

Meditating on God's Word

In this article we will consider the meaning, blessing, and application of meditating on God's word. Old Testament saints and Christians of all times and places have meditated on the Bible though in many cases they have had to rely on their memory, or a small scroll, or perhaps a rare fragment of printed Scripture.



Even today, in many countries to have one page of the Bible is to possess a priceless treasure. How different it is for us! The Bible on your PDA, portable and easy to use, affords much opportunity for meditation on the word of God. I know, however, from experience that having access to the word is not enough; what we need is the hunger and thirst to read it, ponder it, pray it, and seek to do it. God is eager to give us such a hunger, and the more we spend time in His word, the more the word itself will generate this hunger within us. I hope this article will inspire many to take advantage of the opportunities the Lord has given us for meditation in His word, a practice that has the power to transform us and make us a blessing to others if we understand its value and learn its secrets.

The Meaning of Meditation

After the death of Moses, the leadership of God's people was transferred to Joshua, whose responsibility it was to conquer and possess the land of Canaan promised to Israel by God. In that context, the Lord spoke these words to his servant:

*"This book of the law shall not depart out of thy **mouth**, but thou shalt **meditate** thereon day and night, that thou mayest observe to do according to all that is written therein: for then thou shalt make thy way prosperous, and then thou shalt have good success" (Josh. 1:8).*

Joshua was instructed to meditate day and night on what today are the first five books of the Bible, the Torah or Law of Moses. We rendered certain words in bold print to show that meditation has something to do with the mouth, not just the mind. The words were not to depart out of Joshua's *mouth*. This implies a reading aloud of the Scriptures, a verbal and vocal interaction with God in His word, a mixing the word of God with a spirit of faith (compare Heb.4:2 with 2 Cor.4:13), a mingling of reading and prayer (Eph.6:17-18), even a singing of the Scriptures (Eph.5:19). Colossians 3:16 puts it this way:

"Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; in all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts unto God."

To have the word of Christ indwelling richly in us requires more than academic study to acquire knowledge of the doctrines of the Bible; rather, it presupposes a thorough interaction with God in the word, which may involve careful study, thoughtful consideration, prayer in the spirit, speaking and sharing the word with others, and even singing it.

Usage and Definition: Tracking down the Meaning of a Word

To understand more clearly what it was that Joshua was being instructed to do, we need to look at the usage and definitions of the Hebrew word for meditation. To do this we can search for the word and observe it in context, something we demonstrated in the article on Bible searches (see [The Why and How of Bible Searches](#)). This we will attempt to do. We can also use any or all of several helpful Bible reference tools, each available through Olive Tree Bible Software: [Unger's Bible Encyclopedia](#), [The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia](#), [The Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament](#), [The Illumina Bible Encyclopedia](#), [The Complete Word Study Bible](#), [Commentary on the Old Testament by Keil and Delitzch](#), [NASB Strong's](#) or [KJV Strong's](#), both with *Strong's Hebrew and Greek Dictionaries*, and more. In preparing to write this article, I looked up words for meditation in the Bible and in all of these resources. To save time, I will only briefly summarize and explain the process and what I found. I hope, however, that you will enjoy using these tools yourself.

By the term *usage*, we mean the way a word is used in the many places it appears in the context of Scripture. Dictionary and lexicon entries are, in fact, summaries of usage, presented as definitions prioritized according to the frequencies with which various meanings of a word occur. This holds true for English dictionaries as well as biblical ones. Therefore, before we use a dictionary, it is instructive to do a search on the word and look at it in context to see how it is used. Then, when we open a Bible dictionary, we will be better prepared to understand and evaluate what we see there.

