

Deepening Prayer

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Preacher: Steve Jeffrey

[0 : 00] In his book, Hamlet's Blackberry, William Powers likens our digital age to a gigantic room. And in the room, there are more than a billion people. And despite its size, everyone is in close proximity to everyone else.

And at any moment, someone may come up to you and tap you on the shoulder. A text, a hit, a comment, a tweet, a post, a message, a thread.

Some people come up to talk business, others to complain, others to tell secrets, others to flirt, others to sell you things, others to give you information, others just to tell you what they're thinking or doing, whether you want to or not know it.

It just never stops. And for a while, you enjoy that room immensely. Eventually, you go tired of the constant noise where you struggle to find a personal space.

[1 : 14] Someone taps you while you're eating. Someone taps you while you're sleeping. Someone, for goodness sake, even taps you while you're sitting on the toilet. And eventually, we decide we want to take a break, just a short one, just pause for 30 days or one week.

And we decide to exit. But no one seems to know where the exit door is or even cares where the exit door is.

In fact, they all seem really annoyed that you might not want to stay in the room with them. And when you eventually find the exit, you see the enchanting world through the opening, but you're not sure what life is like on the other side, stepping out of the digital room.

It's a leap of faith. It's a leap of faith. You jump out and see what happens. Now, the point of his parable is fairly self-evident. We love the room, but we hate the room.

We want to breathe the undistracted air of digital freedom, but increasingly, this room is all we know.

[2 : 39] How can we walk out when everyone else is staying in? How will we pass our time and occupy our thoughts without the incessant tap, tap, tap, tap, tap, tap, tap, tap, tap, tap?

For many of us, the digital age is like the Eagle song, Hotel California. You can check out anytime you like, but you can never leave.

The scariest part is that we may not, in fact, want to leave the room. What if we, in fact, prefer the endless noise to the deafening sound of silence?

What if the trivialities and the distractions of our day are not, in fact, forced upon us by busyness or not forced upon us at all?

What if we choose to be busy so that we can continue to live with trivia and distraction? Power suggests that digital busyness is the enemy of depth.

[4 : 00] Digital busyness is the enemy of depth. And that we are bound to be stuck in the shallows of life as long as we are connected.

In our age of distracted busyness, there is the threat of Assyria. The word Assyria had its origins in the 17th century and is roughly equivalent in meaning to the word sloth or listlessness.

And in particular, the word means a spiritual and a mental apathy. Richard Newhouse explains, Assyria is evenings without number, obliterated by television.

Evenings neither of entertainment nor of education, but of narcotized defense against time and duty. And above all, Assyria is apathy, the refusal to engage the tragedy of our lives and of God's life with them.

For too many of us, the hustle and bustle of electronic activity is a sad expression of a much deeper listlessness and apathy.

[5 : 23] We are busy with busyness. Rather than figure out what to do with our spare minutes and hours, we are content to swim in the shallows and pass our time with passing the time.

How many of us, growing too accustomed to the Assyria of our age, feel this strange mix in our hearts and of our emotions, the strange mix of busyness and yet lifelessness at the same time? I won't ask for a show of hands. Busyness and yet lifelessness. We are always engaged with our thumbs, but rarely engaged with our thoughts or our hearts.

We keep downloading information, but rarely get down into the depths of our hearts. That is Assyria. Purposeness disguised as constant commotion.

But then again, we want to be harried. We want to be hassled. We want to be busy. We don't have to. We want to. Unconsciously, we in fact want the very things we complain about.

[6 : 47] Because if we had a stillness, if we had a silence, if we had a rest, we would look at ourselves, we would listen to our hearts and see the gaping hole.

And we would be terrified. Because that hole is so big that nothing but God himself can fill it. The hyperactivity of today's contemporary society and our cultural attention deficit disorder makes slow reflection and meditation a lost art.

