



Have Little Talk With Jesus:
Learning the Language of
Prayer

Meditative Prayer —
Listening with the
Heart

Meditative Prayer

Listening with the Heart

In this week of our prayer journey, we turn our attention to the sacred practice of meditative prayer. This ancient form of communion with God invites us to slow down, center ourselves, and create space for the Holy Spirit to speak into our hearts through Scripture and silence.

Meditative prayer is not about emptying our minds, but rather filling them with God's Word and presence. It's about learning to listen with the heart, allowing Scripture to marinate in our souls, and finding strength in the stillness that comes from resting in the Lord.

"Their delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law they meditate day and night." — Psalm 1:2

Opening Our Hearts the Sound of the Genuine

There is something in every one of you that waits, listens for the sound of the genuine in yourself and if you cannot hear it, you will never find whatever it is for which you are searching and if you hear it and then do not follow it, it was better that you had never been born...

You are the only you that has ever lived; your idiom is the only idiom of its kind in all of existence and if you cannot hear the sound of the genuine in you, you will all of your life spend your days on the ends of strings that somebody else pulls...

There is in you something that waits and listens for the sound of the genuine in yourself and sometimes there is so much traffic going on in your minds, so many different kinds of signals, so many vast impulses floating through your organism that go back thousands of generations, long before you were even a thought in the mind of creation, and you are buffeted by these, and in the midst of all of this you have got to find out what your name is. Who are you? How does the sound of the genuine come through to you...



Opening Prayer

"Lord, still our minds and open our hearts to your Word. Help us to center down in your presence, that we might hear your voice speaking to our souls through Scripture and silence. Amen."

Their delight is in the law of the Lord

"Their delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law they meditate day and night."

— Psalm 1:2

This foundational verse from the first Psalm reveals the heart of meditative prayer. The word "meditate" in Hebrew (hagah) means to murmur, to ponder deeply, to chew on something like a cow chews its cud. It suggests a slow, deliberate, repeated engagement with God's Word that allows its truth to penetrate deep into our souls.

When we meditate on Scripture day and night, we're not just reading words on a page. We're allowing God's truth to become part of our spiritual DNA, shaping how we think, feel, and respond to life's challenges. This kind of deep, contemplative engagement with Scripture has sustained our people through centuries of struggle and continues to offer hope and strength today.

Richard Foster on Meditative Prayer

Filling the Mind with God's Word

Richard Foster teaches us that meditative prayer is fundamentally about **filling the mind with God's Word**, not emptying it. This is a crucial distinction that sets Christian meditation apart from other forms of meditation. We don't seek a blank mind, but rather a mind saturated with Scripture, focused on God's character, and attentive to His voice.

Foster reminds us that when we meditate on Scripture, we're entering into a conversation with the living God. The Bible becomes not just a historical document, but a present-tense encounter with divine truth that transforms us from the inside out.

Different from Eastern Meditation

While Eastern meditation practices often emphasize emptying the mind of all thoughts, Christian meditative prayer takes the opposite approach. We intentionally **fill our minds with God's Word and presence**. We don't seek to eliminate all thought, but to focus our thoughts on the One who created us and loves us beyond measure.

This distinction is vital for Christian practitioners. Our goal isn't to achieve a state of nothingness, but to achieve a state of God-consciousness, where our hearts and minds are aligned with His will and His Word becomes our meditation both day and night.

Attentiveness, Not Technique

Foster emphasizes that the goal of meditative prayer is **attentiveness to God, not mastery of technique**. It's not about getting the method perfect or achieving a certain spiritual state. It's about cultivating a heart that is genuinely open to hearing from God and being transformed by His Word.

This takes pressure off the pray-er and puts the focus where it belongs—on God Himself. We come not as spiritual athletes trying to perform, but as beloved children simply wanting to spend time with our heavenly Father and listen to what He has to say.



Howard Thurman on Silence & Presence

Howard Thurman, one of the great African American mystics and theologians of the 20th century, understood the profound power of silence in prayer. His famous phrase "**How good it is to center down...**" captures the essence of what happens when we allow ourselves to settle into God's presence through meditative prayer.

