

## Scripture Teaching 02:

# Meditate

### Intro hook:

- There's a quirky little book called *Luke Skywalker Can't Read*.<sup>1</sup>
- The book is a collection of essays, and in it, the author points out that in the original Star Wars trilogy, you never once see Luke *read*.
- His theory is that Luke can travel the galaxy, but he is functionally illiterate.
- And it's a playful way of saying that here in the Milky Way, technology has made possible wonders, but it's changed our relationship to the written word.
- Every year, people read fewer and fewer books, and spend more and more time on their devices.
- A number of social critics are calling our generation "post-literate."
- But the truth is: we actually read more than ever before in human history. We just don't read *books*.
- We read text messages and emails and social media captions and news alerts and billboards.
- In fact, we are visually *assaulted* by words every time we open our device or drive on the road.
- But this new kind of fast-paced, click-bait-y reading is literally rewiring our brains.
- It's making it *harder* to read anything literary or slow or complex.
- A while back I came across an article on *Medium* from a literary critic about how he's been so distracted by his devices that he's only read four books all year.
- Then he gave this insight about what we lose if we give up reading books:
  - "Books, in ways that are different than visual art, music, the radio, or even love, force us to walk through another's thoughts, one word at a time, over hours and days. We share our minds for that time with the writer's. There is a slowness, a forced reflection

required by the medium that is unique. Books re-create someone else's thoughts inside our own minds, and maybe it is this one-to-one mapping of someone else's words ... that give books their power. Books force us to let someone else's thoughts inhabit our minds completely." —Hugh McGuire

- This is what the books in the library of Scripture have the potential to do — to “let [God’s] thoughts inhabit our minds completely.”
- The problem is that even if in our hearts we say, “Yes, I want that!” our *brains* have been neurobiologically malformed to read in a way that is fundamentally at odds with how Scripture was designed to be read.
- You’re thinking, “Scripture was designed to be read in a certain way?”
- Yes.
- Let's do a little Bible work.

**Seam:** I want to look at three passages. First, let’s look at Jesus.

**Turn:** Turn to Luke 24.

- This story takes place right after Jesus’ resurrection. Two disciples are walking down the road. They are at a low point when Jesus comes up to speak to them.
- Verse 25:

#### **Luke 24:**

He said to them, “How foolish you are, and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?” And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself. —Luke 24v25-27

- If there was a podcast I would give *anything* to listen to, it’s this one!
- Look down at verse 32. Afterward they say this:

Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us? —Luke 24v32

- Then look at verses 44 and 45. Jesus says:

Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms. Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. —Luke 24v44-45

**Seam:** All I want you to notice in this story is *what* Jesus calls the Bible.

**Three parts:**

- He does not call it “the Bible.”
- He calls it “the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms.”
- This was a very common 1st-century Hebrew way of referring to the Hebrew Bible, or what we now call the Old Testament.
- Because it was organized in three major divisions:
  - The Law, or the five books of Moses: Genesis through Deuteronomy.
  - The Prophets, starting with Joshua.
  - And then the Psalms, which were also called “the writings,” because the main part was the Psalms, but it also included the rest of the wisdom literature and a few other unique works.
- This simple, three-part structure is how the Bible of Jesus’ day was organized.
- And in it, we actually get *clues* as to *how* we are to read it.

**Seam:** Next, let me show you two key passages in “the Law, the Prophets, and the Psalms” that biblical scholars call “canonical seams” because they are the literary transitions between the three sections of Scripture.

- And the canonical seams show us *how* we are to read the library as a whole.
- They are Joshua 1 and Psalm 1.
- First, turn to Joshua 1.
- This passage is the seam, or link, between the Law (or the Torah) and the Prophets. Listen ...

**Joshua 1v7-8:**

Be strong and very courageous. Be careful to obey all the law my servant Moses gave you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, that you may be successful wherever you go. Keep this Book of the Law [referring back to Genesis through Deuteronomy] always on your lips; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful. —Joshua 1v7-8

- Notice that in between the Torah and the Prophets, there’s a short passage telling us *how to read* it.

- We are to “*meditate* on it day and night.”

**Seam:** Now turn to Psalm 1.

- Remember, in Jesus’ day, the Psalms were the beginning of the third major division of the Hebrew Bible — the Psalms or the writings.
- And look at the very first Psalm:

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 yields its fruit in season  
 and whose leaf does not wither—  
 whatever they do prospers.

—Psalm 1v1-3

**Hinge:**

- Did you see it?
- The language is almost identical.
- This is what my friend Tim Mackie of BibleProject calls a “hyperlink,” where the authors of Scripture use a key word or phrase as a deliberate literary reference back to a previous passage in the canon.
- And these two “canonical seams” do more than stitch together the library of Scripture. They teach us *how* to read Scripture.
- The word used in *both* passages is “meditation.”

