

Reclaiming Our Christ-Centered Lutheran Devotional Heritage

Part 2: Growing in the Gift of Meditating on the Word



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RECLAIMING OUR CHRIST-CENTERED LUTHERAN DEVOTIONAL HERITAGE

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INTRODUCTION

What is the worst curse God can send our way in this life? Isn't it what is mentioned in Amos 8:11?

“The days are coming,” declares the Sovereign LORD,
“when I will send a famine through the land—
not a famine of food or a thirst for water,
but a famine of hearing the words of the LORD.”

There is nothing more awful in this world than when God goes silent. If it is true that “man does not live by bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD” (Deuteronomy 8:3), then the reverse is also true. Where the judgment of Amos 8 falls, real life has ceased even if breathing continues. Where God ceases to speak, there is no longer any source of spiritual life, and we would become, spiritually, precisely what Israel became when this judgment fell: a valley of very dry bones (Ezekiel 37).

¹ This essay is the second of a five part series. The first part of the series (“*Drawing Our Devotional Life from the Gospel*”) sought to explore the gospel-centered approach to personal Word and prayer that has been a hallmark of Lutheran spirituality over the centuries. The next three parts – including this essay - focus one by one on helping us understand a Lutheran approach to the three ways Luther believed God grows a theologian: *meditatio*, *oratio*, and *tentatio*. The fifth part of the series is a resource packet that a pastor can use to plan ways to strengthen his personal time in Word and prayer. That last part also includes books and schedules that some pastors have found useful for their devotional life.

Those who have not read the first part of the series are encouraged to do so before reading this essay since there is a logical flow of thought from that follows along through all four essays.

² The usual order of Luther’s insight on the three tools God uses to shape a theologian has prayer (*oratio*) in the first position. That follows the chronological order of the believer’s daily experience of the devotional life. The believer begins with prayer that God may open their eyes to see wonderful things in his Word (Psalm 119:18), then proceeds into meditation (*meditatio*) on that Word (which fosters and informs more prayer), and finally heads out into the world to face trials and challenges (*tentatio*) which in turn send the believer running back to prayer and meditation (as the pattern begins anew again and again!).

This essay has chosen to reverse that order and focus first on meditation on the Word since that is the center gift of God in the devotional life. It is central because it is the Word (in particular the gospel) that both informs and impels prayer as well as providing the critical insight that allows the believer to perceive accurately what God is doing in the midst of the testings/trials that come their way. Without the truth of God in Christ revealed by the Word, our prayers are foundationless ramblings and our trials meaningless strugglings.

Conversely, beyond the gift of his incarnate Son, what is the greatest blessing that God can send our way in this life? Is it not what is mentioned in Romans 10:8? “The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart,’ that is, the word of faith we are proclaiming.” Since “no eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him” we could never fully grasp the glory of God’s grace if he had not “revealed it to us by his Spirit” (1 Corinthians 2:9). God has not consigned us to a deafening silence from his lips that would spell our disaster as fallen creatures. Instead he has pulled back the veil in his self-revelation and has invited us to seek his saving face (Psalm 27:8).

And he has done so in a way that does not leave us trembling with terror like Israel beneath Mount Sinai, begging for God to stop speaking. Instead, hearing Israel’s prayer on that day (Deuteronomy 18:15-16), God has seen fit to reveal his saving truth not in fear inducing winds, earthquakes, and fires (1 Kings 19:9ff), but in a faith producing gentle whisper of his gospel that comes to us concealed in everyday human words and images in which lives the Spirit of God (John 6:63; Hebrews 4:12). In this gentle whisper his Spirit blows where he pleases (John 3:8).

How important that we not be like the deaf and dumb denizens of Nazareth who could not get past the humble carpenter’s appearance to see the glory of the Word made flesh speaking in their midst. Don’t take offense that God has seen fit to speak to us in a way intended to save us, not blow us away. Other than the eternal Word made flesh, there is no greater gift given to us than the eternal Word that stands written. And we would not know the gift of the former (nor his gifts of baptism and Supper) if it were not for his gift of the latter. If necessary, we should be willing to move heaven and earth to arrive at the spot where God will most assuredly speak to us (Romans 10). But such Herculean effort is not necessary (and could never drag God out of hiding if he did not wish to reveal himself to us). The LORD deigns to give us his Spirit, to greet us morning by morning, in the quiet of our study of his Word. Such is the gracious gift of the Word given in our human words by which the Spirit reveals the incarnate Word! It is that truth of the living and enduring power of the Spirit’s words (Hebrews 4:12) by which our Lutheran devotional heritage emphasizes that meditation on that Word is enjoying a gift from God not presenting a gift to God. *Meditatio* is all grace, all gift!

OVERCOMING SOME OBJECTIONS

But let’s handle right here a key objection, that, perhaps more than any other, gets in the way of this gentle whisper working its quiet wonders on our hearts. It is the busy nature of life, and parish life in particular as is our calling. In survey work done in September 2012 before a presentation to almost 200 called workers in the South Atlantic District of the Wisconsin Synod, this barrier was repeated again and again by the 150 called workers who responded to an in-depth preliminary survey. When asked, “What is the primary obstacle that got in the way of their meditating on the Word?”, comments like these were repeated by the dozen: “Finding enough quiet time for pondering without interruption and being consistent each day with a time of day.” “The greatest challenge for me is taking the time and not thinking about other tasks that need to be done.”

The best way to answer this objection is to take us back to the key distinction from the first essay between viewing our devotional life as a duty we owe to God (in which we are the primary doers) rather than as a gift given to us by God (in which he is the primary doer). Judged by the law, our time in the Word is something we do for God. And, if judged by results seen and tasks accomplished for God and his kingdom, spending time in the Word does not seem to equal in importance many of the other things clamoring for our time and attention during the day. What is more, we might add, many of those tasks come directly from the various callings in life that God himself has given us (pastor, husband, father, etc.). If from that long list of “to do’s” what ends up left undone is our time in the Word, few if any people will reproach us for that “task” left undone. The opposite is often true if what is left undone ends up being tasks on our “to do” list that more evidently reflect our responsibilities towards others. And so we can reason that since God knows he’s given us all these things to do, surely he will understand if, in the midst of all he’s given us to do, that we fail “to do” for him time in Word and prayer. Since we are already involved in so many things we must “do” for God, surely he will understand!