Thurman taught that silence is not the absence of something, but the presence of something profound—the very presence of God Himself. When we create space for silence in our prayer lives, we're making room for God to speak, to heal, to comfort, and to transform us from the inside out.

This understanding was revolutionary in Thurman's time and remains countercultural today. In a world that fears silence and fills every moment with noise, the practice of sitting quietly with God becomes an act of spiritual resistance and a declaration that we believe God has something important to say to us.

"Meditation is not rushing away from God, but sitting with God, learning to be comfortable in His presence, and discovering that He delights in our company just as much as we should delight in His."

James Cone on Meditation & Struggle

1

Never Escapist

James Cone, the father of Black Liberation Theology, reminds us that **Black meditation is never escapist**. It doesn't seek to run away from the harsh realities of life or to find a spiritual hiding place from struggle. Instead, it grounds us more deeply in our faith so that we can face whatever challenges lie ahead with divine strength and wisdom.

For African Americans, meditation has historically been a way of finding God in the midst of oppression, not a way of escaping from it. Our ancestors found strength to endure slavery, segregation, and ongoing systemic racism through deep, contemplative engagement with God's Word and presence.

2

Confronting Pharaoh

Like Moses before Pharaoh, meditative prayer **draws strength to confront oppression** rather than avoid it. When we spend time in God's presence, saturating our minds with His Word and His promises, we gain the courage and wisdom needed to stand against injustice and work for righteousness.

This is why the civil rights movement was so deeply rooted in prayer and spiritual practice. Leaders like Dr. King understood that sustainable social change required not just political strategy, but spiritual grounding that could only come through deep, consistent engagement with God in prayer and meditation.

3

Fueling Action

Cone emphasizes that **meditation fuels action, not passivity**. True contemplative prayer doesn't make us passive observers of life, but active participants in God's work of justice, healing, and reconciliation in the world. The deeper we go in prayer, the more compelled we become to live out our faith in concrete, tangible ways.

This understanding connects us to a long tradition of African American spiritual activism, where prayer and action work hand in hand, each strengthening the other in an ongoing cycle of spiritual empowerment and social engagement.

Scripture Witness: God's Call to Meditation

Joshua 1:8

1

"Keep this Book of the Law 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."

God's command to Joshua reveals that meditation on Scripture is not optional for those who want to live faithfully. Success in God's kingdom comes not from human wisdom or strength, but from consistent, deep engagement with His Word that shapes our thoughts, decisions, and actions.

Luke 5:16

3

"But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed."

Even Jesus, the Son of God, regularly withdrew to quiet places for prayer and meditation. If the Savior Himself needed these times of solitude with the Father, how much more do we? His example shows us that meditative prayer is not a luxury for the spiritually elite, but a necessity for anyone who wants to live in alignment with God's will.

2

Psalm 19:14

"May these words of my mouth and this meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer."

The psalmist understood that what comes out of our mouths flows from the meditation of our hearts. When we fill our hearts with God's Word through meditative prayer, our speech becomes seasoned with grace, wisdom, and truth. Our words become instruments of blessing rather than curse.

Characteristics of Meditative Prayer



Slow & Unhurried

Meditative prayer moves at **God's pace, not our pace**. In a world that demands speed and instant gratification, this form of prayer invites us to slow down, to be patient, and to allow God's truth to marinate in our souls. There's no rush, no deadline, no pressure to achieve a certain spiritual state quickly.

This unhurried approach allows Scripture to penetrate deeper than surface reading ever could. When we take time to sit with a single verse or passage, repeating it slowly, savoring its meaning, we often discover layers of truth that we missed in faster-paced Bible study.



Reflective & Deep

Rather than reading for information, meditative prayer **engages Scripture for transformation**. We don't just ask "What does this passage mean?" but "How is God speaking to me through this passage today?" We reflect on how the text connects to our lives, our struggles, our hopes, and our calling.

This reflective quality means we might spend an entire prayer session with just one verse or story, allowing it to speak to different aspects of our experience and reveal new facets of God's character and will for our lives.



Attentive Listening

In meditative prayer, we **listen more than we speak**. Instead of filling our prayer time with requests and petitions, we create space for God to speak to us through His Word and His Spirit. This requires cultivating the spiritual discipline of silence and expectant waiting.

