

A Summer Meditation

The Canadian summer is a fleeing joy. After a long hard winter we look forward to a vacation, spending time on the beach, boating, fishing, a time to relax and "to get away from it all." But there is more! A summer holiday offers a great opportunity to meditate.

Meditation is all the rage. But the practice of meditation is not easy. We live in complicated times. Life in the Western world is superficial, filled with tension, with little time left for the deep questions of life. We talk about an information overload. There is so much to know that we can't seem to keep up. We are bombarded by advertising, which draws us away from our inner self. We have a very short span of attention. Busyness seems more significant than godliness. Modern civilization is so complex that devotional practices are difficult. "The thoughtful soul to solitude retires," said a poet of a quieter time, but where is the solitude to which we can retire today? No spot is safe from the world's intrusion. Silence has become a rare commodity in our age of radios, VCRs, Nintendo games, CD players, television, fax machines, elevator music, car radios, etc. When you try to meditate you soon realize how many things can distract us. A TV show turned up loud by your neighbour in the trailer next to you on the campground foils concentration. I recall walking on a beach one beautiful summer day. The waves were quietly lapping against the shore. The birds were singing, and the laughter of children could be heard in the distance. The wonderful sounds of summer! I saw a young man jogging along the beach, wired up to a walkman, oblivious to everything around him. He never heard nor saw nature's beauty.

Meditating on Nature

Exploring the wonders of nature can be one of the greatest pleasures of a summer holiday. In the complexity of nature we receive hints of the beauty, glory and majesty of God. Throughout the world, there are more than 700,000 species of insects and 250,000 varieties of plants. As Calvin put it, "wherever you cast your eyes, there is no spot in the universe wherein you cannot discern at least some sparks of [God's] glory." In creation we see the handiwork of the Designer. God made the sky blue, the grass green, and flowers of various colour and shapes. We look at beautiful and intricate flowers and we say, "To display beauty: that was the purpose of God creating flowers." God made birds to sing and trees to bear fruit. By immersion in the realm of the mundane in nature we discover untold marvels. A well-known stanza from one of William Blake's poem's captured this point perfectly:

To see a world in a grain of sand
And a heaven in a wild flower,
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand
And eternity in an hour.

But nature displays not only beauty but also cruelty. We can't refer to nature as "Mother." The lamb and the lion are not friends. A cobra still kills. We live in a fallen world which "waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed" (Rom. 8:19). In other words, meditation on nature alone cannot lead us to an intimate knowledge of God. "The

things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are unseen are eternal" (2 Cor.4:18). With Isaac Watts we ask,

Is this vain world a friend to grace,
To help me on to God?"

Meditating on Scripture

What helps us on to God the Word of God. Right meditation cannot be separated from the Bible, but will be led by it. The Bible will test our life, our experiences. It reveals that nature's God is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of Moses and the apostles. The God unveiled in Jesus Christ is the active, speaking God, the Eternal One who lives and loves, condemns and rescues, who works out His purposes even in fallen history. He is the One Who takes the initiative. He seeks us. He plans, creates, judges, reveals and redeems. In the Bible we discover the story of salvation, the good news of justification by faith, and spiritual truths which sustain us in our pilgrimage.

The noise, confusion, perplexity, and rush of our times are enemies of the spiritual life. "Be still my soul" is the imperative required if the battle with the world, the flesh, and the devil is to be won. One of the Bible's powerful words is "meditate." Meditation is listening to Scripture. There is no other way to gain a deeper knowledge of God and understanding of His greatness and presence in this world. We must let God speak. If we treat the world as the only thing there is or ever will be, by binding ourselves to its values, by lawlessly feeding our appetites with what it offers the senses, and by acting as though we had no responsibilities beyond it, the Word of God will never be heard. It will never reach us, because a prior and absolute attachment to this world is a sound-proof wall between God and ourselves. We need to meditate upon the Word of God within the discipline of conscious commitment to our Lord, and under cover of an invocation to the Holy Spirit. We prepare ourselves for it by silence, by abstracting ourselves from our familiar world of getting and having. We ask our heavenly Father not for this or that favour (for ourselves or for anyone), but simply to speak to us. We read a short passage from the Bible, and we dwell on especially chosen and significant phrases. We look at ourselves in the mirror of God's Word. Through meditation we appropriate the thoughts of Scripture, to think about our life in its light, to discover where we have gone astray, and to concentrate on Christ; Who is He for us and what are we for Him?