But all our arguments run out of breath if time in the Word is not primarily about *our “doing” for God* but is preeminently about *his doing for us*. Everything changes if what happens in that time in the Word is that the vital, life-giving breath of the Spirit is being breathed into us. What if this time in the Word is, at its heart, the time God serves us so that we can remember who we are in our primary calling as child of God and so that we have the strength and wisdom for how to serve him by serving others in all the other callings he has given us? Then suddenly this item sitting on our “to do” list (which, actually, is on God’s “to do” list!) rises up above anything and everything found on our list.³ God even knows, in his wisdom and might, how to dispense with ten (or a thousand) things on our “to do” list while we pause for him to fulfill the #1 task on his daily to do list: to feed our souls with his grace.⁴ When items on our “to do” list for God are rightly compared with this item on God’s “to do” list for us, is the comparison even close?

That brings us to the heart of the matter, doesn’t it? To exalt our doing over God’s doing is precisely the choice our sinful nature, left to its own logic, makes every time. We tend to trust that we will do a better job on our “to do” list than God will do on his. I can see what I do. I cannot see what he’s doing! In that gap I find plenty of room for doubt and the fearful frenzy of human activity!

Was that not one of the besetting sins of Israel?

In repentance and rest is your salvation, in quietness and trust is your strength, but you would have none of it. You said, “No, we will flee on horses.” Therefore you will flee!

³ This is being said knowing full well that God can allow true emergencies of other people in need that may call us away to serve them no matter what we had planned for that time. However, if we are honest with ourselves, isn’t it more often true that the “emergencies” that arise come from our failure to prioritize for what is truly important or our failure to plan ahead for routine tasks of life and ministry? Such, at least, is my confession!

⁴ And who of us has not experienced the opposite of this truth? By neglecting what God wanted “to do” for us, our frustration from facing tasks with our spiritual tanks on empty means that five simple tasks chase us around all day because we lack the wisdom and strength to deal with them wisely and well. Does this remind you of Israel, who, as they trusted in God, had been assured that five would chase a hundred (Leviticus 26:8) but who in their stubbornness found out instead that one enemy could chase a thousand of them (Deuteronomy 32:30)?

You said, "We will ride off on swift horses." Therefore your pursuer will be swift! A thousand will flee at the threat of one; at the threat of five you will all flee away (Isaiah 30:15-17).

God called them to humble repentance and quiet rest in his grace. He called them to put their hope in what he would do for them. But they would not trust him. They allowed what they could do again and again to trump what God promised that he would do for them.

A stunning concrete evidence of this tendency among God's Old Testament people was their failure to observe the "Sabbath year" (Leviticus 25:1-12; 26:34). Every seventh year God invited Israel to live by faith in a most evident way. They were to leave the ground unplanted and live off what God allowed to grow by itself. For those who were essentially subsistence farmers, this called for great trust in the LORD to provide. As far as we know from the pages of Scripture, no Sabbath year was ever celebrated in Israel. In fact, when the time came for the seventy year captivity in Babylon, it is instructive to note that God proclaimed that he was giving the Sabbath rests to the land that Israel, in its unbelief, had refused to give it (2 Chronicles 36:21).

All of which leads me to exclaim, "[Lord], I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!" (Mark 9:24). How often I have raced off breathlessly to the tasks of the day, convinced that since God had given me so much to do that he would understand if I didn't "do" for him that day by sitting down with his Word. How backwards! How arrogant! How foolish! With what patience God pleads with me to step away from my "to do" list, which often leaves me weary and burdened, so that I can find rest as God "does" for me (Matthew 11:25-30). It is still true that "in repentance and rest is [our] salvation, in quietness and trust is [our] strength." When God invites me to sit down to ponder his Word, he is not trying to frustrate me by adding another burden to a list of tasks that is already too long. Instead, God is seeking to give me strength by reminding me that his "It is finished!" - and all the rest of his doing - trumps everything I will do that day!

And yes, my dear brothers, that also answers the unique "corban" excuse I am tempted to hurl God's way when it comes to my devotional life as a called worker. And what is that? It's this rationalization: I am already so busy with the Word in my pastoral office that personal devotional time in the Word is utterly superfluous.

My brothers, I would be dipping into legalism just as rancid as anything listed earlier in this essay if I would insist, "Your pastoral time in the Word doesn't count in showing the obedience to God you owe him! Scripture proclaims clearly that you must keep in completely separate categories your professional use of the Word and your private use of the Word. So repent!"

How ridiculous! Why? Well, first of all, when we approach our ministerial time in the Word with the mindset that the sermon, Bible class (etc.) is first aimed at our own heart, such a "devotional" use of the Word will reap rich blessings for us long before what we teach or proclaim benefits another soul. I will freely confess that one of the great sadnesses I felt in leaving the parish was the loss of the weekly in-depth study of a portion of God's Word as I

prepared to preach. It is one of the reasons I have remained a pulpit assistant for all my years as a seminary professor so that I am at least doing this once a month.

Second, the whole approach of “that doesn’t count for your obligation to God” is precisely the legalism we must seek to root out of our thinking. I dare not bash you over the head with that which we have consigned to the rubbish heap of sub-biblical motivation.

But, that doesn’t mean there are not very real reasons to caution us against the practice of routinely assuming that study for preaching and teaching is an adequate substitute for personal study of the Word. Why? We all know in the press of the duties of the ministry, how easily our study of the Word shifts from a devotional mentality of being a consumer of the Word (“Speak, Lord, your servant is listening!”) to a merely practical mentality of being a producer of spiritual words (“Lord, don’t you know that Sunday is coming, and I need something to say?”). Because the means of grace are the tools of our trade by which we feed the hungry souls of others, we can very easily slip into becoming merely wholesalers of the Word. We can end up being merely distributors who parcel out to others what brings refreshment to their souls, but all the while our own souls are more and more anything but refreshed. Listen to the confession of a Lutheran pastor.

