

WORLDVIEW GUIDE

MEDITATIONS *of Marcus Aurelius*



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INTRODUCTION

What if you could spy into the mind of a great world leader? Uncover what made them tick? See what motivated them? Learn to understand why they made the decisions they made? Emperor Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations* allow you to do just that, and the wisdom found in them is astounding.

The *Meditations* were not written under contract from a publisher. Aurelius had no literary agent and went on no book tours. From what we can tell, there was no intention that these sayings would ever be read by another soul. Rather, they were the emperor's personal notes on how to think, how to lead, and how to live.



WORLDVIEW ANALYSIS

Take pleasure in one thing and rest in it, in passing from one social act (that is, an act of kindness) to another social act, thinking of God. (VI.7)

How has thou behaved hitherto to the gods, thy parents, brethren, children, teachers, to those who looked after thy infancy, to thy friends, kinsfolk, to thy slaves? Consider if thou has hitherto behaved to all in such a way that this might be said of thee, “Never has wronged a man in deed or word.” (V.31)

Such lines from the *Meditations* stand out as powerful examples of just how “Christian” Marcus Aurelius could sound at times. Church historian Philip Schaff wrote that Marcus was “nearly approaching a disciple of Jesus. We must admire his purity, truthfulness, philanthropy, conscientious devotion to duty, his serenity of mind in the midst of temptations of power and severe domestic trials,

and his resignation to the will of providence. He was fully appreciated in his time, and universally beloved by his subjects. We may well call him among the heathen the greatest and best man of his age.”¹¹

Marcus was not a Christian, however, and his philosophy left him little room to understand their doctrine and way of life, leaving Christian readers with quite a puzzle when approaching his life and writings.

Stoicism

What comes to mind when you hear the word “stoic”? For most people, “stoic” simply means serious, unemotional, or perhaps unconcerned with events around them. Unfortunately, these ideas do not fully capture what it meant to be a Stoic—that is, a follower of Stoic philosophy, as Marcus Aurelius was. Again, Schaff writes that the emperor was “mild, amiable, gentle; in these respects the very reverse of a hard and severe Stoic...”¹²

So, what was Stoicism? What did they believe? The beliefs of Stoics varied a bit, but there are certain elements they seem to have held in common.

First, Stoics believed, as Seneca the Younger, an influential Stoic writer, is known for saying, “Virtue is its own reward.” It is enough to attain goodness in this life, whether or not we have the promise of reward in the afterlife.

11. Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 2:327.

12. *Ibid.*, 2:327.