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EQUIPPING MEMBERS TO PRACTICE COMMUNION WITH GOD  
THROUGH BIBLE MEDITATION AND PRAYER AT RIVERSIDE  
BAPTIST CHURCH IN NEW PORT RICHEY, FLORIDA

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by  
Joseph Michael Earle  
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EQUIPPING MEMBERS TO PRACTICE COMMUNION WITH GOD  
THROUGH BIBLE MEDITATION AND PRAYER AT RIVERSIDE  
BAPTIST CHURCH IN NEW PORT RICHEY, FLORIDA

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Defense Date: September 26, 2022

I dedicate this to my wife Amy, my faithful partner in the service of King Jesus;  
she will one day be rewarded for her sacrificial service  
to God, our church, our children, and me.

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## PREFACE

I am grateful for God's provision of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, which has provided me the opportunity to enhance my understanding and practice of pastoral ministry. I am especially grateful for my project supervisor, Dr. Dustin Bruce, for his careful and thoughtful aid in preparing this project. He, along with my second reader Dr. Matthew Haste, Dr. Donald Whitney, Dr. Joseph Harrod, and Dr. Stephen Yuille have added greatly to my life and ministry.

Joe Earle

New Port Richey, Florida

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Knowing God is foundational to the Christian life and a growing relationship with him provides the joyful confidence that enables strength in suffering, growth in holiness, and bold witness towards a lost world. Christians must know Christ by faith through the gospel if they are to both stand as justified before God and serve through the power of God's Spirit. But this is not a knowledge merely gained at conversion and then set aside for other matters. Rather, this relationship of faith must be at the heart of every Christian's life as they commune with God personally and experience the fruit that results. Therefore, it is my aim to equip the people in my church to practice communion with God through Bible meditation and prayer in order to strengthen them with a joyful confidence in him.

#### **Context**

This ministry project took place at Riverside Baptist Church (RBC) in New Port Richey, Florida, a small congregation of less than fifty members. RBC has a faithful core but has experienced numerous divisions over the last decade that have weakened the church, shrunk its size, and hurt its testimony. For it to be an effective witness for the Lord in its community, its people first need the internal growth that comes from a steadfast communion with God.

#### **Strengths of Riverside Baptist Church**

RBC has numerous strengths that provide hope that it can be a healthy body used by the Lord to minister effectively to the lost people around them. First, it has a small team of humble and unified elders who are deeply committed to the church and are



unfazed by the many challenges it has endured. These men are devoted to the membership as they consistently teach, pray, and enter into people's lives relationally. They are committed to following God's plan for the church in the Bible through their emphasis on expositional preaching, their appreciation for the importance of prayer, and their desire to obey the clear commands that Christ left with his church. They also yearn for evangelistic growth as they seek God's praise through a restored work at RBC that reaches lost people with the saving message of the gospel.

Second, RBC has a faithful core of people in its membership who are earnestly seeking the church's growth and success. They clearly love Jesus and trust him to work through RBC in a way that changes lives, provides hope to needy people, and brings God much glory. These individuals labor in numerous roles including worship and teaching, as well as in basic areas of service such as property maintenance and administrative tasks.

Third, RBC has a prime location in its proximity to a burgeoning downtown New Port Richey. Many small congregations experience the additional trial of being located near small or shrinking populations, but RBC has the great advantage of being placed where many people already are and where the population is growing.

Fourth, the weekly worship of the church is robust and serves as an asset to help the church move forward. It is gospel-centered throughout in that the message of Christ's work on the cross for sinners shapes and guides each worship service. From beginning to end, the worship at RBC is marked by adoration for God's goodness, acknowledgement of sin, looking to Jesus through the gospel, and leaning upon the strength of the Spirit.

Fifth, RBC is somewhat of a blank canvas upon which to do ministry. Due to its past divisions, most of those remaining at the church are now unified and willing to follow the leadership in order to make efforts towards spiritual health and evangelistic growth. They are open to preaching and teaching that directs them with long-range, biblical strategies.

