

The Indwelling Word

Meditation in the New Testament

The Reformed Theological Review 51/3, 1992, 81-90

John W Kleinig

In Isaiah 50:4-11 we come across the confession of a man who was a master of meditation. God had opened his ear, so that he could be a perfect hearer. Every morning, when he got up out of bed, God awakened his ear, so that he could hear the voice of God throughout the day. Since he was taught daily by God in the school of life, he was able to sustain other weary people with the Word of God. Now this man's ears had been opened in a strange way. God had opened up his ears for him as he proved his obedience to God in the face of intense suffering. The more he was ridiculed and abused by his enemies, the more he relied on God for his survival and eventual vindication. And the more he relied on God in the darkness of persecution and rejection, the more clearly he heard the voice of God who justified and upheld him.

In this passage, which is the third of the so-called Servant Songs found in Isaiah, we see much more than just the portrait of an ideal sage or perfect prophet; we have here a sketch of Jesus Christ, the Servant of God. He was the perfect listener. As our heavenly 'guru' he is not only the master of meditation but also the best teacher of it. In fact, Christian meditation is unique, because it begins and ends with him. In what follows I shall tentatively examine his teaching on meditation, showing how the teaching about meditation in the Old Testament, as developed in a previous article (*Reformed Theological Review*, 51/2 1992) finds its fulfillment in him.

Jesus as the Master of Meditation

The Gospels are all rather reticent about the spirituality of Jesus. We know from Luke's Gospel that he regularly withdrew from his disciples to be alone with his heavenly Father in some solitary place.¹ This usually happened at night. Luke does not, however, tell us what he used to do then; he merely mentions that he prayed.²

Yet we can get some clues about what happened from John's Gospel. There Jesus frequently asserts that he does not do his own will but the will of his heavenly Father (4:34; 5:30; 6:38; 8:29). This is so because he remains in constant verbal contact with him. As God's Son he rests in the arms of his heavenly Father and hears his very heart beat (1:18). As God's Son he proves to be the perfect student of his Father; he learns from him by listening to him (7:15-16). He therefore speaks only as he hears (3:32; 5:30; 8:26, 40; 14:24; 15:15); he teaches as he himself is taught (8:28); he gives those words which himself receives (17:8). So because he hears his Father's voice, he is never alone

¹ See Luke 4:42; 5:16; 6:12; 9:18, 28; 22:41.

² Luke 5:16; 6:12; 9:18, 28; 22:41. See J. Dupont, 'Jesus and Liturgical Prayer', *Worship* 43 (1969), pp. 198-213, for an assessment of the role of prayer in the life of Jesus.

(8:29). He abides in his Father's love (15:10). He discovers what his Father is doing in the world and so cooperates with him perfectly like a good apprentice with his master (5:20). Jesus then is the master of meditation because he is a perfect listener, whose whole existence and behaviour is governed by his listening.

The writer to the Hebrews adds the final touch to this picture of Jesus as the perfect listener. He reminds us that Jesus had to learn to be listener. In 5:8 he says that 'although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered.' By suffering Jesus became a master of meditation. He had to learn it for himself as a human being in the school of suffering. There he learned what he now teaches us from his own experience, the art of listening to his heavenly Father.

Meditation on God's Word in Luke's Gospel

1. Meditation as the Fruitful Reception of God's Word

Jesus condensed the fruit of his own meditation in the parables which he taught. They were designed to stimulate reflection and to teach the art of meditation. Of all the parables of Jesus the parable of the sower is singled out for special attention in the New Testament, because it teaches the disciples how to understand all other parables of Jesus (Mk 4:13). By his parables Jesus reveals the mystery of God's Kingdom to the disciples (Mk 4:10-11). Only they receive what he offers in the parables.

