

INSTRUCTIONS IN DAILY MEDITATION
From “Meditating on the Word”
By Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 1986

The Confessing Church was formed in 1934 at the Barmen Synod. There, representatives from German regional churches severed themselves from the national church, which was serving Hitler’s purposes, and they set forth their own understanding of the gospel in the famous Barmen Declaration.

This Confessing Church called Dietrich Bonhoeffer home from London in 1935 to take responsibility for training some of its ordinands at a seminary which was established at Finkenwalde, near the Baltic Sea. The “Instructions in Daily Meditation” have their origin there. They were written down by Eberhard Bethge, the seminarian who was later to become Bonhoeffer’s biographer and the editor of his collected works. Bethge attached them to a circular letter sent to Confessing church pastors from Finkenwalde on May 22, 1936. The letter shared news about colleagues who had been imprisoned by the Nazis.

In the biography, Bethge tells us how the requirement by Bonhoeffer that seminarians devote a half hour each morning to silent on a scriptural text caused them great difficulties. They did not know how to use the time. Some went to sleep, some daydreamed, others worked on sermons. These instructions were intended to make clear to the seminarians the importance of individual meditation and the manner in which it was to be done.

Communal meditation was also practiced once a week at the seminary. Even in individual meditation Bonhoeffer tried to build a sense of community by encouraging the use of a common text. After the seminarians had left Finkenwalde they continued to receive suggested texts for common meditation in the circular letters.

In a letter to Karl Barth in 1936, Bonhoeffer wrote: “The kind of questions serious young theologians put to us are: How can I learn to pray? How can I learn to read the Bible? Either we can help them to do this, or we can’t help them at all. Nothing of all this can be taken for granted.”

1. Why Do I Meditate?

Because I am a Christian. Therefore, every day in which I do not penetrate more deeply into the knowledge of God’s Word in Holy Scripture is a lost day for me. I can only move forward with certainty upon the firm ground of the Word of God. And, as a Christian, I learn to know the Holy Scripture in no other way than by hearing the Word preached and by prayerful meditation.

Because I am a preacher of the Word. I cannot expound the Scripture for others if I do not let it speak daily to me. I will misuse the Word in my office as preacher if I do

not continue to meditate upon it in prayer. If the Word has become empty for me in my daily administrations, if I no longer experience it, that proves I have not let the Word speak personally to me for a long time. I will offend against my calling if I do not seek each day in prayer the word that my Lord wants to say to me for that day. Ministers of the Word are especially called upon to perform the office of prayer: “But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.” (Acts 6:4) The pastor must pray more than others, and has more to pray about.

Because I need a firm discipline of prayer. We like to pray according to our moods – briefly, at length, or not at all. But that is to be arbitrary. Prayer is not a free-will offering to God; it is an obligatory service, something which he requires. We are not free to engage in according to our own wishes. Prayer is the first divine service in the day. God requires that we take time for this service. “I rise before dawn and cry for help; I hope in thy words. My eyes are awake before the watches of the night, that I may meditate upon they promise>” (Ps. 119: 147-8) “Seven times a day I praise thee, for thy righteous ordinances.” (Ps. 119:164) God needed time before he came to us in Christ for our salvation. He needs time before he comes into my heart for my salvation.

Because I need help against the ungodly haste and unrest which threaten my work as a pastor. Only from the peace of God’s Word can there flow the proper, devoted service of each day.

2. What do I want from my meditation?

We want in any case to rise up from our meditation in a different state from which we sat down. We want to meet Christ in his Word. We turn to the text in our desire to hear what it is that he wants to give us and teach us today through his Word. Meet him first in the day, before you meet other people. Every morning lay upon him everything that preoccupies you and weighs you down, before new burdens are laid upon you. Ask yourself what still hinders you from following him completely and let him take charge of that, before new hindrances are placed in your way.

His fellowship, his help, his guidance for the day through his Word – that is the goal. Thus you will begin the day freshly strengthened in your faith.

3. How shall I meditate?

There is free meditation and meditation which is bound to Scripture. We advise the latter for the sake of the certainty of our prayers and the discipline of our thoughts. Furthermore, the knowledge of our fellowship with others who are meditating on the same text will make us love such meditation more.