Pastors face unique problems, I believe, in keeping fresh spiritually. For one thing, the spiritual disciplines we learned as children and young adults are now the tools of our trade. For me, scripture, prayer, and worship became overfamiliar and lost much of their mystery. It was difficult to read the Bible devotionally when I knew I had to prepare a sermon from those texts. I felt so much pressure to come up with something meaningful to say that I read the Bible as though I were on a scavenger hunt! Everything I read was directed towards others' spiritual needs and not my own. (Oswald 1995, 93)

All of which confronts us with the very real danger Paul identified when he warned about preaching to others while we ourselves become “disqualified for the prize” (1 Corinthians 9:27). Which, in turn, brings us back to the most compelling rationale for setting aside time, yes, even in the busy world of parish ministry, for God’s “to do” list for me. Satan likes nothing more than to cause a shepherd to stumble in his faith since lambs and sheep are following that shepherd. While all God’s people are marked for slaughter (Romans 8:36), it is especially those in public ministry whom Satan loves to “sift...like wheat” (Luke 22:31).

But that is precisely why Jesus, who has prayed for us no less than he prayed for Peter (Luke 22:32), also chooses to hold his “angels” in his hand as he vigilantly walks among his churches (Revelation 1:20). And how does he perform that task of holding you in his hand? When you, poor sinner and exalted saint that you are, sit down before his Word to take a “to do” load off your feet. There he performs that task for his “angels” precisely as he has promised: he grasps you in the strong hand of his grace!

Allow another brother to address you with this same encouragement in his own words.

For starters, let's pretend we are not pastors, we don't have our congregations to go back to, we don't belong to a synod – named WELS, we don't have the problems of our people weighing down our hearts and minds; but instead, we find ourselves in front of the empty tomb and having our Risen and Victorious Lord and Savior looking at us eye to eye and comforting us with his Word. It is here where I begin my day most every day. It is here and only here that I find my forgiveness, my security, my comfort, and my eternity. It is here that I hear and see the peace

that surpasses all understanding. It is here that God rescues me from the mire and muck of life, sets my feet upon the Rock, and gives my heart a firm place to stand and a new song to sing. It is here that I see what God's love has done for me and what it is still doing to me in my daily walk of life. Brothers, Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Let the cradle, cross, and empty tomb greet you every morning; otherwise – your problems, deficiencies, your flock's problems and deficiencies will instead greet you. I don't know about you but I would rather wake up every morning and have my Savior's cradle, cross, and empty tomb greet me, rather than anything else.

So, my first practical advice to you, which is nothing new at all, is to read the Word, rejoice over the Word, don't focus on your workload, but instead focus and fill yourself up with what the empty tomb declares to us: GOD AND SINNERS RECONCILED! (Schulz 2007, 1–2)

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO MEDITATE ON THE WORD?

As we seek to set such time aside for God to work his wonders on us through his Word, that leads to the next challenge: what does it mean to meditate on the Word? That is no idle or obvious question. We may be at least two generations removed from a time that personal and/or family devotions could be considered the experience of the majority of Lutherans.⁵ For many of those entering public ministry, the concept of a devotional use of the Word, when no academic course or ministry duty is requiring such study, is not something they feel especially well prepared to pursue. We know how to approach the Word when there's a task to accomplish like organizing a sermon or Bible class, but what do we do when there is no "product" to produce other than a crucified old self and a renewed new self? When this author annually leads seminary seniors in a workshop that includes ideas for studying the Word devotionally, it is not unusual for seniors to comment that no one had ever shown them exactly what that meant.⁶

So, as we seek to define what it means to mediate on God's Word, John Kleinig offers us a very helpful set of three assumptions.

Christian meditation is based on three very important truths. The first is that the risen Lord Jesus is mysteriously present with His disciples as he promised in Matthew 28:20: "I am with you always, to the end of the age." This truth, that is, Christ's presence, makes Christian meditation different from other techniques that either relive past events or visualize a desirable

⁵ While I have unsuccessfully searched long and hard for the documented details, Pastor Wayne Mueller reports on two surveys done by the Lutheran Layman's League of the LCMS. The first survey was done at the time of the First World War, and it indicated a slight majority of LCMS homes in which the Word was shared devotionally on a regular basis. The second survey, done after the Second World War, revealed that the percentage of homes in which the Word was regularly shared devotionally had fallen into the teens. Bringing this to our day, Pastor Mueller commented that in leading workshops for congregational leaders around our synod, he typically found this practice to be single digit rare.

⁶ If this is true of those completing 8 to 12 years in our ministerial education system, consider the implications for the pastoral ministry challenge of helping members of our congregations to develop a regular devotional life! To merely thunder from the pulpit about the importance of personal devotions or a "family altar" may mean that, for many of our people, we are speaking about some mysterious unknown activity. ("Do you build this altar you are talking about out of maple or oak?") Of course, merely thundering about this from "on high" also may mean that our people may completely miss the beauty of our Lutheran devotional heritage. Without intending to, we may be cementing in their minds the "do a favor for God" approach to devotional life that inherently clings to our sinful nature!

scenario. When we meditate on Jesus, we aren't playing mind games; we don't fantasize and imagine unrealities. We envisage what we know to be true. We interact with Christ, who is actually present with us invisibly. He would indeed be visible and audible if we but had eyes to see and ears to hear. Thus, when we meditate on a story from the Gospels, the risen Lord Jesus ministers to us just as He ministered to people when He was visibly and palpably present 2,000 years ago.

