

Mindfulness for Christian Clients

The Bible's Perspective on Life

According to the Bible, Jesus came to earth to offer people fullness of life: "*I have come that they may have **life**, and that they may have it more **abundantly**.*" (John 10:10) (MKJV).

He also taught that if we looked to Him for our spiritual nutrition, we would find ongoing life: "*And Jesus said to them, 'I am the **bread of life**.'*" (John 6:35) (MKJV).

Jesus did not refer to Himself as a leader establishing a new religion: "*Jesus said to him, 'I am the Way, the Truth, and the **Life**.'*" (John 14:6) (MKJV).

When the early disciples were freed from prison, they were not told to recruit members to a movement. Instead, they were instructed to: "*Go to the Temple and take your stand. Tell the people everything there is to say about this **Life**.*" (Acts 5:20) (MSG).

Further Biblical instruction on how to live the life referred to:

"I'm after love that lasts, not more religion. I want you to know GOD, not go to more prayer meetings."(Hosea 6:6) (MSG).

"Go figure out what this Scripture means: 'I'm after mercy, not religion.' I'm here to invite outsiders, not coddle insiders." (Matthew 9:13) (MSG).

"If you had any idea what this Scripture meant--'I prefer a flexible heart to an inflexible ritual' --you wouldn't be nit-picking like this." (Matthew 12:7) (MSG).

It would seem that the abundant life is more dependent upon a relationship with God than on rules.

Mindfulness

We all experience a struggle with staying 'right here, right now', to some degree or other. Even if it is something important that we really want to come to grips with, if it becomes difficult our minds start to stray to the next thing to be done - or other things we could be doing - or things that we should have done and so on.

Mindfulness is a specific practice in fully experiencing what is happening around you and in you at a specific moment in time; in other words, teaching you how to fully be, right here, right now.

Outside my study window there is a bird feeder. It is a simple wire mesh cylinder dangling on a hook, filled with peanuts. The birds perch precariously on the wire whilst pecking through the mesh at the food within. Humble sparrows and beautiful green parrots enjoy the feast together, with what seems like single-minded purpose. They certainly seem to be right here, right now. They don't seem to be deterred by the memory of the cat that was bounding around outside earlier, nor do they seem worried about the desert heat which even now is building up to a crescendo and will turn the shady nook into a blazing heat trap this afternoon. As far as we know, they don't have words in their heads to distract them from what they are doing.

These words make up language, which is a wonderful tool for solving problems, making our lives more comfortable, and communicating with one another. This same language, however, means that sometimes, especially when we are struggling with problems, we can miss the good things around us because we are so busy in our heads. We can be busy trying to solve our problems by reviewing the past and trying to foretell the future. Alternatively, we could be busy letting our minds do what they were designed to do, which is process information to help us to survive and prosper. Too busy, in fact, to assimilate very important information from what is happening around us at the time. Thus language has a bright, and a dark side.

So, what does this have to do with the birds? Let's imagine for a moment that the birds had language and thoughts. The information that a salivating and very toothy white cat may pounce through the window at any minute would certainly be passed on from those who had experienced it to those who had not (we are assuming that they have some community spirit of course!). The weaker and more delicate birds, who would most benefit from having a good feed, may be too afraid to risk going to the feeder, and worry about how they will ever get enough to eat, even though the food is there all the time. The more tired birds may think 'Why bother – I probably won't be able to get near the food anyway!'

It is not difficult to demonstrate that if our feathered friends had language like we do, there may well be a link between *avoiding* difficult experiences and *increased* suffering. Psychologists have found that that is true for people too. That goes for what is happening inside as well as outside. By trying to avoid pain in the short term,

by being somewhere else in our minds rather than right here, right now, we can actually cause more suffering for ourselves in the long run.

Research has shown that if we regularly practise being right here, right now, like the birds, and if we really take notice of what is happening, we can move from being dissatisfied with life to being more satisfied and thereby suffering less. In other words, if we train ourselves to *notice* pain we can *decrease* suffering. This is a surprising paradox.