## **Weaknesses of Riverside Baptist Church**

However, RBC also suffers from numerous weaknesses that must be addressed if the church is to be a healthy, faithful witness to its surrounding community. First, a significant portion of the membership of RBC lacks health in their devotional lives, based upon conversations with and observations of members. They certainly respect the Bible and value the word preached in the worship services. They also express a fondness for the prayer commitment the church once demonstrated and relate a desire for a renewed commitment today. But there is an insufficient practice of the spiritual disciplines in most members' daily lives, particularly in the areas of Bible meditation and prayer. This has weakened them, deprived them of godly joy, and kept them from further acts of faithfulness.

Second, there is a lack of theological depth among a significant portion of the congregation that makes it vulnerable to internal division and outside influence. There are several areas where RBC seems especially in need, including a greater understanding of biblical sufficiency, a deeper appreciation for Baptist polity, and a better grasp on the gospel's importance for all of life.

Third, RBC has at times overemphasized programmatic activities for outreach instead of the organic, prayerful, evangelistic engagement of their own neighbors. Though there is a place for careful planning when it comes to reaching others with gospel truth, RBC has too often relied upon children's programs, youth activities, special services, and outreach events to attract others to the church. While these can be helpful in careful measure, the simple one-to-one evangelistic relationships that have marked the Christian church for centuries have found less practice at RBC.

Fourth, there is a lack of theologically-minded men at RBC who can provide shepherd-like leadership to the congregation. While RBC has some godly elders who provide a faithful service to the church, the next generation of men still need a significant amount of training and growth before they will be ready to step forward and assist in the

leadership of the congregation.

### **Rationale**

Each of these weaknesses has some connection to the first weakness mentioned: that a significant portion of the church does not regularly practice the necessary spiritual disciplines that accompany a steadfast, joyful communion with the Lord. This greater problem affects every other area of the ministry and must be addressed first if RBC is to make strides towards spiritual health and evangelistic growth.

The apostle Paul urged believers towards such a walk with God as he charged them to live in daily dependence upon him for all matters of life. He wrote in Galatians 5:16, “But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.”<sup>1</sup> This spiritual walk is vital for every child of God in order to resist temptations and even to bear the spiritual fruit that honors the Lord. As Paul wrote a few verses later in verses 22–23, “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, thankfulness, gentleness, self-control.” Therefore, it is apparent that a spiritual walk with the Lord, practiced by relational communion with him each day, is necessary if the people of RBC are to live obedient and fruitful Christian lives.

Believers across the world, including those at RBC, face tremendous pressure from the culture around them along with the daily experiences of sickness, pain, and loss that are part of life in this broken world. But knowing God through an ongoing communion with him, which includes the spiritual disciplines of daily Bible meditation and prayer, enables believers to have the joy and strength necessary to face these trials of life. Psalm 1:1–3 speaks of the value of Bible meditation when it calls the man “blessed” who resists sinful paths and instead his “delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night.” In addition, the Lord Jesus emphasized the believer’s great

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture references are from the English Standard Version.

need for prayer when he said to three of his disciples in Mark 14:38, “Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.” Christians, therefore, need to practice both of these disciplines if they are to walk faithfully with Christ in a hard world.

Furthermore, the people of RBC must rest daily in the joy and love of their Savior Jesus in order to boldly stand out as enduring gospel witnesses to those around them. As they practice an ongoing relationship with Christ himself they will then be emboldened by the powerful delight and confidence that stems from it, inspiring them to pass on the message of their Savior to those who do not know him. The Apostle Paul understood this when he exhorted Timothy to “not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord” and to “share in suffering for the gospel” because Christ has “saved us and called us to a holy calling” (2 Tim 1:8–9). He knew that an ongoing remembrance of Christ’s salvation would lead to unashamed gospel sharing.