And it's the enemy of depth. It's one of the biggest roadblocks of us deepening our prayer life, deepening our spiritual life, deepening in such a way that we might encounter God.

Because it requires time. It requires attention. It requires discipline to deepen our prayer life.

Because the doorway to a deeper prayer life is sustained, careful meditation on the word of God.

And way too many of us are just content to have a daily devotion pop up on our screen, read a Bible passage, cook a couple of notes, say the prayer.

[8 : 05] A Bible a day keeps the devil away and I'm sorted. So meditation is the doorway to deeper prayer. The Psalms are the prayer book of the Bible.

But it is noteworthy that the first Psalm, and in fact the first and second Psalm, which scholars would argue are one Psalm, is in fact not a prayer per se, but a meditation on meditation.

Psalm 1, if you get your Bibles, it would be good if you have it open in front of you. Psalm 1 has the prime place at the beginning of the Psalms, and it's not an accident.

And yet the introduction to the book of prayers is not itself a prayer, but it is preparing us to pray instead. It gets us ready to pray. Two weeks ago, I defined prayer for the Christian as continuing the conversation that God has started with us through his word and by his grace, which eventually becomes a full encounter with him.

But there is this middle ground between Bible study and prayer. There is a middle ground between Bible study and prayer.

[9 : 28] And it's a kind of, if you like, a bridge between the two. While deep experiences of the presence and the power of God can happen in innumerable ways, the ordinary way for encountering God according to the scriptures is going deeper spiritually into prayer through meditation on the word of God.

And according to Psalm 1, meditation on the word of God promises at least three things. First of all, it promises stability. The person experienced in meditation is like a tree rooted so that wind cannot blow it away.

Those who meditate on the word become people of substance, people who have thought things out and have deep convictions, who can explain difficult concepts in simple language and who have good reasons behind everything that they do.

Now, notice in Psalm 1 that this tree is planted by streams of water. Now, trees by streams of water go well even if there's little rain.

And you look at all the pictures of drought-stricken western New South Wales and Queensland, and you will see barren paddocks except where the river courses. And there's green trees still there.

[11 : 02] This is an image in someone of someone who can keep going and in fact even grow in hard and dry times. Meditation on the word is how we get stability, how we get peace and courage in times of great difficulty and adversity and upheaval.

By contrast, in Psalm 1, there's the chaff. It's the husk. It's the waste bit around the seed of the grain.

And it's lightweight. It's a little puff and a breeze and it just blows away. Anything can move it. And the way to avoid being the chaff rather than being the tree is through meditation on God's word.

Meditation also brings the promise of character. Chaff cannot produce anything because it's not a growing thing. It's in fact dead.

The tree can produce fruit because it is a growing thing. Those who meditate on the word don't just have stability and firm convictions about truth.

[12:17] They in fact have the character to match it. Meditation bears fruit, which in the Bible means character traits. Galatians 5, 22 and 23.

Character traits is love, joy, peace, patience, humility, self-control. Biblical meditation then does not merely make us feel close to God.

It's not just about having an encounter with God. It results in the transformation of our life. It changes who we are.

Finally, meditation brings blessedness. It means peace and well-being in every dimension. It means character growth. It means stability. And according to verse 2, it means delight.

Delight. See, biblical meditation moves us beyond a mere duty of reading to the word to joy in encountering God and his word.

[13:29] Which takes me to my next point, meditation and the mind. Many forms of meditation, such as particularly stuff from Eastern religions, but not just Eastern religions, such as transcendental meditation, have the goal of emptying your mind of all consciousness.

You get every noise and every thought out of your head so that you are an empty vessel in order to discover meaning within yourself.

Empty yourself and then you'll find meaning within yourself. Seems a little strange to me on one level, but biblical meditation, on the other hand, is the exact opposite. Biblical meditation fully engages the mind.

When the first psalm calls us to meditate, it uses a word that literally means to mutter. It refers to the fact that, particularly in ancient times, the scriptures, the word of God was recited aloud.