Attentive listening is a skill that develops over time. At first, the silence might feel uncomfortable, but as we practice this form of prayer, we begin to recognize the still, small voice of God speaking to our hearts through Scripture, circumstances, and the quiet promptings of the Holy Spirit.



Centering on God

The ultimate goal of meditative prayer is to **draw the heart toward God** and align our will with His. As we meditate on Scripture and spend time in His presence, our scattered thoughts and anxious hearts find their center in Him. We discover peace that passes understanding and strength that comes from above.

This centering effect of meditative prayer helps us navigate the challenges of daily life from a place of spiritual groundedness rather than emotional reactivity. When our hearts are centered on God, we respond to life's ups and downs with greater wisdom, patience, and grace.

African American Witness: The Sacred Sounds of Meditation



Spirituals as Meditation

The repetitive nature of many spirituals creates a **natural rhythm for meditative prayer**. Songs like "Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child" use repetition not for lack of creativity, but as a spiritual discipline that allows the truth of the words to sink deeper into the soul with each repetition.

These repeated lines function like mantras, helping to focus the mind and heart on God while acknowledging the real struggles and emotions of human experience. The repetition creates space for the Spirit to minister healing, comfort, and strength through the simple but profound truth of the lyrics.

*"Sometimes I feel like a motherless child
Sometimes I feel like a motherless child
Sometimes I feel like a motherless child
A long way from home"*

The Sacred Moan

In African American spiritual tradition, the **"moan" represents meditative prayer** in its purest form, wordless but full of meaning, inarticulate but deeply expressive. This sacred sound emerges from the depths of the soul when words are insufficient to express the heart's cry to God.

The moan is not despair, but a form of spiritual communication that transcends language. It's the Holy Spirit interceding through us with groanings that cannot be uttered, as Paul describes in Romans 8:26. Our ancestors understood that sometimes the deepest prayers happen beyond words, in the sacred space of sighs, groans, and wordless communion with the Almighty.

Centering Down in Hush Harbors

Before emancipation, enslaved Africans gathered in secret "hush harbors" to worship freely and encounter God's Word without the censorship of their oppressors. In these sacred spaces, they would "center down" in silence before engaging with Scripture, creating an atmosphere where God could speak directly to their hearts and give them strength for the journey ahead. This practice of centering down continues to be a vital part of African American spiritual tradition today.

Pitfalls & Growth in Meditative Prayer

Common Pitfalls to Avoid

Thinking meditation means emptying the mind: Unlike secular meditation practices, Christian meditation fills the mind with God's Word and presence. We don't seek a blank slate, but a heart and mind saturated with Scripture and focused on the character and will of God.

Expecting quick results: Meditative prayer is not a spiritual microwave that produces instant transformation. Like a slow-cooked meal, the benefits develop over time through consistent, patient practice. Don't be discouraged if you don't feel immediate spiritual highs or dramatic changes.

Making it about technique: The goal isn't to master a method but to encounter God. Some days the prayer will feel rich and meaningful; other days it might feel dry or difficult. Both experiences are normal parts of the spiritual journey.

Signs of Growth and Maturity

Over time, meditation grounds and steadies the soul: Regular practice of meditative prayer develops spiritual stability that helps us weather life's storms with greater peace and resilience. We become less reactive to circumstances and more responsive to God's leading.

Scripture becomes more alive and relevant: As we meditate regularly on God's Word, we begin to see connections between biblical truth and daily life that we never noticed before. The Bible transforms from an ancient book to a living conversation with God.

Prayer becomes less about asking and more about listening: Mature meditative prayer shifts from being primarily about our agenda to being primarily about God's agenda. We find ourselves more interested in what God wants to say to us than in what we want to say to God.

Listen & Obey

"Meditation is the ability to hear God's voice and obey his word."

— Richard Foster

This powerful quote from Richard Foster captures the essence of what meditative prayer is ultimately about—not just hearing God's voice, but responding to it with obedience and faithfulness. When we truly meditate on Scripture, we don't just gain information about God; we encounter God Himself and receive His direction for our lives.