The specific practice of mindfulness is one way of training ourselves to return to being right here, right now. It has been found to be very effective in helping us to learn to stay in the moment more and more in our daily lives and to notice what we are experiencing. When we provide the time and space for ourselves to actually notice what we are experiencing, *we gain important information about ourselves that we may have otherwise missed in the rush of life.*

Take conflict for example. Nobody enjoys conflict, and many of us run away from it or perhaps explode in anger to frighten the other person away. These behaviours help us to avoid talking through the conflict when it occurs. By avoiding conflict, however, we can create potential future problems as issues do not get resolved, thus increasing the possibility of resentment and misunderstanding building up. We may lose valuable opportunities to listen to and try to understand one another. By noticing what is happening in the moment of conflict we learn important things about the other person and ourselves.

Depression and anxiety are just two examples of the types of *emotional* pain that are made worse by worrying and ruminating (going over and over unhelpful thoughts). *Physical* pain can be made worse when we focus all our attention on the area of pain and tense up or don't notice anything else around us.

Being alive – now!!

Mindfulness practice helps us to learn how to live in the here and now. Much has been written about it, and there is not the space here to have a full discussion on what is available in the literature. It might be helpful here to simply get an idea of how to do mindfulness.

There are many different views on just how to practise mindfulness. At this point it would be confusing to consider all the different opinions and all that has been written about it. Jon Kabat-Zinn is considered by many professionals to be an authority on

mindfulness practice as a therapy, so we will confine ourselves to what he has to say, whilst remembering that many others have written excellent books on the topic.

His classic definition of mindfulness is: ‘paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment and non-judgementally.’ This is a compact definition that explains a lot, so it will be used as a framework to look at how to practise mindfulness, taking each term individually and expanding upon it.

Jon Kabat-Zinn and the Beginnings of Mindfulness:

(Rich Simon, Mary Sykes Wylie)

Whilst a graduate student in molecular biology at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1966, Jon Kabat-Zinn attended a talk out of curiosity, and heard the speaker explain how, after six months of meditating, his chronic ulcers disappeared for good. ‘Kabat-Zinn was startled to hear that ulcers – a physical ailment – could clear up without medical treatment. This fact ... sparked in him some barely-conscious surmise about the mind’s power to affect the body’. This developed into ‘a deep curiosity about the possibility that simply being aware of each moment as it happens could subtly but profoundly transform the entire quality of life’.

A series of circumstances led to him bringing about the integration of apparently spiritual traditions and conservative medical practice in the first centre in the United States to use meditation and yoga with patients suffering from ‘intractable pain and chronic illness’. This opened as the Stress Reduction Clinic at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center in 1979. The clinic, now housed elsewhere, has treated about 16000 patients, trained about 5000 professionals (with about 35% being M.D.s) and resulted in more than 250 other programmes being set up around the USA.

Kabat-Zinn knew that if he wanted to gain credibility in the field he would need to back up his findings with research. Peer reviewed articles on Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), which mark a move in the right direction of acceptance, have now topped the 1000 mark. These show a reduction in chronic pain, high blood pressure, serum cholesterol levels, blood cortisol, depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder and eating disorders in patients who practice mindfulness regularly.

He has published a number of books, and has proven that ‘In a world that prefers its distinctions to be clear-cut and mutually exclusive, he’s someone who’s successfully built bridges between different worlds and worldviews’. He is, however, ‘suspicious of the word spiritual because he thinks it obscures and mystifies more than it reveals. In his view,

while meditation may ground people in the fundamental reality of their being, in another sense it's nothing special. "Anybody can meditate," Kabat-Zinn says.

'Paying attention' or concentrating on just one thing is difficult when there is so much to attend to. It requires an act of the will. Practising mindfulness trains the mind to willingly return to one single focus of attention.

This is done in a '*particular way*': usually by sitting or lying still with one's eyes closed or focussed on one spot, although, with experience, this can be expanded into other daily activities such as walking or showering.

A conscious choice is made about what to focus on, often one's breathing or doing a body scan, and returning to this focus every time your mind wanders, '*on purpose*'.