To do this for the topic of meditation, I typed the words *meditation*, *meditate*, and *muse* (a synonym) into the search window and set the search option as "any word" since I wanted to find all of these English words. I used the [American Standard Version](#) (ASV) from 1901 because I soon learned that some modern translations do not use the English word *meditate* as much. This search yielded 23 results. After finding some examples, I was able to determine the Strong's numbers that correspond to the English words *meditate* and *muse* by switching to either the [KJV Strong's](#) or the [NASB Strong's](#), both of which translations Olive Tree provides with Strong's numbers and the accompanying lexicon. Doing this, I found that two numbers stood out the most, 1897 and 7878, corresponding to two Hebrew words frequently, but not always, translated as *meditate*. By searching on these numbers, one can find even more examples of the word *meditate* and gain a deeper appreciation of its varied usage in Scripture. We will look more closely at these words after we look at the places in the Bible where they occur.

My Mouth Shall Praise Thee When I Meditate

If we look up the word *meditate* in our English thesaurus we will find synonyms like *contemplate*, *ponder*, *think*, *consider*, *deliberate*, and *reflect*. What I am about to share with you, however, seems to present a somewhat different concept about meditation. First of all, I found that, with the exception of a few verses, most of the examples of meditation are in the Psalms, those musical poems of praise, punctuated frequently with David's characteristic interjections: "O Lord" (about 190 times in Psalms), "O God" (about 100 times), "Praise the Lord" or "Hallelujah" (31 times), and "bless the Lord" (15 times). The words *mouth*, *voice*, and *tongue* are used in the Psalms 135 times collectively, a testimony to the fact that the psalmists' interactions with God were often not a silent matter. Just as meditation is linked with the mouth in Joshua 1:8, mentioned above, it is often connected with the mouth or voice in the Psalms. Psalm 5:1-3 says,

*"Give ear to my **words**, O LORD, consider my **meditation**. Harken unto the **voice** of my **cry**, my King, and my God: for unto thee will I **pray**. My **voice** shalt thou **hear** in the morning, O LORD; in the morning will I direct my **prayer** unto thee, and will look up."*

Notice the words that we rendered in bold print in these verses. The whole context suggests that the psalmist's meditation is something vocal and audible, for it involves words, the voice, crying, prayer, and hearing.

Now let's look at Psalm 19:14, which says,

*"Let the **words** of my **mouth** and the **meditation** of my heart be acceptable in thy sight, O LORD, my strength and my redeemer."*

Here, as elsewhere, meditation is something related to the heart; but the heart's contemplation is expressed by the words of the mouth. Even if one concludes that the meditation of the heart is a silent pondering of God's law, this inner reflection is accompanied by the words of the mouth, most likely in an attempt to articulate the meditation itself: that is, to put into words what the heart sees and to offer it as prayer or praise or a song to God.

Here is another passage from Psalms that illustrates this point:

*"My soul shall be satisfied as with marrow and fatness; and my **mouth** shall **praise** thee with joyful **lips**; when I remember thee upon my bed, and **meditate** on thee in the night-watches" (63:5-6).*

One can imagine David pursued by Saul's army in the wilderness of Judah, taking a turn at watching by night over his little company of devoted followers, and discovering, as He communes with His Lord, that there is One who satisfies the soul amid the harshest of circumstances. We can almost hear him joyfully praising his God in a low voice so as not to wake the others. To one of *them* it would have sounded like groaning or muttering. But we know, according to the context, that it was his meditation.

Two Enlightening Hebrew Words

When we look up two Hebrew words that are frequently translated *meditate* in the Psalms, we see that they are also used in a variety of other ways, some quite surprising. The Hebrew verb pronounced *hagah* (Strong's number 1897) literally means to growl, groan, sigh, mutter, or speak, but it is used figuratively to mean meditate or ponder. This Hebrew word is used in Isaiah to signify the moans of grief (16:7), the growl of a lion (31:4), and the cooing of a dove (38:14). Yet, it is

the same word that means meditate in Joshua 1:8. *Hagah* is also used in Psalm 1, describing the blessed man who delights in the law of the LORD:

"And in His law doth he meditate day and night" (1:2).

