

# MEDITATION<sup>1</sup>

By Jim Downing

## CHAPTER 2 THE MIND AND MEDITATION

Nearly ten thousand thoughts pass in and out of our minds daily. God wants as many of these as possible to be spiritually nourishing. The Scriptures have much to say about the mind and meditation, this first and extremely important part of the taproot of the soul. We must remember that we share Christ's very life as we exercise our minds in meditation on the Word of God.

God clearly commanded the process of meditation. In His commission to Joshua, He said, "This book of the law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it" (Joshua 1:8). Meditation is commended in other parts of the Bible as well:

- "His delight is in the law of the LORD, and in His law he meditates day and night (Psalm 1:2).
- "Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in Your sight, O LORD, my rock and my Redeemer"(19:14).
- "When I remember You on my bed, I meditate on You in the night watches" (63:6).
- "I will meditate on Your precepts" (119:15,78).
- "O how I love Your law! It is my meditation all the day" (119:97).
- "Your testimonies are my meditation" (119:99).
- "My eyes anticipate the night watches, that I may meditate on Your word" (119:148).

It is evident that God has a great deal to say about meditation, considering it a vital exercise of the minds of His children. It is an important subject in the Scriptures, which tell us specifically what we need to learn to do.

God has given us several avenues through which we may partake of the Word of God. In order to be healthy Christians, we need to feed on His Word. Two of the ways we do this are through hearing and reading.

One way we feed on the Word of God is to hear it preached and taught. A good pastor, for instance, is responsible to feed his congregation, and he does so through faithful exposition of the Word of God. Nehemiah is an excellent example of this; he not only read the law of God distinctly to the people, but he gave the sense and caused them to understand (see Nehemiah 8:8).

John assures us that the person who reads the Word of God is blessed (see Revelation 1:3). We need to feed on the Word of God no matter what our age. The Bible is referred to as bread, meat, milk, and honey. What these foods do for us physically, the Word of God does for us spiritually as we read it for ourselves.

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<sup>1</sup> Downing, Jim, *Meditation*, NavPress, Colorado Springs, 1976, 2001, 2011. Available at <https://www.navpress.com/p/meditation/5452/e-book>  
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We also need to study the Word of God in order to be intelligent Christians. There is a big difference between reading and studying. Once, when I was enrolled in a current events class, I looked into a magazine that belonged to one of my fellow students. It was filled with underlinings, marginal notations, and other evidences of careful study. Any studying results in the systematizing of the subject in a way that can be presented to another person in an orderly manner. Studying also prepares us to pass an exam on the contents of the subject at hand.

The same is true with Bible study. A good Bible study method includes (1) original investigation (do this before reading what others have written about the Bible passage), (2) a written reproduction of the passage in your own words, (3) a personal application, and (4) systematic progression (which leads to knowing more and more of the content of the Bible). A good Bible study must be pass-onable (the method must be simple enough to be shared with another person). In order to be skillful Christians in both living and sharing our faith with others, we need to memorize the Word of God.

In my early days as a believer in Christ, I knew a Christian woman who was convinced she had a needle lodged in the fleshy part of the palm of her hand. She reported that when she was about to yield to temptation, she would feel a sharp pain in her hand. Whether or not her experience was fact, it illustrates an important spiritual point: The Word of God in our hearts (see Proverbs 7:3) is used by the Holy Spirit to remind us to resist the onslaughts of temptation.

While trying to persuade his neighbor to yield his life to Christ, a Christian man I knew did not rely on his own wisdom and abilities to answer difficult questions but always quoted passages of Scripture, prefacing them by, "Thus says the Lord ..." The neighbor finally came to Christ, admitting that because of the authority of the memorized Word of God, "I could no longer argue with God."

Regardless of the method of intake, we need to apply what we find in the Scriptures to our lives. James gives us an excellent illustration of this truth. Just as we never look into a mirror without detecting some flaw in our appearance, we can never look into the Word of God without its mirroring some spiritual flaw which, unless attended to, will negatively affect our lives (see James 1:22-25).