In the same way that the word of a person who is dear to me follows me throughout the day, so the Word of Scripture should resonate and work within me ceaselessly. Just as you would not dissect and analyze the word spoken by someone dear to you, but would accept it just as it was said, so you should accept the Word of Scripture and ponder it in your heart as Mary did. That is all. That is meditation. Do not look for new thoughts and interconnections in the text as you would in a sermon! Do not ask how you should tell it to others, but ask what it tells you! Then ponder this word in your heart at length, until it is entirely within you and has taken possession of you.

It is not necessary every day to go through the entire text we have chosen for meditation. Often we will hold on to one word of it for the entire day. Passages which we do not understand we can simply pass over. There is no need to take flight into philology. This is not the place for the Greek New Testament, but for the familiar Luther text.

If during meditation our thoughts move to persons who are near to us or to those we are concerned about, then let them linger there. That is a good time to pray for them. Do not pray in general, then, but in particular for the people who are on your mind. Let the Word of Scripture tell you what you ought to pray for them. As a help, we may write down the names of the people we want to remember every day. Our intercessions require their appointed time, too, if we are to be serious about them. Pay attention, though, that our intercessions do not become another means of taking flight from the most important thing: prayer for our own soul's salvation.

We begin our meditations with the prayer for the Holy Spirit, asking for proper concentration for ourselves and for all who we know are also meditating. Then we turn to the text. At the close of the meditation we want to be truly able to say a prayer of thanksgiving from a heart that is full.

What text, and how long should the text be? It has proven helpful to meditate on a text of approximately ten to fifteen verses for a period of a week. It is not good to meditate on a different text each day, since we are not always equally receptive, and the texts for the most part are much too long for that. Whatever you do, do not take the sermon text for the next Sunday. That belongs in your sermon meditation time. It is a great help if a community knows that it is concentrating all week on the same text.

The time of meditation is in the morning before the beginning of our work. A half hour is the minimum amount of time which a proper meditation requires. It is, of course, necessary that there be complete quiet, and that we intend to allow nothing to divert us, no matter how important it may seem.

Occasional meditation with two or more people is quite possible in a Christian community, although, sadly, it is seldom practiced. In such meditation there is a narrow way that leads between false, pious talk and idle theological discussion.

4. How do we overcome the problems of meditation?

Whoever seriously undertakes the daily practice of meditation will soon discover great difficulties. Meditation and prayer must be practiced earnestly and for a long time. So the first rule is not to become impatient with yourself. Do not become confused and upset because of your distractedness. Just sit down again every day and wait very patiently. If your thoughts keep wandering there is no need for you to hold on to them compulsively. There is nothing wrong with letting them roam where they will; but then incorporate in your prayers the place or person to which they have gone. So you will find your way back to your text, and the minutes spent in such diversions will not be lost and will no longer be any cause for worry.

There are many helps for special difficulties which each one may use. Read the same passage again and again, write down your thoughts, learn the verse by heart (indeed, you will memorize any text which has been thoroughly meditated upon). But in all this we soon learn to recognize the danger of fleeing once again from meditation to Bible scholarship or the like. Behind all our uncertainties and needs stands our great need to pray; for all too long many of us have known this need without finding any help or direction. The only help is to faithfully and patiently begin again our earliest exercises of prayer and meditation. We will be further helped by the knowledge that other brothers are also meditating, that at all times the entire holy Church in heaven and on earth prays with us. That is a comfort to us in the weakness of our own prayers. And if we really do not know what we ought to pray and completely lose heart about it, we still know that the Holy Spirit prays for us with “sighs too deep for words.” (Rom. 8:26)

We dare not allow ourselves to cease from this daily engagement with the Scripture, and we must begin it right away if it is not now our practice. For in doing so we have eternal life.

MORNING

The community life of the seminarians at Finkenwalde lasted less than two and a half years because the Gestapo closed the seminary doors in September 1937. But this brief experiment in the religious life of Protestant Germany attracted much attention. Bonhoeffer's little book Life Together, published in 1939, was the most widely read of his books during his lifetime. Bethge described it as a work which contained “the outlines of a living Protestant community.” Life Together presented in more finished form what had only been sketched out in the “Instructions in Meditation” and in the following draft, dated 1935 or 1936 in the collected works, and entitled simple “Morning”.

