

“All of us could do with slowing down. That’s true for life in general and for our time in God’s word in particular. We all want to make progress with Jesus, of course, but paradoxically it is by going slower with his word that we will make the fastest progress with him. Linda’s book is a searching and timely call to meditate on God’s word, explaining clearly and carefully what that means and offering up a practical framework to do it well. She is honest about the struggles of finding time for the Scriptures but ambitious about the delight we can discover there. Don’t rush past this one.”

ADRIAN REYNOLDS, *Pastor; Author; Associate National Director, Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches (FIEC)*

“Linda has written a book that makes you want to put down her book and pick up your Bible—there’s not much higher praise to give than that. I laughed (out loud and publicly), paused, prayed, highlighted and jotted my way through this book. Linda warmly instils a sense of expectation and joy at the privilege of mediating on Gods word.”

GABRIELLE SAMUEL, *her. conference and London City Mission*

“This marvellous book must be given the time and space to draw us into its thoroughly biblical, wholesome and potentially life-changing approach. Reading *Deeper Still* has been a refreshing treat and has provided an incentive to meditate more deeply on God’s word, which I pray will lead me to delight greatly in him.”

RICHARD CUNNINGHAM, *Director, UCCF: the Christian Unions*

“This is just what we need: a call to replace our busy, anxious thoughts with focused reflection on God’s word. Linda Allcock helps us with this practical guide to memorising, singing and speaking the word.”

BILL JAMES, *Principal, London Seminary*

“*Deeper Still* is a highly readable and practical book on the richness of biblical meditation. In an age when we are surrounded by endless voices, this is a timely reminder of the importance of filling our hearts and minds with something real, deeper and ultimately far more satisfying.”

STEVE McCCLURE, *Ministry Leader, Navigators*

“Engagingly written and inspiringly simple, *Deeper Still* is a wonderfully clear and practical guide to engaging more fully with God through his word.”

CLARE HEATH-WHYTE, *Author, Old Wives' Tales*

“Linda Allcock has provided us with a great tool for Bible meditation! With humility and clarity, she teaches us how we can fill our hearts with Scripture and ask questions to help the truth saturate our souls. You will not set down this book pessimistic about another spiritual task to accomplish, but you will be encouraged, instructed, and pointed to the grace of the gospel, which permeates Linda’s chapters. I will be recommending this to many.”

TAYLOR TURKINGTON, *Director of Women’s Training Network,
The Gospel Coalition*

“*Deeper Still* is a wonderfully encouraging, terrifically insightful and stunningly simple book. It is written to help us to find eternally satisfying nourishment through our daily encounter with the Lord in his word. As well as offering a simple framework to the reader to follow in achieving this goal, it is also honest, realistic and frank about the challenges there are. *Deeper Still* is also a brilliantly written and at times profoundly personal book. No matter where you are along your Christian journey, this book will be more than worth your time.”

JONATHAN GEMMELL, *Director of Conferences and Resources, The
Proclamation Trust*



Linda Allcock

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Introduction

How quickly can you skim this introduction to work out whether you want to read this book?

You probably don't have long, so I'll cut to the chase. You're busy. We're all busy. Your schedule is full. And your mind is working on overdrive. You've got one hundred and one things you're trying to think, plan and remember—and another hundred and one things you'd really like to *stop* thinking about.

Most of us sense the same problem in our spiritual lives. I remember the day I discovered I could listen to a sermon podcast at 1.5x speed. New heights of efficiency! Listen to the same amount of teaching in less time? Awesome.

Or not.

Perhaps, like me, spending your days scanning e-mails and racing through life in general means that when you sit down to read your Bible, you struggle. You struggle to become immersed in the passage or respond emotionally; you find yourself having to re-read paragraphs and often can't remember what you've read a few hours later. When

we skim, we may get a general sense of the meaning, but we miss out on really understanding, perceiving beauty and grasping complexity.

So when it comes to God's word, maybe it's less about 1.5x-ing it and more about slowing things down; giving ourselves completely to meditating deeply, slowly and carefully, so that God's word captivates our minds and moves our hearts.

That's biblical meditation. And that's what this book is about.

Biblical meditation will help you to go deeper into God's word, and help God's word to go deeper into you. It's a way to listen carefully, memorise, chew over and digest slowly what the Lord is saying to you.

