

Dwell with God

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[0 : 00] Let's pray. Heavenly Father, you say that your word is as sweet as honey.

It is more precious than gold. And so Father, we pray that we would treat your word as such this morning. Please help us to pay full attention and may these words of my mouth and these meditations of my heart be pleasing in your sight.

O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Now I want us to begin by honestly considering this question.

How would you describe your current relationship with God? Or perhaps to make that question a little more interesting, if your relationship with God is like a tree, what would it look like?

Is your tree standing tall? Your trunks thick and upright? Is it a tree that is bright with leaves that are shimmering in vibrant shades of green and roots that are dug deep in rich soil?

[1 : 08] Or is your tree looking dry and withered with the bark peeling away and the leaves looking discolored, with some of them clinging onto limp branches?

Or perhaps somewhere in between? If I'm honest, in 2024, my tree probably looked a little more like the latter than the former, as dealing with bereavement and parenting and pastoring and my own sin became overwhelming at times.

Looking back at 2024, I'm just so grateful for verses like Isaiah 42 verse 3 and Matthew 11 verse 28. I'm so grateful Jesus promises not to crush us when we are like weak branches.

And I'm so grateful for us. And I'm so grateful that he asks us not to dwell in regret, but instead to come to know him once again and lay our burdens at his feet.

And maybe as we begin 2025, that is where you are too. Your tree is dry and withered at the moment, but you don't want it to remain that way.

[2 : 17] You are ready to meet Jesus. Or maybe your tree is currently blossoming and you want it to bloom even more. So how can we bring our tree to health again and keep it thriving?

What habit of grace can we cultivate? Now here's the traditional answer. You've known it since Sunday school. You can probably even sing it.

Read your Bible. That's right. And the answer is traditional for a reason. It is absolutely right.

And I believe you know this. You know the Bible verses. You know 2 Timothy 3.16 tells us that the Bible is necessary to be trained in righteousness. You know verses like Romans 12 verse 12 encourages us to be constant in prayer.

But have you ever felt like there was still something missing? Have you ever felt like that call to just read our Bibles more wasn't quite enough?

[3 : 26] Surely there's more than just being satisfied with moving the bookmark on the page, as the Bishop J.C. Rao once put it. We don't just want to read truth.

We want to be affected by the truths we read. We want to know our Lord more fully and delight in Him more readily.

We want our trees to bloom in full. But how? Well let's turn now to one of our Bible readings for today.

Psalms 1. Please open your Bibles if you've closed it. And did you notice in Psalm 1 that it also pictures our relationship with God like a tree?

In fact, verse 3 says it is possible to be like a well-watered tree, a fruitful tree, nourished in all the right places, growing at all the right times.

[4 : 25] Or put another way, verse 4, it is possible to avoid being chaffed, you know, which has no roots, which are unproductive, which will soon be gone like the wind.

It is possible to be someone who is blessed, someone who walks closely with God and not with the wicked, someone who enjoys spiritual prosperity.

But the question is, how? Verse 2 tells us we can be such a person by being connected to the Word of God.

But don't miss this. We don't become such a person simply by owning a Bible, or even by becoming familiar with its contents. No.

Verse 2 says, We become such people when our delight is in the law of the Lord, and who meditates on His law day and night.

[5 : 25] Did you spot the key ingredient? It is meditation. Fruitful, well-watered trees are produced by those who meditate on the Word of God.

You see what turns our Bible reading from the mere absorption of information and the movement of bookmarks into something that has a transformative impact on our lives?

It is the practice of meditation. It is when we dwell with God. It is what bridges the gap between instruction and application.

As Thomas Brooks, a 17th century pastor, once wrote, It is not hasty reading, but serious meditation on holy and heavenly truths that makes them prove sweet and profitable to the soul.

It is not the mere touching of the flower by the bee that gathers honey, but her abiding for a time on the flower that draws out the sweet. It is not he that reads most, but he that meditates most, that will prove to be the choicest, sweetest, wisest, and strongest Christian.

[6 : 44] It is meditation that links our Bible reading and our praying significantly with our lives. And yet the truth is, it has become a missing link, a neglected link, a forgotten link for many of us.

And my aim today is to restore that link. But before we go any further, perhaps we need to ask that very important question first.

What exactly are we talking about when we say meditation? What is it? For some Christians, mere mention of meditation immediately raises their suspicions, perhaps conjuring up images of yoga poses with soft sitar music playing in the background.

And you can understand why. Meditation, after all, is not unique to Christianity. You can find it in Eastern religions, and you can also find it in secular therapy.

