

THE PRACTICE OF PURITAN MEDITATION (PART 2)

‘It is not a slight thought of the mercies of God that will affect your hearts, but it must be a dwelling on them by meditation.’ Edmund Calamy

Have you ever eaten cold fish and chips? The nutrients are there but the meal sits heavily in your stomach. Digestion is needed. Our Scripture knowledge can also need digesting. We hear many sermons and read many Christian books, but we need to process personally what we have heard and read, so it can become part of our lives.

The Puritans called this digestion process ‘meditation’. The Puritans were English and American believers in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries who desired to bring the whole of life under Christ’s Lordship. Well known Puritans include John Bunyan, John Owen, and Richard Baxter. Richard Baxter was Vicar of Kidderminster (south of Birmingham) in the sixteenth century. Along with Sunday church attendance, daily personal prayer, family devotions, spiritual reading, examination of conscience, and journaling, Baxter so valued meditation that he wrote a 600 page book, *The Saints’ Everlasting Rest* (1652), to extol its virtues and explain his method. I have found his guidelines for meditation to be practical and helpful. In this article I have abridged his advice, and modernized the language. In *The Saints Everlasting Rest*, Richard Baxter defines what he means by meditation:

‘The general title that I give this duty is meditation; not as it is precisely distinguished from thought, consideration, and contemplation; but as it is taken in the larger and usual sense for thinking on things spiritual, and so including both consideration and contemplation.

Meditation follows Bible study, theological education or listening to sermons. Prayerfully reflecting on Scriptural truth, we make time to digest that truth and allow it to impact our own lives. ‘Just as a sheep can bring up the contents of his stomach for rumination, you must use the power of choice to return to topics for further reflection’, says Baxter. He explains that meditation is reflection that employs the mind, heart and will:

I differentiate this from the common meditation of students, which is usually the mere employment of the brain. The stomach must prepare the food for the liver and spleen, which prepare for the heart and brain, and so the understanding must take in truths, and prepare them for the will, and it must receive them, and commend them to the affections. While truth is but a speculation swimming in the brain, the soul has not received it, nor taken hold of it. This is the great task in hand, to get these truths from your head to your heart.

‘Meditation’ is a Scriptural word. In Psalm 1.2 the psalmist ‘meditates’ (*hagah*) day and night on the instruction of God. He murmurs Scripture aloud and turns it over in his mind. The psalmist mentally or verbally reflects (*syach*) on God’s mighty deeds (Ps 77.12), the works of God’s hands (Ps 143.5), and on the precepts, statutes and words of the Lord (Ps 119.15, 23, 148). The Psalmist also meditates on human joys, frailty and sorrow (Psalm 45, 49, 73). Joshua is to meditate on the Book of the Law, so that his life will be changed by it (Joshua 1.8).

Puritan meditation may be on any topic in Scripture or any aspect of daily life. ‘Meditation has a large field to walk in’, Baxter says, ‘and has as many objects to work on as there are matters, and lines, and words of Scripture, as there are known creatures in the whole of creation, and as there are particular, discernible occurrences of providence in the government of the people and actions throughout the world.’ However, for Baxter, the everlasting rest of the saints (Hebrews 4.9-10) is the supreme subject. Thomas Manton suggests we select a topic that is ‘seasonable’, or relevant to our situation. In sorrow we meditate on God’s comfort; in times of moral struggle we reflect on God’s power to help us. Baxter notes the usefulness of memory:

Choose what you will consider. You may look over any promise of eternal life in the gospel, any description of the glory of the saints, or the articles in the Creed of the resurrection of the dead and the life everlasting. One sentence concerning these eternal joys may give you subject matter for many years’ meditation. We should always have a stock of such information in our memory, so when we need it we can bring out of our treasury things new and old (Luke 6.45). If your memory is weak, you can look at notes or books for suitable subject matter.

Puritan meditation has three steps: consideration, soliloquy, and prayer. Richard Baxter recognizes that ‘it may be objected that we should save all this tedious work and move straight to prayer’. He replies, ‘I answer, that meditation should go before prayer, for meditation and speaking to ourselves puts life into prayer’. The Puritan Nicholas Renfrew agrees, ‘Meditation stands between the two ordinances of reading and prayer, as the grand improver of the former, and the high quickener of the latter.’