The second truth is that Christ's Word has life-giving power because it is inspired by the Holy Spirit (John 6:63). This truth is the foundation for the teaching and practice of meditation in the Church. Unlike human words, which accomplish comparatively little or nothing, Christ's Word is powerful and effective. It does what it says. So, when Jesus speaks of healing and forgiveness, He actually heals and forgives people through His Word. He speaks with authority and power. His words are active and performative because they are inspired by and filled with the Holy Spirit. Through His Word Jesus gives His Holy Spirit and grants eternal life to those who trust in Him. His Spirit and His Word belong together and work together. Through faithful meditation on Christ's Word we receive the Holy Spirit and experience the power of the Spirit in our lives.

The third truth is that God the Father has justified us by His grace through our faith in Christ and His Word. Luther explores the connection between justification by grace and meditation in his commentary on Psalm 1. He notes that "delight" in God's Word leads to meditation on it. The problem is that those who lack the assurance of salvation fear and despise His Word because it reveals their guilt and makes them try to justify themselves before God. Their uneasy conscience distorts their hearing of His Word and so prevents them from receiving His good gifts. Since they take no delight in God's Word, they have little or no interest in it. The righteous, those who are sure of God's approval and depend on Christ for their salvation, delight in God's Word because it justifies them and brings the blessings of God to them as a free gift. For them, meditation is a joyful exercise of their faith in Christ; through it they receive the gifts of God and have Him do His work in them. So faith in Christ provides the foundation for fruitful meditation on God's Word. By faith, meditation becomes an experience of God's grace rather than just another futile attempt at self-justification and spiritual self-advancement. (Kleinig 2008, 96–98)

With these three truths, Kleinig seeks to help us to approach meditation on the Word from the side of God's grace and gift. He is urging us to approach the Word as those who know we are dearly loved children who find in that Word the powerful voice of him who is truly present with us every moment.

However, because meditation is so diversely defined, and because many patterns suggested for meditation turn the Word merely into a launching pad for that which proves to be little different from eastern mysticism, three additional touchstones may prove helpful. These touchstones seek to guard us from missing the heart of what Christian meditation on the Word is all about. While there is not one "divinely authorized" pattern for precisely how to meditate on the Word, these three touchstones can help us evaluate any method for meditating on the Word that is being promoted.

Touchstone #1: Does the method of meditation being suggested focus my attention on the external Word rather than on my internal thoughts? So much of what today – and through the centuries - tries to pass itself off as Christian meditation merely uses the Word as a springboard to supposedly higher or more sublime communion with God. Yet there is no higher communion with God in this life than paying close attention to what God has said in Word (which includes, of course, the Word combined with a visible element in the sacraments). Methods that don't keep us focused on the external Word end up exalting the mind of sinful man over the mind of

the Spirit. Only the Spirit knows the thoughts of God (1 Corinthians 2:11), and beyond what he has revealed in Scripture we have no access to God's thoughts. In fact, it is foolish and dangerous arrogance to seek to probe unbidden into the mind of God beyond what he has told us. The more we stay focused on "What is God saying here?" the safer is the ground on which we stand.

Touchstone #2: Is the method suggested for meditation designed to slow me down long enough that I have time to imitate Mary (Luke 2:19; 51) by pondering in my heart these things God has revealed to me? That is especially important not only when I am navigating in more obscure corners of the Word, but when I am walking in those bright and well-known scriptural rooms in which we feel comfortable instantly. When we assume that we already know quite well what we have just read, we miss new depth and beauty of its application to our hearts and lives. Convinced we know everything about that text, we fail in our arrogance to approach like little children to be taught and instructed. We end up so full of our own thoughts about the selected reading that we miss God's own. Every good method of meditation on the Word is designed to slow you down so that the Spirit has plenty of time to have his way with your heart!

Touchstone #3: Does the method suggested give evidence that it comes from someone who understands that the gospel is the beating heart of Scripture? Does the method suggested understand the law as the handmaiden of the gospel? Does the theology behind the method understand that the law's most critical task is to help me see daily my deep and ongoing need for God's grace to me in Jesus? Is the method aware that the study of Scripture is not about being able to pass a test on Bible trivia, but about remaining wise for salvation and finding the power of the gospel to live out more evidently who we already are in Christ? Is the method always looking to help me see new wonders of that grace?

And while repeating that there is no one divinely ordained method for studying the Scripture, yet Kleinig's three assumptions, as well as these three touchstones, would both commend highly the method Luther expounded in his treatise ***A Simple Way to Pray***. As he wrote to Peter the Barber, and to all of us with him, Luther pulls aside the curtain to his inner chamber and allows us to look over his shoulder as he communes with God.

The basic core of his "method" for meditating on the Word is a set of four questions by which Luther seeks to incorporate an insight he noted from the Hebrew words for "meditating" on the Scriptures. Luther noted that the words used, in particular in the psalms, call for a quiet yet audible repeating or murmuring of the Word to oneself. The encouragement appears to be to turn God's words over and over with mouth and mind to ponder them first from one angle, and then from another.

In ***Eat This Book***, the author Eugene Peterson captures that same insight Luther was seeking to incorporate with his four questions. After Peterson tells us a brief story about listening to his dog utter low "growls" of satisfaction over a bone, he writes:

I always took delight in my dog's delight, his playful seriousness, his childlike spontaneities now totally absorbed in "the one thing needful." But imagine my further delight in coming upon a phrase one day while reading Isaiah in which I found the poet-prophet observing something similar to what I enjoyed so much in my dog, except that his animal was a lion instead of a dog: "As a lion or a young lion growls over his prey..." (Isa. 31:4). "Growls" is the word that caught my attention and brought me that little "pop" of delight. What my dog did over his precious bone, making those low throaty rumbles of pleasure as he gnawed, enjoyed, and savored his prize, Isaiah's lion did to his prey. The nugget of my delight was noticing the Hebrew word here

translated “growl” (*hagah*) but usually translated “meditate,” as in the Psalm 1 phrase describing the blessed man or woman whose “delight is in the law of the LORD,” on which “he meditates day and night” (vs.2). Or in Psalm 63: “when I think of thee upon my bed, and mediate on thee in the watches of the night” (v. 6). But Isaiah uses this word to refer to a lion growling over his prey the way my dog worried a bone.