These often involve certain exercises of the body and breathing techniques. In its Eastern religious form, that is with the goal of emptying your mind, of freeing yourself from the world, of losing your sense of yourself.

[8 : 11] In its secular form, it is often with the goal of achieving self-mastery. But biblical meditation is different in its goals and in its forms.

You see, biblical meditation isn't about emptying the mind, but about filling our minds with the thoughts of God and with Scripture.

And its goal is the opposite of Eastern meditation. It seeks attachment, not detachment. It seeks to increasingly become attached to God and to His Word, so that we might be transformed into the character of Christ.

It is Christ-centered, with a focus not so much inwards towards oneself, but outwards towards our Lord. To use the language of Psalm 119, it is verse 10, to seek God with all of our hearts, and to do that, verse 9, by guarding our path according to God's Word.

And that is achieved, verse 11, by hiding God's Word in our hearts. That's just another way of saying that we meditate on God's Word, as it's made more explicit in verse 15.

[9 : 43] And we hide and we meditate by listening carefully to Scripture with attentive hearts, trusting the Holy Spirit to work in our hearts as we do so.

Indeed, perhaps one helpful way is to see meditation the way the writer Eugene Peterson describes it. For Peterson, meditation is like a dog making satisfied sounds as he enjoys his bone.

Now that might sound strange to you at first, but actually, that image captures well the Hebrew word that we translate as meditate. In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word used the most for meditate is the word haggah.

And that is the word found in Psalm 1. And the idea here is that you become taken up with something. You're thoroughly absorbed with that something.

You know, if you've ever been kept up all night worrying about just one thing, that's when you have experienced the negative version of meditation.

[10 : 59] That's what meditating is. To let yourselves be captivated and engrossed with that one thing. But interestingly, that word haggah also has another meaning, which is to make a low-pitched kind of sound.

So it can also be translated to mutter or to moan, to sigh, even to rah. So take Isaiah 31 verse 4, for instance, it should appear on the screen.

This is what the Lord says to me. As a lion growls, a great lion over its prey, and though a whole band of shepherds is caught together against it, and then we can stop there, we don't have to read the rest of the verse.

What I just want to draw your attention to is that word grow. for that word is actually that word haggah, the same one in Psalm 1, the one translated meditate.

So it's interesting that haggah should also have this connotation because it tells us that the idea of meditating that we are so used to, you know, the one where someone is sitting, legs crossed in total silence, isn't quite what the Bible is picturing.

[12 : 27] Instead, come back to Peterson's image of the dog. You know, whenever the dog gets a nice bone, what he often does is he drags it to his favorite spot, and then he goes to work on it.

He's gnawing on it, he's licking it, he's turning it over and around, and as he does so, sometimes he lets out a satisfied growl, you know, indicating his enjoyment of it.

He can amuse himself with the bone for a long time, coming back to it again and again and again. And that is more like the picture of meditation God wants us to have.

Christian meditation fills the mind with truth, turning that truth over and over and over in the mind, allowing it to grip the heart and to stir the affections.

Without meditation, our Bible reading can become like putting some good food into our mouths, but never really digesting it and tasting its flavors.

[13 : 40] And that is why throughout Psalm 119, we often find encouragement to meditate on the Word. So that is the what.

But what about the how? How do we do it? Well, let me try to get a bit more practical for the remainder of this sermon. And I thought the best way to do it today is to roughly follow the template that I learned from this particular book, *Deeper Still* by Linda O'Kock.

Now, the strength of her book is that she keeps it simple by using Proverbs 2, verse 1 to 6 to provide one pattern for meditation.

So, do turn your Bibles to Proverbs 2. just keep it open there so that you can glance down whenever I refer to it. I probably won't be quoting it in full most of the time.

And if you find me overcomplicating things, well, feel free to consult her book instead. But anyway, I have adapted her schema and I have come up with these four Ps.

[14 : 47] so, first P, you know, how do we do it? Number one, prepare with the right posture.

You know, in non-biblical forms of meditation, so much attention is given towards the posture of the body. Right? But in Christian meditation, what is more important is the posture of our souls.

And I think the first posture to adopt is simply to be grateful. Let me read to you Romans 8 verse 5 to 6. Now, when we read those verses in Romans 8, it can sound quite intimidating, can't it?

Oh, this verse is telling me that I need to set my mind on what the Spirit desires to prove that I'm a spiritual person. I need to meditate in order to prove I'm a Christian, to gain spiritual life.

That's what it can sound like. And when we read it like that, it can feel like a burden. It certainly doesn't make me feel particularly grateful.