This helps one to stay in the '*present moment*' and to learn what may be a new skill: just noticing thoughts, emotions and urges and then letting them go, and returning to the chosen point of focus. This is not easy to do at first, but it is a skill that can be learned.

Neither is it easy to approach the exercise '*non-judgementally*' and not to have any particular goal other than just 'to be'. This is probably totally opposite to all that we have been taught and the mind will need to be retrained:

- to stop looking for a purpose and just be
- to stop evaluating performance and getting caught up in mind language.

Put in another way, the aim is:

- to have a mind full of the present moment and
- to wilfully resist being carried away into thinking about anything else.

By training the mind to purposefully let go of thoughts, without trying to fight with them or to judge them, we begin to notice and to resist the temptation to go wandering off in our minds.

If we practise being right here, right now, we are going to have feelings and thoughts that are difficult to be with. This process allows what is there to be acknowledged, even if just with a mental nod.

The aim of mindfulness is not to empty the mind, but to pay attention to what is there

There is no right way or wrong way of practising mindfulness. The practice of persistently bringing your mind back to one point of focus in the present moment is all that mindfulness is about. That point of focus can be your feet, doing a scan of your body from head to toe and/or back again, listening carefully for all the sounds you can hear, from the furthest away to the nearest, or anything else you choose to focus on in the present moment.

Ultimately the aim is for you to be able to bring mindfulness into your day-to-day experience as and when you want to. At first, however, it is usually a good thing to decide upon a time to practise, say two or three times a week, and set an amount of time for the practice, say five minutes. Once you become used to doing the practise, start to bring it into everyday activities like showering, or doing housework, or eating. Not only will it bring a new dimension to these experiences, but it will also help you to become increasingly aware of your experiences.

If you keep practising, eventually it will become more and more a way of life, and something that you can do at will, whenever you realise that your mind has taken you on a trip away from where you are.

Meditation

Practitioners of mindfulness who also practice meditation have noted how the *experience* of practising mindfulness can be very similar to the *experience* of practising meditation. This has led to a certain amount of confusion, even amongst professionals. Both terms have become common in the media and popular psychology, and can have very different meanings for different people.

Mindfulness as a therapeutic practice has no essential spiritual connotations. The aim is to relearn how we can simply let our thoughts, emotions and physical urges or sensations just *'be'*, without trying to *'do'* anything with them or about them. No spiritual exercise is part of the practice. Meditation is usually linked with spiritual practices which have spiritual gains as their goal. The difference between the two practices lies in the goal of the practitioner, although the method of practice may be very similar.

It is not essential for a Christian to practise meditation in order to benefit from mindfulness. Some may find it threatening to consider doing meditation as it is often linked with other religions.

The aim of Christian meditation is very specific and will be explained in detail as we go on. It is very important to keep in mind why we are doing an exercise such as mindfulness or Christian meditation.

It is impossible to cover all types of meditation in order to uncover the differences between them and Christian meditation. It is more relevant to focus on what Christian meditation is than spend time thinking about what it is not.

Christian meditation

Becoming acquainted with God's perspective on life and people

In Psalm 1 the Psalmist says *"Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers. But his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night."* Blessed means 'happy'! Does that, and the word 'delight', mean that meditation on God's word is, in fact, a source of happiness?

The Bible says that God wants a relationship with us based on love, obedience and trust and not an empty show of rituals. (1 Samuel 15:22)

Praying and communicating with God can be difficult as it involves conveying our thoughts and feelings, and listening for God's perspective. In close relationships words are not always needed. The mere presence of the loved one brings delight. It is a profoundly moving experience to be free of the need for words and to just be in the Presence of God, in the spirit.

Sometimes there are words, and you may hear the *"still small voice"* (1Ki 19:12) (NIV) of God in these quiet and alone times. Paying attention to what God may be saying in that moment can be a great help in experiencing the Presence of God in a full and open relationship.

Sometimes there are words, oftentimes no words but just a sense of being in His Presence.