Hagah is a word that our Hebrew ancestors frequently used for reading the kind of writing that deals with our souls. But “meditate” is far too tame a word for what is signified. “Meditate” seems more suited to what I do in a quiet chapel on my knees with a candle burning on the altar, or to what my wife does while sitting in a rose garden with the Bible open in her lap. But when Isaiah’s lion and my dog meditated they chewed and swallowed, using teeth and tongue, stomach and intestines: Isaiah’s lion meditating his goat (if that’s what it was); my dog meditating his bone. There is a certain kind of writing that invites this kind of reading, soft purrs and low growls as we taste and savor, anticipate and take in the sweet and spicy, mouth-watering and soul-energizing morsel words – “O taste and see that the LORD is good!” (Ps. 34:8). Isaiah uses the same word (*hagah*) for the cooing of a dove (38:14). One careful reader of this text caught the spirit of the word when he said that *hagah* means that a person “is lost in his religion,” which is exactly what my dog was in his bone. (Peterson 2009, 1–2)

So, what Luther is seeking to provide to us in his four questions is room to get lost in the portion of Scripture we are reading. He is urging us not to gulp our spiritual food, but to chew long enough to taste the goodness of our dear God in the particular passage set before us. He is seeking to slow us down so that what we could mindlessly read in five minutes becomes instead the savored delight of our hearts. Yes, that’s true even when what we meditate on crucifies our old self! Faithful are even the wounds inflicted by our heavenly Friend (Proverbs 27:6).

And what precisely are Luther’s four questions? As you read ***A Simple Way to Pray***, Luther doesn’t immediately hand his barber, or us, his method for meditating. His treatise begins by talking about meditating on the Lord’s Prayer, but in that section he does not so much hand us his method as give us an example of the kinds of things he ponders as he works his way through that prayer. But when he comes to the next section, on the Ten Commandments,⁷ Luther gives us the “behind the scene” glimpse of the “tools” he uses to mediate on the Word before him.

If I have more time than the Lord’s Prayer requires, I do the same thing with the Ten Commandments. By taking each one piece by piece, I can more readily concentrate upon it prayerfully. I divide each commandment into four parts, thinking of it in terms of a wreath made of four strands. For example, I approach every commandment as a lesson in itself, as it is meant to be. I ask myself, what does the Lord God expect of me? Secondly, I find in it a source

⁷When reading ***A Simple Way to Pray***, it is important to remember the context. Luther is writing in a setting in which the ownership of books was rare, and so was the ability to read them. While no one knows for sure, scholars tend to estimate the literacy rate of Germany at the time of the Reformation somewhere between the high single digits to the mid-teens. Luther, ever the practical theologian, therefore is emphasizing the careful pondering of information Peter and many other Christians would have known by heart: the Ten Commandments, the Apostles Creed, and the Lord’s Prayer. While we are foolish if we determine such pondering of well-known biblical truth is kindergarten material that we’ve long since mastered, it would be a distortion of Luther’s point to conclude that he isn’t encouraging a broader sampling of the Scripture where the availability of copies of the written Word and the ability to read that Word were available. He says so in at least a couple places in this treatise (5, 29).

of thanksgiving; then an opportunity for confession; and, finally, an occasion for prayer. (Luther 1983, 15)

Most often you will see his “four strands” worded as four questions. The first question is this:

What does the Lord God expect of me?

Here, remember that he is listing his strands in the midst of pondering the Commandments. That is why, when most people list Luther’s first question, they tend to word it in a way that doesn’t lean either to law or gospel but encompasses them both: *What is God saying to me here?* If we were reading a section of gospel, the question might be reframed, *What promise is God giving me here?* No matter how we phrase the first question, this first strand is seeking to slow us down long enough to gain one thing: an understanding of precisely what God says and means in the particular words from Scripture we are pondering at that moment.

The second strand, turned into a question in a manner similar to the first is this:

For what does this lead me to give thanks?

Here Luther is urging us to look for gifts and blessings that God is giving to his world — to us and/or others. We are looking for where God is showing himself as the LORD, the God of free and faithful grace, and as the God who in justice refuses to let evil prosper. We are seeking to understand what insights this portion of Scripture adds to why we can “Rejoice in the Lord always” (Philippians 4:4).⁸

The third strand, once again put into question format is:

What sins does this lead me to confess?

Remember again the first of Luther’s 95 Theses: “When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, ‘Repent’ (Matthew 4:17), he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.” It is critical that we be constantly on the watch for where our natural hearts are being deceived by the lies of Satan. As we stand before his Word, God is teaching us to abandon hypocrisy, for we are studying “the word of God [that is] living and active.” It is “sharper than any two edged sword.” As we study that Word we will be reminded powerfully again and again that “nothing in all creation is hidden from God’s sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account” (Hebrews 4:12-13). How important to remember that

⁸ At this point some Lutherans, conscious of the proper distinctions between law and gospel, invert Luther’s order to include confession (the third strand) before thanksgiving (the second strand). For many years I followed that “inversion” of Luther’s second and third strands as well. But certainly Luther’s order was not revealing a lack of perception about the distinction of law and gospel. Instead, might there be some wisdom in allowing us to begin applying the Word to ourselves by pondering the wisdom of Paul’s encouragement to think about “whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – if anything is excellent or praiseworthy” (Philippians 4:8)? Is not the pattern of thinking about good gifts of God even as we head toward confession the same pattern we find in our common confession in the liturgy where the first words are, “**Beloved** in the Lord...”? Finally, there is often no more crushing cause to run to God in confession than to ponder his goodness, for there we discover how slow we often are to remember his kindness to us. Viewed psychologically, I often find myself “disarmed” by pondering God’s blessings in the second strand as I am being prepared to be “laid bare” by the third strand. Is Luther allowing us to be involved in some pleasant conversation with our Lord as we head towards what feels, at first, to be quite unpleasant (at least to our sinful nature who is being crucified all over again)?

those who know the grace of God have nothing to fear, no matter what evil the Word reveals in our hearts. Before we ever confess with our lips the wickedness hiding in our hearts or already showing in our lives, God with whom we are speaking already knew the state of your heart and mine. There is no sin his Word reveals for which the blood of Jesus is not sufficient. There is no failure on my part for which the life of Christ hasn't already provided perfection. In Jesus, we are given a confidence to speak with a depth of honesty that the world will never understand!

