

# Gamma 12

## Study 1

### Meditation

#### PSALM 1

Tim Keller Leaders guide

#### INTRODUCTION

The word “meditate” is used often in the Psalms. One Hebrew word means literally to “mutter” or to “talk to oneself.” This refers to the fact that meditation entails both focused attention and personal application. The other word means to “muse” or “ponder.” In Psalm 77:12 and 143:5, we are called to meditate on the works of God in nature and history. In Psalm 119:15, 23, 27, 48, 78, and 148, we are exhorted to meditate on God’s Word, his verbal revelation. In Psalm 63:6, the psalmist simply meditates “on thee.” Clearly, many of the Psalms are themselves extended meditations. What is meditative prayer? Or what is the meditation that leads to deepening prayer?

#### 1. What can you learn about meditation from verse 2?

First, we see that the object or basis for meditation is “the law of the Lord,” the Word of God. There are many other things that people may and should meditate upon. But in Psalm 1, the primary concern is meditation on Scripture.

Second, we see that “delighting” in the law of the Lord is closely associated with meditation. If we are honest, we will admit that we do not usually think of the words “delight” and “law” in the same sentence. But this shows us at least two things about meditation. (a) Meditation involves *not just the head, but the heart*. “Delight in the law” is not simply intellectual study, but an internal relishing and cherishing of the truth. (b) Meditation involves *not just thinking but acting*. “Delight in the law” is not simply a matter of noticing truths and principles. You only “delight in the law” if you love having God tell you what to do! Meditation, then, means very hard thinking: “How does this apply to me? How does this change me? How does this affect me? How does it make me different?”

Third, we see in the phrase “day and night” the consistency and discipline of meditation. This is not just a spontaneous epiphany that happens to us. It is something we decide to do. It must happen regularly, relentlessly. It is something you do whether you feel like it or not.

**Note:** In his study of Psalm 1, Eugene Peterson brings out the fact that the original meaning of the Hebrew word used here for “law” — *torah* — comes from a verb that

means “to throw something to hit its mark, as in a javelin.”<sup>1</sup> That is highly significant. The Scriptures are not words we simply study as if for an exam, unlocking information to use as we will. These are energies hurled at our heart. God’s words are designed to penetrate, wound, remove, heal, and infuse us. In the New Testament we read that the Word of God is “alive and active... a sword” (Heb. 4:12). This is quite important practically. This realization is necessary for meditation: that his word is *torah*, living truth aimed to penetrate. Sometimes that very thought spontaneously moves us into meditation and prayer.

**2. What is meditation contrasted with in verse 1? What does that teach you about meditation? (Hint: what is the significance of the progression from “walk” to “stand” to “sit”?)**

The first thing this contrast teaches us is that meditation leads to blessedness! There are so many contrasting clauses in this first sentence (which stretches across the first two verses) that we often miss the point. If we look only at its beginning and end, it becomes clear: “Blessed is the man who... meditates day and night.” Once we remove all the contrasts and the qualifiers, we see the point: If you want “blessedness,” you must meditate. The word “blessed” in Hebrew means far more than just “happy.” It refers to complete peace and fullness of life, total well-being — an enormous promise.

Second, we learn what we could see implicitly before: that meditation is not just an intellectual exercise, but the basis for our whole way of life. The life of a godly man in verse 2, based on meditation on God’s law, is contrasted with the life of the ungodly man in verse 1. Notice, however, that even an *ungodly* life is also based on some form of “meditation.” It begins with “walking in the counsel of the ungodly.” “Counsel” refers to a form of wisdom and thinking. We will either be meditating and walking in God’s wisdom or meditating and walking in worldly, human wisdom. What shapes your thinking (“counsel”) shapes your behaviour (“way”) and your attitude and heart (“scoffers”).

Thus, we must always consider what we are listening to and meditating on in our heart of hearts. We will naturally meditate on the “counsel of the wicked” *or* we will deliberately make ourselves meditate on the law of the Lord. There are no other alternatives.

**In summary:** in verses 1-2, our blessedness or lack thereof depends on what we are meditating on in our heart of hearts.