The Psalmist declares blessed who **meditates** on the law of the Lord (Ps.1 :2). The term meditate, here, carries the secondary meaning of half-aloud recollection of the Written Word. The well-known Psalm19: 4 shows that meditation involves the outward verbalizing of one's thoughts before God, of the poring over his teachings and works. It means to articulate, in a low tone, thoughts of worships, wonder, and praise. "I meditate on your precepts," the Psalmist writes elsewhere (Ps.119:15). But who has time for long periods of meditation?

The time element in our clock -conscious culture and busy work schedules make it difficult to set a time slot aside for meditation. In *Our Father Abraham: Jewish Roots of the Christian Faith* Marvin R. Wilson points out that the world of the Hebrews was such that they had long periods of time for uninterrupted meditation. The rhythm of their lives was not ordered by alarm clocks or factory whistles but by the sun. When we recognize these

realities of ancient life, as well as the fact that both day and night they did not have to deal with the competition of telephones, TVs, and other modern sappers of time, we realize that they had considerable opportunity for meditation. Although we live in a different and more hurried age, our spiritual needs are the same as in the ancient past. May we joyfully repeat the words of the Psalmist:

Oh, how I love your law, my God and King!
By day and night it is my meditation.
It makes me wise, it is my constant friend.
Sweeter than honey are your words and precepts;
Sweet to my taste the laws that you have made-
They give new joy and turn me from false pathways (Ps.119:13).

Meditation on Scripture has an indispensable role in the Christian faith. It reveals Christ. It centres on the Mediator. We can meditate on the intense suffering of the Saviour, the sorrows of hell or the glories of heaven. But above all, the companionship of Christ must be cultivated. He must be sought, not for His gifts, but for Himself. "Christ in you, the hope of glory" (Col. 1:27). Meditation leads to godliness. In Philippians 4: 8 the apostle Paul urges Christians to think about [meditate on] the criteria for right action - whatever is just, pure, lovely or to be held in honour - as a test and stimulus of right action. Moral fulfillment is never irrelevant to or isolated from Christian meditation. The love of God requires love of our neighbour (Matt.22: 37-39). Real meditation's purpose is to open ourselves up for the reality around us.

Meditating in Solitude

Failing to meditate, can lead to spiritually exhausted. We see the neglect of meditation in our churches. That church life has become so superficial betrays a lack of spiritual exercise. We seem afraid of solitude, of facing God alone, or indeed of our facing the inner feeling of guilt and self-betrayal. Yet a time alone with the Lord is vital for our spiritual well-being. For a modern activist Reformed Christian solitude seems alien, even theologically suspect. I believe we need to withdraw from the world on occasion so that we can return to work in it more fruitfully. After their return from a mission the disciples gathered around Jesus and reported to Him all they had done and taught. The Gospel Mark says, "because so many people were coming and going that they did not have a chance to eat, He (Jesus) said to them, 'Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest.' So they went away by themselves in a boat to a solitary place" (Mark 6: 30-32). Although they were surrounded by the cares of the world, the Lord told His disciples to get physical and spiritual rest and refreshment away from the crowds. Our Lord Himself set an example. He often sought the presence of His heavenly Father in solitude. May our Lord grant that we may be led into the blessedness of a richer and fuller Christian life this summer through setting time aside for meditation on the wonders in nature and upon the Word of God and its rich Gospel message.

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