Where does Mindfulness fit in?

The practice of mindfulness as described above can facilitate and provide a platform for the practice of Christian meditation. Kabat-Zinn says that what tends to happen in mindfulness is that it shows us how to ‘surf the wave between chaos and order’. Even when we feel very turbulent or our minds are troubled, mindfulness helps us to “*find the sweet stillness inside the wave.*” (Rich Simon, Mary Sykes Wylie) Mindfulness is good preparation for focussed attention on God’s word.

Paying attention to ‘what comes up’ in the present moment with no goal other than just to notice, then continually return to this task *without judging oneself*, brings us to a ‘Just as I am’ state of mind.

It is hard not to judge ourselves and try to fix things about ourselves before approaching God. It is *natural* to want to protect parts of ourselves from scrutiny. It is *hard enough* to be willing to notice certain aspects of ourselves without going into judgemental mental activity when we are alone. That is why it takes *practice* to *allow* all these parts to be present when we spend time with God.

In approaching ourselves first in an attentive manner without judging, we allow the totality of who we are right now to be present.

Meditation is not difficult in the sense that it requires skilful learning. It is difficult because it ‘goes against the grain’. Just as it is not easy to take time out from daily tasks to exercise physically, so it is not easy to take our minds out of their usual activities into a special time of just experiencing the present moment, right here, right now.

Taking the time to learn this skill can be the beginning of a wonderful journey, experiencing the Presence of God.

As one who persevered in this pursuit, Brother Lawrence said: “*Be not discouraged by the repugnance which you may find in it from nature... At the first one often thinks it lost time, but you must go on, and resolve to persevere in it to death, notwithstanding all the difficulties that may occur.*” (Lawrence, 1967)

As mentioned earlier, it is important to remember what we are aiming at. The aim of Christian meditation is not to empty the mind but to focus upon ‘obedience and faithfulness’ to God which, as Foster suggests, is what “*most clearly distinguishes*

Christian meditation from its Eastern and secular counterparts.” (p37) (Foster, 1998) Further on he states that “..*detachment is not enough; we must go on to **attachment.***” (p43)

Mindfulness practice is a good way to set the stage for this. It does not aim at emptying the mind but makes room for what is there in the first place. Persistent thoughts and feelings may constantly return as if fighting for a place in our consciousness if we do not gently but firmly allocate a space for them to be held loosely, and then get on with the task at hand.

How to practise Christian meditation:

The Bible instructs us to meditate. In Joshua 1:8, God says to meditate on His word day and night so that we will obey it. The psalmist says "*his delight is in the law of the Lord, and in His law he meditates day and night.*"(Psalm 1:2) (MSG).

Does the Bible tell us how to meditate? If we take a careful look at what the words translated as ‘meditation’ mean in the original texts of the Bible, we can gain a better insight into precisely what was meant in verses such as Joshua 1 verse 8, where Joshua was instructed to meditate on God’s word day and night.

In the Hebrew-Greek study Bible edited by Spiros Zodhiates the words used in the Old Testament are translated expansively, giving a rich picture of pondering, imagining, musing, attending, considering, perceiving, discerning, understanding and prudently regarding (Hebrew-Greek Key Word Study Bible: New American Standard Version). As a description of the mental activity involved, this gives us a lot of scope to work out how to do at least some of it. This is made even easier with descriptions extending to vocalisations from murmuring and/or making a solemn sound through to talking (with) and even roaring.

Old Testament words for Meditation

In the Old Testament there are at least three primary Hebrew words for meditation (Hebrew-Greek Key Word Study Bible: New American Standard Version):

1. (hagah) haw-gaw': A primitive root; to murmur (in pleasure or anger); by implication to ponder: imagine, meditate, mourn, mutter, roar,speak, study, talk, utter.);

(higgayon) hig-gaw-yone: Intensive from (hagah) - a murmuring sound, that is, a musical notation (probably similar to the modern *affettuoso* to indicate solemnity of movement); by implication a machination: - device, Higgsion, meditation, solemn sound.