1. CONSIDERATION

Consideration is thinking about truth as applied to our own lives. The Puritan Bishop James Ussher urges us ‘to see how the matter stands between God and my own soul’. Thomas Manton asks, ‘How am I concerned with this truth?’ Baxter describes the process:

Consideration opens the door between the head and the heart. How can the glory of Christ move us if we never think about it? Meditation draws forth arguments to work upon the heart. If we can be persuaded by other people, how much more should we listen to our own hearts! And even more, how much should we repeat over to ourselves God’s reasons to our hearts, and dispute with ourselves on his terms. Produce the strong arguments for the truth of Scripture; plead them against your unbelieving nature, answer and silence all the arguments of unfaithfulness, read over the promises, study all confirming providences, call out your own recorded experiences, remember the Scriptures already fulfilled to the saints in former ages and in the present, and those that have been fulfilled particularly to you. Get the clearest and most convincing arguments, and keep them near you. Frequently use them to keep your faith fresh. If you daily set the wheel of faith in motion, the wheels of the affections would more easily move.

Baxter recommends that consideration must be prolonged. ‘To run a few steps will not make you hot, but walking for an hour may. A brief occasional thought of heaven will not raise our spiritual affections, but meditation can continue our thoughts, and lengthen our walk till our hearts grow warm’. Baxter gives an example of this heavenly contemplation, ‘for the help of the unskilful’:

O blessed rest, when we shall rest from sin but not from worship, from suffering and sorrow but not from solace! O blessed day, when I shall rest with God; when I shall rest in the arms and bosom of my Lord; when I shall rest in knowing, loving, rejoicing and praising; when my perfect soul and body together, shall in these perfect actions perfectly enjoy the most perfect God; when God also, who is love itself, shall perfectly love me, yes, and rest in his love to me, as I shall rest in my love to him, and rejoice over me with joy and singing (Zephaniah 3.17), as I shall rejoice in him! This is that joy that was procured by sorrow, this is that crown that was procured by the cross. My Lord did weep, that now my tears might be wiped away, he did bleed, that I might now rejoice, he was forsaken, that I might not now be forsaken, he did then die, that I might now live.

2. SOLILOQUY

The second step is to engage in straight talk to your soul, as the Psalmists did. ‘Why are you cast down, O my soul?’ (Psalm 42.5,11; Psalm 43.5); ‘Bless the Lord, O my Soul.’ (Psalm 103.1; 104.1). Baxter notes that this soliloquy, or self-conference, ‘has been the practice of the holy men of God at all times’, citing Genesis 44.6; Judges 5.21; Psalm 16.2; and Jeremiah 4.19. ‘David pleads with his soul against dejection, and argues it into confidence’. Baxter gives an example of his own soliloquy, ‘Oh my drowsy, earthy, blockish heart, how coldly you think of this reviving day. Would you rather sit in dirt and dung than walk in the court of the palace of God?’ He invites us to move from consideration to soliloquy as an essential step in spiritual transformation:

Because mere consideration, if not pressed home, will not pierce and affect the heart, we must proceed to the second step, soliloquy, which is nothing but a pleading the case with our own souls. As in preaching to others, the bare propounding of truths seldom succeeds without lively application, so it is in meditating on truths ourselves. To quicken your own heart, you must enter into serious debate with it, plead with it in the most moving language, urge it with the most powerful arguments.

‘Every good Christian is a good preacher to his own soul’, says Baxter. We know our own hearts, so we can challenge ourselves on our weak spots or encourage ourselves in our fears. We use whatever arguments we will find the most persuasive. Baxter comments, ‘Copy your favourite preacher. Remember the points you wish a preacher had made, and make them to your own soul’:

First, explain the subject to yourself and study the difficulties. Use Scripture to confirm its truth. Apply it according to its nature, and your need. Question yourself, how you have loved this truth, and what effort you have made to obtain it. Speak to yourself about the coldness of your heart, or encourage yourself if you have been faithful. Ask your heart, what it can say against taking action, and answer the objections. Resolve to

be faithful and find the helps and means to follow through. You know what will fit your own heart, and what arguments will work well for you.