Now the parable of the sower in Luke contains some significant additions to Mark's version. They have all been added to highlight what kind of hearing will prove productive in the life of the disciple. The Word of God as preached by Jesus in his parables cannot take its desired effect in one's life unless it first produces *the right kind of hearer*. Luke then uses the parable of the sower to teach his readers about the need for meditation on the teaching of Jesus.³

First, the kind of hearing which is compared to the fertile paddock is qualified in several ways in Luke 8:15. Luke does not underline the intellectual side of hearing, as Matthew does, when he equates fruitful hearing with understanding. Instead, Luke shifts the emphasis from hearing the Word to its deliberate retention. The verb to 'hear' ceases to be the main verb and becomes a participle. 'Retain' (*katechousiv*) replaces it to stress the importance of making the Word a permanent possession. This is reinforced by a further addition. Luke stresses the need for 'patience' on the part of the hearer, if the Word is to bear fruit in his life. What's more, Luke adds that the Word must be taken and kept in his 'heart'. It needs to be appropriated, memorised and kept constantly in mind by the hearer so that it can penetrate his whole being. The heart then is the seedbed of the Word. Only if the Word stays there can it both sprout and produce its bumper harvest. The Word requires the soil of 'a noble and good heart'. What Luke seems to imply is that the Word of God must change the hearer's heart into 'a hearing heart', before it can remain there and then bear fruit. The Word itself makes the heart receptive to itself and increases its receptivity, if it is allowed to stay there. Meditation then is the deliberate appropriation

³ I. H. Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1978), p. 324, maintains: 'The point of the parable is, in our view, the importance of hearing and receiving the word of God.'

and retention of God's Word into the heart, so that the whole person is slowly transformed by it and begins to bear its fruit in his behaviour.

Secondly, Luke makes a telling change in 8:16-18 to the parable of the lamp which follows this parable as it does in Mark. In Mark the parable of the lamp refers to the mode of revelation adopted by Jesus, whereas in Luke it has to do with how the word is received by the disciples.⁴ Mark's warning: 'Take heed *what* you hear' (4:24) becomes Luke's counsel: 'Take heed *how* you hear (8:16). For Luke the light of God's grace is concealed in the parabolic Word, so that it can become fixed in the heart of the hearer, like a lamp on a lampstand in a room, and illumine it by its presence there. It needs to be held within a person's mind, if it is to enlighten that mind. Only if it remains there can it be the vehicle of God's good gifts to the disciple of Jesus. As long as he holds the Word in his heart, he will receive more and more blessings from God through it. But the reverse is also true. The person who does not retain the Word in his heart will lose both the Word and its potential benefits. Meditation then is that receptive, retentive, attentive hearing which lets the Word light up the heart of the believer, so that he may thereby receive the fullness of God's grace.

Thirdly, Luke highlights the importance of hearing God's Word properly by relocating the saying about the true relatives from Mark 3:31-35 immediately after the parable of the lampstand. In Mark, Jesus had declared that all those who did the will of God were part of his family; in Luke he says: 'My mother and my brothers are those who hear the Word of God and do it' (8:21). People become relatives of Jesus by hearing his Word and responding appropriately to it. God's Word, which created the family of God, also produces right life style within that family.

2. Nourishment and Enlightenment as the Fruit of Meditation

We find a further treatment of the fruit of proper hearing in Luke 11:27-36. It occurs as part of the controversy of Jesus with the Pharisees in 11:14-54. In it Jesus traces the connection between hearing and receiving illumination.

The discussion begins with the incident where a woman congratulated Jesus for his mother. She said: 'Blessed is the womb that bore you, and the breasts that you sucked' (11:27). To this Jesus retorts rather tartly: 'Blessed rather are those who hear the Word of God and keep it' (11:28). In this response Jesus contrasts those who receive physical life and nourishment from an earthly mother with those who receive spiritual life and nourishment from God's Word. The disciple is created and nourished by the teaching of Jesus. Hence it is of vital importance for him not only to *hear* it but also to *keep* it like a treasure under lock and key in his heart. The verb translated as 'keep' in the RSV (*phulassein*) means to guard something closely, to keep watch over it, to keep it constantly in mind.⁵ The disciple must preserve the Word in his mind, because his

⁴ In line with Matthew 11:33 (Q) Luke also gives a different introduction to the parable and omits the words: 'the measure you give will be the measure you get, and still more will be given to you' (Mk 4:23). Mark seems to take the fruit as the spreading of the gospel. It must not be kept hidden but must be shared with others, if a person is to retain it and receive more blessing from it.

