

Directions for Heavenly Contemplation

by Richard Baxter

Richard Baxter emphasizes the importance of meditation for spiritual growth and connection with God, advocating for both scheduled and spontaneous practices.

Scripture: Genesis 24:63, Joshua 1:8, Psalm 1:2, Matthew 6:6, Luke 2:29, Luke 22:41, Acts 12:7, Romans 8:18, 2 Corinthians 4:16, Revelation 1:10

Topics: "Meditation", "Spiritual Growth"

Description

Richard Baxter emphasizes the importance of meditation as a means for the soul to digest truth from the Bible, turning belief into action and transforming the mind into strong willpower, genuine emotions, and holy living. He urges Christians to actively engage in heavenly contemplation, making it both spontaneous and scheduled, to cultivate a deep fellowship and friendship with God. Baxter advises on the best time, frequency, and season for meditation, highlighting its significance in times of suffering, distress, and especially when facing death, as a way to prepare the soul for eternal rest in heaven.

Transcript

Meditation is the means by which the soul digests truth for its nourishment and strength. It was God's command to Joshua, "This book of the law shall not depart out of your mouth; but you shall meditate therein day and night, that you may observe to do according to all that is written therein" (Josh. 1:8). As digestion turns food into health, so meditation turns Bible-believing into Bible-living. It turns the truths received and remembered by the mind into strong will power, genuine emotions, and holy living.

Supposing you to be a Christian, having title to the everlasting rest, I now urge you to be an active Christian. It is work for the soul that I am prescribing. God has created the soul with a capacity to appreciate heaven. What better had we been for fragrant flowers, if we had no sense of smell? What benefit would music have been to us, if we could not hear? What pleasure would we have found in food and drink, without the sense of taste? So what good would all the glory of heaven have done us, if we had been without the capacity for love and joy?

It is a mistake of Christians to think that meditation is only the work of the mind. Any student can use his mind to think about subjects which he hates. This is not the way we meditate on heaven. There is more to be done, you see, than merely to think of heaven. Just as some exercises exert the whole body, so does meditation involve the whole soul. David describes the blessed man like this--"His delight is in the law of the Lord, and in his law does he meditate day and night" (Ps. 1:2).

This meditation should be both spontaneous and scheduled. Just as there are scheduled times for prayer and other times when we offer up flash prayers wherever we may be; so there is scheduled and spontaneous meditation. When scheduled, we apply ourselves completely to that work. When spontaneous, we enjoy thoughts of God and heaven while in the midst of other duties. Though I want to encourage you to practice that meditation which is mixed with your common daily duties; I would also persuade you to make it a regular, scheduled part of your day. Don't mix other matters with it, at such times, anymore than you would in prayer.

Remember, this meditation is upon your everlasting rest. That which will make us most happy when we possess it, will make us joyful when we meditate upon it. This is a walk to mount Zion--from the kingdoms of this world to the kingdom of saints; from earth to heaven; from time to eternity. Do not think, like worldlings, that such meditation will make you mentally unbalanced. Will it make the prisoner mentally ill to think of deliverance, or the sufferer to foresee healing, or the poor to think of approaching prosperity? Of course not! I think it would more likely make a person frustrated and mentally ill to live in a world of wickedness without hope of any relief. Knowledge has no enemy but ignorance. This heavenly course was never spoken against by any but those that never knew it, or never used it.

Now, as to the BEST TIME for this heavenly contemplation, let me advise that it be scheduled, frequent, and seasonable.

Give it a scheduled TIME. This will defend it against many temptations to skip it. Some people do not have control of their own time, and therefore cannot set their hours. Some are so poor, that the necessities of their families deny them this freedom. Such people should watch for opportunities, and especially meditate and pray as much as they can while they work. Those who have more time to spare from their worldly occupations, and who set their own working hours, should schedule a definite time for meditation.

Let it be frequent as well as scheduled. How often it should be I cannot say, because people's circumstances differ. In general, Scripture requires it to be frequent, when it mentions meditation day and night. For those, therefore, who can omit other business, I advise that it be at least once a day.

Frequency in heavenly contemplation is particularly important to prevent shyness between your soul and God. Frequent fellowship breeds friendship, and friendship increases love and delight. It gives us confidence with a person. The chief purpose of meditation is to have fellowship and friendship with God. Therefore, if you come but seldom to it, you will remain a stranger. When a man feels his need of God, and must seek His help in a time of trouble, then it is great encouragement to go to a God with whom we are acquainted. The heavenly Christian says, "I know Him. I have gone this way many a time before. It is the same God that I daily talk to. We know each other." How different it is when a person is forced to seek God in desperation, and thinks, "I'm not familiar with the court of heaven, and I hardly know the God to whom I must speak."

Especially when we come to die, and must immediately appear before God, and expect to enter into His eternal rest, then the difference is most significant. What a joy it will be to think, "I am going to the place that I daily visited; to the place where I tasted frequent delights; to that God whom I have met in my meditation so often." On the other hand, what a terror will it be to think, "I must die and leave a place where I am acquainted, to go to a place that is strange to me." I am convinced that it is the neglect of this duty which so commonly makes death, even to godly people, unwelcome and uncomfortable. Therefore, I urge you to make your meditation frequent.