**Meditation:**

- In Hebrew, the word is *hagah*.
  - It most literally means “to murmur,” likely referring to the ancient practice of reading Scripture in a quiet voice under your breath.
  - Hence Joshua’s colorful line, “Keep [it] always on your *lips*.”
  - Neuroscientists tell us this is hugely helpful for memory retention.

- Some people even argue that you should always read the Bible out loud, even if just at a whisper.
- But *hagah* can also be translated as “to growl over.”
- The word is later used by the prophet Isaiah, who writes, “A lion growls [and the word there is *hagah*], a great lion over its prey.”<sup>2</sup>
- Think of a lion and its prey; it’s very similar to a dog and its bone.
- I just gave our dog a bone a few days ago. She has been chewing on it, gnawing it down, reveling in it, and she is so happy.
- In meditation, we do that with Scripture. We *hagah* it — we chew on it and get to the marrow of it.
- The Presbyterian Eugene Peterson, in his book on reading Scripture, appropriately titled *Eat This Book*, writes:
  - “Christians feed on Scripture. Holy Scripture nurtures the holy community as food nurtures the human body. Christians don’t simply learn or study or use Scripture; we assimilate it, take it into our lives in such a way that it gets metabolized into acts of love.”
- He writes about the story in Revelation 10, where the angel has a scroll that is symbolic for the Scriptures; he gives it to John and says, “Eat it.” Not, “Read it.” Not even, “Study it,” but, “*Eat it.*”
- Put away your journal and pen. Pick up your knife and fork.
- *Meditate* on Scripture.
- The canonical seams of Joshua 1 and Psalm 1 are telling us that Scripture was *designed* to be meditated on.
- The BibleProject scholars call it “Jewish meditation literature.”
- That’s one of the reasons that it’s full of riddles and puzzling sayings and phrases with double meanings and complex plotlines.
- It’s likely why over a third of the Bible is poetry. Poetry can’t be read quickly. It forces you to *slow down*.
- And it doesn’t quickly give up its meaning. You have to meditate. You have to ponder it.

**Seam:** But this is hard to do in our fast-paced world.

**Speed:**

- Again, we've been formed to read quickly. To skim the page and get what we need and move on.
- You may get a verse of the day as an alert on your phone and glance at it between text messages and that's not bad.
- But Scripture was not designed to be read the way you read a news alert or a caption on a social media post.
- Or even the way you read a novel.
- It's more *prayerful*.
- Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German Lutheran pastor, defined meditation as the "prayerful consideration of Scripture."<sup>3</sup>
- Dr. Richard Peace of Fuller Seminary calls it "contemplative Bible reading."<sup>4</sup>
- It is a slow, prayerful, reflective mode of reading Scripture with the goal of *formation*, not just *information*.
- But this requires us to retrain our brain a bit.
- I remember years ago reading the science journalist Michael Pollen's book *In Defense of Food*. He has a whole section in there on how important chewing is for metabolism, and how most modern people barely chew at all.
- Health experts say we should chew each bite *at least twenty times* before we swallow.
- Go try that during your next meal. Unless you eat floating in the lotus position, you likely chew like me, about *three* times before you wolf it down.
- In the same way, we often read Scripture at breakneck speed, and in doing so, we miss out on all that God has for us in it.
- Which is why ...

**Sticky line:** The first step for many of us in our practice of reading Scripture is to slow down and meditate.

- There is no *one* way to meditate on Scripture.
- But there is one practice that has risen to the surface over the centuries that many people find is the most helpful way to meditate.
- It's called:

## Lectio Divina

- ... which is Latin. *Lectio* means “reading” and *Divina* means “divine” or “spiritual.”
- In the monastic tradition, monks and nuns would go off alone into the quiet, where they would read and re-read a passage of Scripture, slowly turning over each word and phrase in their minds and listening for God’s voice.
- This meditative mode of reading is different from study, which we’ll cover in the next session.
- If study asks, “*What did this text mean to them, then, and how do we apply it to our life, now?*”
- Lectio asks, “*How is God coming to me personally through this text?*”
- Now, we have to be careful here not to manipulate Scripture or allow the deceiver to manipulate Scripture as he tried to do with Jesus in the desert.
- We’re not asking for a new meaning.
- We’re asking, “What aspect of the *original* meaning is the Spirit wanting to directly impress into our own lives?”

### Four steps:

- And *lectio* isn’t just for monks and nuns!
- But they have spent centuries fine-tuning this discipline.
- It was first popularized by Saint Benedict all the way back in the sixth century.
- Then in the 12th century, it was codified into a four-step process:
- *Lectio, meditatio, oratio, contemplatio.*
- Or: read, meditate, pray, contemplate.
- First, you read (*lectio*):
  - Slowly and intuitively.
  - Often what will happen is a particular word or phrase or idea will just gently lift off the page. It will catch your mind’s attention or nudge you emotionally.
  - Or, as you’re reading, a picture will enter your mind’s eye, or a memory from your past, or an idea will come out of nowhere.
  - What’s actually happening is Jesus — the *Word* of God — is coming up to you as you read and is speaking to you.