⁵ This same verb translates *shāmar* in the prologue to Proverbs. It appears to be a technical term for the mental conservation of the teacher's words in Pr 4:5; 5:1; 7:1, 2; 8:34. The most precise description of this process of preservation is given in Pr 4:20-23:

spiritual life and being depends on its presence there within him. It brings him the gift of repentance and of life-giving wisdom.

Jesus follows this retort with some sharp criticism of those who seek a sign from him. In answer to the demand for some visible proof of his authority, Jesus asserts that his teaching of divine wisdom as a greater Solomon and his preaching of repentance as a greater Jonah are the only sign which can produce spiritual insight. Enlightenment does not come from looking at Jesus and his miracles but from *listening to his preaching and teaching*. Jesus reveals himself in his Word to those who receive it and believe it. Since Jesus has come, like a lamp, to bring light to people, the lack of illumination does not stem from some deficiency in Jesus. Rather it stems from the lack of receptivity in the mind of the person confronted by Jesus, just as blindness comes from defective eyes rather than the absence of light. Everything then depends on the kind of eyes which a person brings to bear on Jesus. If we are single-mindedly receptive to the light of the gospel proclaimed by Jesus, then our whole being will be full of the light which comes from his presence. The words of Jesus will dispel the darkness of unbelief and make us see the light. But if we refuse to hear and keep his Word, then our whole being will be plunged in total darkness. Even the Word itself will be eclipsed by the lack of receptivity. We will not receive eyes to see and so will not be able to receive light into ourselves. Because we refuse to receive the teaching of Jesus, we will not receive Jesus through it.

In sum, this section of Luke's Gospel describes meditation as *keeping the Word of God in mind until we receive illumination from it*. Just as a baby receives life and nourishment from its mother, so we too need to draw our life from the teaching of Jesus. Moreover, since this teaching is like a lamp in the heart of a person, we can only become filled with the light of his presence and grace if we keep it fixed within us and concentrate our full attention on it. That is the essence of meditation.

3. Mary as a Model of Meditation

Mary the mother of Jesus is presented to us by Luke as a person who practiced the art of meditation. When she heard the Word of God, it did not go in one ear and out of the other without entering her. No, she truly heard the Word of God and kept it (11:28). That qualifies her to receive the blessing of her Son.

When the angel announced the conception of Jesus to Mary, she accepted the Word of God to her, even though she did not understand it. She submitted herself to the will of God for her like a slave woman with her master. She believed that God's Word would find its fulfilment in her (1:45), and so she said: 'Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word' (1:38). She ceased to be the active subject of her own existence and became the passive recipient of God's activity. And that too is our basic stance, when we meditate. We shift from active voice to passive voice in God's

'My Son, be attentive to my words... Keep them within your heart. For they are I to him who finds them, and healing to all his flesh. Keep your heart with all vigilance, for in it are the springs (starting point) of life.'

The words of wisdom need to be preserved within the student's heart as his source of life. Like irrigation canals, they bring life to the very centre of his being from where it can flow and give life to the whole body. The student must therefore, preserve these words to preserve the lifelines of his existence.

presence. Our whole being takes on a listening air. We do not seek to get our own way with God. Rather we let God have his say and let him enact his Word in us. And so the Word of God which became incarnate for us through Mary becomes incarnate in us through our submission to it in meditation. We let it do its work in us and find its fulfilment through us.

This picture of Mary as a model of meditation is sketched out more fully in two other places. In 2:19 Luke tells us that Mary ‘treasured up’ the ‘events’ or ‘words’ of Christ’s birth and ‘kept turning them over in her mind.’ She realized that there was much more to the birth of her son than met her naked eye. She therefore kept puzzling over what had happened to her in the light of the shepherds’ report about the message from the angels. She tried to make sense of it for herself by recalling it and pondering it, by mulling over it and re-enacting the whole business in her mind.

