

The Discipline Of Lectio Divina

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 good success.

— Joshua 1:8 [ESV]

Introduction

Our next Spiritual Discipline is the Discipline of Lectio Divina. This is a fairly well known practice within both the Anglican and the Roman Catholic traditions. Typically, it is in a group setting where one is exposed to it, perhaps at a retreat, seminar, or class. However, it is also a wonderful Spiritual Discipline that can be done “solo” and provides a great way to experience a passage of Scripture anew.

History

Jan Johnson, in her book, *Meeting God in Scripture: A Hands-On Guide to Lectio Divina*, provides the following historical overview of the practice:

At least since the fifth century, one of the primary ways Christians have meditated on Scripture is by reading a passage and then following the Jewish idea of “taking hold” and “keeping” God’s words (Proverbs 4:3-4). Christians began calling this process lectio divina, which is a Latin phrase for “divine reading” or “sacred reading” (from ecclesiastical Latin, pronounced LEX-ee-oh dih-VEE-nuh). The central idea of lectio divina is invitation. Lectio divina assumes that God is inviting us into interaction and conversation as we read Scripture.

A Word About Meditation

Returning again to Jan’s book in the section, *Why Meditate on Scripture?*:

Meditation on Scripture was a common activity in Jewish culture. It is mentioned fifteen times just in the Psalms. Those who meditated on the law day and night flourished like trees planted by streams of water. Meditating on Scripture gave the psalmists wisdom that surpassed their teachers and enemies, led to diligent obedience and kept them out of temptation's way. Meditation was a delightful practice—God's words tasted sweeter than honey (Psalm 1:1-3; 119:97-103).

Scripture meditation has been so neglected in the last century that some have come to associate meditation only with Eastern religions. But the fact that meditation is common in Eastern religions doesn't mean it is wrong. Eastern religions practice other disciplines Christians practice, such as fasting, praying and even repeating quotations from Jesus. Perhaps Scripture meditation became infrequent because of the post-Enlightenment emphasis on science and linear thinking, which displaced reflection and rest (two ideas found prominently in the Psalms).

Like all spiritual disciplines, Scripture meditation is another way to become more attentive to the still, small voice of God and to become more willing to respond when we hear it. Paired with the study of Scripture, meditation helps both those who are new to faith and those who feel like they've heard it all before. Even if you're familiar with the words and ideas, in Scripture meditation God speaks the words we need to hear in our life today. Because meditating on Scripture helps us hear God's Word to us, we experience even well-known passages in fresh ways.

Structure

Traditionally there have been four phases to lectio divina, but in recent years those have been expanded to six phases by some authors, Jan being one.

The six phases are:

1. Relax (Silencio)
2. Read (Lectio)
3. Reflect (Meditatio)
4. Respond (Oratio)
5. Rest (Contemplatio)
6. Return (Incarnatio)

Here is a brief description of each of the phases:

- **Relax:** This is where we slow down, put away all distractions, and drink in the quiet before starting our practice. This is where we invite the Holy Spirit to be present with us in our heart, in our mind, and in our soul.
- **Read:** This is where we begin to enter into the passage. We read it very, very slowly. Once silently. Once aloud. We are listening for anything that shimmers to us, a word, a phrase, an image. We simply receive it without trying to analyze it. We are listening with the ear of our heart.
- **Reflect:** This is where we meditate on the passage and what has stood out to us. If it is a narrative passage, we try to enter into it and look around. If it is a teaching or discourse passage, we try to just look more closely at what shimmered within the larger context of the reading. Once we have done this, we read the passage once again. Perhaps we notice something new that we had missed before.
- **Respond:** This is where we respond to God about what we have been given, what we think we have heard. It may be to ask questions or to marvel in wonder. It may be to just sit silently with God holding what you have received gently in your hands. Once we have done this, we read the passage one last time. (This may seem excessive, but it is often surprising what else comes to you.)
- **Rest:** This is where we simply rest in the presence of God. It is a form of worship. There is nothing for us to do. We just listen and wonder with gratitude for what we have been given, now and always.
- **Return:** This is where we return to the world with gratitude for what we have been given. As disciples of Christ, we live for the sake of others. We walk in love as Christ loved us. How may what we have been given here help us to serve others with the love that knows no limits?

Guidelines

At this point you likely have some questions. Here are answers to the most common questions:

- *Is it okay to use different translations for the readings?*
Yes, but with caution. It is best to use just one when starting out. Later it is okay to add another one, but never more than two.
- *How long should the passage be?*
Keep it short. Optimally, eight to ten verses.
- *How do I know what to pick for the passage?*
Start with familiar passages, like 1 Corinthians 13, Psalm 23, 1 Kings 19. Once you become more comfortable, branch out to whatever God puts on your heart.
- *Teaching or Narrative?*
Start with Narrative passages. It is easier to enter into a story than a discourse.
- *May I use my study tools?*
No. It is fine to do the study of the passage ahead of time, but lectio divina is not at all the same thing as Bible study. Ideally, it is best to use a Bible without study notes for the actual practice of lectio divina.
- *What if I get part way in and realize that I have switched to contemplative prayer?*
Go with that. There is overlap with the Spiritual Disciplines. Trust that God is leading you to do this and relax with it. It would be counterproductive to try to force it back to lectio divina.
- *Is this a Spiritual Discipline that I would do on a daily basis?*
Probably not. It is important to spend additional time after the practice sitting with what you have been given. Think of it as a precious stone in your pocket. You will know when it is time to find a new passage to work with.

- *Is there more help in getting started?*

Yes. Jan Johnson's book, *Meeting God in Scripture: A Hands-On Guide to Lectio Divina*, is the perfect place to start. In the book she provides much more detail about each of the phases along with individual guided practices for forty different Scripture passages.

Practice

The Practice for today is a homework assignment to do at your leisure if you so desire.

Reflection Discussion

What thoughts do you have at this point? Does this seem like a Spiritual Discipline that you would be interested in trying? Does the idea of it resonate with you? Do you have any lingering questions? As with our other Spiritual Disciplines, I am happy to assist you with this in whatever ways I am able, even after our time together here today is done.

Resources

- Jan Johnson, *Meeting God in Scripture*
- Dallas Willard, *Hearing God*
- Tim Gray, *Praying Scripture for a Change: An Introduction to Lectio Divina*