The connection between hearing and obeying is crucial. Many people can hear God's voice through Scripture and prayer, but spiritual maturity is measured by our willingness to align our lives with what we've heard. Meditative prayer creates the spiritual space where God can speak clearly and where our hearts become tender enough to respond with "Yes, Lord" rather than "Yes, but..."

This quote reminds us that the goal of meditative prayer is not spiritual experience for its own sake, but transformation that leads to faithful living. When we truly hear God's voice through meditative engagement with His Word, we find ourselves compelled to live differently—to love more deeply, serve more faithfully, and trust more completely.

Discussion Questions for Small Groups

01

How is meditating on God's Word different from just reading it?

Consider the difference between scanning a text for information and sitting with it for transformation. When we read Scripture quickly, we might grasp the basic meaning, but when we meditate on it, we allow it to **marinate in our souls** and speak to different aspects of our experience.

Meditation involves repetition, reflection, and personal application in ways that casual reading does not. Share examples from your own experience of how a familiar passage took on new meaning when you spent extended time with it in prayer.

Think about the difference between consuming Scripture like fast food versus savoring it like a home-cooked meal prepared with love and attention to detail.

02

What role does silence play in your prayer life?

Many of us are uncomfortable with silence, but it plays a **crucial role in creating space for God to speak**. Reflect on your current prayer habits—do you fill all the space with words, or do you create room for listening?

Consider how silence functions in human relationships. Sometimes the deepest communication happens without words. How might this apply to our relationship with God?

Discuss practical challenges to finding silence in our noisy, busy world and brainstorm strategies for creating quiet spaces for prayer and meditation.

03

How might meditative prayer strengthen us for today's struggles?

Connect the practice of meditative prayer to the real challenges you face in daily life—workplace stress, family conflicts, health concerns, social injustice, financial pressures. How can **regular time in God's presence** equip us to handle these challenges differently?

Think about how our ancestors used meditative prayer and spiritual practices to sustain themselves through much greater hardships than most of us face today. What can we learn from their example?

Consider both the immediate benefits (peace, clarity, strength for the day) and the long-term benefits (spiritual maturity, deeper faith, greater resilience) of consistent meditative prayer.

Practice Exercise: Meditating on Psalm 23

Step-by-Step Practice

First Reading

- 1 Read Psalm 23 slowly and aloud, paying attention to each word. Don't rush or try to analyze—just let the familiar words wash over you as if you're hearing them for the first time.

Second Reading

- 2 Read the psalm again, even more slowly. This time, notice if any particular word, phrase, or image stands out to you. What seems to be catching your attention?

Silent Reflection

- 3 Sit in silence for 2 full minutes (use a timer if needed). During this time, focus on the word or phrase that stood out to you. Don't try to figure it out—just hold it gently in your heart and mind.

Group Sharing

- 4 In groups of 3-4, share what word or phrase stood out to you and any insights or connections that emerged during the silence. Listen respectfully without trying to fix or interpret others' experiences.



Psalm 23 (NIV)

The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he refreshes my soul. He guides me along the right paths for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

This exercise demonstrates the key elements of meditative prayer: **slow reading**, **reflective silence**, and **communal sharing**. Notice how the same passage can speak differently to different people, and how the silence creates space for the Holy Spirit to highlight specific truths for each person's current situation and spiritual need.

Memory Verse & Key Takeaway

Memory Verse

Psalm 1:2

"Their delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law they meditate day and night."

Memorizing this verse will serve as a constant reminder that **meditation on God's Word** should be a source of delight, not duty. When we truly delight in Scripture, meditation becomes natural and life-giving rather than forced or mechanical.

Key Takeaway

Meditative prayer fills us with God's Word, steadies the heart, and strengthens us for faithful living.

Unlike meditation practices that empty the mind, **Christian meditative prayer fills us** with God's presence and Word. This practice doesn't make us passive or withdrawn from life's struggles, but grounds us in divine truth and strength so we can face whatever comes with faith, courage, and wisdom.

As we continue to practice meditative prayer, we'll discover that it becomes a cornerstone of spiritual maturity—steadying us in uncertainty, comforting us in sorrow, and strengthening us for the work of justice and love that God calls us to do in the world.

Next week: Week 4 - Intercessory Prayer: Standing in the Gap