[16 : 24] But let us read those verses in context. Come down with me to verse 9, which should be on the screen as well. You, however, are not in the realm of the flesh, but are in the realm of the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God lives in you.

And so Paul is saying, hey, remember who you are. Guess what God has already done in you? If you trust in Christ, he's given you his Spirit.

And that is guaranteed. Something he says clearly again later on in Romans 8. And here's the thing, if you have the Spirit, you can be sure it is possible for you to be spiritual minded.

In other words, verse 9 helps us to read verses 5 and 6 properly. Verses 5 and 6 are not saying, hey, you better meditate to have any hope of life and peace.

Rather, verses 5 and 6 are saying, my friends, you have the Spirit because you belong to Christ, so it is possible for you to set your minds on God.

[17 : 46] It is definitely possible to enjoy life and peace as you do so. Here is God's gift to you. And that changes our perspective, doesn't it?

When we realize that meditation, like confession last week, is a gift from God given to us to enjoy Him, we are grateful.

And that is the first posture we should take. Then, I think, the second posture we must prepare to adopt is to be humble.

There is an Old Testament scholar called Andrew Ebernetti, and he tells of a time when he visits Jerusalem. He was especially excited to see Hezekiah's tunnel.

This tunnel was dark, they think, probably about 3,000 years ago, when King Hezekiah was preparing to face the Azzerians. Some of you in home fellowship groups might remember studying that last year.

[18 : 54] But let me tell you something else about Professor Ebernetti. He is very good at basketball, and no wonder, because he is six foot six.

But the thing is, the ceiling of this particular tunnel would get as low as five feet sometimes. So if he wants to get inside this tunnel, he has to crouch low.

He has to adopt a lowly posture. Otherwise, there is no way through that tunnel for him. And if we really want to get into the Bible, Professor Ebernetti says, that is the posture we must adopt.

If we want to find delight in the Lord and his law, we must humble ourselves. You know, once you've been a Christian for a long time, it's easy to start thinking that you know maybe not quite everything, but certainly a whole lot.

So easy to look at a portion of Scripture, especially something familiar, and subconsciously take this attitude, you know what, I already get this, I already understand this, next.

[20 : 16] But when we do so, we are selling ourselves short. For actually, as Proverbs 2, verse 6 tells us, if we depend on our familiarity or our cleverness, we won't get any wisdom, because only the Lord gives wisdom.

It is only from his mouth that we gain knowledge and understanding. And so as we open our Bibles, let's be humble, let's be teachable, let's be the kind of person, Proverbs 2, verse 3, pictures someone who calls out for insight and who cries aloud for understanding.

Let us be like the psalmist in Psalm 119, verse 12, not hesitating to cry out, O Lord, teach me your decrees. When we're looking at that passage again, for the hundredth time, well, let us not be too proud to become like babies again, unashamedly crying out for milk.

But when we do so, we might find that the tunnel of understanding and insight is actually much, much longer than we realize. But the only way to discover that is to stoop and to adopt a lowly posture.

Otherwise, you never enter into that tunnel. And so when you're struggling to be teachable or to be undistracted or to be meek before God's word, well, tell God you need his help.

[22 : 03] Cry out to him for God gives grace to the humble. And the third posture we should adopt, I think, is to be intentional.

We can see Jesus himself doing this when, for example, he withdraws from the crowds to spend time with God or right before he chose his twelve disciples.

Commit a time and a place where you can protect yourselves as much as you are able from distractions and interruptions. If you are a busy parent of young kids, this might seem really difficult, I sympathize, but even if you can only set aside ten minutes then, do that.

And this is just a suggestion, but consider using a physical Bible, not a phone Bible. You know yourselves best, but I think for 90% of us, maybe even more than that, a phone Bible is just too much of a distraction and interruption machine.

At least, you know, physical Bibles won't give you pop-up notifications. So that is P number one. Prepare with the right posture.

[23 : 26] And then we can move on to P number two. Ponder with wonder. Now that we've made sure that we're in a place without distraction, we've said, thank you and help me to God, and we've opened up our Bibles what do we do next?

Well, we still start with trying to understand. We don't skip this step. A meditation isn't some mystical exercise where we randomly open our Bibles and take some random thoughts from it.

On the contrary, because this is God's word, we love him enough to take care to get what he's really saying right.

God's interpretation is what we understand the author's intention, getting the context right, and understanding things within the flow of God's big storyline are still in play.

If you come to my Bible overview class, you'll learn how to do this in a little more detail. and our library, as Aaron just mentioned, also has a number of books that can help you learn to do this a little better as well.

[24 : 45] But we need to do this. We can't skip this step to make sure that we don't go off track and end up making up stuff that has no actual basis in God's word.

