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BIBLICAL REFLECTIONS

Think on These Things

Reader's Version

By John L. Wheeler

"Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things." (Philippians 4:8 ESV)

There is something remarkable about this instruction from the apostle Paul. He does not merely tell believers what they should believe, how they should behave, or what they should avoid. He tells them what they should think about. More than that, he provides a list of qualities that ought to characterize the things upon which their minds dwell. Truth, honor, justice, purity, loveliness, excellence, and whatever is worthy of praise are to occupy the believer's thoughts.

It is an extraordinary command. But it did not appear without preparation. Long before Paul wrote to the Philippians, the Old Testament had established that God is concerned not only with the outward conduct of His people but also with the meditations of their hearts.

David expressed that concern in a prayer that reaches far beyond anything spoken aloud:

"Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer." (Psalm 19:14 ESV)

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David understood that the thoughts never expressed, the considerations entertained in silence, and the meditations known to no other human being are nevertheless known to God. He wanted more than acceptable speech. He wanted an acceptable inward life. His prayer acknowledged that the Lord who hears the words of the mouth also knows the meditations of the heart.

But what should occupy those meditations? The opening psalm provides an answer.

“Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; but his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night.” (Psalm 1:1–2 ESV)

Here the righteous man is distinguished not merely by the company he avoids but by the object of his delight. God's law is not simply a collection of requirements he reluctantly acknowledges. It is something in which he finds pleasure, something worthy of his attention, something to which his mind willingly returns.

And yet, what does it mean to meditate upon God's law day and night? Must the believer spend every waking hour contemplating commandments, ordinances, and statutes? Must every thought be a conscious examination of Scripture?

Surely the psalmist is describing something richer than an endless mental recitation of regulations. The law of the Lord is His revealed instruction, disclosing His character, His righteousness, His wisdom, and His will. To delight in that law is to find in God's revelation a treasure worthy of continual consideration. Meditation is not limited to memorizing commandments. It includes considering the God who gave them and the life they teach His people to live.

Psalm 119 develops this thought further:

“I will meditate on your precepts and fix my eyes on your ways. I will delight in your statutes; I will not forget your word.” (Psalm 119:15–16 ESV)

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Notice the deliberate language. The psalmist resolves to meditate, to fix his attention, to delight, and to remember. His mind is not merely receiving whatever thoughts happen to arrive. He is intentionally directing his attention toward what God has revealed.

There is a difference between possessing knowledge of God's Word and deliberately returning to it in thought. A person may know a passage of Scripture and yet rarely consider its meaning. The psalmist desires more than possession of information. He desires an inward life shaped by what he knows.

The book of Proverbs then introduces another dimension:

“Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life.” (Proverbs 4:23 ESV)

The surrounding verses speak of the mouth, the eyes, and the direction of one's feet. What begins within the heart eventually finds expression in words and actions. The inward life is not isolated from outward conduct. It is the source from which conduct proceeds.

A person who continually entertains bitterness should not be surprised when bitterness eventually appears in his speech. A person who nourishes envy may eventually act upon it. Conversely, a heart increasingly shaped by truth, righteousness, and mercy will increasingly influence the way its possessor lives.

The heart must therefore be guarded, not because every passing thought determines a person's character, but because what is willingly cultivated within the heart influences the direction of life.

Then Isaiah adds a remarkable promise:

“You keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on you, because he trusts in you.” (Isaiah 26:3 ESV)

Here meditation is connected with trust, and trust with peace. The steadfast mind is not merely occupied with religious information. It rests upon the Lord Himself. The foundation of its peace is not the strength of its concentration but the faithfulness of the God upon whom it depends.

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This is especially important when we return to Philippians. Immediately before instructing believers concerning their thoughts, Paul writes:

“And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 4:7 ESV)

Isaiah speaks of the mind stayed upon God and kept in peace. Paul speaks of God's peace guarding hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Both passages locate the believer's security ultimately in God rather than in the perfection of human mental discipline.

And now Paul provides his remarkable list.

Whatever is true. Whatever is honorable. Whatever is just. Whatever is pure. Whatever is lovely. Whatever is commendable. Whatever possesses excellence or deserves praise.

The repeated word whatever is significant. Paul does not confine worthy contemplation to explicitly theological subjects. Truth may be encountered in the study of mathematics or medicine. Excellence may be recognized in craftsmanship, literature, music, or scientific discovery. Justice may be observed in an act of courage. Loveliness may be found in the created world, in a child's kindness, or in the enduring faithfulness of a friend.

These things are not substitutes for God's revelation, nor do they establish their own independent standards of goodness. They are to be understood and evaluated in the light of the God who is Himself true, righteous, holy, and good.

The Old Testament has taught us that the meditations of the heart matter to God, that His Word is worthy of delight, that attention should be deliberately directed, that the heart must be guarded, and that peace belongs to those who trust in Him. Paul now describes the qualities that should characterize the things to which believers give their attention.

It is a beautiful progression.

It is also, at first reading, rather overwhelming.

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Impossible.

That single word may arise almost involuntarily when a believer considers what these passages seem to require.

Who can honestly claim that the meditations of his heart are always acceptable to God? Who delights in God's law without interruption? Who continually fixes his attention upon God's precepts? Who guards his heart with perfect vigilance? Who maintains an unwavering mind, never distracted, never anxious, never occupied with anything unworthy?

The commandments are good. Their righteousness is beyond question. The difficulty is not with what God commands but with the person who is commanded.