Finally, we become fruitful Christians by meditating on the Word of God.

### **The Process of Meditation: *Just what is meditation?***

One of the synonyms given by most regular dictionaries is the word ruminate.

Many animals—among which are cattle, sheep, goats, antelope, camels, and giraffes—are in a class called ruminant animals. They have four stomachs each, or to be more technical, each has a stomach with four compartments. The first part, or the first stomach, is called the rumen.

The way this particular class of animal goes about the digestive process is not the most elegant by human standards. If you've ever watched a dairy cow eat bluegrass, you will notice

that she goes out early in the morning, puts her head down like a mowing machine, and never lifts it until someone disturbs her. She really concentrates on eating.

When I was in the Navy, we had a fellow on board ship who ate rather rapidly. One day one of the men at the table where we sat put an adjustable end wrench next to his plate. When the rapid eater came in, he picked up the wrench and asked, “What’s this for?”

His shipmate replied, “It is to help you bolt down your food.”

And that’s what the ruminant animal does—just bolts down its food. Then about ten o’clock in the morning, when the sun begins to get hot, the animal lies down in the shade and regurgitates the food out of stomach one, the rumen. This time it chews it thoroughly. The food then goes into stomachs two, three, and four. Eventually the digested food is absorbed into the animal’s bloodstream and literally becomes part of its life.

A friend of mine, Dr. Hubert Mitchell of the Great Commission Prayer League, spent a number of years in India. He once told us that he was watching a cow lying by a stream ruminating and was fascinated by her precision. He thought she must have a built-in timer, so he clocked her with his wristwatch and discovered that she would regurgitate a bite of grass, chew it for fifty-five seconds, swallow it, and bring up another. As long as he timed her, she never varied one second from the fifty-five. If she had chewed it for fifty-four, she might have missed a little bit of nourishment. If she chewed it for fifty-six, she would have wasted some time and effort.

Rumination and meditation are parallel words. They are synonyms. A cow brings her molars down on her cud, and every time she brings pressure with her teeth, nourishment is forced out of the grass, mixed with the salivary juices, and goes into her other stomachs. The nourishment she has extracted from her food literally becomes part of her bloodstream.

As we meditate on the Word of God, the life of Jesus Christ flows out of Him, through the Word, and becomes a part of our spiritual bloodstream. The Bible is the primary means by which we share the life of Christ.

A friend of mine once said that he felt our organization, The Navigators, made a fetish out of the Word of God and worshipped it more than we did Christ. In a well-meaning way, he said he did not want anything to get between him and Christ, not even the Bible. I certainly agree with his statement; however, the Word of God does not get between the soul and God. It is a door, not a barrier, by which we have contact with Him and share His life. Scripture is quite clear on this. David said, “I will bow down toward Your holy temple and give thanks to Your name for Your lovingkindness and Your truth; for You have magnified Your word according to all Your name” (Psalm 138:2).

Two other passages in the Word of God have something to say on this subject. When I was a new Christian, I attended a Bible study at the YMCA in Bremerton, Washington. The teacher was an old veteran of the Brethren Assemblies. When he taught Psalm 40, he suggested that the punctuation in verse 7 might not emphasize the most important meaning of the passage, “Then said I, Lo, I come: in the volume of the book it is written of me” (KJV).

Scholar friends have told me that in the original Hebrew and Greek the inspired Word did not have punctuation. That was supplied in subsequent translations to make the Scripture more readable. (Note, for example, how various current translations punctuate differently.) Our instructor, a man of many years' experience, felt that the proper emphasis of the passage was brought out when the punctuation was changed to "Lo, I come in the volume of the book," with Jesus Christ speaking prophetically through David. Christ does come into our lives in the volume of the Book, the Word of God. The only revelation we have of Him is through the Scriptures.

In the 1950s, The Navigators had their primary training program at the Glen Eyrie conference grounds in Colorado Springs, Colorado. Part of the training was to arrange for each person in the program to set aside at least a half day each month to be alone with God. To those who had never tried to do this, it was a frightening thought. What in the world would they do? A half day alone with God!