Biblical meditation will still your mind. It's an opportunity to dial down the volume on your frantic thought-life and rest in God's unchanging truth. So that even when the Bible is not open in front of you, God's words are still at the forefront of your mind.

Biblical meditation will fill your heart. It means listening to God's word in a way that impacts us deeply, so that we keep thinking about it throughout the day; soaking in God's truth so that it moves us to delight, empowers us to obey and enables us to hold fast.

And it's worth saying this: biblical meditation is not as hard as you may think. Meditation is not about spending hours and hours stuffing our heads full of Scripture but about coming to Jesus for life. As we look to him, we find not only the grace that forgives but the power to take God's words and live them out.

Before we get started, let me sketch the outline of where we're going. In section 1, *Still Your Mind*, we'll look at what biblical meditation is, and how it's different from secular versions. Section 2, *Fill Your Heart*, will equip you with a series of practical, simple steps that I hope will revive your daily Bible time as you "store up" God's word in your heart (Proverbs 2 v 1). Then in section 3, *Feed Day and Night*, we'll consider some passages that explicitly mention meditation and explore how they help us to live out the truth we hear in God's word throughout the day—particularly as we seek to delight in God, fight sin and endure suffering. I'd encourage you to read with a pen in hand to help you concentrate, question and remember.

Above all, my prayer is that this book will take you deeper still into the wonderful truths that God has revealed in his word, so that they fill your heart and fix your mind on him.

So please... don't just skim it.

SECTION 1

STILL YOUR MIND

CHAPTER 1

What is Meditation?

W e're not really a museums sort of family. Our recent experience of the Imperial War Museum in London reminded me why. As I walked past a 1940s air-raid-shelter-come-dining-table with my husband and three boys, I was fascinated. "Can you *imagine* what it would have been like to have one of these in your home?" I thought to myself. "Imagine living with a constant reminder of the very real possibility of being bombed at any point..." I wanted to get inside the air raid shelter, to really feel what it would have been like to have all five of us crammed in there, straining to hear the bombers, terrified of what might happen next. I could feel my pulse beginning to race even as I looked at it.

Sadly, I had approximately 90 seconds to take in the exhibit—just enough time to skim-read the information panel. "Oh, an air raid shelter," was the extent of the engagement of certain members of the family, before they raced on to the next display, desperate to get the whole thing over with so that we could get to the best part of the day: McDonald's.

THE PROBLEM WITH SKIMMING

As frustrating as my visit to the Imperial War Museum was, it gives us a helpful impression of what biblical meditation is, and is not. Meditating on Scripture is more than just skimming the information panel to get the gist of what's going on before moving on. Meditation is thinking deeply about what it would have felt like.

The problem is that skimming is how we handle literature nowadays. I read recently that *The New York Times* on Sunday contains more information than the average 18th-century French nobleman would have learned in his lifetime!¹ I'm not sure that can be verified, but the point is clear. We are increasingly overloaded with information—not just in the Sunday papers, but through the internet, emails, social media and advertising, even before we take into account all the other things we choose to read, watch or listen to. We cope with this bombardment by skimming—glancing through, trying to glean the important bits of information.

This all means that really reading and thinking deeply about what the Bible says does not come naturally. It takes deliberate effort to slow down and read each word—to get into the type of literature it is and feel the emotion, the suspense and the climax. This is why we need to relearn the art of meditation—slowing down and thinking deeply about what we are reading.

MENTAL DECLUTTER

It's not just our reading habits that have changed in the last few decades. Meditation has changed too...

In 1990 *The Oxford Dictionary* defined “meditate” as meaning: “1. To think about something deeply. 2. To reflect deeply on spiritual matters. 3. To plan, consider, or think of doing (something).”

Now that definition has changed. Notice what comes first in this definition from their online dictionary today:

1 Focus one’s mind for a period of time, in silence or with the aid of chanting, for religious or spiritual purposes or as a method of relaxation.

1.1 (Meditate on/upon) Think deeply about (something).

1.2 (With object) Plan mentally; consider.²

Whereas previously meditation was to *think deeply about something* (the *something* being the important thing), it’s now an exercise in *focusing the mind* (the mind itself being the important thing).

Why? Because of all the skimming!

Instead of thinking deeply on a few things, we are now overloading our minds with so much information that we need a new form of meditation to cope with it—a form that *empties* our minds.