2. ('siyach') see'-akh; A primitive root; to ponder, that is, (by implication) converse (with oneself, and hence aloud) or (transitively) utter: - commune, complain, declare, meditate, muse, pray, speak, talk (with).
3. ('biyn') bene: A primitive root; to separate mentally (or distinguish), that is, (generally) understand: - attend, consider, be cunning, diligently, direct, discern, eloquent, feel, inform, instruct, have intelligence, know, look well to, mark, perceive, be prudent, regard, (can) skill (-ful), teach, think, (cause, make to, get, give, have) understand (-ing), view, (deal) wise (-ly, man).

The New Testament description expands with more detailed activities such as taking an inventory or counting, reasoning and intensively interesting oneself in something or setting the affections on an object of desire.

New Testament words for Meditation

The New Testament brings in a few more descriptions, such as (Hebrew-Greek Key Word Study Bible: New American Standard Version):

1. ('analogizomai') an-al-og-id'-zom-ahee; to estimate, that is, (figuratively) contemplate: - consider.); log-id'-zom-ahee: Middle voice from 'analogizomai'; to take an inventory, that is, estimate (literally or figuratively): - conclude, (ac-) count (of), + despise, esteem, impute, lay, number, reason, reckon, suppose, think (on).
2. (phroneo)fron-eh'-From (phren: to rein in or curb); to exercise the mind, that is, entertain or have a sentiment or opinion; by implication to be (mentally) disposed (more or less earnestly in a certain direction); intensively to interest oneself in (with concern or obedience): - set the affection on, (be) care (-ful), (be like-, + be of one, + be of the same, + let this) mind (-ed, regard, savour, think).

Let's take a look at a few examples of the topics we are told to meditate upon, and ideas on how to go about it.

Upon what topics does the Bible command that we meditate?

~ *The Word of God*

Joshua 1:8: *"Do not let this book of the law depart from your mouth, meditate (hāqāh) on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful."*

Psalms 1:2: *"But his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates (hāqāh) day and night."*

Psalms 119:95: *"The wicked are waiting to destroy me, but I will ponder ('bīyn') your statutes."*

~ *The Works of God*

Psalms 143:5: *"I remember the days of long ago; I meditate (hāqāh) on all your works and consider what your hands have done."*

Psalms 145:5: *"They will speak of the glorious splendour of your majesty, and I will meditate ('štyach') on your wonderful works."*

~ *Jesus*

Hebrews 12:2-3: *"Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider ('analogizomai') him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart."*

~ *Things that Please God*

Psalms 19:14: *"May the words of my mouth and the meditation (higgāyōn) of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O LORD, my Rock and my Redeemer."*

~ *Eternal Things:*

Colossians 3:2: *"Set (phroneō) your minds on things above, not on earthly things."*

Philippians 4:8: "*Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable - if anything is excellent or praiseworthy - think (logizomai) about such things.*"

Starting to practise

Find out for yourself. Read about people whose lives have been changed in this way. Above all, use the Bible as your guide. Trust your own experience as you train yourself to quietly just be there, and then wait for God to make His Presence known to you.

There is no special way to do this. People have been trained in methods such as the '*lectio divina*' and had special teachers as did Theresa of Avila. It may be useful to research all of this, but not essential for your own practice.

Some suggestions:

If you have been practising mindfulness already this will provide an excellent basis for meditation. As in mindfulness, Christian meditation requires you to just be there. It is not necessary to prepare in any way, although it can be helpful to decide beforehand what to focus on. Just as in any family, the action of merely being together with God, with no particular purpose in mind, can be very satisfying.

Start with mindfulness practice. It is helpful to sit in a place where you will not be disturbed. The emphasis on silence and stillness, which is greatly facilitated by mindfulness, helps to prepare a mind which is not full of distraction. As the Psalmist wrote in Psalms 46:10: 'Be still, and know that I am God.' (New International Version) Remember that this practice on it's own has been shown to be beneficial in helping people.