Those of us in charge of the program would then give them some orientation, tell them what to take with them into the hills, and suggest what they should do. One of the pieces of equipment we recommended very highly, in fact at the top of the list, was a Bible. The trainees could very well have gotten out there among the trees and rocks, the hills, the bushes, and the clouds, tried to make contact with God, and not have been able to do it. But when we open the Bible, we make contact with Him. He truly does come in the volume of the Book.

Another illustration of this truth is in the gospel of John. Christ had just fed a multitude miraculously (see John 6:1-14). This was a great experience for His followers. In fact, some of them probably observed that becoming His follower was better than retirement and a social security pension. Whenever they had a need, He would rearrange the atomic structure of matter to provide for that need. But Christ was displeased with this response and told His listeners that the bread which He had miraculously provided would not do anything for them spiritually. They cited an Old Testament precedent: "Our fathers ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, 'HE GAVE THEM BREAD OUT OF HEAVEN TO EAT' " (verse 31). This bread had come down six days a week for forty years. But it didn't do a great deal for their spiritual lives. So Jesus inferred, "The bread that I miraculously provided for you will not do anything for you spiritually either." He said in effect, "You have to eat and feed on Me. I am the One who gives you spiritual nourishment."

How do we feed on Him? Christ explained that when He said, "The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and are life" (verse 63). The Bible then, rather than being a barrier between us and Christ, is the means that He has provided for His people to share His life.

Just as a ruminant animal extracts nourishment from grass or hay through chewing and transferring it into its bloodstream, so also as we meditate on the Word of God we extract the life of Christ and transfer that life into our spiritual bloodstreams. This is the fulfillment of Jesus' statement: "It is the man who shares my life and whose life I share who proves fruitful" (John 15:5, Phillips Translation).

### ***The Subconscious in Meditation***

The importance of meditation is seen by the commands and promises of God to Joshua and through the psalmist (see Joshua 1:8; Psalm 1:3). What a fascinating challenge to actually meditate day and night! Is this an exaggeration for emphasis? Not at all. Are we to take the command literally? Certainly. Is it possible to obey this command? Yes, and we are going to find that it is not only possible to meditate day and night, but meditating in the night is the key to meditating in the daytime. It is the open secret of practical, blessed, hour-by-hour living.

Have you ever had the experience of every muscle in your body going rigid just as you were ready to drop off to sleep? You get stiff all over, seem to leap an inch off the mattress, and knock all the blankets off the bed. It happens in a split second, but you are aware that your bodily behavior has been unnatural. Your heart is now beating rapidly, and you are short of breath. You wonder, *What has happened? Did my heart stop*

By the way, have you ever used the expression “go to sleep”? Where do you go when you go to sleep? It is commonly recognized that each of us has a conscious mind and a subconscious mind. We don't know a great deal about how they work, but one thing that seems to occur when we go to sleep is that the conscious mind goes off duty. The human body is an intricate mechanism and needs some organ controlling it even during sleep if the heart is to keep beating, the blood circulating, and the lungs pumping air. This job falls to the subconscious mind. One of its responsibilities is to keep the body functioning normally and to sustain life during sleep.

It is widely recognized that one of the greatest problems in human relations is the matter of communication. Any communication that can be missed or misunderstood will be. Thus, it seems that a communication breakdown between the conscious mind and the subconscious mind is possible. The conscious mind thinks that the subconscious knows it is about to leave and will be taking over the control of the bodily functions. But a communication breakdown occurs.

Let's assume that during your waking hours every muscle, nerve fiber, and cell of your body is under the command of the conscious mind. Let's assume further that during your sleeping hours these same nerves, muscles, and cells are under the control of the subconscious mind. This means that there is an instant in which the conscious relinquishes control to the subconscious.

This seems to be the explanation of the phenomenon described previously—the sudden rigid flexing of the body just before going to sleep. The conscious mind turned over the control of the bodily functions to the subconscious mind, but for some reason the subconscious did not immediately assume control. To its horror, the conscious mind suddenly realized that the subconscious was not in control and that tragedy was about to occur. For an instant neither conscious nor subconscious was controlling the bodily life functions.