And it was recited aloud from memory. And there is no better way to meditate on a passage of the Bible and draw out all of its aspects, all of its implications, and all of its richness, than in fact to memorize it and to chew it over like a good piece of steak or something like that.

[15:04] Other words translated as meditate in the psalms mean to ponder and to question thoroughly, such as you've got Psalm 77 in front of you, verses 3, 6, and 12.

The first stage of engaging the mind is to study the passage. It's to study and interpret the passage so that we get to know something about what the passage actually means.

You cannot reflect on or enjoy what you do not understand. And so to understand a section of scripture means answering two really basic questions. There's more questions to ask than this, but two really basic questions about it.

First of all, what did the original author intend to convey to his original readers about in this passage? That's the first question.

Not what does it say to me first, what does it say to them, the first recipients? And secondly, what role does this passage play in the whole message of the Bible, of God's unfolding plan of salvation?

[16:17] How does it contribute to the gospel message and a move along the main narrative arc of the Bible, which climaxes in salvation in Christ Jesus?

Unless you first do that hard work of answering those questions about a passage, your meditations on the passage won't be grounded in what God is actually saying in the passage.

Let me say that one more time. Unless you do the hard work of studying the passage in its original meaning and where it fits in the Bible, your meditation on the passage will not be grounded in what God is actually saying.

When we do that, what we are doing is we are listening to our own heart or the spirit of our culture and imposing that on God's word instead of listening to God's voice in the Bible.

Martin Luther said that before he could turn a biblical text into praise, he first needed to understand it as instruction, as truthful information.

[17:48] So biblical meditation is founded on the work of sound biblical interpretation and study. But secondly, meditation and the heart.

Biblical meditation is, however, more than just intense thinking. It's more than just Bible study. The Bible contains information, but it's so much more than just information.

It talks about itself as living and an active agent in Hebrews 4.12. Biblical meditation involves not just mind work, but heart work as well.

When Paul talks about the word of God dwelling in us richly in Colossians 3.16, he's clearly talking of something which is beyond mere ascent to information.

He's talking about deep and penetrating contemplation that enables the Bible's message to have transforming power in our life. Biblical meditation is, if you like, tasting that the Lord is good.

[19 : 09] It's tasting the scripture. It is delighting in it. It is sensing the sweetness of the teaching, feeling the conviction of what it tells us about ourselves, and thanking God and praising Him for what it shows us about Him.

It's taking the truth that we are engaging with our minds and pushing it into our hearts until it catches fire and begins to melt and shape and mould our lives in such a way that it shapes and moulds our reactions to God and reactions to ourselves and reaction to the world around us. It is taking the truth into all of our relationships. It's to ask the question, what does this mean? Now that I've understood what this passage meant for the first hearers as God intended it, what does this passage mean for my relationship with God?

What does it mean for my relationship to myself? What does it mean for this person, my relationship with this person and that person and this group of people? Is this or that behaviour or habit, what does it mean for that?

What does it mean for my friends? What does it mean for my culture? Is there something that I need to stop because of this passage? Is there something I should start because of this passage?

[20 : 41] Why might God be showing me this passage on this day in this moment? What is God doing now in my life would make this passage relevant to me?

You know, if I'm constantly engaging in God's word and he's constantly, for instance, bringing out passages about prayer, is he trying to tell me something about that?

If it's sin, is he trying to tell me something about that? These are questions that are very searching. And as you work a truth in, you may be convicted, you may be humbled, you may be troubled, you may be calmed, you may be comforted, you may be excited, you might be filled with uncontainable joy.

And once you've worked out the truth and then worked it in to your heart, the immediate results may, in fact, vary. Martin Luther was quite realistic when he said that sometimes the Holy Spirit begins to immediately preach to your heart and sometimes he does not.

Sometimes, no matter what we do, we simply cannot concentrate or we find our thoughts not to become big and we find our thoughts not to become affecting but rather we sometimes will feel bored and we will feel hard and we will feel distracted.