The same thing happened after Jesus had been left behind at the temple. Luke tells us that Joseph and Mary did not ‘understand’ what Jesus had said about himself then (2:50). Yet Mary sensed that it was a matter of great importance to her personally. So she ‘treasured up’ these ‘events’ or ‘words’ in her ‘heart’. She kept recalling them and paid careful attention to them over a long period of time, before they made sense to her and so clarified her relationship with this strange son of hers.

In these descriptions of Mary, Luke employs the language of the wisdom tradition with its emphasis on meditation as *the permanent retention and constant consideration of God’s teaching in the disciple’s heart*. Like a good student of wisdom, Mary tried to make sense of her experience in the light of God’s Word. Her meditation did not focus upon herself or her own experiences, upon her opinions or the opinions of others; it focused on her son Jesus and the Word of God which had been spoken about him and by him. It led her to him as her Saviour (2:11), in whom the treasures of God’s wisdom were hidden and revealed to her.

Meditation on Jesus and His Word in John’s Gospel

1. Meditation as Abiding in the Word of Jesus

In his controversy with the Jews in John 8:31-59 Jesus spells out the close connection between discipleship and his Word. He warned them that, if they wanted to be his disciples, it would not do for them just to hear his words and believe what he said to them. No, his Word had to find room for itself in them (8:37). They had to internalise it; they had to base their whole existence upon it. He expected them to ‘remain’ in his Word (8:31).

By the use of the verb ‘remain’ or ‘abide’ (*menein*) Jesus clarifies the nature of our relationship with his Word.⁶ His Word is not a temporary feature of our relationship with him which, while it may be useful like a crutch in the early stages, can later be discarded as we mature spiritually. It is the permanent basis of our whole association with Jesus.

⁶ See the short discussion of *menein* in R. E. Brown, *The Gospel according to St. John* (London: Chapman, 1966), Vol 1, pp. 510-512, as well as a full treatment in J. Heise, *Bleiben-Menein in den Johanneischen Schriften* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1967).

Apart from his Word we cannot be his disciples. Hence we must 'remain' in it. It must be *the ground for our existence*, if it is to empower us. When we meditate we should therefore not first use his Word to stir ourselves up to think or feel or do something. Rather, by entrusting ourselves to it and its leading, like a person floating in a current of water, we let it become subjectively to us what it is to us objectively. By relying upon it as the basis for our spiritual existence as believers, we allow it to permeate our being and shape our consciousness.

By such self-abandonment to the Word of Jesus we 'remain' in it, just as a branch remains attached to the stock of the vine (15:4), an object remains either in the darkness (12:46) or the light (1 Jn 2:10), or a person remains in the love of a lover (Jn 15:9-10). Meditation then is not the application of the Word to ourselves as the master of our own existence but rather *the entrustment of ourselves to the Word of Jesus as the master of our existence*.

If we live and remain in the then three things will follow (8:3 1). We will be disciples who get to know him learn from him, just as an apprentice in the ancient world got to know his and learnt his trade from him by living with him. We will discover the truth about Jesus as God's Son and of ourselves as children of his heavenly Father through him. By the discovery of this truth in our experience as disciples, we will be set free from illusion, sin and darkness. But all this can only happen to us as long as we abide and dwell in the Word of Jesus. That is what meditation is all about.

The notion of remaining in the Word of Jesus is developed further in John 15:7-10. Just as a branch remains in the stock of the vine, so the disciple must remain attached to Jesus and his love by keeping his commandments. As a result of this, the words of Jesus come to 'remain' in the disciple (15:7). They find their home in his heart and take up residence there. By the process of meditation the external word is internalised and appropriated, so that it can unite the disciple with Jesus and keep him in constant contact with him. Wherever the words of Jesus remain, there Jesus himself remains (15:4, 5). So by letting the words of Jesus 'remain' in him, the disciple remains in Jesus. And this in turn lays the foundation for Christian prayer. If Christ is present in a person through his Word, then that person will be able to pray in his name and have the assurance that his prayer has been heard. *His prayers will be governed by Christ and his word*. His will will be conformed to the will of God. Jesus himself will speak in and through him to his heavenly Father. Because the words of Jesus remain in the disciple, this prayer will be motivated by the intercession of Jesus and included in it.

