Developing the Spiritual Life of the Church Planter:  
The Puritan Practice of Christian Meditation

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• 1 Timothy 4:16 – Pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching; persevere in these things, for as you do this you will ensure salvation both for yourself and for those who hear you.

• Joshua 1:8 – 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; for then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have success.

• Psalm 1:1-3 – How blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, nor stand in the path of sinners, nor sit in the seat of scoffers! 2 But his delight is in the law of the LORD, and in His law he meditates day and night. 3 He will be like a tree firmly planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in its season and its leaf does not wither; and in whatever he does, he prospers.

• Acts 20:28 – Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.

I. Introduction – the Importance of Biblical Meditation to the Puritans.

A. William Fenner (The Use and Benefit of Divine Meditation):

As a man without may see the outside of the house, but he cannot see the rooms within, unless he come nigh, and draw the latch, and come into the house and go into the rooms, and look about them. Meditation pulls the latch of the truth and looks into every closet, and every angle of it. Here is my sin, here is my uncleanness, and here is God’s anger, here is the woeful evil that will follow upon it, and here is a remedy against it. Meditation searches into all the lofts and closets of the truth.

B. Thomas Watson (The Christian on the Mount: A Treatise on Meditation): “Grace breeds delight of God, and delight breed meditation – a duty wherein consists the essentials of religion, and which nourisheth the very life-blood of it.”

C. Richard Baxter (The Saint’s Everlasting Rest): “It be that duty by which all other duties are improved, and by which the soul digesteth truth, and draweth forth their strength for its nourishment and refreshing…. A man may eat too much, but he cannot digest too well.”
D. Consider Psalm 119 on the importance of personal meditation on God’s Word.

1. Psalm 119:14-16 – I have rejoiced in the way of Your testimonies, as much as in all riches. 15 I will meditate on Your precepts and regard Your ways. 16 I shall delight in Your statutes; I shall not forget Your word.

2. Psalm 119:23-24 – Even though princes sit and talk against me, Your servant meditates on Your statutes. 24 Your testimonies also are my delight; they are my counselors.

3. Psalm 119:27 – Make me understand the way of Your precepts, so I will meditate on Your wonders.

4. Psalm 119:48 – And I shall lift up my hands to Your commandments, which I love; and I will meditate on Your statutes.

5. Psalm 119:78 – May the arrogant be ashamed, for they subvert me with a lie; but I shall meditate on Your precepts.

6. Psalm 119:148 – My eyes anticipate the night watches, that I may meditate on Your word.

7. Psalm 119:97 – O how I love Your law! It is my meditation all the day.

II. The Puritan definition of meditation and its nature.

A. Meditate means to think thoughtfully, muse, or reflect on.

1. A biblical synonym is delighting or rejoicing.

2. Biblical meditation deals with the mind and heart with the goal of producing godly actions and service.

B. Various Puritan Definitions.

1. Thomas Watson – “The holy exercise of mind whereby we bring the truths of God to remembrance, and do seriously ponder upon them and apply them to ourselves.”

2. Richard Greenham (The Works of Richard Greenham in 1 vol.) – “Meditation is that exercise of the mind, whereby we call to remembrance that which we know, do further debate of it, and apply it to ourselves, that we might have some use of it in our practice.”

3. William Bates (The Whole Works of the Rev. William Bates, Vol. 3) – “Meditation, is the serious exercise of the understanding, whereby our thoughts are fixed on the observation of spiritual things in order to practice it.... The rays of the sun may warm us, but they do not inflame unless they are contracted in a
burning glass; so some slight thoughts of heavenly things may warm us a little, but will never inflame the soul, till they be fixed by close meditation.”

III. Two kinds of Puritan Meditation.

A. Occasional or Spontaneous meditation.

1. Meditation that spontaneously comes into your mind and you suddenly begin to meditate on the Lord and raise up your thoughts to Him and His truth.


   Our blessed Savior teacheth us to see the face of heavenly things in earthly glasses, and to make a ladder of the creatures, whereby we may ascend to heaven in our thought. He hath set us a pattern that we should follow in His steps…. He instructeth his disciples by lilies growing, and seed sown in the field; by trees and vines in the orchard and vineyard; by pearls, treasures, tares, leaven, mustard-seed, water, bread, nets, fish, salt, oil, lamps.

3. Joseph Hall (*The Art of Meditation*) said that occasional meditation is “nothing else but a bending of the mind upon some spiritual object, … unpremeditated, occasioned [meditations] by outward occurrences offered to the mind.”

   a. “Man is placed on this stage of the world to view the manifold natures and actions of the creation…. This is the kind of meditation pursued by the divine psalmist, who upon viewing the glorious frame of the heavens was led to wonder at the merciful respect God had toward so lowly a creature as man.”

   b. Hall called occasional meditation “the breathings of a divine soul.”

4. Thomas Boston (*The Complete Works of Thomas Boston, Vol. 4*) exhorted his people “to take up a holy meditation on things that you see or hear, turn them to a spiritual use.”

5. George Swinnock (*The Works of George Swinnock, Vol. 2*) calls occasional meditation the “labor to spiritualize earthly things…. He that hath learned this mystery is the true spiritual chemist…. He hath better than Midas’s wish; he turns all he toucheth to better than gold.”