Though RBC has many challenges, ranging from needs of more leadership to a healthy culture of disciple-making, the church’s greatest challenge is for each member to find their daily delight in Christ and to walk in intimate communion with him. They need lives rooted in Philippians 3:8: “Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ.” Like Paul, the people of RBC need to learn the value of approaching God for the fellowship, joy, and confidence that comes from a close walk with him. They must learn this through the practice of the spiritual disciplines, especially Bible meditation and prayer.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this project was to equip the members to practice communion with God through Bible meditation and prayer at Riverside Baptist Church in New Port Richey, Florida.

## **Goals**

The following four goals relate the steps I took to accomplish this project. The first goal relates my desire for the congregation to be stirred and strengthened by God's Spirit through preaching. The second goal relates to the pre-assessment and post-assessment of the congregation regarding their growth in understanding and practice. The third and fourth goals relate to the actual work of increasing their knowledge and equipping them for practice. These goals are listed as follows:

1. The first goal was to develop a six-week sermon series on communion with God through Bible meditation and prayer.
2. The second goal was to assess the congregation's knowledge and practice of communion with God through Bible meditation and prayer.
3. The third goal was to increase the knowledge of communion with God through Bible meditation and prayer in the members of the church through the sermon series.
4. The fourth goal was to equip the members of the church to practice communion with God through Bible meditation and prayer through the sermon series.

A specific research methodology has been created that measures the successful completion of these four goals.<sup>2</sup> This methodology is described in the following section.

## **Research Methodology**

Successful completion of this project depended upon the completion of these four goals. For the first goal I developed a six-week sermon series on communion with God through Bible meditation and prayer. This goal was measured by the elders of Riverside Baptist Church, who used a rubric to evaluate the biblical faithfulness, clarity, and relevance of the sermon series.<sup>3</sup> This goal would be considered successfully met when a minimum of 90 percent of all the rubric evaluation indicators met or exceeded the sufficiency level.

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<sup>2</sup> All of the research instruments used in this project were performed in compliance with and approved by The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary Research Ethics Committee prior to use in the ministry project.

<sup>3</sup> See appendix 1.

The second goal was to assess the congregation's knowledge and practice of communion with God through Bible meditation and prayer. This goal was measured by administering the Communion with God Inventory which was used before and after the preaching of the sermon series to measure growth in both doctrinal knowledge and the practice of communion with God through Bible meditation and prayer.<sup>4</sup> This goal would be successful met when the Communion with God Inventory was successfully created and administered to at least seventy-five percent of the church membership.

The third goal was to increase the knowledge of communion with God through Bible meditation and prayer in the members of the church through the sermon series. This goal was measured by administering the Communion with God Inventory from goal 2, which would be used to measure the change in doctrinal knowledge.<sup>5</sup> This goal would be considered successfully met when a t-test for dependent samples demonstrated a positive statistical difference in the Communion with God Inventory scores.

The fourth goal was to equip the members of the church to practice communion with God through Bible meditation and prayer, also through the sermon series. This goal was also measured by administering the Communion with God Inventory from goal 2, which measured church members' knowledge, confidence, and motivation to practice communion with God through Bible meditation and prayer. This goal would be considered successfully met when a t-test for dependent samples demonstrated a positive statistical difference in the Communion with God Inventory scores.

### **Definitions and Limitations/Delimitations**

The following definitions of key terms are used in the ministry project:

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<sup>4</sup> See appendix 2.

<sup>5</sup> See appendix 2.