Keil and Delitzch say of this word that it speaks "of a deep, dull sound, as if vibrating between within and without" and "here signifies the quiet soliloquy of one who is searching and thinking." We can only attempt to appreciate the depth of this word as it depicts the blessed man who day and night is considering and pondering God's word and whose voice sometimes breaks into sighs of longing or coos of delight as he interacts both silently and audibly with God in His word.

Another Hebrew word for meditate is *siach* (Strong's 7878), a verb which can mean to muse, ponder, converse, utter, complain, pray, sing, or speak. Notice again how the mouth is implied by most of the varied meanings of this word, which is used three times in Psalm 77. This psalm initially expresses the groanings of one who is deeply troubled:

*"When I remember God, then I am disturbed; when I **sigh** (*siach*), then my **spirit** grows faint" (v.3).*

When he remembers the days of old, he takes heart:

*"I will remember my **song** in the night; I will **meditate** (*siach*) with my heart..."(v.6).*

His spirit lifts even further when he considers the lovingkindness and compassion of the Lord (vv.8-9). Then he begins to talk to himself,

"And I said, 'This is my infirmity; but I will remember the years of the right hand of the Most High'" (v.10).

He determines to remember the deeds of the Lord and His wonders of old (vv.11-13). Finally, he says,

*"I will **meditate** (*hagah*) on all Your work and **muse** (*siach*) on your deeds" (77:12).*

His appreciation of God's willingness and ability to deliver His people has been greatly enriched by a progressive and deliberate interaction with God's word through sighing, singing, speaking, meditating, and musing.

Just consider how the psalmist takes charge of his soul, opening his mouth in the middle of overwhelming feelings of depression — first in a sigh, then in a song in

the night, then in speaking to himself and remembering the deeds of the Lord, then in meditation and musing on the Lord's works. The result is that he now proclaims,

"You are the God who works wonders; You have made known your strength among the peoples" (v.14);

and he spends the rest of the psalm enumerating the Lord's mighty deeds on His people's behalf. His increasingly vocal meditation and musing on the word and the deeds of the Lord have brought him out of introspection, out of looking at himself and his predicament, into the realm of a revelation of God, who works wonders for His people.

Chewing the Cud

The English word *muse*, though only a translation of the biblical word in Psalm 77:12, mentioned above, offers a window into a life of interacting with God in the Scriptures. Coming from a Middle French word that means to idle or loiter, to muse means "to become absorbed in thought" (*Webster's Third New International Dictionary*), and its primary synonym is the word *ruminare*, from a Latin word which meant to chew the cud. This is the natural process whereby some animals, many of them domesticated, chew and chew and chew their food, then swallow, regurgitate, and chew some more. By this means, they obtain the maximum nourishment from what they eat, digesting it thoroughly. Not without significance, animals in the Old Testament were considered clean and suitable for food if they split the hoof and chewed the cud (Lev.11:3). By analogy, we could say that a person who "chews the cud" in relation to God's word is made clean and fruitful by the word (John 15:3,7); just as Christ's glorious church is cleansed by the washing of the water of the word (Eph 5:26).

Though the word *ruminare* may not be found in your Bible, the concept of chewing is a biblical one, for the Greek word used by the Lord in John 6:57 for eat may imply to chew, masticate, gnaw, crunch, or nibble — more or less constantly, like snacking:

*"As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father; so he that **eateth** me, he also shall live because of me."*

For many of Jesus' followers, this saying was hard to take (v.60), but the Lord was clearly revealing Himself as the bread of life (v.48) whose words are spirit and life (v.63). To spend a generous amount of time musing or ruminating over

His words with prayer is to eat the bread which is Christ Himself as the eternal life of God (v.58) and this eating issues in living by Him as our sustaining source. Surely, to linger with God's word by meditating and musing with a prayerful spirit is one kind of loitering or idleness which not only may be considered virtuous, but which brings the greatest of all rewards: Christ Himself indwelling us richly.