3. PRAYER

Prayer is an essential part of meditation. Baxter claims, 'speaking and pleading with God does more to elevate the soul than any other part of meditation'. Speaking to ourselves and to God, we imitate the psalmists (Psalm 42.9, 11; Psalm 77.1, 2-3, 4, 5-10, 11-20). Observing that David 'frequently intermixed soliloquy and prayer', Baxter says, 'I conceive this to be very suitable and necessary, and that it is the highest step that we can advance in the work'. The goal is to set our hearts alight with the love of God, so that we might do his will. Thomas Manton reminds us that application is the purpose of meditation, 'The use is to press us to put our seal to these truths, to adventure our souls upon the warrant of them.' Baxter concludes his sample meditation with prayer:

Oh my Lord, while I have a thought to think, let me not forget you. While I have a tongue to move, let me mention you with delight. While I have a breath to breathe, let it be after you, and for you. While I have a knee to bend, let it bow daily at your footstool. And when by sickness you confine me to my bed, please make my bed, and number my pains, and put all my tears in your bottle (Psalm 56.8). Return, O Lord, O let your kingdom come! The desolate bride says, Come; for your Spirit within her says, Come (Revelation 22.17), the Spirit who teaches her to pray with groaning after you which cannot be expressed (Romans 8. 22-27). The whole creation says, Come. You yourself have said, Surely I come. (Revelation 22.20) Amen. Even so, Come, Lord Jesus.

Wishing everyone to be able to practice 'heavenly meditation', Baxter provides a brief summary, 'for the use of the weak'. To assist even the least able person, whose memory may 'let slip' the specific instructions of the previous twelve chapters, he offers the following practical suggestions:

1. Set aside one half hour or hour every day in addition to your daily prayers.
2. Withdraw into a secret place, and set yourself wholly to the work.
3. Take Isaac's time and place if you can, who went forth into the field in the evening to meditate (Genesis 24.63), but if you are a servant or a poor man, take the fittest time and place you can, when you can be private while you are working.
4. Look towards heaven, remember it is your everlasting rest, study its excellence and its reality.
5. Urge your soul using comparisons of heavenly joys with earthly delights.
6. Plead the case with your heart.
7. Draw it to love, desire, hope or joy in heaven by showing its beauty and certainty.
8. Force it to the work, keep at it till you obtain your goal. Do not stir away, if possible, till your love flames and your joy is raised.
9. Call in assistance from God, mix prayers with your considerations and soliloquies, till having seriously pleaded the case with your heart, and reverently pleaded the case with God, you have pleaded yourself from a clod to a flame, from a forgetful sinner to a mindful lover.
10. In a word, what will not be done one day, do it the next, till you have pleaded your heart from earth to heaven, from conversing below, to a walking with God; and till you can lay

your heart to rest, as in the bosom of Christ, in this meditation of your full and everlasting rest.

‘Taking Isaac’s time and place’ (Genesis 24.63) is a novelty for Evangelicals. Richard Baxter meditated outdoors, in the late afternoon. Our long tradition of ‘Bible before breakfast’ may make a walk in the open air at sunset seem a little unspiritual. Baxter found the glory of God displayed to him in the fields. The time is a good one for deeper reflection. Such meditation could also take place on a tram or while driving home from work, or even during repetitive tasks such as washing up or weeding. Some might prefer to set aside one of their morning prayer times for this process, or a special time on the weekend.

Baxter urges us to try the process for ourselves, to test its merit. ‘If I do not spread before you a delicious feast,’ he urges, ‘if I do not set you up in a profitable trade, then cast it away, only try it thoroughly, and then judge.’ Baxter was prepared to stake his reputation on the value of this process: ‘I say again, if in the faithful following of this method, you do not find an increase of all your graces, if you do not grow beyond the stature of ordinary Christians, and if you are not made more useful in your place, if your soul does not enjoy more fellowship with God, and if your life is not fuller of pleasure and consolation, and if you do not have comfort more readily available to you in the hour of your death or in your time of greatest need, then throw these directions back in my face, and exclaim against me as a deceiver for ever.’

Jill Firth is Assistant Minister at St John’s West Brunswick and an adjunct lecturer in theology at Ridley Melbourne. She recently led a quiet day for EFAC using Richard Baxter’s guidelines for meditation.

Quotes from *The Saints Everlasting Rest* have been significantly abridged and the language modernized. The basis is the Christian Heritage Publications edition, (Fearn, Ross-shire: 1998), 454-672