*Communion with God.* Communion with God is receiving God’s loving communication to us while joyfully responding through our union with Jesus (1 John 1:3). John Owen defines it: “Our communion, then, with God consisteth in his communication of himself to us, with our returnal unto him of that which he requireth and accepteth, flowing from that union which in Jesus Christ we have with him.”<sup>6</sup> According to Matthew Henry, communion with God “is in one Word to pray” for which we receive our primary instruction from “the Gospel of Christ.”<sup>7</sup>

*Bible meditation.* Biblical meditation is receiving God’s biblical revelation with the careful consideration of one’s Spirit-directed mind for the purpose of enjoyed relationship, life application, and prayer. According to Thomas Watson, “Meditation . . . is a holy exercise of the mind whereby we bring the truths of God to remembrance, and do seriously ponder them and apply them to ourselves.”<sup>8</sup> Donald Whitney refers to it as “deep thinking on the truths and spiritual realities revealed in Scripture, or upon life from a scriptural perspective, for the purposes of understanding, application, and prayer.”<sup>9</sup>

Two limitations applied to this project. First, the accuracy of the Communion with God Inventory survey was dependent upon the willingness of members to be honest about their biblical understanding of communion with God along with their practice of Bible meditation and prayer. To mitigate this limitation, the Communion with God Inventory survey of members was publicly anonymous. Only I knew the responses of each member in order to better pastor them in the future. Second, the effectiveness of the preaching and teaching was limited by the faithfulness of members’ attendance. To

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<sup>6</sup> John Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, vol. 4, *Communion with God* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1965), 8–9.

<sup>7</sup> Matthew Henry, *Directions for Daily Communion with God*, 3rd ed. (London: M. Lawrence, 1715), 8.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Watson, quoted in David Saxton, *God’s Battle Plan for the Mind: The Puritan Practice of Biblical Meditation* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage, 2015), loc. 609, Kindle.

<sup>9</sup> Donald Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, rev. and updated ed. (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2014), 46.

mitigate this limitation, all members who missed instruction time were encouraged to listen to recordings of the sermons that they missed.

Two delimitations applied to this project. First, participants in the Communion with God Inventory were required to be RBC members. Though others could attend the sermons, this allowed the project to focus on the target group of committed members. Second, the preaching occurred over a six-week period. This provided ample time to teach and equip RBC while avoiding tediousness.

### **Conclusion**

Communion with God is central to the Christian life and a right practice of it will affect believers in seemingly every important area. This project related through Scripture why communion with God through Bible meditation and prayer is so vital to the Christian life as well as the happy benefits that it brings. It also noted various historical and practical issues that are related to communion with God in order to better understand its importance and right practice. Finally, this project revealed how the preaching and teaching of this subject affects the knowledge and practice of communion with God among the members of RBC.



CHAPTER 2  
BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL BASIS FOR COMMUNION  
WITH GOD THROUGH BIBLE MEDITATION  
AND PRAYER

The purpose of this chapter is to communicate the biblical rationale for communion with God through the means of Bible meditation and prayer. This will be accomplished by exploring several texts of pertinent Scripture. First, a consideration of John 15:1–11 and John 17:1–3 demonstrates that God has made intimate communion with him possible. Second, a study of Galatians 5:16–26 expresses each Christian’s need to practice communion with God daily. Third, a review of Psalm 1 reveals that biblical meditation is an essential means provided by God in order to commune with him. Finally, a reflection upon Hebrews 4:14–16 communicates that prayer is also a vital means of communion with God.

**Communion with God Made Possible  
(John 15:1–11; John 17:1–3)**

God has made joyful communion with him possible for believers in Christ. This is true not only because they are redeemed through Christ’s death on the cross, which removes the enmity between them and God (2 Cor 5:18; Eph 2:16), but also because God made it possible through Christ for believers to have an ongoing, intimate relationship with him wherein they enjoy his love for all eternity.

