sup>3</sup>

**Read (lectio).** In these meditations I will often ask you to read the passage aloud, and to read it a few times. That’s because the first time we read a passage, we barely absorb what’s going on. Reading aloud allows the words to “fall on our ear” and increases our perception of what is said. Listen slowly to each word with the “ear of your heart,” so to speak. Be open and attentive to whatever stands out to you.

**Reflect (meditatio).** Some of the passages in this book are teaching or discourse passages. You are invited to notice what stands out or “shimmers” for you, trusting that this is the prompting of the Holy Spirit. Others passages are stories. Here you are invited to use your imagination to picture the scene using the cues provided. In both cases, the background information and questions will help you immerse yourself in the passage and set aside distractions.

With narrative passages, the questions and cues will help ground you in a concrete way—what are you seeing or smelling?—but don't try too hard to create a careful, detailed picture. Your goal is to let God speak to you, not to do a perfect reconstruction of the event. Establish yourself in the setting and then move through the passage to let God speak to you.

Sometimes much of the scene will elude you, but a particular word or image will stand out. In the story of the woman with the issue of blood (Mark 5:24-34), I was struck once by the words "whole truth," which she told Jesus. I felt her embarrassment as she spoke out. I saw her being publicly vulnerable to Jesus, the prophet, and it made me see just how real I could be with God.

**Respond (oratio).** A truly interactive life with God will be one in which God speaks to you (most often through Scripture) and where you respond to God about what you think you have heard. You may wish to ask God questions at this time or even protest what has come to you. If nothing else, you may wish to thank God for speaking to you through Scripture.

**Rest (contemplatio).** This last phase step provides space to simply be present with God. You can contemplate what has come to you, or to absorb the flow of the conversation with God, or to notice how the interaction affected you. You may also yourself worshipping God who says and does marvelous things.

**Trying it on (incarnatio).** Finally, in each meditation I offer a brief suggestion to invite you to take some action that embodies a truth in the passage. If the suggestion doesn't resonate with you, ask God to show you a different way to experiment with living out something from the passage, even in a small way.

Throughout this book you will find call-out boxes that provide information and guidance about how to meditate on Scripture, or that answer frequently asked questions. You may read them all in one sitting or as you move through the book.

The goal of this book is to help you interact with God through Scripture in a formative way. As Dallas Willard writes,

I find myself addressed, caught up in all the individuality of my concrete existence by something beyond me. God acts toward me in a distinctively personal manner. This is the common testimony across wide ranges of Christian fellowship and history . . . . We stand within a community of the spoken to.<sup>4</sup>

### USING THIS BOOK WITH A GROUP

The book addresses readers as individuals, but it can easily be used in groups with a few modifications. Groups of no more than four or five work best, but if you have more, divide into groups of no more than four or five with one person leading each. The meditation exercises may be led by anyone by simply following the directions, but here are some things to think about.

***Relax and refocus (silencio).*** The group may wish to decide beforehand if they want to use the optional exercises. If they are used, the group leader can read the instructions aloud and participants can speak their responses aloud to the group. Some group members may not wish to share their answers or may not have a response. While verbal answers usually help the others in the group, passing on a response is always allowed.

If the group prefers, they may wish to use a favorite prayer as an opening relax and refocus exercise. They may even wish to use it every time, so that it develops into a comfortable way to settle in.

Here is one possibility. Participants may read this aloud together:

Let us release the cares of our day,  
and open our eyes to the wonder of God.  
With an attitude of empathy to people of another time,  
let us open our hearts and minds to God.

Let us prepare to experience God's Word to us through the presence of the Holy Spirit.<sup>5</sup>

Or,

May the words of our mouths and the meditations of our heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer.

**Read (lectio).** The leader will read the instructions and then the passage aloud the first time, slowly. Participants may wish to close their eyes to listen, or to follow along in the book. The leader should ask another participant to read the notes below the text aloud. Then either the leader or someone else should read the passage again.

**Reflect (meditation).** Participants will read the questions and cues silently and take a few minutes to write down their responses to the questions. Then the leader may read each question aloud and those who are willing can share their answers. Background statements may be read aloud also.

This sort of meditative exercise is not a discussion, however. Commenting on other participants' answers may be distracting. The point is to listen to God in Scripture, not to talk about it with others. If someone is troubled or puzzled by the passage, it's not a good idea to immediately address this. The process allows quiet moments for the Spirit to do that. The purpose is not so much analysis (although that does occur), but to listen to God and to learn to be truly present to each other as group members describe their experiences.

The leader asks someone to read the passage aloud again. Then the leader may read the questions listed in that section, allowing a few minutes after each one for participants to consider their answers silently. Those willing to share can do so after time is given to consider the answer.

Again, this is not a discussion group, but participants are telling others what they believe God might be saying to them. It's wise not to evaluate what others say, as this usually prevents people from hearing God for themselves. It's equally important that participants don't interrupt each

other or make suggestions. Instead, trust the Spirit to illuminate the Word to each person. Frequently, participants understand more as they try to put their experience into their own words.

**Respond (oratio).** Normal conversation involves back and forth. Since God speaks to us in Scripture, participants need to reply back to God. Some participants may wish to read their prayers aloud, while others will not.

Whatever is spoken or written needs to address God, as in prayer, not the group. The prayer concerns what participants most want to say to God about their experience in the Scripture passage.

Participants may want to ask God questions. The answers to these questions may come through the group or to the individuals later in the week. Writing prayers down can be a powerful way of communicating with God, and at the very least can keep the mind from wandering.

**Rest (contemplatio).** Participants will most likely wish to do this in silence. However, it's also possible that a participant will wish to reflect aloud on how God seemed during this time of meditation. Did God seem to be present to you? If so, what was that like to you?

**Trying it on (incarnatio).** The group leader should read this suggestion aloud and ask the other participants to consider whether it fits with their own conversations with God. They may wish to modify it, do something else or do nothing.

#### A NOTE ABOUT QUIET

This format involves a lot of quiet, and some people find being quiet in a group difficult. In most groups, people talk a lot! This version of group lectio divina provides a different kind of togetherness. A sense of community can be developed without small talk or chitchat. It helps to use fewer words, offering only the words and images that resonate within you.

As stated above, sometimes participants are unable to verbalize their answers or are unwilling to share with the group something that is too personal. It's fine to pass. For some participants, sitting in the quiet is a



little difficult and they may wish to doodle in the margin of their book. Others may find the quietness refreshing because they don't have to come up with something to say. The quiet actually provides the space to hear God more easily.

### **USING THIS BOOK WITH SPECIFIC GROUPS**

Scripture meditation is not only for those already familiar with Scripture. The meditative approach of this book works well with many ages, including children and teens, and with adults in many situations, although modifications will need to be made. This means taking into account more limited attention spans and reworking or omitting ideas that might not be easily understood. If you usually teach in a specific setting, such as in prisons or among the homeless, you'll already have some idea what modifications need to be made.

With all kinds of groups, it works well to meditate on a narrative passage by reading and studying it first, and then acting it out—even with adults. If you do this, pause (“freeze-frame”) at certain moments in the action of the passage and ask participants to assume the role of certain characters. Then you might ask, “How do you feel about what is happening?” Ask, “What kind of look (would you suppose) is on Jesus' face based on the text and the cues provided?” This can create some riveting moments of encountering Christ as never before.