

BIBLICAL MEDITATION: A FORGOTTEN RESOURCE
IN LEARNING NEW TESTAMENT GREEK?

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Could it be that meditation on the Bible, which seems to be little talked about these days in academic circles, is a discipline that students of New Testament (NT) Greek could find helpful? Consider the difficulty of learning Greek; consider also the role that meditation could play in this effort.

Textbooks and teachers of NT Greek readily admit the difficulty of retaining Greek and often urge students to be regular in reviewing it.¹ For English speakers, the language typically seems very foreign. It seldom becomes comfortable or finds a home in the student's mind and heart. Hard-won gains in mastering vocabulary and grammar are often quickly lost once intensive review stops. Learning Greek all too often never goes beyond being a very "external" exercise that may not go much beyond knowing a few words and being able to translate some of the simpler NT passages.

Students may be successful in memorizing paradigms and vocabulary, even in reviewing this memorized material often enough to retain it for a period of time. It seems that few, however, succeed in memorizing verses or paragraphs from the Greek NT, and fewer still find that this discipline brings Greek into anything their heart can work with.

1. For example, in his recent text Larkin commends the discipline of sight-reading Greek, with specific suggestions for a doable rate of reading and an emphasis on context as an aid in maintaining proficiency (*Greek Is Great Gain*, 27–38); Porter, Reed, and O'Donnell recommend a daily twenty-minute drill to counter the otherwise rapid loss of unreviewed Greek (*Fundamentals of New Testament Greek*, xiii–xiv).

Biblical meditation, however, though arising from a different motivation, nevertheless has promise both for memorizing Scripture (though as a by-product, not as the primary goal) and for fostering the “internal flourishing” of Greek. In speaking here of meditation, I have in mind the day-and-night pondering on the word of God that brings blessing (Ps 1:1), understanding (Ps 119:99), and success (Josh 1:8). It is the personal and humble reflection on Scripture for the sake of experiencing its teaching, reproof, correction, and training in righteousness (2 Tim 3:16). Underlying this form and purpose is the ultimate goal, as Richard Foster puts it, of learning to “hear God’s voice and obey his word.” In Foster’s rich imagery, meditation is the discipline by which “we create the emotional and spiritual space which allows Christ to construct an inner sanctuary in the heart,” to become “a portable sanctuary that is brought into all we are and do.”²

Martin Luther evidently practiced exactly this kind of meditation, which he details in a letter to his barber, who had asked Luther for instructions on “a simple way to pray.” In great detail, Luther explains his daily practice of meditation, which included clause-by-clause reflection on the Lord’s Prayer and the Ten Commandments, and sometimes also the Apostles’ Creed. Luther practiced a specific fourfold reflection on these texts, considering and interacting with each clause first as instruction, then as thanksgiving, then confession, and finally with prayers of request and intercession. Luther’s mind and heart were thus fully engaged in the words and prayers of his meditation. He comments colorfully, “To this day I suckle at the Lord’s Prayer like a child, and as an old man eat and drink from it and never get my fill.”³

2. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 17, 20.

3. Luther, “A Simple Way to Pray, for a Good Friend,” 200. Luther’s experience well illustrates Peterson’s emphasis on the emotional, personal side of meditation: “We meditate to become empathetic with the text. We move from being critical outsiders to becoming appreciative insiders. The text is no longer something to be looked at with cool and detached expertise but something to be entered into with the playful curiosity of a child” (*Eat This Book*, 102).

In thus meditating on Scripture, we aim at “internalizing and personalizing the passage.”⁴ We listen to the Spirit’s application, and we speak directly to God, to our own heart, and even to the world, the flesh, and the devil. This speaking is best done out loud, or at least under one’s breath,⁵ with no human audience. The immediate context of meditation can be a heart desire to worship God directly and verbally, a sense of waiting for insight as to the meaning or application of a specific phrase or sentence, or the presence of pressure or concern, even danger, harassment, or persecution. The Christian who has treasured, or stored up, God’s word in the heart (Ps 119:11) simply *must* speak from Scripture, *must* stand on the words of the Bible in earnest dealing with his or her Rock, the Father in heaven, and in contending with inward and outward pressure. Through frequent and meaningful use, and likely also through direct intention, the words at some point become memorized and thus available whenever the heart in its “inner sanctuary” wishes to ponder them.

What if someone who meditates becomes a student of NT Greek? (Or if a student of Greek decides to become a meditator?!) The most natural thing will be to *use the words of the Greek NT in one’s meditation!* For one who has never functioned in a language other than English, this step may appear more daunting than it needs to be. Here the meditator must be wise: start simply, and plan to expand slowly. For example, start with the two-word verbless clause Κύριος Ἰησοῦς (Jesus is Lord), in 1 Cor 12:3. From the outset, make sure that you voice the words with confidence and joy at what they affirm—in spoken devotion to the Father, in building up your own heart, in moving with assurance against evil. Make it a point never to say the words faster than you can appreciate their meaning. Write the words down (3" × 5" cards are especially handy), review them often, and occasionally write them out from memory to verify your

4. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 29.