[22 : 16] In fact, I even think Psalm 1 is a passage that is realistic. it's a tree by streams of water sucking in the water consistently.

It's a tree that will always be green but it only bears its fruit in season. There are seasons where the fruit's just not coming.

And when that happens, that's when we should just simply turn to God. Martin Luther said we just simply turn to God and ask for help. And he says that even if your meditation give you only a renewed gracious sense of your own dryness, your own weakness, your own insufficiency, that's not a waste of time.

This is hard work and hard work is always hard work and that is why most prefer the noise of busyness and distraction and entertainment to the deafening silence of being alone and searching the depths of our hearts.

So how do we get the energy and the motivation to do this hard work?

[23 : 51] Some of us may have been studying the Bible for decades but the hard work thing, we're being content in our biblical knowledge but the hard work thing, that's even right now to think about it, it's hard work.

How do we get the energy and the motivation to do hard work and especially when we are in a season where it seems there isn't much fruit being produced or in fact we actually don't like what we see, we don't like what we see.

Someone tells us that the godly man or woman meditates on the law of the Lord day and night and delights in it. The answer for us in that moment is to look at the central figure of the entire written word.

The one that John 14 1 calls the word made flesh. Jesus Christ, the ultimate expression and communication of God and to find our delight in him while we're doing the hard work.

Last week, this is off text, sorry John, just feel late I should say this, James took us through the Lord's Prayer. Let me tell you, my general experience when I go through the Lord's Prayer prayer is

I don't get much beyond our Father.

[25 : 25] And that normally breaks me, our Father. And all the implications with that. And I have moments where I just want to praise and thank God that I, who I am, minuscule as I am, get to call the almighty God of this universe, Father.

And I have this image of little John Jr. in the White House under the desk as a two-year-old while JFK's having a meeting with all the heavies of the world and the heavies of his administration.

No other two-year-old gets to go into the Father's presence like that. And yet I do. But I've gone through this Lord's Prayer a few times recently in the last number of months.

And it happened to me again last Sunday. As I was sitting here in church, go through the Lord's Prayer. Bang, bang, bang, bang, bang. And I got past our Father without tears.

But inside of me what's been happening lately is I get to the bit, forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. And it's that second statement, those who sin against us, that's right now is where my heart's leaping.

[26 : 45] And I think, hear what, what God's saying. I just prayed a prayer, forgive me my sin as I forgive those who sin against us, sin against me.

In the same way that I forgive others, you forgive me. sin against me. And I don't get any further than that.

No, God, don't do that. Don't forgive my sins like I forgive other sins. And he's been working in my heart about unresolved issues of resentment towards other people.

God, please don't forgive my sin like I have forgiven their sin because I haven't. what's the solution in the moment there?

The son. Jesus, dwell on the word who became flesh. Jesus delights in doing God's will.

[27 : 51] He's the one who prays day and night, who meditates on his word day and night. He's the one who, when he looks to God, experiences the light in his father. he's the one who meditated so profoundly on scripture that he literally bled scripture, quoting it instinctively in the most extreme moments of his life, using the word of God, even when enduring the infinite agony of the cross.

And yet Jesus is not just simply a good example for us to follow. If that were true, his life would crush us. If he was just an example, his life would crush us with guilt and with failure, since no one could meditate on the scripture as he does or live up to what it reveals about God and about us.

Jesus is not just an example within the Bible. He is the one to whom the Bible points. And the main message of the Bible is salvation by grace through Jesus.

He forgives me my sin. It's all about him. The written word and its law can be a delight because the incarnate word came and died for us, securing pardon for our sins and shortcomings for not living up to God's law.

You cannot delight in the law of the Lord without understanding Jesus' entire mission. conviction. Without Jesus, the law of the Lord is nothing but a curse.

