

A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO PURITAN MEDITATION

Jill Firth

Are you any good at silent reflection? The practice is undergoing a renaissance in evangelicalism internationally. While spending time in sustained 'meditation' has fallen into disuse among modern evangelicals, it was a practice prized in Scripture. The Psalmists encourage reflection on Scripture (Psalm 1.2, 119.15) and on God's mighty acts of creation and redemption (Psalm 77.12; 104.34; 145.5). This might be pondering on or musing about a topic, or continually murmuring or reciting Scripture. Paul exhorts us to think about (consider, reflect on) whatever is true, honourable, just, worthy of praise (Philippians 4.8). Consideration of daily events was also suitable for reflection: Solomon invites us to consider the ant in Proverbs 6.6, Jesus observes farming and house cleaning (Matthew 13.31-33) and Paul uses observations from soldiering, athletics and domestic management (2 Timothy 2.4, 5, 20).

The Puritans valued meditation on theological doctrines and key propositions of Scripture. They sought to fill their mind, imagination, consciousness and memory with God and his purposes. Richard Baxter (d 1691) is representative of the Puritans in seeing heaven as the foremost subject of meditation. John Owen (d 1683) particularly prized meditation 'on the person of Christ, and the glory of Christ's kingdom, and of His love'.

According to the Puritans meditation should be frequent and focussed. Adequate time must be set aside. William Bates comments that our meditations are like eggs which need to be kept warm in the nest, 'if the bird leaves her nest for a long space, the eggs chill and are not fit for production' but 'holiness and comfort to our souls' will be the result of regular time with God. At the beginning, meditation is like trying to build a fire from wet wood. Bates encourages us to persevere 'till the flame doth so ascend' (*On Divine Meditation*, 1700).

Meditation begins with 'consideration' or reflection on the chosen truth. Then by engaging in a 'soliloquy', we exhort ourselves, seeking to 'quicken the heart' (Richard Baxter). Meditation should conclude with prayer, for 'prayer is a tying a knot at the end of meditation that it doth not slip' (Thomas Watson). The Puritans valued praying out loud, in private as well as public devotions. Meditation must lead to 'particulars' ie concrete changes in behaviour (Edmund Calamy, *The Art of Divine Meditation*, 1634).

Sermons and reading can provide the material for sustained reflection, but Richard Baxter comments that though some are never weary of hearing sermons or reading, they yet have 'starved souls'. A sermon may briefly refresh them, but unless it is properly digested, the benefits will be short lived. He compares the 7 or 8 hours needed for physical digestion with the time needed for spiritual digestion of an hour's sermon.

Meditation is not the 'bare thinking on truths' but the setting of the affections on God (*The Saints' Everlasting Rest*, 1650). The Puritan Thomas White agrees, 'it is better to hear one Sermon only and meditate on that, than to hear two Sermons and meditate on neither' (*A Method and Instructions for the Art of Divine Meditation*, 1672). Thomas Watson (d 1686) described academic study as 'a winter sun that hath little warmth and influence', while meditation 'melts the heart when it is frozen, and makes it drop into tears of love'.

You may find it valuable to set aside a significant and regular block of time for Scripture reflection, for meditation on God and on your own life and ministry. Practical suggestions from the Puritans on this style of prayer and reflection are found in my article, 'Practicing Puritan Meditation'. Guidelines for Puritan meditation can also be found in Peter Adam, *Hearing God's Words* (2004), 202-210, and Joel R Beeke, *Puritan Reformed Spirituality* (2006).

Quotations in this article can be accessed from Joel R Beeke, *Puritan Reformed Spirituality: A Practical Study from our Reformed and Puritan Heritage*. Darlington: Evangelical Press, 2006 (2004, Reformation Heritage Books) and from Richard Baxter, *The Saints' Everlasting Rest* (1650) http://www.ccel.org/ccel/baxter/saints_rest.iii.XII.html (and sections XIII-XVII) *The Practice of Puritan Meditation (Part 1)*

This is an abridged form of Jill Firth, 'The Practice of Puritan Meditation (Part 1)', which originally appeared in the Autumn 2009 edition of *Essentials*, the magazine of the Evangelical Fellowship in the Anglican Communion.

Jill Firth is Assistant Minister at St Augustine's Moreland and an adjunct lecturer in theology at Ridley Melbourne. She has completed an MA in Spiritual Direction with the MCD and is currently researching suffering in the Psalms.