The fourth strand, also put into question format is:

For what does this lead me to pray?

As I ponder the Word, what needs of heart and life for myself and others come to mind? If you have found a promise of God, pray it. You don't even need to ask, "If you will..." since you know what his will is. His own promise reveals it to you. Essentially, what we are doing, is praying the gift of God's words back to him using God's gift of prayer! The latter gift will be the focus of the entire next section of this essay!

As shared with his barber, such was Luther's pattern in pondering Biblical truth in his personal devotional time in the Word. And if you wonder whether following this pattern would mean spending 30 minutes (or more) on a brief excerpt of Scripture you could read in less than 5, the answer to that question is: "Yes!" But that is not a miscalculation on Luther's part. It is his intended design! Chew the bone!

SOME PRACTICAL ENCOURAGEMENTS AND WARNINGS RELATED TO *MEDITATIO*

Before bringing this essay on *meditatio* to a close, allow a potpourri of practical encouragements and warnings.

Perhaps the most frequent frustration in regard to meditation on the Word that was expressed in the September 2012 survey of called workers in the South Atlantic District would be summarized by these two survey responses:

- "Thinking about the responsibilities of the day and not slowing down to reflect and enjoy the voice of God."
- "Taking time to ponder. I seem to be in a hurry to get to other tasks that I fail to soak it all in."

As many others have expressed it before, both of these sample comments reflect the challenge of being a Mary in a Martha world. How do you keep your mind focused on the Word before you when the world and its urgent concerns are seeking to press in all around you? While the chief answer has really been expounded above (remember who is serving whom!), here are some practical encouragements that may also prove helpful:

- ***Avoid distractions!*** Get away from as many other distractions as possible by finding a quiet place that you associate with meditating on the Word. More than a few called workers report going into the sanctuary for their devotional time, away from the sights and sounds of the "office" (with all the distractions of other tasks screaming from the elevated pulpit-piles on your desktop). If using the early morning hours, is it almost essential that emails and texts be left unchecked until after you have checked in with your heavenly Father.

- ***Don't be iconoclasts!*** Many have found that Christian artwork can prove helpful in getting their minds to focus in on the task at hand. There are three pieces of artwork that surround me in the spot I have chosen to sit each day for my devotional time: a copy a seminary student made for me of J.P. Koehler's painting of the parable of the lost son, a picture of Jesus mourning over Jerusalem received by my father in 1941 from his Sunday School teachers in La Crosse, and a drawing given to me by the members of Calvary, Thiensville, that shows a man pondering Psalm 1 by a quiet stream while the face of Jesus (hidden until you look carefully) beams over him.
- ***Secure a regular appointment in your calendar!*** Setting aside a definite time each day for devotional life helps orient thoughts towards meditation almost before beginning. What is more, knowing that this is a regularly devoted time of the day keeps you from feeling quite so much the pressure to move on to other things. In the survey done with the South Atlantic district, those who set aside a regular time of day for Word and prayer were ***twice*** as likely to spend 5-7 days a week in devotional study of the Word. What is more, they tended to spend more time on each of those days since they weren't looking to "squeeze in" Word and prayer "somewhere" during the day.
- ***Just sit there!*** In that same survey, one called worker noted: "Two minutes of quiet, still time ('meditation' unfocused) before starting really allows me to fully focus when study begins."
- ***Distractions may be your friends!*** Understand that many things we might at first label as distracting thoughts may not be. They may be cause for prayer and challenges the Word you are about to read will be addressing. Here too God can make all things serve our good!

But perhaps no encouragement can be more useful in gaining focus than this: pray for the gift of being able to focus on the Word! Pray for the gift of the Holy Spirit whom Jesus promises that our Father in heaven loves to give to his children (Luke 11:13). To put this another way, here again you are shifting something from your "to do" list ("I've got to figure out a way to stay focused!") to God's list ("Lord, send your Holy Spirit that above all the clamor and clatter of life I may hear his gentle whisper speaking through these words!"). The words of the hymn writer come to mind:

Lord, open now my heart to hear,
And through your Word to me draw near.
Let me your Word e'er pure retain;
Let me your child and heir remain. (CW 282:1)

Or the words of the psalmist:

Open my eyes that I may see
wonderful things in your law. (Psalm 119:18)

The next warning is to be careful that we don't set ourselves up for needless discouragement by having an unreal expectation that each time we read the Word we are going to experience absolute joy and delight because we always clearly perceive how God is speaking to our hearts and lives.

Yes, there are those days, to use Luther's language, when "the Holy Spirit is preaching." Listen, as in the midst of talking about meditating on the petitions of the Lord's Prayer, Luther speaks to his barber about such joyful experiences.

It happens often that in my meditation I run across such rich thoughts, that I disregard the other six petitions. When such a wealth of ideas comes, one should forego other petitions and make

room for such thoughts, listen silently, and certainly not hinder them from coming. Under such conditions the Holy Spirit is preaching and in his sermon one word is better than a thousand in our prayer. I have learned much more from this kind of listening than I could have from much reading and reflection. (Luther 1983, 12–13)

Yet such is by no means the norm, and I would even, having experienced longer stretches of time that felt more like wandering in the wilderness than entering heaven, argue that Luther's word "often" may be a bit much. At times it will seem that what we have just read may have little or nothing to do with what is on our heart and mind at that moment. The reading and our lives may seem to be existing in non-intersecting universes. In his book *Life Together*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer eloquently speaks of those times we seem to have no "experience" of God's blessing while meditating on his Word.