[29 : 30] It is a condemnation. It is a witness against us. He obeyed the law of the Lord fully, so now it can become a delight to us, even when we've been brought to conviction.

Jesus is supremely the one on whom we meditate because he is the meditation of God.

He is God's truth becoming real. He is God's truth made concrete and applied. Meditate on Jesus who is the ultimate meditation of God.

Look at him loving you. Look at him dying for you. Look at him rejoicing in you. Look at all of that. And he will be a delight to you. And the law of the Lord will be a delight to you.

And you will be like a tree planted by streams of water. And you'll bear your fruit in season, no matter what happens, your leaf will not wither.

[30 : 41] John Calvin wrote, the word of God is not received by faith as if it flits about in the top of the brain, but when it takes root in the depth of the heart.

heart. We must not settle for an informed mind without an engaged heart.

If we do, the New Testament calls it Pharisee. the great prayer by the Apostle Paul in Ephesians 3 suggests that Christians have blessings in Christ that we don't experience.

Paul prays for his readers that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith in verse 17. That they would know this love of Christ in verses 18 and 19.

And finally he prays that they would be filled with all the fullness of God in verse 19. They are his three petitions for the church at Ephesus.

[32 : 00] And yet this church at Ephesus, these Ephesians, were all Christian believers. In Ephesians 1 verses 22 and 23, he teaches that by being united with Christ, they already have the fullness of God in them.

So why is Paul asking God to give Christians things that they must surely already have? Why is he doing that?

Well, at one level, Christians have these things and at another level, they haven't experienced them yet. It is one thing to know of the love of Christ and to say, yeah, I know he did all that for me. I know he went to the cross, he died, and he's forgiven my sins. It's another thing to grasp how wide and how long and how high and how deep is the love of Christ.

The difference is this. Right now, I've got three daughters in kids' church, in somewhere out there, I'm assuming.

[33 : 15] They're my girls. They're my children. I'm their father. And that is a status that always exists. It will always exist.

I'll always be their father. They'll always be my girls. If I walked in there right now, and if one of the leaders of kids' church said to them, ah, Steve's your dad, they'd go, yep.

That's true. But if I walked into kids' church right now, said, just excuse me for a minute, walked in and picked up one of my girls, and hugged her, and said to her, I'm proud of you and I love you. Don't care what anyone else is doing right now, I just want you to know that. Give them a kiss and put them back down. They would know that I am their father in a slightly different way.

objectively and legally, there's no difference in my fatherhood, in my relationship, whether I'm here or whether I'm there. It makes no difference objectively or legally.

[34 : 26] But in my arms, my daughters experience that they are my children. And what Paul is talking about is the difference between having something to be true of you in principle, all and fully appropriating it, using it and living in it.

In your inner being, in verse 16, in your heart, in verse 17, it is possible for Christians to live their lives with a high degree of phoniness, of hollowness and inauthenticity.

reality. And the reason is they have failed to move that truth that they know in their mind into their hearts and in such a way that it's not actually changed who they are and how they live from the inside out.

It's not until it drops that internal change happens. up here, external change of behaviours may happen, but that's just called pharisaism.

pharisaism. It's not until the affections are moved from the heart, internal change happens and outward change happens as a result.

[35 : 56] And in Ephesians 3, Paul is praying that by the Spirit's power, we may have our hearts and our affections engaged and shaped by the truths of the faith that we hold in the mind.

Paul says, I pray that out of his glorious riches, he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being so that you may grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ.

The word grasp there is so important. It's more than just believe. It means to get a secure hold on something.

And Paul's prayer suggests that Christians need a spiritual grasping, a spiritual sensitizing, all the truths that we mouth and assent to make no difference at all in how we live.

If you are exposed to the light of the Christian truth that God is holy, and if the Holy Spirit has sensitized your heart, then you not only respond with emotion, with tears or trembling or joy, but you permanently change the way you live and behave in the world.