6. Edmund Calamy (*The Art of Divine Meditation*) also explains that occasional meditation is this, when a man take an occasion by what he sees, or by what he hears, or by what he thinks of; when he takes an occasion by any thing that is sensitive, to raise up his thoughts to heavenly meditation…. Occasional meditation is when a man makes use of the creature, as footstool to raise him up to God, as a ladder to heaven…. Herein lies the excellency of a Christian, that he is able to spiritualize natural things.
B. Daily, deliberate meditation.

1. Direct meditation is when a man’s mind focuses his entire attention to meditate on something outside of himself, such as the Word of God.

   a. William Bates describes direct meditation as “when the understanding fixeth itself upon some truth, and draws from it those advantages, which may be proper to itself…. Therefore it is said, ‘the law shall talk with thee,’ (Prov. 6:22), it shall give thee direction how to manage the course thy life.”

   b. Henry Scutter (The Christian’s Daily Walk in Holy Security and Peace) added that the goal of direct meditation is to gain better understanding of a divine truth and “to enlighten the mind with knowledge.”

2. Reflexive meditation as Scutter says is equally necessary to “make a right and profitable application to yourself and to your actions… whether you come short, or are swerved from it.”

   a. As William Bates explains that reflexive meditation “is a solemn discourse between the soul of man and himself… an inward conference between a man and his own heart… and puts practical questions concerning his everlasting state.”

   b. Henry Scutter instructs that in reflexive meditate must be “a persuasive and commanding act, charging the soul in every faculty, understanding, will, affections, yea, the whole man, to reform and conform themselves to the rule, that is, the will of God.”

IV. The Puritan idea of the duty and necessity of meditation.

A. Our God who command us to believe, commands us also to meditate.

B. Meditate because it is God’s letter of love to us.

C. One can’t be a solid, mature Christian without meditation.

D. Without meditation, the Word preached will fail to profit us.

E. Without meditation, our prayers are less effective.

F. Christians who fail to meditate are unable to defend the truth.

V. The manner of Puritan meditation

A. Frequency and time for Meditation.
1. Lengthy intervals between meditation will hinder the fruit of meditate. William Bates: “If the mother bird leaves the eggs, they will soon chill and be useless for production; where there is constant incubence, they will bring forth healthy produce.”
2. When you are least stressed and distracted.
3. Use the Lord’s Day to have generous times of meditation.
4. Use special times for meditation.
5. Do not stop meditating until you have been fed by the Lord. William Bates: “Meditate ordinarily until you find some sensible benefit conveyed to your soul… meditating is like trying to build a fire from wet wood… only those who persevere will produce a flame… When we begin to mediate, we will only have smoke and sparks, but eventually you will have flames and fire.”

B. Preparation for Meditation.

1. Clear your heart from things of this world.
2. Come to God having had heart cleansed from pollution from sin.
3. James Ussher (A Method for Meditation) – “I have to do with a God in this mediation who sees me completely… His eye is on your heart.”
4. Find a place of meditation, quiet and free from distraction.

C. Guidelines for Meditation.

1. Read Scriptures, pick a verse, part of verse or subject from what you read.
2. Fix your thoughts on this particular text or subject.
3. Stir up your affections.
4. Apply your meditations to yourself. William Fenner: “Dive into your own soul... threaten your soul with judgments for sin.”
5. Turn your applications into resolutions.

VI. Subjects of Puritan meditation

A. What did Puritans meditate on? Basically, the doctrines of systematic theology.

B. The attributes of God, the providence of God, The glory of God as man’s chief end, sinfulness of sin, personal sin, corruption and deceitfulness of heart, the fall of man from God, passion of Christ, love of Christ, wonder of the Gospel, promises of God, self-examination, rich privileges as a believer, death, judgment, hell and heaven.

VII. Benefits of meditation for the Puritans.
A. Helps focus on God and love Him.
B. Helps increase knowledge of God and promotes fear to God.
C. Enlarges our view of God and faith; helps us trust Him during troubles.
D. Augments our affections for God; hatches good affections for God.
E. Fosters repentance and reformation of life; friend of memory.
F. Help our worship of God; transfuses Scripture into soul; great aid to prayer; helps us hear Word with profit.
G. Stresses the heinousness of sin; gives inner resources to draw from; to ward off satan and temptation
H. Grateful for all of what God has done for us; glorifies God. Don’t read most but meditate most to be a strong Christian.

VIII. Puritan obstacles to meditation
A. Unfitness or ignorance.
B. Busyness of life.
C. Spiritual lethargy.
D. Worldly pleasures and friendship.
E. Adverseness of heart.

IX. Conclusion to Puritan Meditation.
A. George Swinnock: “Meditation on the Word is what fire is to water; though water be naturally cold, yet put fire under it, and it will make it hot and boiling; so, though thine heart be cold in regard to affection to the Word, put this fire [of meditation] under it, and it will boil with love to it.”
B. Thomas Watson: “If you have formerly neglected your meditation, lock yourself up in a closet and field, ascend this hill, you will see a fairer Christ in heaven, than you have seen before.”
BIBLIOGRAPHY OF PURITAN WORKS OF MEDITATION


* Although all are to be commended, these are my personal favorites in regard to Puritan meditation.