So the conscious mind called out, "Attention," and every muscle, nerve, and cell in the body responded. Hence, the sudden flexing of the muscles, the rapidly beating heart, and the stepped-up breathing. Usually, however, the transition is smooth and not noticeable, and you drop off to sleep effortlessly. If the subconscious mind "gets the word," we drift off into a deep sleep, out of the conscious into the subconscious without even being aware that a transfer of responsibilities has taken place.

At the instant the conscious mind turns over control of the body to the subconscious, another phenomenon takes place. When the conscious mind relaxes, it relaxes completely; in fact, it empties itself totally. And so the most prominent item in the conscious mind is then transferred to the subconscious. Too often, that which is transferred is in the form of an unsolved problem (we call it worrying).

The response of the subconscious mind to inheriting the unsolved problem is "What a dirty trick!" The subconscious mind knows full well what its main job is: to rebuild the physical and mental parts of the body completely to their greatest peak of energy and usefulness. It does so by decelerating the heartbeat from a normal seventy-two beats per minute to sixty or less. Then the amazing process of renewal brings every cell, muscle, and nerve in the body to its greatest efficiency. If all goes well, it becomes a common experience for some of us to wake up at three o'clock in the morning so charged up with energy that we cannot stay in bed any longer. We have to get up and start burning energy.

When the conscious mind transfers an unsolved problem to the subconscious, a restless night might be in store. For the subconscious mind to concentrate on a problem it did not want requires energy. And energy must be generated by sugar in the bloodstream. Increased demands for energy call for increased blood circulation, which in turn requires more heartbeats per minute.

This normal function is completely upset when you try to sleep with the worry of unsolved problems on your mind. Instead of relaxing, you toss and turn. It seems as if the subconscious mind gets tired of struggling with the problem and hands it back to the conscious mind. Thus you wake up many times during the night as the problem keeps bouncing back between the conscious and subconscious minds. As you wake up in the middle of the night, the problem which might have been somewhat bearable when you went to sleep becomes unbearable at two in the morning.

The subconscious mind, not being at the peak of efficiency in weighing the facts, gets them distorted. So when you wake up, the facts are distorted and the problem seems even more acute and aggravated than when you tried to go to sleep with it. No wonder that by three o'clock you are *not* filled with energy and ready to get up and start burning it. There has been a sort of tug-of-war throughout the night between the conscious and the subconscious. So you get up in the morning more exhausted than when you went to bed.

All this came about because of the misuse of the subconscious. There is, however, a legitimate use of the subconscious mind during the hours of sleep.

### **Meditating Day and Night**

Language students have found that if you go over about ten new vocabulary words just before dropping off to sleep, the subconscious mind will start working on them. In the morning, with no further effort, you will know about six of them. So the subconscious does sometimes come through with real efficiency.

I didn't realize it at the time, but in my many years in the Navy aboard ship, the breakfast conversation always seemed to be similar. Usually the subject was the plot of the movie that the crew had seen the night before. Why was it so prominent in their minds? It was because everyone who went to the movie observed the plot and thought about what had taken place, and this was in their subconscious minds as they dropped off to sleep. During sleep the subconscious analyzed the plot and perhaps brought out some features they hadn't realized. When they woke in the morning, they realized there were several new angles in the plot they hadn't appreciated when they saw the movie. Hence, the reason for the breakfast conversation. The subconscious had greatly enhanced the plot and passed it back to the conscious in its amplified state.

It is not God's intention that the subconscious mind be occupied with movie plots or unsolved problems. Hence, the clear command in the Word of God (see Joshua 1:8; Psalm 1:3). We are called to meditate on the Word of God day and night. In order to do so, we must make use of the subconscious. We need to make sure that the last prevailing thought in our conscious minds at the end of the day is some portion of the Word of God.

