

Spiritual Reading of Scripture – Lectio Divina

“Read with a vulnerable heart. Expect to be blessed in the reading.
Read as one awake, one waiting for the Beloved.
Read with reverence.”
Macrina Wiederkehr

“For the **word of God** is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And before him no creature is hidden, but all are open and laid bare to the eyes of him with whom we have to do.” *Hebrews 4.12-13*

“Let the **word of Christ** dwell in you richly, teach and admonish one another in all wisdom, and sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs with thankfulness in your hearts to God.” *Colossians 3.16*

“But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you have been acquainted with **the sacred writings** which are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. **All scripture** is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.” 2 Timothy 3.14-17

“Let every man be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger, for the anger of man does not work the righteousness of God. Therefore put away all filthiness and rank growth of wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls. But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if any one is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who observes his natural face in a mirror; for he observes himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. But he who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer that forgets but a doer that acts, he shall be blessed in his doing.” James 1.19-25

The Word of God is transformative. It is this radical yet experientially validated conviction, within the context of the Holy Tradition, that is foundational to a practical knowledge of the love of God the Father and growth into the likeness of Christ Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit. Scriptural reading that comes under the heading of *Lectio Divina* is *prayerful, meditative and reflective*.

It is *prayerful* in as much as it is concerned not with *speed* or *volume* but with depth and *receptivity*. That is because the purpose of scriptural reading is to open ourselves in such a way as to allow God to speak to us and encounter us in and through any particular passage. We are seeking not merely *information* but *formation* – the fulfillment of St. Paul’s hope that “the word of Christ may dwell in your hearts richly”.

Scriptural reading is a *meditative* approach to the written word. It requires unhurried time and an open heart. If the purpose of our reading is to be addressed by God, we will need to practice attentive listening and a willingness to respond to what we hear. The attitude permeating scriptural reading is that of the boy Samuel: “Speak, Lord, your servant is listening” (1 Samuel 3.10).

The art of scriptural reading as a *reflective* assimilation of God’s Word reaches straight back into the Jewish tradition of meditation: “Happy are those ... (whose) delight is in the law of the Lord, and on His law they meditate day and night” (Psalms 1.1-2).

The practice of Scriptural reading in the Christian Church was refined and given special weight by Saint Benedict in the sixth century. In the Benedictine understanding and practice, scriptural reading is referred to by its Latin title, *Lectio Divina*. Few Protestants are aware that figures like the great reformer John Calvin, and the Puritan pastor Richard Baxter advocated a method of reflective meditation with scripture that was directly derived from the Benedictine practice of *lectio divina*.

Over 300 years ago Madame Guyon wrote a book entitled, *Experiencing the Depths of Jesus Christ* (referred to by Guyon as, *A Short and Very Easy Method of Prayer*). It is comforting to realize that there is a relationship between experiencing the depths of the love of the Father in Jesus Christ (and its consolations) and a simplicity of method. Experiencing the depths of His love is not intended by our Lord to be impossible or unattainable by the ordinary believer, somehow intended only for the monk, nun, priest, or super mature Christian. It is for all. It is accessible to any and all who would engage in it with a spirit of humility and zeal.

Let us remember that there is often, in the Christian life, a direct relationship between simplicity and discipline. The place where they meet does not reside in the mind but the heart. While this is true, we do not “check our minds at the door”. Rather, God invites us to allow our minds to “rest in our heart” with the conviction that the fulfillment that the mind desires from the Scriptures can only be offered and received by way of the heart.

There are four phases in the classic practice of scriptural reading or *Lectio Divina*. In Latin they are termed: *lectio, meditatio, oratio, and contemplation*.

1. **Lectio** – literally means “reading”, as if you have a love letter in hand, reading each sentence as if for the first time, with expectancy. The hope and conviction is that God will address you with a direct and personal “word” and that address will be an actual encounter with God Himself.
2. **Meditatio** – translates as “meditation”, which engages us with the text at the level of the “heart” (where memory, experience, thoughts, feelings, hopes, desires, intuition, and intentions are joined).
3. **Oratio** – refers to prayer that naturally flows out of our meditation, our first response to what we have heard and assimilated in the first two phases of scriptural reading. It is our “oration” or “giving voice” as a response to God’s initiative. This is the direct cry of the heart to God that rises when we have been personally addressed and encountered by God through the Word.

4. **Contemplatio** – “contemplation”, is essentially the “resting” in not only the presence of God but of God Himself. It is not only a “with” but an “in” reality. It is the moment and time when “doing gives way to being”. When contemplation is authentic, it ceases to be a goal to be achieved through some method, and is simply the enjoyment of the underlying reality of being in a relationship of mutual belovedness in all of its rhythm and blessing.

These phases represent general and often natural progression, but you may experience a “weaving back and forth” or “moving in and out” as the Spirit moves you. Because we have yet to “arrive” or “attain to” perfect and sustained union with God by grace in every facet of body, soul, and spirit we will experience distraction. How we address the distraction is of vital importance.

The key to dealing with distraction is gentleness and compassion. Our tendency is to introduce, through how we deal with distraction, “perfectionism” and “law” into our experience. In order to resist this tendency we need to be intentionally compassionate toward ourselves with regard to distraction. When you become aware of thoughts (perceptions, images, memories, worldly anxieties, etc.) let the Lord take them and offer them to you as a gift. How could distraction become a gift? Consider that the fact that you have become aware of the distraction as a distraction is an wonderful opportunity to return to the enjoyment of God’s presence and love. The Holy Spirit has acted to “awaken” us to His presence again by alerting us to the wandering in which we are participating. So, with joy we can gently set aside the distraction and return to God’s presence and love.