In John 15:1–11, the Lord Jesus relates a metaphor that reveals the tight connection formed between his followers and himself; Jesus is the vine, and his followers are the branches who are to abide in (*μείνατε*, “remain with,” 15:4) the vine. This relates an “organic” spiritual union wherein each Christian has become “vitaly connected to the

vine (Jesus).”<sup>1</sup>

The word *dependence* likely best communicates Christians’ vital connection to the Lord in this passage, for they (the branches) are entirely reliant upon Christ (the vine) for all good progress in the faith (ex., spiritual fruit). As verse 4 states, “Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me.” Thus, every branch is entirely dependent upon the vine to accomplish what God intends for it—namely, to bear spiritual fruit. This necessary dependence by the believer for the totality of the Christian life is articulated well by Andreas Köstenberger: “John emphasizes that Jesus is not merely the person in whom the faith of his followers is rooted but that he should also be the continuing source of nurture and strength in the life of individual believers and of the community.”<sup>2</sup> The Christian life is therefore to be marked by an ongoing relationship of dependence with God himself wherein they remain in close connection to the Lord Jesus Christ.

But the Lord makes clear early in his metaphor that his true followers were already a part of the vine and that it must now be their ongoing aim to abide in him. In verse 3, Jesus states, “Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you.” The word Jesus had spoken to them was undoubtedly the teachings surrounding his gospel (the Gospel of John’s primary message: John 3:16; 20:30–31) which demanded faith from his hearers. This word from Jesus was already accepted in faith by his followers and it made them spiritually “clean,”<sup>3</sup> although their ongoing cleansing from sin (“prunes” v. 2) was a continual need. Craig Keener provides a helpful explanation to the distinction between an already accomplished spiritual cleansing and an ongoing

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<sup>1</sup> Andreas Köstenberger, *A Theology of John’s Gospel and Letters* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 241.

<sup>2</sup> Köstenberger, *Theology of John’s Gospel and Letters*, 503.

<sup>3</sup> J. Ramsey Michaels, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 803.

spiritual cleansing: “When Jesus speaks of the continued “cleansing” of the branches (15:2) after they have already become ‘clean’ (*καθαροί*, 15:3), the disciples in the story world and John’s ideal audience might recall 13:10, which implies that the disciples are mostly clean but their feet must still be washed.”<sup>4</sup> Thus, although Christians are made spiritually clean by hearing the word of Christ with faith, they have need for an ongoing cleansing, connected to regular confession of sin (1 John 1:9), as they walk through this sinful world. And this ongoing cleansing necessitates their continual abiding in Christ. As D. A. Carson states, “Continuous dependence on the vine, constant reliance upon him, persistent spiritual imbibing of his life—this is the sine qua non of spiritual fruitfulness.”<sup>5</sup>

This dependent abiding is marked by three relational acts found in this passage: clinging to Christ’s word, prayerful requests for fruit, and loving obedience. First, in verse 7 Jesus says, “If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.” As the first part of this verse alludes, to remain closely connected to Jesus is to let his words absorb deeply into one’s mind, heart, and life. In other words, to depend upon Jesus Christ is to depend upon his very words. It is to let his words shape and direct one’s life in such a way that a Christian is entirely dependent upon them for each daily step. Therefore, the same truthful word that makes a Christian spiritually “clean” before God (v. 3) is the word that must be embraced for a Christian’s ongoing life before God.

Second, Christ’s followers have free access to God through prayer when his words abide in them. “Ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you” (v. 7); this is not an encouragement by the Lord to treat prayer like a magical lamp that can be rubbed whenever a selfish desire forms. Rather, this encourages believers to faithfully ask for

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<sup>4</sup> Craig Keener, *The Gospel of John*, vol. 2 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004), 996.

<sup>5</sup> D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 516.

God-given spiritual fruit in their lives or in the lives of others (v. 8).<sup>6</sup> To abide then in one's relationship with Christ, by clinging to the words of Christ, opens up the door to relational prayer which leads to lasting spiritual fruit. The ramifications of this relationship are profound, affecting both the Christian's sanctification (vv. 10, 12), as well as his or her evangelistic and missionary efforts (v. 27).