Develop a habit by setting a regular time aside such as 5 minutes two or three times a week, perhaps increasing the amount of time over weekends. Start modestly, and as your desire for this type of communion with God develops, increase the time when possible. It has been said that it takes 21 days to form a habit. Family and work commitments may make this difficult, but over time the practice begins to make itself a priority and becomes more important and easier to do. It can help to fit it in with another habitual practice, such as waiting outside school for your children (It can be done outside the house! Please park your car first!)

Study aids to the Bible such as a concordance, a Bible dictionary, lexical aids (which give the full translation of some words from the original Greek or Hebrew) or commentaries all provide extra material which allow one to ‘reason and intensively interest oneself’ in God’s Word or other aspects of our relationship with Him. Many versions of the Bible are now available with built-in study aids which are a good starting point. These are not essential however and should not limit you if they are not available.

Music is a great help in ‘setting the affections on an object of desire’. Guidance from God on a particular issue, or an experience of the love, joy and peace which are a part of our inheritance from Him are greatly facilitated by music.. It is a good idea to have these materials available beforehand. Choose something to focus on, perhaps a word, or a verse or a scene from the Bible, or allow the Holy Spirit to lead you during the process.

The topics suggested above, and the extended interpretation of the words used in the Bible, give a number of ideas that can be used in meditation. So:

- ponder,
- imagine scenes,
- muse over,
- attend to,
- consider,
- work at understanding and prudently regard(ing) with perception and understanding’ the
- ‘Word and works of God,
- Jesus, and
- eternal things and those that please God’.
- One could also ‘take an inventory or count’ what God has done or the ways in which He has said certain things in the Bible.

All these different types of thinking will help us to obey what Jesus called ‘the first and greatest commandment’ which is found in Matthew chapter 22 verse 37: *“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your **mind**”*.

Expect difficulties. While mindfulness and meditation are not difficult to do, it is difficult to keep at it as already mentioned. It is not unusual to experience strong emotions at times. Do not suppress them, do not try to guide, judge or in any way

interfere with the process of just letting your experience be. Let your emotions be expressed freely, and this may bring ‘relief, healing, self-understanding, revelation of God's love and growing intimacy with him.’ (John Mark Ministries) Have compassion for yourself, and any weaknesses that you may become aware of. In Matthew 22 Jesus followed up the greatest commandment with a second one which He said was just ‘like it’: “Love your neighbour as yourself” (vs 39). How can we love others if we have no compassion for ourselves? There is no wrong or right way to do this.

Don't worry if your mind wanders, or tells you this is a waste of time, that is normal. Just keep returning to your focus on God and appreciate whatever you receive – even if you are not sure what it is. The mere practice of just being in God's Presence brings its own blessing, something you will become more and more aware over time.

Something dramatic may occur, and you may see or hear something in your spirit, but more often than not there is no special experience. It is very important to remember that the focus is on the God Who brings the experiences and not the experience itself. Over time, however, you can expect to receive more and more comfort from this practice when you need it most.

Possible Obstacles for Christians

Is this misguided mysticism?

A problem that Christians may have is the fear that any exercise of this sort is seeking an experience that may pose as a ‘counterfeit’ to the Presence of God. This is seen as a very real danger for vulnerable people who may be susceptible to ‘misguided mysticism’ (John Mark Ministries). This is a very complex topic which requires in-depth investigation if it becomes an issue. At this stage, however, it is sufficient to note very clearly that the safeguard against this would be to keep in mind that we are seeking time with the God who makes the experiences, and not the experiences themselves.

Too heavenly-minded?

Linked to this is the fear that practices such as this may make us ‘so heavenly minded that we are of no earthly good’. A consideration of the Quakers and their emphasis on ‘listening silences’ proves this to be a false fear because, as Foster notes, “*the result has been a vital social impact far in excess of their numbers*”. (p44) (Foster, 1998)

Much has also been written about the dangers of Christians spending too much time in the mind and in the imagination. If this is something you fear, then consecrating the time to God will ensure that He gives you His protection.