Each morning is a new beginning of our life. Each day is a finished whole. The present day marks the boundary of our cares and concerns. (Mt. 6:34, Jas. 4:14) It is long enough to find God or to lose him, to keep faith or fall into disgrace. God created day and night for us so we need not wander without boundaries, but may be able to see

every morning the goal of the evening ahead. Just as the ancient sun rises anew every day, so the eternal mercy of God is new every morning. (Lam. 3:23) Every morning God gives us the gift of comprehending anew his faithfulness of old; thus, in the midst of our life with God, we may daily begin a new life with him.

In Holy Scripture, morning is a time full of wonder. It is the time of God's help for his Church (Ps. 46:5), the time of joy after a night of weeping (Ps. 30:5), the time of proclamation of the divine Word (Zeph. 3:5), the daily distribution of the sacred manna (Ex. 16:13F). Before daybreak Jesus went away to pray (Mk. 1:35), in the early hours the women go to the tomb, and the disciples find the risen Jesus on the shore of the Lake of Tiberias (Jn. 21:4). The people of faith wake early because of their expectation of God's marvelous acts. (Gen. 19:27, Ex. 24:4, Job 1:5, etc). Sleep no longer holds them. They rush to greet the early grace of God.

When we awake, we drive away the dark shapes and confused dreams of the night as we speak the morning blessing and commend ourselves for this day to the Triune God. The evil moods, uncontrollable emotions and desires, which we cannot get rid of during the day, are often enough simply ghosts of the night that were not driven off in the morning and now want to spoil the day for us. The first moments of the new day are not the time for our own plans and worries, not even for our zeal to accomplish our own work, but for god's liberating grace, God's sanctifying presence. To anyone who is wakened early by car, Scripture says: "It is in vain that you rise so early and go so late to rest; eating the bread of anxious toil for he gives to his beloved sleep." (Ps. 127:3) It is not my anxiety about the coming day, not the burden of my work which I have before me, but it is the Lord who wakes me every morning;..."he wakens my ear to hear as those who are taught". (Is. 50:4) Before the heart unlocks itself for the world, God wants to open it for himself; before the ear takes in the countless voices of the day, it should hear in the early hours the voice of the Creator and Redeemer. God prepared the stillness of the first morning for himself. It should remain his.

Before our daily bread should be the daily Word. Only thus will the bread be received with thanksgiving. Before our daily work should be in morning prayer. Only thus will the work be done as the fulfillment of God's command. The morning must yield an hour of quiet time for prayer and common devotion. That is certainly not wasted time. How else could we prepare ourselves to face the tasks, cares, and temptations of the day? And although we are often not "in the mood" for it, such devotion is an obligatory service to the One who desires our praises and prayers, and who will not otherwise bless our day but through his Word and our prayers.

It is wrong to say that we are being "legalistic" when we are concerned with the ordering of our Christian life and with our faithfulness in requirements of Scripture reading and prayer. Disorder undermines and destroys the faith: any theologian who confuses evangelical freedom with lack of discipline needs to learn that. Whoever wants to carry out properly any fully developed spiritual office, without bring both self and

work to ruin by mere activism, must learn early on the spiritual discipline of the servant of Jesus Christ. The young theologian will find it a great help to set certain times for quiet prayers and for devotions, and to hold to them with patience and persistence.

Every Christian needs quiet time for prayer. The theologian who wants to be a Christian needs it more than anyone else. More time for God's Word and for prayer is needed because of our appointment to a special task. (Acts 6:4) How should we go about during the day as ministers of the Word, preaching and instructing, helping to carry the burdens for others, if we have not experienced God's help for the day ourselves? We do not want our work to become routine and hollow. It is advisable to base the quiet time of prayer on a passage of Scripture. That provides content for our prayers and gives us confidence and ground to stand on. It can be the same portion of Scripture for a week. Then the Word can dwell in us and begin to come alive; consciously or unconsciously, it will be present with us wherever we go. A too quick change makes for superficiality. Grounded in the Scripture, we learn to speak to God in the language which God has spoken to us. We learn to speak to God as the child speaks to its mother.