That will no longer be meditating but imagining. So we work hard first at understanding God's revealed truth.

Tim Keller puts it this way, we need first of all to think a truth out. And this gets easier with practice and experience. But here's the thing, we don't stop with understanding.

When we do, we run the risk of turning our Bible reading into just a comprehension exercise. As Tim Keller goes on to put it, after we think a truth out, we then think a truth in until its ideas become big and sweet, until the reality of God is sensed upon the heart.

We don't just understand but ponder. treasure. Or to use the language of Proverbs 2 verse 4 again, we read it as if we're searching for hidden treasure.

[26 : 10] We're hunting for silver. That's how the writer of Proverbs wants us to conceive of God's word. So that means we should come to the Bible with anticipation.

Whenever we read it, we're to have this mindset, that there is treasure here. There's something of value here. There's something I can keep coming back to here.

I know it's there. Can I, with God's help, find it? And to begin looking for this treasure, here are some questions we could ask on the screen.

There are questions to do with adoration. how can I love and praise God on the basis of what I'm reading? What do I see here that I can praise Him for?

Or questions to do with repentance? How do I fail to realize this in my life? What wrong behavior or harmful emotions or attitudes result when I forget this?

[27 : 17] There are questions to do with gospel thanks. How can I thank Jesus as the ultimate revelation of this attribute of God, which you reflected on in the first question?

And the ultimate answer to this sin or this need of mine as reflected upon in the second question? And then questions of aspiration. How does this show me what I should or could be or do?

How would I be different if this truth were powerfully real to me? So let us take a simple work example. Here is Luke 12 35-37 from one of Luke's parables.

We looked at this last year. Be dressed, ready for service, and keep your lamps burning, like servants waiting for their master to return from a wedding banquet, so that when he comes and knocks, they can immediately open the door for him.

It will be good for those servants whose master finds them watching when he comes. Truly, I tell you, he will dress himself to serve, will have them recline at the table, and will come and wait on them.

[28 : 36] Now, what do these verses mean? The ESV Study Bible note puts it concisely. it says believers should be continually expecting and ready for Christ's return because the time of his coming is unknown.

So, that's the basic meaning. We've gotten the basic understanding. But maybe let's ponder some more, and let's zoom in on verse 37 in particular.

You know, when we think of Jesus' second coming, we usually think of him coming in great majesty and in glory and as a great conquering king, right? And that's true because other verses tell us that.

But what if we pause here on verse 37? Notice what does the master do when he comes? What kind of picture do we get?

He is dressed ready to serve. He is dressed like a waiter at a table full of insignificant and unworthy servants.

[29 : 50] That's what Jesus will also be like when he comes. It is an unexpected image. As we ponder some more and we turn this truth over and over in our heads that Christ who is creator, Christ who is at the right hand of the father, Christ who will one day judge all evil.

And we imagine, we realize being at a table where this same Christ is lovingly waiting for us and on us.

a table that we will be at if we stay faithful. Well, what does that begin to do to our hearts?

It helps us to continually be ready for Christ's return, knowing that this is how Christ is coming to treat us, not to lord it over us, but to continue to love us in this way still.

It is a stunning image, one that we can value, one that we can come back to again and again whenever we're struggling to persevere. And perhaps one way meditation is different from Bible study is that in Bible study we are mainly observing things, but here in meditation we are also storing the treasures we discover.

[31 : 26] And sometimes it is helpful in your Bible reading to just pick one thing, you know you might have discovered several interesting things, but maybe just pick one truth for the day and stay there a little longer.

Perhaps God has shown you something lovely about Christ, or maybe he's challenged you about some sin, or changed your wrong perspective on some situation.

Well, whatever it is, stay there and store it up so that you can come back to it at some point. For some people, they store stuff up by repeating and memorizing verses.

Now go for it if that is you. For others, they find journaling helpful. I must confess it doesn't seem to work for me so well, but for some people, they have testified that they find this beneficial where they write down their reflections for the day.

And actually, that's also why taking notes during sermons can also be a good thing to do, because you are storing up what you have heard so that you can come back and ponder some more and be reminded again.

[32 : 41] I still have sermon notes from more than ten years ago that I still come back to. And then third piece, pivot your heart.

Pivot your heart. That is what Proverbs 2, verse 1 to 2 encourages us to do. Notice the writer encourages us not just to accept and to store up God's word, but to actually turn to him.

God doesn't want our meditation to stop at simply pondering, for if we really treasure his wisdom, we will also turn from folly, from foolishness.

so how does that work in meditation? Well, one way is like this. It's to take that one truth, that one truth that you're pondering on for the day, and ask, what is the negative side of this?