Meditation then begins with concentration on the Word of Jesus, until it issues in prayer, for it is the words of Jesus which teach us to pray and help us to pray to our heavenly Father. Meditation on the Word precedes prayer, as listening precedes speaking.

2. The Manifestation of Jesus to those who keep His Word

As far as I can gather, the fullest theological treatment of meditation in the New Testament is to be found in John 14:15-24. There Jesus elaborates on the basis and results of Christian meditation in his final discourse to his disciples.⁷

⁷ See R. B. Brown, John Vol. 2, pp. 637-648, for a fine detailed analysis of this section.

The argument in the passage is governed by two demands. First, there is the request from Philip in 14:8 for Jesus to show the Father to them as his disciples. The second is the question of Judas in 14:22 which arises out of the promise by Jesus to manifest himself to the disciples and not to the world. He asks: 'Lord, how is it that you will manifest yourself to us, and not to the world?' In response to these demands Jesus talks about the gift of the indwelling Spirit in vv. 15-17, his own coming to his disciples in vv. 18-21, and the gift of the Father's love which results in the indwelling of both Father and Son in the disciple in vv. 23, 24.

First, Jesus gives *the precondition for meditation*. It is the disciple's love for Jesus (14:15, 21, 24). Faith in him is presupposed, as he is the disciples. In his reference to the need for love, Jesus echoes the words of Dame Wisdom who had asserted in Proverbs 8:17: 'I love those who love me.'⁸ The love of Jesus initiates and informs all Christian meditation. In it the beloved hearkens to the voice of the lover.⁹

Secondly, Jesus establishes *the time for Christian meditation*. It will take place in the period after the 'little while' between his death and resurrection. It occurs in the last times between his visible appearance to the apostles after his resurrection and his public appearance on the Last Day. Meditation is therefore an eschatological activity which anticipates the age to come in the present age.

Thirdly, Jesus describes *the means of meditation*. The disciples must 'possess' and 'keep' his commandments or words (14:21; cf. 14:15, 24). There is no basic difference in meaning between the 'words' and the 'commandments' of Jesus. Both are virtually synonymous.¹⁰ Just as the student of wisdom was urged to appropriate and prize the teaching of his master, so the disciples are encouraged to assimilate and to guard the words of Jesus as their most treasured possession. They are to keep his word, just as he keeps his Father's Word (8:5 5) and commandments (15:10). If they keep his life-giving Word within them, they will never die (8:51-52). Now it is true that, if they 'keep' the Word of Jesus in the very centre of their being, they will also 'obey' it. That Word will permeate their entire personality and govern their whole behaviour. It will enact itself in them. His words can do this, because they are the words of the heavenly Father (14:24). They are effectual words (cf. 6:63). The disciples therefore meditate by allowing the Word to possess their attention and by safeguarding its presence in them as their spiritual lifeline.

Fourthly, Jesus explains *the results of meditation*. Since the three persons of the Holy Trinity are involved in the practice of meditation, all three impinge on the disciple and affect him in some way. The order which Jesus follows in his explanation is the order of experience. In the first place, the person who meditates will come to know the presence of the Holy Spirit in him as a result of the intercession of Jesus. He will know the Spirit,

⁸ See also the Wisdom of Solomon 6:12: 'Wisdom. . . is easily discerned by those who love her.'

⁹ In the prologue to Proverbs the LXX uses *tērein* as a synonym for *phulassein* to translate *nāsar* which is a synonym for *shāmar*. See Prov 3:1, 21; 4:23.