It’s easy to see parallels between our approach to information and our approach to material things. Previous generations used to consume much less, but really value what they consumed. My granny was a case in point. Everything was valuable. She used to wash out plastic bags and bits of foil so that they could be used and reused. The Christmas box

was filled with old wrapping paper, often with three different Sellotape markings from years gone by. I once found a rag under the sink in the downstairs bathroom that in a previous life had been a pair of men's Y fronts!

That's thrifty (if slightly eccentric). My granny really valued each thing to the extent that she kept coming back to it again and again to get the most out of it.

Today we're more likely to "skim" stuff, just like we skim words: single-use plastics, throwaway packaging, clothing that we wear just a few times before chucking out and replacing with the latest trends. Our local authorities have to lay on advanced systems of waste disposal in order to keep up with the rubbish.

In a sense, that is what most people take meditation to mean nowadays: a way to empty our minds, dispose of the waste, and declutter all the information we've overloaded them with. And with the constant bombardment of emails, group chat messages, autosuggested YouTube videos, and targeted ads everywhere we turn... it's no surprise that meditation is increasingly attractive in our culture.

On hearing that I was writing a book on meditation, my neighbour John gave me an admiring didn't-know-you-were-into-yoga-chanting-retreats look, and commented: "Woah, interesting. It is very popular at the moment."

Another friend was excited because she relies heavily on the Headspace app, which helps people to practise mindfulness meditation. She imagined that I would be writing similar exercises to help Christians to de-stress.

When I said the word "meditation", each had assumed

that I meant emptying my mind (as in Oxford's online definition #1). For the sake of clarity, we will refer to this as "secular meditation" (although it's not strictly secular, as by this I mean all types of meditation that aren't biblical, even if they may be religious). This category includes the popular method of mindfulness meditation.

Distinct from that, we have what we'll call "biblical meditation". This is almost the opposite. Whereas secular meditation aims to *empty* the mind, with biblical meditation we are *filling* our minds with thoughts about a particular subject.

In the Bible's original language, the word means basically to talk with yourself; to think carefully about something; to take time to really engage with what it means. Essentially it is similar to definition #1 in the 1990 Oxford dictionary: "Thinking deeply about (something)".

As we dig more carefully into the Bible passages about meditation, we find that in all of the seven verses that are specific about it, it is the *heart* that meditates (a translation of the Hebrew word *leb*, meaning the centre not just of our emotions, but of our mind and will). The author John Piper explains biblical meditation like this: "'Meditation' in Hebrew means basically to speak or to mutter. When this is done in the heart it is called musing or meditation."³

In other words, biblical meditation is "talking with yourself in your heart".

This means that biblical meditation is more than just *studying*. It's more like getting inside the air raid shelter and feeling what it would have been like. Obviously, we can't literally get inside a Bible text. But we can ask those same questions

that I was asking in the museum: “Can you imagine what it would have been like...?”

Can you imagine what it would have been like to have been Noah and his wife, hearing the first drops of rain after sitting inside an ark on dry land feeling like a muppet for seven long days?

Or to have stood near the cross as the sky went dark at midday for three long hours? 180 agonising minutes. 10,800 seconds. 1... 2... 3... 4... 5... Is this ever going to end?

Or to have been one of the women, unable to sleep, rising before dawn and walking to Jesus’ tomb, desperately sad... only to find it empty?! The confusion, shock, sadness, grief?

So biblical meditation involves *feeling* God’s word, but also *learning* God’s words—or as Proverbs 7 v 3 puts it, “[writing] them on the tablet of your heart”. This is far more than just *memorising* a text. After all, anyone can do that—and hate it! The seventeenth-century minister Richard Baxter makes the point that biblical meditation “stirs ... the whole soul”, not just the mind (*The Saints’ Everlasting Rest*, p 188).

For the most part, I am like the child who races past the exhibits in the museum to get to McDonald’s. I’m desperate to get my Bible reading out of the way so I can get on to the action of the day.

But there is no *better* part of the day! The psalmist describes God’s word as “more precious to me than thousands of pieces of silver and gold” (Psalm 119 v 72). He’s not racing past. He knows that meeting God in his word is truly precious. Why would I want to think about anything else?

EVERYBODY MEDITATES

Yet the reality is, I think about *a whole lot else*.

In this sense, you already know how to meditate. In fact, you already *do* meditate. You're already "talking with yourself in your heart". The problem is with what you're saying.

Just think for a moment about what you are thinking about...