How might the devil seduce me with the opposite of this truth? Well, let me give you one more example. let's say we are pondering on our key verse from last week, 1 John 1 verse 9.

[34 : 02] If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. us. And the one truth that we are pondering with wonder from this verse is that we realize that God is always ready to forgive when we come to him with contrite hearts.

We realize that God wants to save us, he doesn't want to condemn us. But what does the devil want me to believe? What is the opposite of that truth that he wants me to, he wants to deceive me with?

Well, he wants me to believe that God doesn't really desire to forgive. And I have to ask myself, in what ways might I have believed what the devil wants me to believe?

Perhaps as I meditate, I realize that when I sin, I subconsciously believe that God is setting me up for failure anyway, and so I don't practice confession as a habit of grace.

And because I'm so sure that God is itching for the chance to condemn me as soon as I can, I don't want to do anything. But this verse exposes that as a lie.

[35 : 24] And so as the lie is exposed, and I now realize the truth, I then turn to God. I pivot my heart. I confess what I have wrongly believed, I go back to God, I ask for his help to live now in light of this truth.

That's the third P, pivot your heart. And then very briefly, the final P, we persist in pressing these truths home.

in someone, the psalmist says that he meditates day and night. That's simply another way of saying that he does so regularly. Or to put it in the negative, he will not neglect God's words, Psalm 119 verse 16.

And there are different ways that we can press it into our hearts. One way is to turn what we're pondering into prayer, thank him, praise him, petition him using the very words that you've just been pondering.

And another way is to share what you've learned with others. Actually, that is why we sometimes put coffee questions in the bulletin, is to give you one more opportunity to share what you've learned with others, so that those truths can be pressed home into your heart and my heart.

[36 : 55] love. And as we do so, we will begin finding God's word changing us. I like what the commentator Ryan O'Dowd says about Proverbs 2 verse 5.

He says, the path of wisdom is like an upward spiral. We begin the search for wisdom with the fear of the Lord, which leads to greater understanding of God, who then increases our wisdom.

And that is where meditating on God's word regularly can take us. But as we finish, I hope we won't see meditation as one more painful thing we have to do, but as a habit of grace.

Without a doubt, it requires discipline, but I hope we will also see it as a delight. That's how the psalmist takes it in both Psalm 1 and Psalm 119, doesn't he?

He sees it both as discipline and delight. Perhaps think of it this way. Now, I didn't do so much of this in 2024, which I kind of regret, but in 2023, I used to set up a Zoom call roughly every three months or so with another pastor friend of mine who's based outside of Sarawak.

[38 : 17] and it took deliberate action and discipline to schedule those calls in. We are both busy and it was really easy for those calls to fall off the agenda, as it sort of did last year.

But when we did discipline ourselves to check in with one another, we discovered that we delight in sharing with one another our hopes and our struggles, our praise points and our prayer points.

It grew our relationship and kept it going beyond those Zoom calls. They were not a burden, but a delight. But it takes discipline for that delight to happen.

And that is the kind of dynamic that goes on in meditation. The discipline and the delight go together, reinforcing one another.

And so I hope that encourages us to cultivate this habit of grace. And ultimately, let's not forget, meditation really is simply seeking the God who first loved us.

[39 : 38] That's what it is at its root. God is so as we conclude, let us take hold of this habit of grace for our tree to be healthy again.

And let's end actually by meditating once again on the words of Psalm 1. So could you please turn back to me to Psalm chapter 1 and we're just going to read the first three verses aloud together.

And then after that I'll pray. So please turn to Psalm chapter 1 verses 1 to 3. Let us read aloud together on the count of three.

One, two, three. Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked or stand in the way that sinners take or sit in the company of mockers but whose delight is in the law of the Lord and who meditates on his law day and night.

That person is like a tree planted by streams of water which uses fruit in season and whose leaves does not wither whatever they do prospers.

[40 : 58] Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you once again that you are a God who desires relationship with us and you have given us your word, your precious eternal word that lasts forever.

And so Father, please help us to make the most of this gift that you have given us. Help us, Lord, we know that we are people who are often very distracted, who find it hard to pay attention sometimes, especially in a world filled with smartphones and social media.

Help us, Lord, nevertheless, to spend time with you, to dwell with you, so that our tree can grow to be strong, so that we can be like that well-nourished fruitful tree of someone, that we can enjoy our relationship with you, and so that we can stand strong as your people in this world.

So help us to also encourage one another to keep cultivating this habit. All this we pray in the name of Christ. Amen.