The Blessings of Meditating on God's Word

A few passages selected from the Psalms will impress us with the spiritual rewards of meditating on God's Person, work, and word. Consider how the entire book of Psalms begins:

"Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly,

Nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful.

But His delight is in the law of the LORD;

*And in His law doth he **meditate** day and night.*

And he shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water,

That bringeth forth his fruit in his season;

His leaf shall not wither; and whatsoever he doeth shall prosper" (Psa. 1:1-3, [KJV](#)).



Someone I know once testified that upon reading this Psalm a spontaneous prayer welled up in him, "Lord, make me that blessed man!" Many times I have

had the same reaction to this Psalm, for it describes a person deeply rooted in the Lord and His word, who has learned to draw from the river of water of life. Not only is such a delightful enjoyment of God its own reward, but it consistently produces fruit for God's own satisfaction. At the end of the Psalm the man is made to stand in the congregation of the righteous, indicating that He is in harmony with God's people and overcomes in the Day of Judgment. What a blessed man!

Psalm 119 mentions meditating on God's word, law, precepts, and statutes at least eight times. Some of these references to meditation indicate that it functions as a safeguard to the person who practices it.

*"Princes also sat and talked against me; but thy servant did **meditate** on thy statutes" (v.23). "Let the proud be put to shame; for they have overthrown me wrongfully: but I will **meditate** on thy precepts" (v.78).*

Clearly, the writer believes that meditating on the statutes and precepts of God's law diffuses his enemies' attempts to harm him, just as if he were encompassed with a wall of fire (Zech.2:5).

Wisdom is another benefit of meditating on God's word. In verses 97-99, the psalmist says,

*"Oh how I love thy law! It is my **meditation** all the day. Thy commandments make me wiser than mine enemies; for they are ever with me. I have more understanding than all my teachers; for thy testimonies are my **meditation**."*

These statements remind one of the young David, who "behaved himself more wisely than all the servants of Saul" (1 Sam.18:30); and of the twelve-year-old Jesus, whose parents found Him "in the temple, sitting in the midst of the teachers, both hearing them, and asking them questions: and all that heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers" (Luke 2:46-47). As an adult, nearing the end of His earthly mission, He responded so wisely to every barbed question of the scribes, Pharisees, and Sadducees that "No one was brave enough to ask him another question" (Luke 20:40, [ERV](#)).

Remember well that Christ is the fulfillment of the law upon which the Old Testament saints meditated (Matt.5:17). Every statute, every precept, every offering, every type, every shadow, every phrase, word, and diacritical mark of the books of the law given by Moses pointed forward to this Person who would one day come as God in the flesh to fulfill, as He Himself said, each and every jot

and tittle of the law. No wonder David and others like him experienced such unfeigned delight in meditating, ruminating, musing, and feeding on the law of the Lord. Like Paul in the New Testament, they were counting all things loss on account of the excellency of the knowledge of a wonderful Person, who was Himself their blessing and reward (Philip.3:8).

An Application of Meditating on the Word

Finally, let us look at a particular application of meditating on God's word and its benefits: the Lord Jesus being tempted by the Devil in the wilderness. After His baptism, at which time the Father spoke from heaven and the Holy Spirit descended on Him in the form of a dove, Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert, where he fasted for forty days and nights. What He was doing during that time the Bible doesn't say directly, but there are strong indications that He was meditating on the word of God, even a particular portion of Scripture. Whether He had with Him a scroll or whether He used His memory is not clear. But notice that His answers to Satan's temptations all come from the same portion of Moses' writings, Deuteronomy chapters 6 and 8. These chapters speak about another time of trial in the wilderness, that of the children of Israel after their exodus from Egypt, a time also measured by the number forty, in their case forty years. Observe the following verses from Matthew 4:1-10, NKJV, with the words of Christ in red:

Satan: If you are the Son of God, command that these stones become bread.