"Did I lock the door? I don't remember locking the door. I always lock the door. It's probably locked. I should go and check. No, I'm sure it will be fine. But what if I didn't lock the door?!"

"They are so much better looking than me. This shirt really makes me look fat. I'm so slow at running. What's wrong with me?"

"The lead role in that box set—now they are hot. If only I looked like them." (Accompanying action = reaching for the low-cal smoothie for breakfast and the salad for lunch.) Or alternatively, "I'll never look as hot as them—what's the point of even trying? I can always start the diet tomorrow..." (Accompanying action = reaching for the large cheese feast pizza, half a tub of ice cream, the other half a tub of ice cream, and a sharing size bar of chocolate, all washed down with 2 litres of Coke.)

It's not just the anxious and jealous voices. There is also the proud soundtrack:

“He liked it. He said it was good. That moment when they clapped... I just want to relive that moment. I can do this!”

Though there is a B-side to that one, called the I’ve-just-been-criticised soundtrack:

“I will never be able to write this book. No one will read past this chapter. I am so rubbish. Why did I even try?”

And don’t even get me started on the when-is-the-next-meal soundtrack!

“I’m hungry. Surely it’s nearly lunchtime? That croissant looks so good. I don’t need it. I already ate. I really need it. 10am, I’ll wait till 10. How is it only 9:43?”

Stopping to think about what we think about is especially important these days, because there are plenty of companies out there who are seeking to be one step ahead of us. I was unnerved by an advert for the entertainment provider NowTV on the side of a bus, which said: “We take your free time seriously”. We used to have to choose which TV shows we watched, which newspaper we picked up, which books we read. But now such media is not sitting on a shelf waiting to be picked up—it is actively intruding into our headspace. And this is serious business. I open an internet page and I am bombarded not just with adverts, but targeted ads, using so-called “cookies”. It’s not a chocolatey treat that is out to tempt us, but a calculated invasion based on

our search history. What that NowTV ad should really say is, “*We* are writing *our* words upon the tablet of your heart”.

You can “talk with yourself in your heart” about the things of God; or you can “talk with yourself in your heart” about the things of NowTV. But you can’t *not* meditate.

CHANGING OUR THINKING FROM ME TO HE

For the first 30 years of my life, the background chatter of my heart wasn’t really noteworthy. But that changed when I developed post-natal depression after the birth of my third child. Life with three kids was busy, but life inside my mind was unbearable. The soundtrack in my head became a repeated refrain of: guilty, worthless, useless. As part of my treatment I was encouraged to really think about what I was thinking about. The chatter had become so dark and all-consuming, there was no way of pretending that my inner dialogue wasn’t important.

If meditating is talking to ourselves in our hearts, then in the biblical sense of the word, everyone meditates. Our autopilot is to ponder our passions, desires and fears. The church leader Edmund Calamy recognised this back in the 17th century: “Like mill-stones [used to grind grain into flour] ... the heart of man will always be grinding, always musing, always meditating”.

The constant noise in our heads can be exhausting. For a lot of us, we don’t like what we hear. This is why people in our culture are increasingly turning to secular meditation—they’re desperate to declutter the voices from their heads. And who can blame them?

But as we'll see, there's actually a bigger problem with our thought soundtracks. They come in different tunes, but with the same essential content: it's all about me. Even when I'm thinking about *someone else*, it's almost always really about me.

Ironically, as I started to think about writing this book, I blogged my way through *my experience* of meditating on God's word: in the darkness of depression; in unexpected (and unwanted) life circumstances; in the battle to trust him in big life choices; in family life; in the fight against sin.

I started with me: "What does my experience teach me about this subject?" It was only as I was studying one of the meditations in the Bible, Psalm 104, that I noticed a simple but profound truth: the psalmist doesn't start each thought with *me me me*, but *he, he, he*.

I realised that I had started in the wrong place. I had to screw up my research, print off all of the Bible verses that mentioned meditation and start over. I had to change my thinking from *me* to *he*. What does *God* say that biblical meditation is?

My initial approach was like a parable of the problem. But biblical meditation doesn't delight in me. Biblical meditation writes God's word on our hearts so that we think about him; delight in him; want to spend all day, even all eternity, thinking about him.

To find a real solution to our soundtracks—to transform the thoughts of our hearts from *me* to *he*—would need a miracle. And God is in the business of working miracles.