It is not necessary that we should have any unexpected, extraordinary experiences in meditation. This can happen, but if it does not, it is not a sign that the meditation period has been useless. Not only at the beginning, but repeatedly, there will be times when we feel a great spiritual dryness and apathy, an aversion, even an inability to meditate. We dare not be balked by such experiences. Above all, we must not allow them to keep us from adhering to our meditation period with great patience and fidelity.

It is, therefore, not good for us to take too seriously the many untoward experiences we have with ourselves in meditation. It is here that our old vanity and our illicit claims upon God may creep in by a pious detour, as if it were our right to have nothing but elevating and fruitful experiences, and as if the discovery of our own inner poverty were quite below our dignity. With that attitude we shall make no progress. Impatience and self-reproach will only foster our complacency and entangle us ever more deeply in the net of self-centered introspection. But there is no more time for such morbidity in meditation than there is in the Christian life as a whole. We must center our attention on the Word alone and leave consequences to its action. For may it not be that God Himself sends us these hours of reproof and dryness that we may be brought again to expect everything from His Word? "Seek God, not happiness" — that is the fundamental rule of all meditation. If you seek God alone, you will gain happiness: that is its promise. (Bonhoeffer 1954, 83–84)

What else can we say when we seem to read and lack understanding?⁹ How about the advice of James? "If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it

⁹ Perhaps here could also be added the rebuke of August Pieper who noted that if we spent as much time with the Scriptures as we do with the newspaper (or today he might have said: surfing the web), so much more would be clear to us. Too often we are needlessly suffering from the long term effects of – to twist a common sports malady – "non-repetitive use injury." Here is the quotation itself:

We American pastors, also we who are German-Americans, with the exception of a few bookworms, study too little. Only too often we are satisfied with what we learned in school. When we are in the ministry, we do not of our own accord continue the studies we were more or less forced to pursue when we were in school. We read a lot, but we don't study. Reading is entertainment, whiling away the time; study is hard work. We so easily become lazy in the study. Oh, how the reading of newspapers, magazines, and novels makes a person indolent and superficial, how it kills the spirit and pollutes and brutalizes the soul. But theology, which is part and parcel of our sacred office, we do not study. Most days of the week we may even leave the Bible itself unopened on our desk. In the parsonage, in the pastor's study, in his little den are the sources of the church's strength. If this little den becomes cold and empty, or if it is dedicated to the Old Adam and the spirit of this world, the church's strength will evaporate, and the spirit of the world will overwhelm it. If, on the other hand, the Spirit's fire burns in the

will be given him” (James 1:5). God has no desire to leave you in the spiritual dark. He who once by his almighty Word shone light into the darkness of the universe is still not hard pressed to cause the light of his Word to illumine our hearts (2 Corinthians 4:6).

Perhaps another word from James would prove helpful right here. As he encouraged believers to remember that the Last Day is coming he made a comparison to the work of a farmer. “See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop and how patient he is for the autumn and spring rains” (James 5:7). What is true about patiently waiting for the Last Day, can also be applied to patiently waiting for God’s Word to bear fruit in our lives. Our present day cultural immaturity — spurred on by the immediacy of digital communication — that forever sees only the “now” can easily forget that what I read today may only be God’s initial planting. Over the course of days or months God is going to water and water and water until it bears a harvest at just the right time.

Do you want a case in point? What was so urgent in Luke 10 about Martha sitting down with Mary to listen to the words of comfort Jesus had for both of them? Might at least part of the reason have been that words of gospel comfort spoken that day would bear fruit when their dear brother would die in the not too distant future? And if Martha did sit down, then what we hear from her mouth in John 11:17-27 would be evidence of Jesus’ words bearing fruit at the proper time. Here’s how Thomas à Kempis makes the same point as he puts these words into God’s mouth:

Write My words in your heart, and meditate diligently on them; for in time of temptation they will be very needful. What you understand not when you read, you shall know in the day of visitation. In two ways I am wont to visit Mine elect, namely, with temptation and with consolation. (à Kempis 1958, 99)

Of course, the clearest promise of the often “delayed reaction” of the Word can be found in the familiar words of Isaiah 55:10-11. At least in the less temperate climates of the earth, consider how long the snows of winter seem to delay in making the earth bud and flourish. Yet they do not fail to accomplish that purpose. “So is my word that goes out from my mouth.”

Allow two more quick practical encouragements as we close out this section on *meditatio*. First, will we read directly from Scripture or will we use a devotional tool in which someone else is sharing with us the

pastor’s praying and studying, new streams of his Spirit will flow out daily to God’s people. But that is the great evil of the church in our day: we pastors and teachers of the church do not study enough, and we pray even less. We are so busy with ecclesiastical externals, and our spiritual life is all too sterile. The latter ought to be first and foremost and govern the former. We make externals the important thing and forcibly dry up our inner, spiritual life. The result is that we become more and more stunted as far as having the Holy Spirit is concerned, our religion eventually becomes a mere formality, and we drag the church down with us into this maelstrom. When pastors and teachers have a sluggish nature, the whole life of the church and school becomes a dull outward habit without spirit or life. It accomplishes nothing and finally dies off completely. When, on the other hand, they have an energetic and active nature, it effuses in a lot of outward bustle. They build large, expensive institutions, beautiful parsonages, and club facilities, and settle down mundanely in this world. They deceive themselves with the vain delusion that things are going splendidly in the church because they supposedly still have the pure doctrine. Actually, of course, the spirit of the pure gospel has disappeared and has given way more and more to a superficial sectarian and worldly spirit. That is our evil, and its source lies in the study, in the pastor’s little prayer cell, from which the Spirit has fled because we pray and study only in connection with our work and all too little for the sake of our own soul. If a halt is to be called to the further ruin of the Lutheran church in our land and a new springtime of the Spirit is to burst upon it, there must first of all be a new Pentecost - in the pastor’s study. (Pieper 1997, 293–294)

fruit of their own meditation on the word? There certainly is no shortage of good devotional materials available. And they certainly can have their place to be a blessing to us as a helpful element of our devotional life. Who is so arrogant as to think that we cannot grow through the insights God has given to others on his law and gospel? Devotional books can be a wonderful tool for a quick “snack” of God’s Word.