¹⁰ See Brown, *op.cit.*, p. 638, as well as his analysis of *entolē* on pp. 504-505. Like the word of Jesus his command is a life-giving creative command which performs what it says.

because the Spirit will remain and be in him as a permanent resident (14:17).¹¹ Meditation then leads to *the subjective manifestation and personal recognition of the indwelling Spirit in the disciple*.¹² In the second place, Jesus himself promises to ‘come’ to the disciple who keeps his Word.’ By his coming he will share his own eternal life with him (14:19) and show his love to him (14:21). But he will do even more than that; he will manifest himself to him in such a way that the disciple will ‘see’ him. Now this is a very special kind of seeing, as it involves recognition and insight rather than mere physical sight. It sees what remains unseen to the naked eye. The disciple will recognize Jesus in his heavenly Father, himself in Jesus, and Jesus in his disciples (14:20). By recognizing Jesus in his fellow disciples and his own sonship in Jesus, he will know Jesus and behold his glory as the eternal Son of the Father. *Meditation then results in the spiritual perception of oneself, one’s fellow disciples, and Jesus*. In the third place, Jesus explains that, if a person demonstrates his love for Jesus by keeping his Word, the Father will show his love to the disciple in exactly the same way as he shows his love to his Son (14:21, 23; cf. 17:23, 26).¹³ Through the Word both the Father and the Son will ‘come’ to him and make ‘their dwelling place’ with him.¹⁴ That person will become the temple of the Triune God, where God’s glory is present and manifest (cf. Jn 1:14). Then the prophecy of Ezekiel 34:26-28 will be fulfilled in him:

I... will set my sanctuary in the midst of them for evermore. My dwelling place shall be with them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people)

By sharing in the Father’s love for his Son, disciples will have *a foretaste in themselves of the final dwelling of God with his people in heavenly Jerusalem* (Rev 21:1-3). They will not be taken out of this world into some heavenly sphere but will share in the life of God here in this earthly life.

Meditation then culminates in the indwelling of the Father and the Son in the person who loves Jesus and keeps himself fixed on his Word. Thus, Jesus manifests himself to his disciple, so that the disciple can join John in affirming:

‘And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father. . . And from his fullness have we all received, grace upon grace (Jn 1:16).¹⁵

¹¹ Note the strange combination of the present tense of *menei* with the future tense of *estai* in Jn 14:17. Could Jesus be playing on the paradox that, even though the Spirit remains in the disciple, he nevertheless needs to be repeatedly received?

¹² The RSV mistranslates *erchomai* as ‘I will come’ rather than ‘I am coming.’ By the use of the present tense Jesus distinguishes this coming through the Word from his future coming in the parousia.

¹³ In Jn 17:26 the presence of Jesus is equated with the presence of the Father’s love in the disciples. If the Son is in them, then the Father loves them as him and identifies them with him.

¹⁴ John uses the rare noun *monē* here. The only other occurrence of it is the plural form at Jn 14:2 for the ‘rooms’ in the Father’s house.

¹⁵ See also the promises in Lev 26:11 and Zech 2:10. John’s use of temple symbolism here should warn us against taking this discourse too individualistically. Jesus addresses the whole body of the disciples here. We therefore never meditate alone as isolated individuals but as members of Christ’s body. The indwelling of the Father and Son is both personal and corporate according to Jn 14:20 and 17:20-26. We therefore come to recognize the Father, Son and Holy Spirit as much in each other as in ourselves through meditation.

Conclusion

In the New Testament Jesus is depicted as the master of meditation. His whole life was shaped by his constant attention to the Word of his heavenly Father. He is therefore the subject of Christian meditation. He teaches his disciples to meditate on God's Word which he proclaims. His words are aids for meditation to them. They create and direct their meditation. As they meditate on his Word he comes to them and dwells in them. Only because they are united with him as his disciples can they meditate on his words. They therefore do not realize their own spiritual potential by their meditation; they realise his potential and the potential of his word as they meditate. They draw their life and nourishment from him like branches on a vine.

But Jesus is also the object of Christian meditation. The disciple is called to fix his full attention on Jesus. That is the one thing needful. Nothing must take the place of Jesus; nothing must distract the disciple from attending to his Word. Meditation on anything else is therefore of limited and temporary value. Jesus gives his words to the disciple as the substance of his meditation. They contain a hidden treasure and power which is revealed and unleashed in meditation. So then, Christians who meditate *fix their attention on Jesus and his Word*. Through meditation on that Word, the person who through faith stands with Jesus in the Father's presence beholds the hidden glory of the incarnate Word (17:24). That is the spiritual perception which comes through hearing God's Word and meditating on it.