5. The “out loud” nature of meditating derives lexically from the Hebrew root פָּחַח, *hgh*, which, besides “meditate,” includes the meanings “sigh,” “mutter,” “whisper,” and “speak” (Negoită, “*hāghāh*”), and practically from the known value of spoken words in focusing one’s thoughts and heart.

spelling. Such a practice leads to the words of the Greek NT gradually making themselves at home in your heart-sanctuary, becoming trusted friends as you worship God, speak to your own heart, and deal with your world.

The *primary* function of these ultimately memorized words from the Greek NT is to use them in meditation, in all the richness described above. A *secondary* function is to build up a stockpile of Greek words and sentences that can enrich one's own progress in grasping the language more widely and deeply. By aiming directly at the heart in meditation, the language learner brings the verses inside his or her heart fully (with both the forms and the meaning of the words), from where they can:

- inform the mind (which now has access to the form of the words, as well as the syntax of the phrases and clauses and paragraphs),
- connect with God in worship (e.g., using Col 2:9–10),
- address his or her own soul (e.g., in the spirit of Ps 42:5, 11 and 103:1–2), and
- speak to encountered evil (e.g., using Jas 4:7).

Such a meditator thus follows a disciplined path that seamlessly blends warmth of relation with God, inner growth, and confidence in facing the temptations and trials of life. Insofar as the Greek student thoughtfully stays on this path over the course of months and years, the journey can lead incidentally but effectively to a rich grasp of Greek vocabulary and grammar.

As encouragement either to continue this type of meditating or to begin doing so with confident expectation, I mention some of my own discoveries in this process.

In the early 1960s I took three years of Greek at Wheaton College. Later, after getting married, I began a graduate program in linguistics at Indiana University in 1969. Somewhere along the way I memorized some Bible verses in Greek, doing so, as I recall, as somewhat of a curiosity. In the spring semester of 1972, however, curiosity deepened to urgency. I was assigned to teach a section of undergrad linguistics and soon discovered that my class included an abundance of young women who dressed in ways that I found very distracting. Fearing for my spiritual health, I almost instinctively focused on a passage I had

previously memorized in Greek—Col 3:1–3—and began earnestly meditating on it as I walked to class each time, using its words to affirm my own relation with Christ and my own agreement with the command τὰ ἄνω φρονεῖτε, μὴ τὰ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς (set your mind on things that are above, not on things that are on earth). The results all that semester were positive, surprisingly and unfailingly so. Since then, with some periods of inaction, I have continued to add other verses to my meditation “repertoire.”

I have found that the linguistic benefits of this practice, though perhaps spiritually less remarkable, have been real. For example:

- Do I need to brush up on imperatives? Recall the Lord’s Prayer (Matt 6:9–13), with its rich collection of imperatives: three are third person singular (two types), and four are second person singular (two types, plus a prohibition with the subjunctive).
- Do I need help remembering the genitive singular of third declension nouns? For starters, there is σκότους (darkness, Col 1:13; nom. σκότος), νοός (mind, Rom 12:2; nom. νοῦς), and πίστεως (faith, Eph 6:16; nom. πίστις).
- Have I forgotten which aorist tense-form of ἵστημι (stand, cause to stand) is intransitive and which is transitive? The *transitive* infinitive phrase παραστήσαι τὰ σώματα ὑμῶν (present your bodies, Rom 12:1), with the *first* aorist form of this verbal stem, provides a convenient reminder.
- Would I like to review relative clauses and participial clauses? Think through Heb 1:1–4, which provides three examples of the former and five of the latter. It also features two ways of expressing comparison (v. 4: a substantive in the genitive case; the preposition παρά + a substantive in the accusative). As a worship bonus, the exquisite literary style of this memorable sentence is more than matched by the scope and profundity of the author’s account of the Son’s character and accomplishments.⁶

6. In the opinion of Thiselton, the rhetoric of this passage is “the most sophisticated in style in the whole NT, employing alliteration, rhythm,

The path for those wanting or needing to learn NT Greek is not necessarily easy or friendly. Those who are ready to practice biblical meditation using Greek, however, may find it to be a resource of great usefulness, allowing both their spiritual and their linguistic journeys to go more warmly and profitably.⁷

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elegance, force, and careful artistry"; it represents a "richly multilayered, multilevel model of preaching, teaching, and praise" ("Hebrews," 1454).

7. My thanks to Bill Larkin for helpful comments on an earlier version of this article.