CONTEMPLATIVE READING

DEFINITION

Contemplative Reading (often called "divine reading") is a practice that helps us slow down with Scripture to meet with God, not just learn about him. Rather than rushing to cover more text, this approach invites us to linger and listen through four simple movements– *Read* the passage carefully, *Reflect* on what stands out and why, *Respond* to God in prayer, and *Rest* in his presence– trusting the Spirit to use his Word to shape our hearts as well as our minds. To pray in this way, clear your mind and focus on God's presence. Then simply enjoy being with him, dwelling on his love and resting in his goodness.

HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE

Contemplative reading was a common practice in the first 1500 years of the church before people had printed Bibles. The exact origin of this practice is uncertain. While many church fathers allude to reading the Scripture in a way that brings God's presence to life, more formal contemplative reading seems to first appear in the practices of the Desert Fathers, 3rd, and 4th century Christian monks. It gained traction and was formalized by St. Benedict of Nursia in the 6th century, finding a place in his "Rule" for daily life.

One of the most significant contributions to the idea of contemplative reading in history is Guigo II, a 12th century Carthusian monk. In his book, The Ladder of Monks, he says this about contemplative reading: "Reading puts the solid food into our mouths, meditation chews it and breaks it down, prayer obtains the flavor of it and contemplation is the very sweetness which makes us glad and refreshes us." It was a process that eventually led to refreshment in Jesus.

In the last 500 years, this practice has moved out of the monastery and into the lives of everyday people! Initially, the Reformation led to some caution regarding any contemplative practices, favoring instead the rational and doctrinal, but several people, including Teresa of Avila, St. John of the Cross, and St. Ignatius of Loyola, all found solace in contemplation. More specifically in the last two centuries we have seen another surge of the practice. It seems the healthy follower of Jesus needs both intellectual study of God's word *and* the joy of experiential intimacy with God through his word.

BENEFITS

- Contemplative reading holds great benefits for those willing to try with the right framework and principles in mind. Benefits of contemplative reading include:
- Greater intimacy with God. "O God, you are my God; earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you as in a dry and weary land where there is no water. So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary, beholding your power and glory." (Psalm 63:1-2)
- Deeper understanding of Self. "For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" (Romans 7:22-25)
- A place to be slow in a world that is fast. "Be still, and know that I am God." (Psalm 46:10)

ENCOURAGEMENT

- If you've never tried contemplative reading before, this practice should take you between 15-30 minutes. However, there isn't a time limit! If you want to use this practice to commune with Jesus for a greater amount of time, go for it!
- Rely on the Holy Spirit as to when to linger and when to move to the next step. Eventually, with practice, these steps become more fluid.
- Keep in mind your observation and interpretation of Scripture first. You are not seeking "new revelation" from God, rather you are communing with God over the truth of his word.
- Find a quiet spot and remove any distractions before beginning.

HOW TO PRACTICE CONTEMPLATIVE READING

1. *Read the passage carefully*. This may look like reading it once slowly, or reading it several times over. It can be out loud or silently. Let the words sink in and settle. Before you start reading, ask the Holy Spirit to protect you from distractions.
2. *Reflect on what stands out and why*. This is a moment to pause and meditate. Ask yourself: "How does this passage, phrase, or word reveal Christ to me?" or "Where in my life do I need the truth I read today?" "What do I sense the Spirit prompting me to take notice of?"
3. *Respond to God in prayer*. This is a chance for confession, repentance, lament, gratitude, or anything else that you need to speak with God about regarding what he has revealed in steps 1-2. Share your thoughts and feelings with God.
4. *Rest in his presence*. It is likely this will be the most challenging part for most. It's a posture of surrender, a moment of stillness where you can fully embrace the love of God.

EXAMPLE

Today, I set aside time to do some contemplative reading. I put away my phone and found a quiet space to spend the next half hour. The only thing I brought with me was a Bible which I opened to Acts 5:27-32. I slowly read:

"And when they had brought them, they set them before the council. And the high priest questioned them, saying, 'We strictly charged you not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching, and you intend to bring this man's blood upon us.' But Peter the apostle answered, 'We must obey God rather than men.' The God of our fathers raised Jesus, whom you killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him."

I paused, breathed, and read it again, this time out loud. I lingered on the phrases that stood out to me, doing my best to let the words resonate. I then spent time reflecting. When I asked myself "where in my life do I need the truth I read today?" the Spirit led my mind to the phrase, "We must obey God rather than men." So often I find myself people pleasing, more concerned with what others think rather than God. I realized that this is so deeply engrained in my way of life that I rarely take opportunities to share the gospel or be bold in my faith. I am too worried about obeying men, seeking their approval. When a situation to share about Jesus comes up, I gloss over it rather than asking "what is God wanting me to do here?" This was eye opening, and so I turned to God in prayer. I confessed my disobedience and sought forgiveness. I asked God to help me to repent, to turn from my people pleasing and instead to be bold like the apostle Peter. After this, I rested in the loving kindness of a God who forgives me when I fall short.

SOURCES:

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