How clumsy are people in doing that in which they have had little practice. Frequency will familiarize you with the work, and make it easier and more delightful. The hill which made you pant and puff the first time you climbed it, you may easily run up when you become accustomed to it.

If in holy meditation you get near to Christ and warm your heart with the fire of love, but then come rarely to it, your former coldness will return. Especially is this true because the work is so spiritual and goes against depraved human nature.

Choose also the most seasonable time. All things have their season. The same hour may be seasonable to one and unseasonable to another. Laborers must use that time which their work permits. Some may have to do it while traveling or at night. Those who can choose whatever time of day they wish, should observe when they find their spirits most active and fit for contemplation. They should then decide upon that time as most suitable for their scheduled meditation. I have always found that the best time for myself is early evening, from sunset to twilight. I mention this, because it was the experience of a better and wiser man; for it is expressly said, "Isaac went out to meditate in the field at the eventide" (Gen. 24:63).

The Lord's day is an especially seasonable time for heavenly contemplation. What better time to converse with the Lord than on the Lord's day? What more appropriate day to ascend to heaven than that on which He arose from death? The best attitude for a true Christian is, like John, to be "in the Spirit on the Lord's day" (Rev. 1:10). Christians, let your Sundays be steps to heaven, until you have passed them all and have arrived there. Especially those of you who cannot take time during the week when you wish, see that you make good use of the Lord's day.

Besides considering the best time of each day for heavenly contemplation, and the best day of each week; consider the special seasons. For instance, when God has warmed your spirit with fire from above, then you may soar with greater freedom. Observe the gales of the Spirit, and how the Spirit of Christ moves your spirit. When the Spirit finds your heart, like Peter, in prison, and says, "Arise up quickly...and follow me" (Acts 12:7, 8), be sure you then arise and follow; and you will find your chains fall off, and all doors will open, and you will be at heaven before you know it!

Another special season for this duty is when you are suffering, distressed, or tempted. When is it more appropriate to walk in heaven than when we have nothing but grief below? Paul said, "I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us" (Rom. 8:18). "For which cause we faint not; but though our outward man perish, yet the inward man is renewed day by day. For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, works for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory; while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen--for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal" (2 Cor. 4:16-18).

Another season particularly fit for this work is when we are about to die. When should we more frequently sweeten our souls with the believing thoughts of another life, than when we find that this one is almost over? How near to heaven was John in Patmos, a short time before his departure to glory (Revelation 1:9). If it be your case, reader, to be aware of your death drawing near, O, where should your heart now be but with Christ? I do you think should behold Him standing by you, and should speak to Him as your husband, physician, friend. I think you should see the angels about you, waiting to perform their last service to your soul, ready to escort you to heaven. Say, as Simeon, "Lord, now let you your servant depart in peace, according to your word--for my eyes have seen your salvation" (Luke 2:29-30).

As for the most suitable PLACE for heavenly contemplation, it is sufficient to suggest a private place. Our spirits need all the help they can get to be free from hindrances. If, in private prayer, Christ directs us to "enter into our closet and shut the door" (Matt. 6:6), so should we do in meditation. How often did Christ Himself retire to some mountain or wilderness, or other solitary place. I do not give this advice for spontaneous meditation, but for that which is scheduled. Therefore withdraw from the fellowship, even of godly men, that you may enjoy the fellowship of your Lord alone. If a student cannot study well in a crowd, when he is only exercising his mind, much less can you meditate in a crowd, when you need to use all the powers of your soul upon an object far above nature. We seldom read of God's appearing, by Himself or by His angels, to any of His prophets or saints in a crowd. Usually it was when they were alone.

Observe for yourself what place is best for you personally, whether inside or outdoors. Isaac's example, in going out to meditate in the field, may suit some (Genesis 24:63). Our Lord so often used a private garden, that Judas, when he came to betray Him, knew where to find Him. Though Jesus took His disciples with Him to the garden, yet "he was withdrawn from them" (Luke 22:41) for more private devotions. Though it is only specified that He prayed, the meditation is implied in that His soul was first made sorrowful from bitter meditations on His coming sufferings and death. Then He poured out His soul in prayer. Christ had His accustomed place, and so must we. However, there is a decisive difference. Christ meditated on the sufferings that our sins had deserved; but we are to meditate on the glory He purchased for us with those sufferings.

Finally, I want to advise you concerning the preparation of your heart for this heavenly contemplation. Get as free from the world as you can. Heaven is ready for you, but your heart is unready for heaven. Say to all your worldly business and thoughts, as Christ said to His disciples, "Sit here, while I go and pray yonder" (Matt. 26:36). Be sure to enter this work with reverence. There should be no trifling in holy things. Endeavor to have the deepest awareness of the presence of God and His greatness. With what serious humility should you approach Him who made the worlds and keeps the sun, moon, and stars in their courses. You are going to talk with Him before whom the earth will quake and at whose bar of justice you and all the world must soon stand and be finally judged. If you were pleading for your life in the court of an earthly judge, you would be serious, and yet that would be a trifle compared to this. Consider what awe you should have in daily communication with God.

None on earth live such a life of joy and blessedness as those who are acquainted with this heavenly meditation. The joys of all other people are, by comparison, like a child's toy, or a sick man's dream of health. How seriously, therefore, should this work be done.

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