[37 : 23] Now, no one expressed this better than Jonathan Edwards. In his sermon, some would say the great sermon, divine and spiritual light.

Now, at the heart of his sermon was a famous, what is a famous illustration about honey. And he says there's two ways to know that honey is sweet.

You can read the ingredients. I can tell you it's sweet. Probably there's three ways to know. One way is the ingredients. which is here somewhere.

Ingredient. 100% pure honey. That's not telling me a lot. What if I said to you 100% bee spit? Not compelling.

But I could tell you another thing is I replace this stuff with shoo. This is sweet. This is really sweet. And I could go through a chemical compound of why the bee spit is a lot more tasty than mine.

[38 : 35] I could talk to you about chemically how it's built up and you could sit there and go, well, I know that's true. It's fantastic. But what Edwards said to make it absolutely undisputable, you take the lid off and you get a spoon and you put it on your mouth.

And he said, in that moment, if you do not sense that honey is sweet, I can't do anything for you. I can't help you in any other way. you can know that honey is sweet because people tell you about it and you believe them, but when you actually taste it, you know fully, mentally as well as experientially.

when you move from just mentally knowing about the sweetness of honey to directly tasting it, you go, oh, now I know.

Now I know. Honey is one thing, but God's another. There is a difference between having an opinion that God is holy and gracious and having a sense of the loveliness and the beauty of that holiness and graciousness in the heart.

And Paul is asking here in Ephesians 3 that the Holy Spirit will sensitize the hearts of the Ephesian believers so that they taste the truths, spiritually speaking, and when they taste the truth, they encounter God for who he is.

[40 : 19] And it's a prayer for us too. this is a prayer for us, that we don't just know, but that we really know, we taste that the Lord is good.

So I want to ask you, have you grown too accustomed to the acedia of our age, where the purposelessness is disguised as constant commotion?

Maybe you, in fact, something happened to you in that moment when I said and repeated, do you feel the strange mix of busyness and yet lifelessness?

The hyperactivity of today's contemporary society and our cultural attention deficit disorder make slow reflection and meditation a lost art.

Friends, there is no quick fix, there is no simple formula to going deeper in prayer. It takes time, it takes planning, and it takes constant attention.

[41 : 43] And there is little more than I can say time. If you have a time, then stop it. Take back the time. Don't tell me you haven't got time.

Take back the time. Turn off the TV. Put down the phone. Start saying no to your children.

Or whatever it is that's filling your diaries. Put down the novels, put down the magazines, put down whatever it is, and seek the face of God. There's no other way than to take back the time.

Only he can fill the hole. Keep buying new cars, keep searching for more information on Google, look at, see what's happening with the weather for the tenth time today.

Today, only he can fill the hole, only he can be the delight of your heart. And you will only discover the delight of your heart as you meditate on his word to you.

[43 : 03] Only he can fill the hole. That's because in the Garden of Eden, we sinned and we lost the face of God.

This was the greatest disaster possible for humanity because we were designed by God in his image to live in a unique, perfect, in the marvelous light of his presence.

presence. We were designed to exist in his presence. We were created to be constantly encountering him.

And ever since the Garden of Eden, humanity has wandered empty and destitute, looking for every kind of substitute to fill the gaping hole in our hearts because we do not have an encounter with God.

We do not exist in his presence. In Exodus 32, Moses realized that if I could just get once again that encounter with God, if I could just see God face to face, he said all of my longings would be fulfilled.

[44 : 24] And so he asked to see it, but he couldn't because sin was a barrier. And in Jesus, that sin has been taken away and we can begin to see again.

Though only partially this side of heaven and by faith, we can see again the light of the glory of God in the face of Christ and when we meditate and we pray the gospel and its auxiliary truths into our hearts, those longings for the face of God are slowly satisfied and other things in life become gifts rather than God's.

And we slowly but surely and radically change in our character and in all of our relationships. relationships. So take back the time and encounter God by meditating on his word and prayer. prayer.