Third, abiding in Christ is tightly connected with obedience to Christ. Jesus says in verse 10, "If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love." Jesus relates his loving connection to his Father here, as their pristine relationship of intimacy is preserved by Jesus keeping his Father's commands. The same is true for Christians who express their loving connection to God by keeping the commandments of God. And the key commandment that Jesus relates, one which encapsulates the rest of his commands, is love for God (v. 9) and love for others (v. 12; especially brothers and sisters in Christ).<sup>7</sup> So, to abide in Jesus includes walking in loving obedience to Jesus.

Lest Jesus' followers think their relationship with him is marked solely by utility and moral progress, he relates the deep and happy intimacy that he desires and has even made possible for his followers. He declares in verse 11: "These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full." Jesus wants his followers to experience the joy that he himself experiences with his Father as they too abide in him. So, though remaining close to Jesus through his word and approaching God through prayer leads to obedient spiritual fruit, a key aim of Jesus is that Christians would share in his wonderful joy. God has provided Christians with a relationship of dependence with himself that is marked by unmatched affection and delight. Carson well

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<sup>6</sup> Michaels, *Gospel of John*, 808.

<sup>7</sup> Michaels, *Gospel of John*, 800.

states this happy relationship of love in this way: “What is presupposed is that human joy in a fallen world will at best be ephemeral, shallow, incomplete, until human existence is overtaken by an experience of the love of God in Christ Jesus, the love for which we were created, a mutual love that issues in obedience without reserve.”<sup>8</sup>

Not only does John 15:1–11 communicate that God has made joyful communion with him possible for Christians, but two chapters later, in John 17:1–3, God’s accomplishment is explicitly articulated. Here, Christ prays to the Father and describes the inexpressible gift of eternal life that is now given to his followers.

In pursuit of the glory of God (v. 1), Jesus relates that his Father has “given him authority over all flesh, to give eternal life to all whom [the Father has] given him” (v. 2). The sovereign choice of God to save his people is related here, as Jesus communicates that his authority comes from his Father directly and that the nature of his authority is to give eternal life to all who belong to the Father as they are given to him. The clear possessive language of verse 6 should also be noted as the tone intensifies: “I have manifested your name to the people whom you gave me out of the world. Yours they were, and you gave them to me.” So, the Father gives authority to Jesus Christ to give eternal life to all those who belong to the Father.

But Christ’s description of eternal life in verse 3 is what is so relevant for this project. He explains it as something far better than simply acquiring endless days with an unending quantity of breaths. Rather, eternal life includes a relationship with God to be enjoyed by the Christian on an ongoing basis as soon as he or she places faith in Jesus Christ. This ongoing relationship is related in verse 3 when Jesus speaks of knowing God in the present tense: “And this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.” Therefore, there is an immediacy to this eternal life,

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<sup>8</sup> Carson, *Gospel According to John*, 521.

as Köstenberger declares, “The possession of eternal life is not relegated to a later time after death; people can have eternal life already in the here and now.”<sup>9</sup> This current, ongoing enjoyment of eternal life is in accord with Christ’s past tense language in John 5:24, where he speaks of eternal life as a reality already enjoyed by a Christian: “Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life.” Therefore, this eternal life is already realized for believers in Jesus. It is not merely something to be enjoyed by a Christian at the eschatological day to come but is a relationship of delight in the here and now.

The reason this joy is currently realized is that eternal life is equated by Jesus in verse 3 as knowledge of God himself: “And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.” To have eternal life is to know God with a loving intimacy that is given to the believer by Jesus. Eternal life is experienced now because the believer comes to know God now, before the arrival of future, heavenly blessings.

Carson helpfully explains that eternal life is the fulfillment of the new covenant promise of an intimate relationship with God which he has now made possible with his people through Jesus. He quotes the prophet Habakkuk, who foresaw a time when “the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea” (Hab 2:14). And he writes that an “integral element of the promised new covenant is that all of God’s new covenant people, from the least to the greatest, would know him personally, and without an intermediary.”<sup>10</sup> Carson goes on to declare, “Eternal life turns on nothing more and nothing less than knowledge of the true God. Eternal life

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<sup>9</sup> Andreas Köstenberger, *Encountering John: The Gospel in Historical, Literary, and Theological Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013), 160.