- Then the next step is ...
- You meditate (*meditatio*):
  - You “chew” on it. You re-read it a second or third time and reflect on the connections between the passage and your life and what God may be saying to you.
  - You may want to ask Jesus clarifying questions and enter into a dialogue with the Spirit of God.
  - You want it to penetrate you deeply.
- Then we pray (*oratio*) what we are hearing back to God.
- And finally we contemplate (*contemplatio*), meaning we look up from the text into the eyes of God himself. And we gaze upon him, gazing upon us in love.
- Now, there was a monk in the 12th century named Guigo who came up with these four steps, and for him, this was a linear process — read, meditate, pray, contemplate.
- He literally used the analogy of climbing a ladder.
- But many of us experience *lectio* in a less linear way — more like four steps in a dance.
- At first, when you are learning the dance, it’s helpful to follow the four steps: to read, then meditate, then pray, then be still.
- But once your body is familiar with it, you just follow the Spirit’s lead as you move back and forth between the steps.
- But however you do it, many of us believe that recapturing meditation on Scripture is utterly essential to spiritual formation in the digital age.
- Unlike other popular forms of meditation, such as mindfulness meditation where the goal is more to empty your mind, the goal of biblical meditation is to *fill* your mind with the words and thoughts of God and to let them give shape to who you are and who you become.
- Which is why it is our practice for this coming week.

**Seam:** But! And this is very important — meditation is not the end of the process, it’s only the beginning.

### **Obedience:**

- Many teachers add a fifth step: *incarnatio*, or incarnation. You put flesh and blood on the passage. You translate the Bible into your life.

- Joshua writes, “Be *careful* to *obey* all the Law ... meditate on it ... so *that* you may be careful to *do* everything written in it ...”<sup>5</sup>
- It’s not enough to just meditate on the Bible.
- You have to get it out of your head, and even out of your heart, and into your hands and feet.
- The Rabbis used to teach that you learn the Torah with your feet more than with your ears.
- Meaning, you learn *through* obedience.
- In Psalm 119, King David compares God’s words to honey in his mouth, but he writes this:
  - “I have more insight than all my teachers, for I *meditate* on your statutes. I have more understanding than the elders, for I *obey* your precepts.”<sup>6</sup>
  - In today’s language, “I know more than all my professors at university because I actually do what God says.”
- This line is a hyperlink back to Joshua 1.
- He’s saying, like Joshua, I meditate *and* I obey.
- In the modern world, we have this bizarre ability to divorce knowledge from practice.
- The social critic Neil Postman called it a “low information-to-action ratio.”<sup>7</sup>
- There’s so much information we’re inundated with all day long that we’re used to hearing truth *and then doing absolutely nothing about it*.
- This is devastating to our spiritual life.
- The goal is to get this library lived; to get it out of our heads and into the muscle memory of our bodies.

### Ending:

- And if this sounds arduous or serious ...
- Did you notice? The word used in Psalm 1 for the ideal emotional disposition to Scripture is *delight*.
- We are to love it and savor every word, like our family dog, gnawing on her bone.
- As I was working on this session, I was reminded yet again of the advice of doctors that we should chew every bite at least twenty times!
- So I tried to do that last Sabbath.

- We start our Sabbath with a feast with family and friends.
- And my wife makes homemade sourdough bread, with cheddar and jalapeño, that is to *die* for.
- And we have this silly tradition called “minute of bliss” where after we pass out the bread, and pour the wine, and give thanks, one of my kids counts down and we do sixty seconds where there’s no talking allowed; we just savor the goodness of each bite.
- And usually I just inhale the bread!
- But this week, I counted — one, two, three ...
- I could not believe how much it elevated the experience.
- It was *hard* to slow down, and I kept forgetting as the meal went on, but when I could chew it twenty or twenty-five times, it was pure delight.
- That’s what reading Scripture can become like for you. It may start out as an acquired taste. It may be hard at first to slow down and focus.
- But as you retrain your brain to *eat* Scripture, to *meditate* ...
- There is joy waiting for you on every page.

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## Notes

1. Ryan Britt, 2015
2. Isaiah 31v4
3. Bonhoeffer, D. (1939). *Life Together: The Classic Exploration of Christian Community*. Christian Kaiser Verlag.
4. Peace, R. (1995). *Contemplative Bible Reading: Experiencing God Through Scripture*. NavPress.
5. Deuteronomy 28v1-9 (Emphasis added)
6. Psalm 119v99-100 (Emphasis added)
7. Postman, N. (1985). *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*. Viking Penguin.