Jesus: **It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God' (Deut.8:3).**

Satan: If you are the Son of God, throw Yourself down [from the temple]. For it is written: 'He shall give His angels charge over you, and in their hands shall they bear you up, lest you dash your foot against a stone' (Psa.91:11-12).

Jesus: **It is written again, 'You shall not tempt the LORD your God' (Deut. 6:16).**

Satan: All these things [the kingdoms of the world] I will give

Jesus: **Away with you, Satan! For it is written, 'You shall worship**

You if You fall down and worship me.

the LORD your God, and Him only you shall serve' (Deut.6:13).

Deuteronomy 6-8 is a portion of Moses' word to the children of Israel as he prepares them to go into the land of Canaan to take possession of it. This land, the promised blessing of Abraham, is to be their portion, and it is in this land that God will dwell with His people and from this land that He will bless the nations. Moses reminds them how the Lord led them all the way through the wilderness those forty years to humble and test them, to know what was in their heart, to see whether they would keep His commandments or not (8:2). God humbled them and allowed them to hunger, and fed them with manna, something unknown to them or their fathers, in order to make them know that man lives not on bread only, but on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God (8:3).

Just as that had been a time of testing for Israel, signified by the number forty, this was a time of testing for Jesus, who, being a man, was hungry after His forty-day fast. Being the Son of God, however, He was perfectly capable of turning stones into bread to meet His physical needs or of diving off the temple as a show of power. To do so would have been to confirm His equality with God, which would not, in the godhead, be regarded as robbery (Philip.2:6), but would completely undermine His mission: to live and die as a man for the redemption of all mankind and the glory of the Father. Instead, He made Himself of no reputation, took the form of a bondservant, remained in the likeness of men, and humbled Himself, passing every test (Philip.2:7-8). To Satan's "He shall give His angel's charge over you" (a Scripture quotation), Jesus said, "A proper man doesn't tempt his Lord." To Satan's "I will give you all these worldly kingdoms if you worship me," He chose, as a man, to worship and serve the Lord His God. And in every case He responded with the written word of God from Deuteronomy, once applied to Israel in the wilderness, but now to the blessed Christ, who chose to take the position of a man in His time of testing and would maintain that position throughout His life, even when the taunt would come back in another form, "If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross" (Mat.27:40). His triumph as a man of perfect humility in the wilderness paved the way for the even greater victory of the cross. For this God highly exalted Him and in His name every knee shall bow (Philip.2:9-10).

The Victorious Life Is Now an Indwelling Person

Now Jesus is the real Joshua, leading God's people into the realm of the Spirit as the fulfillment of the land of promise (Gal.3:14). Moreover, He is both the Root and the Offspring of David (Rev.22:16), who conquered all the enemies in the land and led the praise of God's people. For Jesus as a man, meditating on God's word was a way of life, one that brought constant victory. Just as Israel ate the manna in the wilderness of Sinai, Jesus was feeding on God's word in the wilderness of Judea, fulfilling Isaiah's prophecy:

"Therefore will the Lord himself give you a sign: Behold, the virgin shall conceive and shall bring forth a son, and call his name Immanuel. Butter and honey shall he eat, that he may know to refuse the evil, and to choose the good" (Isa.7:14-15, Darby).

Jesus defeated the Devil by taking the revealed will of God as His food;

"My meat is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work" (John 4:34, ASV).

Now His very life as the Son of God, imparted by new birth, continually saves those he reconciled to God through His death (Rom.5:10). We have more than Joshua or David had; we have not only the written word that points to Christ, but Christ Himself as the life-giving Spirit (1 Cor.15:45), the very Person in resurrection who is the fulfillment of the word, living in us, so that we might draw from Him hour by hour, meditating on His words, which are spirit and life (John 6:63).

*"Oh how I love thy law! It is my **meditation** all the day. Thy commandments make me wiser than mine enemies; for they are ever with me" (Psa.119:97-98).*

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