Instructions for Lectio Divina:

A discipline of this sort is intended to be unhurried. A minimum of half an hour is suggested, although a full hour is often more satisfying and fruitful.

Give God the best time of your day, not the “left-overs”. Take this into account in choosing the time you will devote to this discipline.

Choose a text of the Scriptures that you wish to pray. Many Christians use in their daily practice one of the readings from the Eucharistic liturgy for the day or the coming Sunday; others prefer to slowly work through a particular book of the Bible. It makes no difference which text is chosen, as long as one has no set goal of “covering” a certain amount of text: the amount of text “covered” is in God’s hands, not yours.

Choose a place that is quiet, comfortable and affords you the kind of physical space you need. Place yourself in a comfortable yet awake position.

Pray briefly asking the Lord to to guide you and help you to hear his message for you through His Word; reveal His presence and love; and for there to be a “meeting” or “experience of union” between Him and you during this time.

Calm your mind from the busyness of life. Give yourself to your heart's desire to become silent. Breathe deeply and focus on Jesus Christ and His promise to be with you always. Many people have a beloved "prayer word" or "prayer phrase" they gently recite in order to become interiorly silent (i.e., "*For God alone my soul in silence waits*" or "*The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want...*" or "*In Your presence there is fullness of joy..*") or just a short prayer of your own, whatever allows you to set aside the world's clamor and concentrate on your desire to be with the Lord and His great desire to meet with you. Since you are in no hurry, plan on about least 5-10 minutes for this quieting. Often it will take longer to become "centered" in Christ. We are in no rush here. Jesus has all of eternity – so He isn't in a hurry.

Turn to the text and read it slowly, gently. For some, silent reading allows the mind to wander, so reading in a quiet voice is a good idea if the environment allows for it. Savor each portion of the reading, constantly listening for the "still, small voice" of a word or phrase that somehow says, "I am for you today." Do not expect lightning or ecstasies. In *lectio divina* God is teaching us to listen to Him, to seek Him in silence. He does not reach out and grab us; rather, He softly, gently invites us ever more deeply into His presence. Let the words "wander around", echo, and resonate in your mind and heart. Allow the text to sink in and make its own impression. Let associations arise and images surface. If a word or phrase seems especially significant to you, remain with it, turning it over and over. When the sense of immediacy fades, move on in the passage. If the word or phrase returns to you, return to it. Be content to listen simply and openly as a child. As Madame Guyon says, "You should always remember that you are not doing this to gain some rational understanding of what you have read; rather, you are reading in order to turn your mind from outward things to the deep parts of your being. You are not there to learn or to read, but you are there to *experience the presence of your Lord.*"

Receive the word or phrase into yourself as a gift from Him for the purpose of leading you into the experience of union with God. Slowly repeat it to yourself, allowing it to interact with your inner world of concerns, memories and ideas. Do not be afraid of "distractions." Memories or thoughts are simply parts of yourself which, when they rise up are asking to be given to God along with the rest of your inner self. Allow this inner pondering, this rumination, to invite you into dialogue with God. Why is this word for you? What is it about your life right now that needs to hear this word? Is it a word of challenge or promise? Where does the word seem to make its home in you (body, soul, spirit)? What does God seem to be saying?

Speak to God. Let your prayer emerge from your rumination over the word or phrase. Whether you use words or ideas or images or all three is not important. Interact with God as you would with one who you know loves and accepts you. Give to Him what you have discovered in yourself during your meditation. Experience yourself as the priest that you are, as you are moved to pray this "word" for yourself and for others. Let the prayer flow from your heart expressing freely and fully what bubbles to the surface. Experience God using the word or phrase that He has given you as a means of blessing you and others which your pondering on His word has awakened.

Gradually release your prayer for yourself and others. Let it quiet down naturally. Do not rush through the time of prayer. If you do you will find yourself returning to it as “unfinished business”. “Let go” of the word or phrase and the conversation with the Lord as the “point” and let it become a means to a more profound end, namely union with God. This may be the most “disturbing” part of the whole exercise or experience because it is not about labeling but resting the mystery of the satisfaction of “beholding and being beheld”, “loving and being loved in stillness and silence”. The Scriptural passage will fall away. Be patient, let it happen. Do not be surprised when it does happen and dwell on that fact.

Rest in God's embrace. There is no longer any need for words or even thoughts or feelings. “In Him we live and move and have our being” is really true!!

****Note**** When the Lord invites you to return to your pondering of His word or to your inner dialogue with Him, do so. He is in charge. If it is His choice to do so it is always for a perfect reason – trust Him. Even the goal of silence and resting in Him can become an idol if we hold on to it when He wants us to return to a work or phrase. Learn to use words when words are helpful, and to let go of words when they no longer are necessary. Rejoice in the knowledge that God is with you in both words and silence, in spiritual activity and inner receptivity. Sometimes one will return several times to the printed text, either to savor the literary context of the word or phrase that God has given, or to seek a new word or phrase to ponder. At other times only a single word or phrase will fill the whole time set aside for *lectio divina*. It is not necessary to anxiously assess the quality of one's *lectio divina* as if one were "performing" or seeking some goal: *lectio divina* has no goal other than that of fostering an opportunity to be in the presence of God by praying the Scriptures.

Remain silent at the end of the time set aside. Allow yourself to rejoice in and not judge the quality of your time with the Lord through His Word. Reciting the “Our Father” slowly is very often beneficial. Gently return to your day bringing the silence with you into it. Let your reflection and prayer continue inwardly as you move through the rest of the day. At some point during the day “journaling” the word or phrase will be helpful so it does not “get misplaced” or forgotten.

Sources:

Soul Feast, by Marjorie Thompson

Experiencing the Depths of Jesus Christ, by Madame Guyon

Too Deep for Words, by Thelma Hall r.c.