Proceeding from the Word of God, we pray everything which the Word teaches us; we bring the coming day before God and cleanse our thoughts and intentions before him; we pray above all to be in full communion with Jesus Christ. We do not want to forget to pray for ourselves; "ascribe to yourself honor according to your worth." (Syr. 10:28) Next, the broad field of intercession lies before us. Here our view expands to see persons and things near and far, in order to commend them to the grace of God. No one who has requested our prayers may be left out. We must include all those who have been committed to our care either personally or professionally – and there are many. Finally, each of us knows of persons who otherwise would scarcely have anyone to pray for them. Nor should we forget to thank God for those who help and strengthen us by their intercessions. We do not want to conclude the quiet time of prayer before we have repeated the Amen with great conviction.

For our common devotions we seek housemates or others from the neighborhood in order to hear God's Word, to sing and to pray with them. Above all, we should read the psalms together. They can only become our possession if we read and pray them daily without omitting any, even when they are difficult. Then a not-too-modest portion of the Old and New Testaments should be read in series. The songs of the Church will place us in the great congregation of the present and the past. The prayer which one person speaks for the whole fellowship will bring the common concerns of the little house congregation before God.

Now God has spoken his Word in the silence of the morning; now we have found fellowship with God and with the congregation of Christians. We can go to our day's work with confidence.

THE BIBLE ALONE

A Letter to Dr. Rudiger Schleicher

Rudiger Schleicher was Bonhoeffer's brother-in-law and good friend. They shared many interests, including music. Dietrich played the piano and would accompany Rudiger on the violin in sonatas of Beethoven and Mozart. While trained in the law, Schleicher was interested in theology. At the time of this letter, at least, his position was in line with the liberal school of Protestant teach exemplified by Adolf Harnack. Dietrich had been a pupil of Harnack's but was now identifying more with Karl Barth in his rediscovery of the "strange new world of the Bible".

The early paragraphs of the letter allude to various criticisms by Schleicher of his brother-in-law's teaching and preaching. Bonhoeffer accepts the sincere intentions of his friendly critic and then proceeds to explain to him in increasingly personal terms his own approach to reading and appropriating the Word of God in the Bible.

In the first paragraph reference is made to Schleicher's having been laid up due to a wound he had suffered in World War I. He would not live to see the end of World War II. In the final month of the war he, like his brother-in-law, would be arrested and executed for participating in the conspiracy to kill Adolf Hitler.

Friedrichsbrunn, 8 April 1936

Dear Rudiger!

Your letter just arrived. It pleased me so much to receive it that I want to respond right away. I am using the typewriter as an act of charity to you! – I didn't know that you were laid up again. Nowadays, with so much careless talk about war, that affects me in a special way.

Now to the main concern. We have often feuded with each other before, and until now it has always come out right. So it will again. I find it helpful to keep reminding myself that the pastor can never satisfy the proper "layman." If I preach faith and grace alone (as I did at Trinity Church!), then you ask: What about the Christian life? If I discuss the Sermon on the Mount (as I did in my lectures!), then you ask: What about real life? If I interpret the very real and sinful life of some person in the Bible, then you ask: Where are the eternal verities? And all these questions really express only one concern: how can I live a Christian life in the real world, and where are the final authorities for such a life, which alone is worth living?

First, I want to confess quite simply that I believe the Bible alone is the answer to all our questions, and that we only need to ask persistently and with some humility in order to receive the answer from it. One cannot simply read the Bible the way one reads other books. One must be prepared to really question it. Only then will it open itself up. Only when we await the final answer from the Bible will it be given to us. That is because in the Bible it is God who speaks to us. And we cannot simply reach our own conclusions about God; rather, we must ask him. He will only answer us if we are seeking after him. Naturally, one can also read the Bible like any other book – from the perspective of textual criticism, for instance. There is nothing to be said against that. But that will only reveal the surface of the Bible, not what is within it. When a dear friend speaks a word to us, do we subject it to analysis? No, we simply accept it, and then it resonates inside us for days. The word of someone we love opens itself up to us the more we “ponder it in our hearts,” as Mary did. In the same way, we should carry the Word of the bible around with us. We will only be happy in our reading of the Bible when we dare to approach it as the means by which God really speaks to us, the God who loves us and will not leave us with our questions unanswered.

Now, we can only seek for what we already know. If I do not know what I am really looking for, then I am not really looking for anything. So, we must already know which God we seek before we can look for him. If I do not know that, I will just rummage around, and seeking will become my main purpose instead of finding anything at all. So I can only find if I know what I seek. Now, I either know about the God I seek from my own experience and insights, from the meanings which I assign to history or nature – that is, from within myself – or I know about him based on his revelation of his own Word. Either I determine the place in which I will find God, or I allow God to determine the place where he will be found.