**3. How are verses 3-5 an example of meditation? (a) Make a list of what the extended metaphors tell us about the contrast between godliness and ungodliness. (b) How is a tree like a meditating person? (c) What else does this example tell you about meditation in general?**

One of the most fascinating things about this psalm is the way it actually does a meditation *on* meditation.

**(a) Make a list of what the extended metaphors tell us about the contrast between godliness and ungodliness.**

Verses 3 through 5 are an extended consideration of the contrast between the ungodly life and the godly life, much like “chaff” contrasts with a tree. [Some of us urbanites need to recall that chaff is the seed covering, husk, and other debris that separate from the more valuable grain during threshing. In ancient times, the grain and the chaff were thrown into the air together, allowing the wind to blow away the useless — and lighter — chaff, leaving the heavier grain to fall back to earth to be gathered for planting or food.] What does this metaphor-contrast tell us? (1) A tree is useful, but chaff is useless, so ungodliness is of no profit. (2) A tree is stable and lasting, while chaff is blown about and blown away. So ungodliness leads to instability and all its gains are temporary. (3) A tree bears fruit; thus it gives life to people and grows more trees. Chaff cannot bring forth any new life. Nor can it feed anyone; it has no nutritional value. So godliness matures, nurtures, and bears life, while ungodliness leaves you empty, hungry, unsatisfied, and starving.

**(b) How is a tree like a meditating person?**

Verse 3 begins, “he is like.” Who is “he”? The man who meditates on the law day and night (v. 2). Therefore, the tree in verse 3 is an extended meditation on the one who meditates. What do we learn? Ironically, as soon as we begin to answer the question, we are beginning to meditate!

(1) Meditation takes time, like a tree putting roots down. Trees don’t grow overnight!

(2) Meditation leads to depth and stability. The deeper one’s “roots” in meditation, the less likely that a windstorm will blow you over.

(3) Meditation is looking at the Word of God like a thirsty tree looks at water. This shows us that meditation goes beyond the intellectual. It is a spiritual “tasting” of Scripture, delighting in it, sensing the sweetness, thanking God and praising God for what you see. It is also spiritually “digesting” Scripture, applying it, thinking about how it affects you, describes you, and guides you in the most practical way. Meditation also helps you draw strength from Scripture, letting it give you hope, using it to remember how loved you are

(4) Meditation will always lead to character growth — to fruit. It is not just a way to feel close to God. Real meditation changes the heart permanently into a heart of love, joy, peace, patience, humility, and self-control (Gal. 5:22-23). As Derek Kidner observes, “The tree is no mere channel, piping the water unchanged from one place to another, but a living organism which absorbs it, to produce in due course something new and delightful, proper to its kind and to its time.”<sup>2</sup>

(5) Meditation leads to stability, but not immunity from suffering and dryness. This tree only bears fruit “in season,” though “its leaf does not wither.” This means that meditation will lead to stability. A meditating person is an evergreen! Yet we must not always expect meditation to lead to uniform experiences of joy and love. There

are “seasons” for great delight (springtime blossoms?) and for wisdom and maturity (summer fruit?). It means there are also spiritual winter times, when we don’t feel God close, though our roots may still be firmly in his truth. “The promised immunity of the *leaf* from withering is not independence from the rhythm of the seasons... but freedom from the crippling damage of drought.”<sup>3</sup> Only in light of the balance of this metaphor can we understand the last line of verse 3. When the psalmist says, “Whatever he does prospers,” he does not mean that “he reaches every goal” or “he is always successful.” Rather, it means something like this: “A meditating person will always grow. Sometimes it is growth internally through suffering (as in winter) and sometimes it is externally through success (as in springtime). But you will always grow and prosper!”

**(c) What else does this example tell you about meditation in general?**

Meditation has a lot to do with the imagination. You are trying to grasp how truth really *affects* you. There is no better way than to create an image in your mind, for an image helps you make an abstract truth more concrete to your understanding and more gripping to your heart. Someone once defined meditation as “the mind descending into the heart.”