Dawson Trotman, founder and first president of The Navigators, a good friend and close associate of mine for many years, mastered this principle. In Daws, the excellent account of his life and ministry, Betty Skinner reports:

Dawson's love of the unadorned Word also led him unwittingly to apply a principle of meditation that psychologists would later stress as an important influence on the mind—the purposeful use of the subconscious, the theory that the last dominant conscious thought will inevitably simmer in the unconscious mind during sleep. Dawson's habit, on a camping trip or even at home, was to say when conversation ended and lights were out, "All right, HWLW," after which a passage of Scripture would be quoted without comment as the last word spoken. The HWLW habit—His Word the Last Word—was popular on early Minute Men trips, but Daws and Lila continued the practice through the years, as did others, as a way to end a day with thoughts fixed on the Lord.<sup>2</sup>

Someone has suggested that we need to give God the night key to our hearts. That night key is the Word of God. Solomon states, "When thou goest, it shall lead thee; when thou

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<sup>2</sup> Betty Skinner, Daws (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1974).

sleepiest, it shall keep thee; and when thou awakest, it shall talk with thee” (Proverbs 6:22, KJV). This is a summary of the relationship between conscious meditation and subconscious meditation, and of its relation to our daily walk.

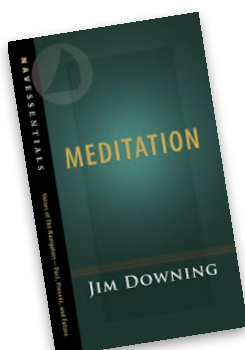
- Subconscious meditation—“When you sleep, it [the Word of God] will keep you.”
- Conscious meditation—“When you awake, it [the Word of God] will speak to you [on awaking in the morning].”
- Our daily walk—“When you go, it [directions from the Word of God] will lead you.”

The first thought you had when you awakened this morning was the last conscious thought you had the last time you were awake during the night. There is a closed circuit between the conscious and the subconscious. The conscious mind passes a thought to the subconscious. When the conscious comes back on duty, the subconscious mind passes the thought back to the conscious. If the last waking thought you have is something from the Word of God, when you wake up in the night it will speak right back to you. That’s what the Scriptures say. Furthermore, when you awaken in the morning, it will be the most prominent thought in your mind.

An intriguing question then arises: How did God decide when the Scripture was concluded? He must have used many criteria. The psalmist gives us a clue: "The counsel of the Lord stands forever, the plans of His heart from generation to generation" (Psalm 33:11). One of the things God made sure was that every problem and every challenge to which any Christian would ever be subjected were written in the Bible along with the solution and His editorial comment.

God knows exactly what is going to happen to each of us in the next twenty-four hours. Someplace in the Bible He has told us about someone else who had the same experience, along with His instruction to us in the experience. God is able to use the Scriptures to fortify us for the greatest challenges we're going to face in the next twenty-four hours. As we discover the thoughts He gives us from the Bible and allow the subconscious to meditate on them the night before, we are ready to go forth the next day, prepared for any challenge that might confront us. This is the meaning of the last part of Solomon's statement, “When thou goest, it shall lead thee” (Proverbs 6:22, KJV). The thought, promise, or command with which God fortified us from the Word of God during the night is going to be foremost in our minds during the day to minister to us in time of need.

—Downing, Jim. *Meditation, Chapter 2 (NavEssentials Book 1) . The Navigators. Kindle Edition.*



Retired Navy Lt. Jim Downing was one of the last known survivors of the 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor. He was born August 22, 1913 in Oak Grove, Missouri and left home for the Navy in 1932. Jim met Dawson Trotman founder of the Navigators in 1935, and became one of the original 6 sailors to launch the ministry. Following his career in the US Navy he served for more than 50 years on staff with The Navigators.

Jim wrote three books including his autobiography in 2016, *The Other Side of Infamy* which earned him a Guinness World Record as the oldest published male author, age 102. Jim and his wife Morena were married for 68 years, and had 6 children and many grandchildren. Jim entered the presence of the Lord in 2018 at the age of 104.