Yet when it comes to the central “meal” of our devotional study, I would urge you strongly to wrestle first-hand with the Scriptures rather than leaning primarily on the insights of others. I am, after all, writing this essay for those who have been given a training in the Word that is second to none in the world. Years of training have not only equipped us to study the Word for the purpose of sharing it with others, but also for the purpose of pondering it first-hand for our own hearts and lives. No devotional writer is living in our precise place and time in the kingdom of God with our unique set of callings in life. Allow the Scriptures to speak directly to you in relation to the unique callings God has given to you – and first of all in the common calling we all share one by one as children of God!

And our last question is: how much of the Word do we want to be reading each day? The resource packet that accompanies this essay provides a brief list of resources and reading schedules that have been a benefit to other pastors. Those tools typically provide suggested readings for each calendar day or day of the church year.

But, there are several traps waiting to grab us right here! The first trap may only reflect my own learning style, but I trust I am not alone in this. If I try to read too much on any given day, I find it very hard to truly meditate on any of it. The fire hose has been put in my mouth and so much of the water of life is rushing in my direction that I have no time to swallow any of it. Yes, a rapid reading of Scripture keeps all of salvation history before me on a regular basis. That has a place and purpose in our spiritual life all its own.¹⁰ But there is also a place for a more deliberate pondering of smaller portions of Scripture. My own reading schedule, while beginning with a psalm or two, focuses on a single chapter of Scripture. Often, that is even too much to truly ponder with care, and I will end up asking Luther’s four questions about one particular paragraph which that day leaps off the pages of Scripture begging for my attention.

And then there is a second trap waiting, especially if we completely merge rapid reading of Scripture with our basic devotional study of Scripture. The temptation is strong when reading large quantities of Scripture to merely be reading to read while our mind is on auto-pilot. Then we are easily slipping right back into the “to do” list approach to our devotional life. There are no “merit awards” to be won for how many times we may have read our way through the entire Scripture, as important as it is that no part of Scripture be unfamiliar to me as a public minister of the gospel.

The final trap again may prove only the distorted depths of my easily guilt ridden conscience! I have found that reading schedules that list certain chapters (often several) to be read on a particular day can throw me off track as much as assist me. If I fall behind, the effort to “catch up” can be exhausting, dragging along with it both of the previous two traps just mentioned. While I am personally convinced of the benefit of a *lectio continua* method of devotional study (reading through whole books of the Bible

¹⁰As I set aside time to plan the new year (2013) in regard to my devotional life, I am pondering how I might establish an “extra” reading time each day in which I would focus not so much on a careful pondering of smaller sections of Scripture but on a more rapid reading of a larger quantity of Scripture. This both/and approach to time in the Word would help me enjoy the blessings of both approaches simultaneously.

as units on consecutive days), yet refusing to be bound by a “January 15 means I am in Exodus 12” style of reading schedule allows me to focus and enjoy what I am reading rather than being anxiously concerned about how many calendar days I am “allowed” to read through a book. For several years it was a great blessing for me to follow a pattern that set a “book of the month” (alternating between OT and NT). Often, that pattern allowed me to read shorter books multiple times within that month. I am not mindful to apologize that it took me several years using that pattern to make my way through all of Scripture. The tour may have been slow, but it was breath-taking! If I am driving a scenic highway, I do not want to be sitting in the cockpit of a Formula 1 race car.

CONCLUSION

Such is the gift of meditation on the Word. Pursued with confidence in the grace of Christ, it is the gift of heaven opened to us. Our God descends to speak with us in Words inspired by his Spirit through human authors and expounded for us by that same Spirit’s power in human hearts. To *sola scriptura* Lutherans, meditation is the central gift of a Christ-centered Lutheran devotional heritage.¹¹

But as awesome of a gift as *meditatio* is, without the next part of our devotional life, *oratio*, it still remains only half a conversation with our heavenly Father. In fact, so intimate is the connection between *meditatio* and *oratio* in Luther’s mind that he often simply spoke of his time in “prayer” when he was referencing his personal devotional time. It is to this next gift of grace, to prayer, that the next essay in this series will now turn.

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¹¹ In the fifth part of this series, there are some planning tools and other resources that can help you begin to plan for strengthening your grip on the beauty of God’s gift of *meditatio*.

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR USE WITH GROUPS

Evaluate how helpful it is to “making time” for our personal study of the Word to remember that meditating on the Word is primarily God’s “doing” for us and not our “doing” for him.

In what way would it indeed be legalism to insist on drawing a complete division between “professional” study of the Word and “personal” study of the Word? And yet, in what way is there wisdom still in not allowing our only study of the Word to be study done when we have a “product to produce” (a sermon, a Bible study, etc.)?

Note any helpful insights gained from the quotation from Pastor Marcus Schulz on pages 6-7.

Evaluate the usefulness of the three assumptions Kleinig urges us to keep in mind (pages 7-8) whenever we approach the Word.

Evaluate the usefulness of the three touchstones for evaluating any “method” of meditating on the Word (pages 8-9).

Comment on the helpfulness of Peterson’s insight about the meaning of the Hebrew verbs for “meditate.”

Share what has proved helpful to your devotional life in using Luther’s fourfold questions or share any other pattern for meditating on the Word that has helped you slow down sufficiently so that you ponder carefully what you are reading.

On pages 12-13 there are some practical suggestions for remaining focused on your meditation that are listed. Which of those proved most helpful to you, or what else from your own experience has proved helpful in staying focused on the portion of Scripture you are reading?

How real is the challenge of expecting a “mountain top” experience whenever we meditate on the Word? What did you find in the essay or what have you found in your own experience to be the most helpful answer to that challenge?