**4. What do verses 5-6 promise? How does this result from a life of meditation?**

Verse 5 gives us the chilling interpretation of the “chaff” metaphor. Just as the chaff is blown away into oblivion by the wind, so the wicked will be blown away by the presence of God on judgment day. By inference, we are being told that the one who meditates on the law of the Lord can be confident of “standing” on that day. Verse 6 tells us that the Lord “watches over” us, a word that means he comes close and cares for us. We will not have to be afraid of what will happen when we stand before God. We can have assurance that we will stand in the judgment.

How can a life of meditation lead to this kind of confidence and assurance? We who read Psalm 1 in the light of Jesus Christ have a ready answer. Without Jesus and the cross, it is frightening to meditate on “the Lord watches over the way of the righteous” (v. 6). Who in the world is righteous enough for God? Without the assurance of Jesus’ death for me and his righteousness imputed to me (2 Cor. 5:21), I will *lose* confidence the more I meditate on Psalm 1 and the righteousness of God on judgment day. But if I meditate on what Jesus has done for me, I truly will find my assurance growing. Richard Lovelace comments:

“It is an item of faith that we are children of God; there is plenty of experience in us against it.” The faith that surmounts this evidence and is able to warm itself at the fire of God’s love, instead of having to steal love and self-acceptance from other sources, is actually the root of holiness... “We are not saved by the love we exercise, but by the love we trust.”<sup>4</sup>

When Lovelace speaks of “warming oneself at the fire of God’s love,” he is describing what it means to meditate on the righteousness we have in Christ by his sacrificial death. If we don’t meditate on that until our hearts are hot with assurance, we will “steal love and self-acceptance” from worldly achievements, beauty, and status. That is why there are only two paths! We either walk in the counsel of the world, getting our warmth there and walking in accordance with it (v. 1), or we delight in what the Word tells us about our salvation. If we do verse 3, we will have the confidence of verses 5-6.

In summary, meditation on Scripture is pondering, relishing, imagining, applying, and rehearsing God’s truth until it becomes real to your heart and permanently affects your attitude and behaviour. It leads to blessedness (v. 1), stability and the ability to grow in all circumstances (vv. 3-4), freedom and independence from the world’s ways (vv. 1-2), and confidence and assurance in our relationship to God (vv. 5-6).

**5. Unlike most of the Psalms, Psalm 1 is not itself a prayer. It is a meditation on meditation. Why do you think it was chosen to introduce the prayers of the Psalms?**

The Psalms were collected and arranged at a certain point in Israel’s history, so this psalm’s first place is not an accident. It stands as the doorway into the Psalter, the prayer book of the Bible, and its subject is the doorway into *real* prayer. It *is* not itself a prayer. It is what it talks about — a meditation. Now, if the first psalm is about meditation, it is a strong indication that meditation is the necessary preparation for deeper prayer.

This is an important discovery. Most of us have a devotional life in which we jump from a fairly academic study of the Bible into prayer. But there is a kind of middle ground between prayer and Bible study; a kind of overlap or bridge between the two. After studying a passage, we need to learn to meditate our hearts hot and yet quiet on the truth of God. That is a doorway into deeper prayer.

**6. List any ways that. (a) Jesus Christ sheds light on Psalm 1, and (b) Psalm 1 sheds light on the person and work of Jesus Christ.**

(a) On the one hand, Jesus was pre-eminently a person who delighted in the Word and meditated on it day and night. He is the One who meditated so profoundly on Scripture that he virtually “bled” Scripture, quoting it in the most extreme moments of his life (Matt. 27:46; cf. Ps. 22:1). That is how he stood firm — how he was truly a tree “evergreen” — using the Word of God even when in hell (on the cross). Do you want to put up even with hell? Put your roots into Scripture!

(b) Jesus is also supremely the One on whom we meditate. Why is his life, especially as depicted in the Gospels, such rewarding fuel for our meditations? Because he *is* the meditation of God! He is God’s truth become “real,” made concrete and applied. As we saw above, *he* is the One who enables us to stand on judgment day. *He* is the One who puts in us the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23). We must meditate on him

and with him. Then, not only will Psalm 1 come to life in new ways, but we will become unshakable trees, as he was.