**Contemplative and Meditative Prayer**

**What is contemplative prayer?**

Contemplative prayer, at its core, is simply being with God, opening ourselves to his mystery (*Psalm 42:7* - deep calling to deep). It’s the cultivation of the practices of silence and stillness in our lives, making the intentional space to enter into his presence and just abide with him for a time. It is a form of unguided prayer without words, thoughts, or images: simply sitting silently in the presence of God. (*1 Kings 19:9-13 , Psalm 46:10, Psalm 23:1-3*)

Whereas pure contemplation is simply sitting openly and silently in his presence, meditation introduces elements to help us focus on God, guiding us to ponder and think about various elements of him. A guided narration or soft background music might be included. In practice, the distinction between contemplation and meditation is subtle, and it’s really only modern Western culture that tries to separate the two into distinct disciplines. So practically speaking, the two terms can be used interchangeably.

God calls us to rest as the 4th of the ten commandments; the call for sabbath, a time to set aside our work and focus on God. We are called many more times over the course of the Bible to set aside time to rest in our lives, and contemplation is one way that we can cultivate postures of rest on a daily basis.

Contemplative prayer is challenging! For most people, it takes practice to become truly comfortable with it. We live in a world with nearly ever-present noise and stimulation, and a constant push to move, to do, and to be busy; few of us are at ease being silent or still for more than a few minutes at a time. For many people, however, a regular discipline of contemplation is the solution to stress and anxiety: the refuge of peace and rest that God promises, the rest for our souls (*Matthew 11:28-30, Jeremiah 6:16*), equipping us to better cope and trust him when we re-enter the pressures of our busy world.

**Defining Terms**

Two commonly used terms can present challenges to Christians as they begin to explore contemplative practice. Both words have ancient use in Christian tradition but have since taken on alternate meaning and use in our world, which can cause confusion.

*Meditation* – Christian meditation seeks to focus ourselves on God to allow aspects of him to fill us. The Bible directly uses the term *meditate* in places where people seek depth with God (Psalm 119, for instance, uses it eight times). This differs from the eastern definition that most of the world understands: pushing all thoughts away to empty oneself, to seek nothingness.

*Mystic* – The traditional term for those who engage in contemplative practice: those who intentionally seek the mystery of God. This is the original, earliest use of the word; something that’s “mystical” has since come to mean something that’s associated with magical, occultic, or supernatural elements.

**Entering In**

How does one get started in the practice of contemplation? Start small and manageable with just a few minutes in stillness at a time and build up from there. Be gracious with yourself; remember that this is tough for most people, and it will likely take practice. Don’t worry about getting it “right”- this is about being, rather than doing. Here are some steps to get going:

1. *Environment* – Select a space and time that best lends itself to quiet and a place to sit that is comfortable (but not too comfortable). Find a way to mentally set this apart as a sacred space, a way that signals to you that “it’s time to be with God” whenever you settle in there.
2. *Posture* - Choose a good posture that doesn’t restrict blood flow, allows for proper breathing, and isn’t distractingly uncomfortable. Avoid a posture so relaxed as to invite falling asleep.
3. *Centering word* – Select a word or short phrase to focus on; a way of keeping your mind from wandering as you teach it to be still. This can be a simple prayer, a phrase from scripture, a specific name of God, or something like “Come, Lord Jesus” or even just “Jesus.”
4. *Breath* – Become aware of your breathing: slow and steady. Aligning your breath to your centering word can help the needs of your body point your focus towards God. Using the ancient Jesus Prayer, for example:
	* Inhale: *Lord Jesus Christ*
	* Exhale: *have mercy on me*

If you journal, be ready to record thoughts, impressions, or anything God might say to you in this time.

**Dealing with Distractions**

Distractions will happen. The last thing the enemy wants is for us to have intimate time with God; plus we just live in a noisy world, and in homes that don’t necessarily pause when we try to. When they happen:

* Don’t try to ignore random wandering thoughts- that will just make them harder to ignore. Acknowledge the distraction then concentrate on your centering word to return your focus to God. Often the attention that we give distractions (like feeling frustrated, annoyed or guilty) can be more detrimental to our prayers than the distraction itself is.
* Picture your time of contemplation like floating down a slow river. See unexpected noises and distractions as things that just go by, don’t affect your journey, and disappear behind you.
* Some distractions can be acknowledged by turning them into a prayer of thanksgiving (the neighbor’s dog barking can be acknowledged as giving thanks for dogs), before moving back into stillness.
* Deeper worries and anxieties may be a call to spend time in prayer over a certain need, rather than time in contemplation. That’s okay!
* Sometimes we just can’t go deep or be still. That’s okay, too! Contemplation is about being with God rather than doing something specific or achieving a goal. God understands where we are and what we’re up against at a given time. Coming to him in any way that we can is the right response when we can’t be still.

**Two recommended books on contemplative prayer for beginners:**

Sherrill, AJ. *Being with God: The Absurdity, Necessity, and Neurology of Contemplative Prayer*.

2021

Thibodeaux, Mark E. *Armchair Mystic: Easing into Contemplative Prayer.* 1989, 2019

**Lab Time: Lectio Divina**

The formal tradition of lectio divina (“divine reading”) can be traced back to the Benedictine monks of the 6th century, but as a meditative practice, it is much older than that. St. Benedict called it “listening with the ear of the heart” and it is a way meditate over the scriptures, letting God speak through them. There are many variations on exactly how to do a lectio divina, but all involve the slow reading of a scripture multiple times, allowing God to draw your attention to something specific in each reading.

**1st reading** *Lectio* (read) – Slowly read or listen to the passage. Note what word (or concept) jumps out at you.

**2nd reading** *Meditatio* (reflect) – Ponder the word or passage; mentally chew on it. What is God showing you about this word?

**3rd reading:** *Oratio* (speak) – Talk to God about the word and/or reflect through journaling. Let this be a conversation with him, both speaking and listening, about what he wants to you learn.

**4th reading:** *Contemplatio* (rest) – Sit in silence and stillness with what God has given you.

**Psalm 48:1-7**

As the deer pants for streams of water,
    so my soul pants for you, my God.
2My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.
    When can I go and meet with God?
3My tears have been my food
    day and night,
while people say to me all day long,
    “Where is your God?”
4These things I remember
    as I pour out my soul:
how I used to go to the house of God
    under the protection of the Mighty One[[d](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=psalm+42&version=NIV#fen-NIV-14560d)]
with shouts of joy and praise
    among the festive throng.

5Why, my soul, are you downcast?
    Why so disturbed within me?
Put your hope in God,
    for I will yet praise him,
    my Savior and my God.

6My soul is downcast within me;
    therefore I will remember you
from the land of the Jordan,
    the heights of Hermon—from Mount Mizar.
7Deep calls to deep
    in the roar of your waterfalls;
all your waves and breakers
    have swept over me.