“Law-bound disciplines breathe death” - Foster

A final caution from Foster: *“The Spiritual Disciplines are intended for our good. They are meant to bring the abundance of God into our lives. It is possible, however, to turn them into another set of soul-killing laws. Law-bound Disciplines breathe death.”* (p32) (Foster, 1998). To him the greatest danger is that we will miss out on the whole point of the exercise which is make Christ’s longing to commune with us a ‘living reality....’ in our ‘portable sanctuary’ (p42).

Final bits from Other Christians:

Rick Warren, in *‘The Purpose Driven Life’*, (Warren, 2003) describes meditation this way: *“Meditation is **focused** thinking. It takes serious effort. You select a verse and reflect on it over and over in your mind...if you know how to worry; you already know how to meditate.”* (190). Warren goes on to say, *“Worry is focussed thinking on something negative. Meditation is doing the same thing, only focussing on God’s Word instead of your problem. No other habit can do more to transform your life and make you more like Jesus than daily reflection on Scripture...If you look up all the times God speaks about meditation in the Bible, you will amazed at the benefits He has promised to those who take the time to reflect on His Word throughout the day.”*

On their website, John Mark Ministries (John Mark Ministries) says *“Meditation....is part of the Christian heritage and certainly has been explicit and emphasised in the church through religious movements as far back as the Desert Fathers and Mothers of the 4th Century AD.”*

‘The Practice of the Presence of God’, a Christian classic, which has already been mentioned, was written by Nicholas Herman of Lorraine, a Carmelite monk who lived in the seventeenth century. Known as ‘Brother Lawrence’, he wrote about his experience of an active relationship with God, and of how this was the most important thing in the world to him: *“Were I a preacher, I should, above all other things, preach the practice of the presence of God.”* (p44)

Brother Lawrence’s description of how to achieve this sounds like a description of what happens in mindfulness: *“I know that for the right practice of it the heart must be empty of all other things, because God will possess the heart alone; and as he cannot possess it*

alone without emptying it of all besides, so neither can He act there, and do in it what He pleases, unless it be left vacant to Him.” (p43, 44) (Lawrence, 1967.) Further on he stated: “I cannot imagine how religious persons can live satisfied without the practice of the presence of God.” (p45) (Lawrence, 1967).

In recent centuries, the Church, especially Western Protestantism, has largely ignored Christian meditation. These may be a few of the reasons:

- Result-oriented thinking characterises formal education today and much church teaching in the West. The results of meditating are quite difficult to demonstrate and they are not evident in the short-term.
- Widespread literacy moved the classroom from the world of experience to that of the book. Modern educational systems minimise the importance of experiential learning, although this tendency has been recognised and is being addressed in some areas. Before we could read a lot of learning happened by experience. Learning was essentially a ‘doing’ activity.
- In addition to this, meditation takes time to do and time to teach, and is not conducive to being done in the large groups which comprise many churches today.

These writers show us that Christians do meditate. In fact, some have written about the practice as being an essential part of their relationship with God. As Richard Foster so passionately states: “*How sad that contemporary Christians are so ignorant of the vast sea of literature on Christian meditation by faithful believers throughout the centuries! And their testimony to the joyful life of perpetual communion is amazingly uniform. From Catholic to Protestant, from Eastern Orthodox to Western Free Church we are urged to ‘live in his presence in uninterrupted fellowship.’*” (p40) (Foster, 1998)

In a nutshell

1. Keeping our minds on the present moment is difficult, especially when things are not going very well for us.
2. By refusing to notice difficult emotions, thoughts or physical sensations, we can create unnecessary suffering for ourselves.
3. There is a way to learn how to notice these things called ‘mindfulness’.
4. The benefits of mindfulness practice are documented in modern psychological research.
5. Mindfulness does resemble meditation.
6. It is ‘Christian’ to meditate.
7. The Bible tells us to meditate, and how to. Some Christian writers have supported meditation. There is also evidence that it has been supported in the church since the 4th century AD.
8. The benefits of meditating on the Bible are promised – in the Bible.
9. Christian meditation focuses on the giver of the experience and not the experience itself.
10. Ideas on how to meditate and examples.