<sup>10</sup> Carson, *Gospel According to John*, 556.

is not so much everlasting life as personal knowledge of the Everlasting One.”<sup>11</sup>

Therefore, eternal life is ultimately the accomplishment of what God promised his people, that they would know him personally. This is now possible through Jesus.

This knowledge of God is not merely a cerebral knowledge, as if all that mattered was an intellectual understanding of his existence. By contrast, though this knowledge does involve the intellect, it is a profoundly relational knowledge that is marked by intimacy, love, and joy with God which endures forever.<sup>12</sup> Köstenberger explains this relationship as he connects this knowledge of God to the language of intimacy found throughout the Bible. He writes that “to know God does not merely refer to cognitive knowledge; it involves a personal relationship.”<sup>13</sup> He declares that such closeness of connection is consistent with the term “to know,” which “encompasses even the most intimate human relationship, sexual intercourse.”<sup>14</sup> And comparing this to the believer’s knowledge of God, he states that “knowing God means entering into a growing personal relationship with him through Jesus Christ.”<sup>15</sup> Therefore, this is a knowledge of close, personal intimacy with God himself.

To summarize these texts from John’s Gospel: Jesus, the authoritative Son of God, gives eternal life to the people of God, and this eternal life includes an intimate relationship of love and joy with God. So, God has made communion with him possible through Jesus his Son.

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<sup>11</sup> Carson, *Gospel According to John*, 556.

<sup>12</sup> Keener, *Gospel of John*, 1054.

<sup>13</sup> Köstenberger, *Encountering John*, 161.

<sup>14</sup> Köstenberger, *Encountering John*, 161.

<sup>15</sup> Köstenberger, *Encountering John*, 161.

## **The Necessity of Daily Communion (Gal 5:16–26)**

Not only has God made communion with him possible for believers in Jesus, but it is vital for them to practice communion with him daily. In Galatians 5:16–26, this constant need for Divine fellowship is clearly communicated by the apostle Paul as he commands the Galatian believers—with present tense verbs which are ongoing in force—to “walk by the Spirit” (v. 16), be “led by the Spirit” (v. 18), and “keep in step with the Spirit” (v. 25). These instructions are tightly connected with an intimate communion with God himself. But in order to understand this important connection, one must first know what it means to “walk by,” be “led by,” “and “keep in step with” the Holy Spirit. Second, one must also comprehend why such activity is important as believers battle with their sinful flesh. Third, one must grasp how to go about living in this way in order to enjoy its blessings in the Christian life.

First, all three verbs are essentially referring to the same action with regard to the Holy Spirit. Walking by the Spirit, being led by the Spirit, and keeping in step with the Spirit all refer to the Holy Spirit’s guidance and power over the life of a Christian. Timothy George clarifies their connection to each other, along with a fourth verb, to “live by the Spirit,” in his commentary on Galatians 5. He explains that these individual verbs all “designate the Spirit-controlled life of the believer” and that all are “roughly equivalent in meaning.”<sup>16</sup> He states that “each of these verbs suggests a relationship of dynamic interaction, direction, and purpose” with the Holy Spirit, wherein the believer is to “go where the Spirit is going, to listen to his voice, to discern his will, to follow his guidance.”<sup>17</sup>

The clause “walk by the Spirit” (v. 16) will be the primary focus of this project,

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<sup>16</sup> Timothy George, *Galatians*, New American Commentary, vol. 30 (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1994), 386.