If it is I who say where God will be, I will always find there a God who in some way corresponds to me, is agreeable to me, fits in with my nature. But if it is God who says where he will be, then that will truly be a place which at first is not agreeable to me at all, which does not fit so well with me. That place is the cross of Christ. And whoever will find God there must draw near to the cross in the manner which the Sermon on the Mount requires. That does not correspond to our nature at all; it is, in fact, completely contrary to it. But this is the message of the Bible, not only the New Testament but also the Old (Is. 53!). In any case, Jesus and Paul understand it in this way – that the cross of Jesus fulfills the Scripture of the Old Testament. The entire Bible, then, is the Word in which God allows himself to be found by us. Not a place which is agreeable to us or makes sense to us *a priori*, but instead a place which is strange to us and contrary to our nature. Yet, the very place in which God has decided to meet us.

This is how I read the Bible now. I ask of each passage: What is God saying to us here? And I ask God that he would help us hear what he wants to say. So, we no longer look for general, eternal truths, which correspond with our own “eternal” nature and are, therefore, somehow self-evident to us. Instead, we seek the will of God, who is

altogether strange to us, whose ways are not our ways and whose thoughts are not our thoughts, who hides himself from us under the sign of the cross, in which all our ways and thoughts have an end. God is completely other than the so-called eternal verities. Theirs is an eternity made up of our own thoughts and wishes. But God's Word begins by showing us the cross. And it is to the cross, to death and judgment before God, that our ways and thoughts (even the "eternal" ones) all lead.

Does this perspective somehow make it understandable to you that I do not want to give up the Bible as this strange Word of God at any point, that I intend with all my powers to ask what God wants to say to us here? Any other place outside the Bible has become too uncertain for me. I fear that I will only encounter some divine double of myself there. Does this somehow help you understand why I am prepared for a *sacrificium intellectus* – just in these matters, and only in these matters, with respect to the one, true God! And who does not bring to some passages his * *, in the confession that he does not yet understand this or that passage in Scripture, but is certain that even they will be revealed one day as God's own word? I would rather make that confession than try to say according to my own opinion: this is divine, that is human.

And now let me tell you quite personally that since I learned to read the Bible in this way – and that is not so long ago – it has become daily more wonderful to me. I read it mornings and evenings, often also during the day. And each day I take up a text, which I have before me for the entire week, and I attempt to immerse myself in it completely, in order to really listen to it. I know that without this I could no longer rightly live, let alone believe. And every day more riddles are solved for me, even though I am still just moving on the surface.

As I was looking at medieval art again in Hildesheim, it occurred to me how much more they understood about the Bible in those times. I am also struck by the fact that our ancestors in their battles for the faith had nothing, and wanted nothing, but the Bible, and that by means of the Bible they became strong and free for a real life of faith. It would be simply superficial, I think, to say that everything has changed since then. Human beings and their needs have remained the same. And the Bible answers those needs today no less than then. It may be that this sounds very primitive. But you have no idea how happy one can be to find one's way back from the false tracks of so much theology to these primitive things. And I believe that in matters of faith we are always equally primitive.

In a few days it will be Easter. That makes me very happy. But do you think that either of us by ourselves could believe or would want to believe these impossible things which are reported in the gospels, if the Bible did not support us in our belief? Simply the Word, as God's truth, which he vouches for himself. Resurrection – that is not a self-evident idea, an eternal verity. I mean, of course resurrection as the Bible means it – as a rising up from real death (not sleep) to real life, from life without God to new life with

Christ in God. God has said (and we know this through the Bible): “Behold I make all things new.” He made that come true at Easter. Must not this message appear much more impossible, distant, unreal than the whole story of King David, which my comparison, is quite harmless?

There remains, then, only the decision whether we will trust the Bible or not, whether we will allow ourselves to be supported by it as by no other word, in life and death. And I believe that we can only be happy and at peace when we have made that decision.

Forgive me, this has become a very long epistle. I do not know if I should write in this way. Yet I believe I should, and I am very pleased that we have had one such exchange of letters. We must go on sharing what we believe we have discovered. Whether we have a right to speak as I have now spoken to you will be proved in our experience. For now we must lay it aside.

With all good wishes and greetings to you all,

Your Dietrich