There is something familiar about this struggle. Jesus identified the great commandment:

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.” (Matthew 22:37 ESV)

Who has ever fulfilled that commandment perfectly? Who has loved God with every affection, every intention, every faculty, and every thought, without the slightest failure?

Only Jesus Christ.

Yet the impossibility of perfect obedience in our present condition does not make the commandment unreasonable or unnecessary. God's righteousness is not diminished by human weakness. Nor does the believer's inability to obey perfectly mean that genuine obedience is impossible.

But perhaps another difficulty has been introduced by the way we understand these passages.

Consider a physician who has spent hours reading medical journals, reviewing laboratory findings, evaluating medications, and considering the implications of diagnostic studies. Eventually his mind grows tired. He closes the journal and wants to think about something else.

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Perhaps he reads an interesting essay. Perhaps he watches a science fiction movie. Perhaps he enjoys a conversation that has nothing to do with medicine, theology, or any other demanding subject. Perhaps he simply sits quietly and allows his mind to rest.

Has he abandoned the instruction of Philippians 4:8?

Not necessarily.

Paul does not command believers to maintain an uninterrupted stream of explicitly religious thoughts. He does not prohibit intellectual recreation, ordinary conversation, or the enjoyment of imaginative literature. Indeed, the very breadth of his language suggests otherwise.

A science fiction story may be imaginary, but it can portray genuine courage, loyalty, sacrifice, or justice. An essay about the natural world may reveal something true and remarkable. A conversation between husband and wife may contain tenderness, humor, faithfulness, and love.

The question is not whether every subject is theological in its immediate content. The question is whether what occupies the mind is worthy of its attention.

Of course, this does not resolve every difficulty. The human mind is not a perfectly disciplined servant. Thoughts appear uninvited. Memories return unexpectedly. Resentments are rehearsed. Imaginary arguments are conducted with people who are not present. Suspicions are entertained, pride is indulged, and sometimes the mind seems determined to revisit precisely those things it ought to leave behind.

There is a difference between an unwelcome thought entering the mind and deliberately inviting it to remain. Nevertheless, even with that distinction, the believer must acknowledge the continuing presence of sin.

The answer cannot be found in the confident assertion that sufficient determination will produce a perfectly disciplined mind.

Paul himself provides a different foundation:

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“For it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.” (Philippians 2:13 ESV)

The Christian life is not an exercise in achieving righteousness through independent human effort. The believer is united to Christ, indwelt by the Holy Spirit, and progressively sanctified by the grace of God. The commands of Scripture are not discarded because obedience is imperfect. They become part of the means by which God instructs, corrects, and transforms His people.

The believer learns to recognize what deserves attention. He learns to turn away from what corrupts the heart. He learns, sometimes slowly and through repeated failures, to direct his thoughts toward what is good.

And somewhere within that process, something wonderful may happen.

Thinking may become worship.

Consider a person standing beneath a clear night sky. Above him are countless stars, their distances almost beyond comprehension. He considers the immensity of the universe, the extraordinary order of its movements, and the remarkable laws by which it operates.

His thoughts may begin with astronomy. There is nothing improper about that. The scientific truths themselves are worthy of consideration.

But then his thoughts turn toward the Creator.

“The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork.” (Psalm 19:1 ESV)

He recognizes that the heavens are not merely magnificent objects of study. They are the handiwork of God.

His contemplation has become something more than intellectual appreciation.

It has become worship.

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Worship is a conscious, God-directed response, offered in truth and humility, arising from the recognition of who God is or what He has done.

That distinction is important. Admiration is not necessarily worship. A person may appreciate a beautiful landscape without consciously acknowledging its Creator. He may admire an act of courage without considering the God whose moral goodness provides the ultimate standard by which courage is recognized.

But when the believer sees beyond the goodness of the thing contemplated to the goodness of the God from whom every good gift comes, admiration may become gratitude, and gratitude may become praise.

The contemplation of truth may lead to the God of truth. The recognition of justice may direct the mind toward the righteous Judge. The beauty of creation may awaken wonder at the wisdom and power of its Creator. An act of unexpected kindness may remind the believer of the mercy he has received in Christ.

Not every such experience automatically becomes worship. Nor must the believer consciously transform every ordinary thought into a theological exercise. But the mind increasingly shaped by God's truth becomes increasingly prepared to recognize His goodness in the ordinary experiences of life.

And perhaps this is one of the most encouraging implications of Paul's instruction.

The believer does not need to abandon the ordinary world in order to think about what is true, honorable, just, pure, lovely, commendable, excellent, and worthy of praise. He lives in a world created and sustained by God, a world in which the effects of sin are everywhere evident, but in which the goodness, wisdom, and providence of God have not disappeared.

There remains much that is worthy of thoughtful appreciation.

And beyond all these created expressions of goodness stands the Lord Himself, whose character is the perfect realization of everything Paul describes.

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The mind that cannot sustain uninterrupted contemplation is nevertheless invited to return, again and again, to what is good. The heart that cannot achieve perfect obedience is nevertheless being renewed by the Spirit of God. The believer who recognizes his weakness need not despair, for the God who commands is also the God who works within him.

The goal is not to achieve a state of perpetual religious concentration. It is to grow in the knowledge of God, to recognize what is worthy of attention, and to become increasingly responsive to His goodness wherever it is truly displayed.

And sometimes, without any deliberate intention to begin a theological meditation, an ordinary thought may lead the mind toward the extraordinary God.

A moment of appreciation becomes a moment of recognition. Recognition gives rise to gratitude. Gratitude becomes praise.

And praise becomes worship.

Just a thought.

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