<sup>17</sup> George, *Galatians*, 386.



as walking illustrates well the idea behind the Spirit-controlled life and is a common New Testament description for Christian behavior.<sup>18</sup> As Fung explains, “Walking is a common Hebraism for ‘conducting one’s life’ and thus is synonymous with living.”<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, according to commentators, walking appears to encapsulate the action Paul is seeking to encourage in believers throughout Galatians 5; an action that “denotes the need to submit to the Spirit day by day,”<sup>20</sup> and to let one’s “conduct be directed by the Spirit.”<sup>21</sup> As Fung again explains, “To ‘walk by the Spirit’ means to be under the constant, moment-by-moment direction, control and guidance of the Spirit.”<sup>22</sup>

Second, it is crucial for Christians to walk by the Spirit because a spiritual battle rages in and around them. As Thomas Schreiner argues, as he comments on Galatians 5, “A conflict between the flesh and the Spirit has ensued, explaining why it is so vital for believers to walk in and to be led by the Spirit. . . . The flesh wars against the Spirit and the Spirit wars against the flesh. Still . . . as one walks by the Spirit and is led by the Spirit, there is substantial, significant, and observable victory over the flesh.”<sup>23</sup> He goes on to state that this battle continues for the believer “until the day of death.”<sup>24</sup>

But in Galatians 5:16, Paul writes that if Christians “walk by the Spirit” they will “not gratify the desires of the flesh.” In other words, if a Christian walks under the ongoing guidance and empowerment of the Holy Spirit then that Christian will be able to

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<sup>18</sup> Douglas J. Moo, *Galatians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013), 352–53.

<sup>19</sup> Ronald Y. K. Fung, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 130.

<sup>20</sup> Thomas R. Schreiner, *Galatians*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, vol. 9 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 342.

<sup>21</sup> F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 243.

<sup>22</sup> Fung, *Epistle to the Galatians*, 130.

<sup>23</sup> Schreiner, *Galatians*, 345.

<sup>24</sup> Schreiner, *Galatians*, 351.

resist the sinful desires of the flesh. This word “flesh” (Greek: σάρξ) is particularly important to understand, as it relates the internal battle that Christians continually face. “Flesh . . . is not simply the body . . . but human nature in its unregenerate weakness,”<sup>25</sup> according to F. F. Bruce.

Douglass Moo perhaps best encapsulates this idea of the flesh as he explains its different uses in Scripture, clarifying that “flesh” is used on a “spectrum from the physical/neutral to the spiritual/negative.”<sup>26</sup> It can refer simply to the “soft tissues of the human body” or to the “human body as a whole.”<sup>27</sup> But it can also “denote the limitations of the human condition that have been imposed by sin,” and, going even further, it can refer to “human beings in opposition to God.”<sup>28</sup> As Moo states, it often represents “everything aside from God in which one places his final trust. . . . This is the sense that the word has in this part of Galatians,” where it is often “placed in opposition to the Spirit.”<sup>29</sup>

The deeds of the flesh—a human’s unregenerate weakness in opposition to God—are listed by Paul in Galatians 5:19–21: “sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these.” These evil deeds should be resisted by Christians for they are the antithesis of the Spirit-empowered graces which should mark the children of God: “the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control” (Gal 5:22–23).<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Bruce, *Epistle to the Galatians*, 149.

<sup>26</sup> Moo, *Galatians*, 343–44.

<sup>27</sup> Moo, *Galatians*, 343–44.

<sup>28</sup> Moo, *Galatians*, 343–44.

<sup>29</sup> Moo, *Galatians*, 343–44.

<sup>30</sup> Bruce, *Epistle to the Galatians*, 251.

The way Christians resist fleshly desires and bear the fruit of the Spirit is by walking by the Spirit. As Schreiner states, “If believers live in the Spirit, then they will not put into practice the desires of the flesh. The desires of the flesh will be thwarted and conquered.”<sup>31</sup> If Christians will live under the Holy Spirit’s guidance and control, they will be able to resist temptation and display God-honoring character in their lives. In fact, the triumph that Christians can enjoy is stated pointedly by Fung: “Believers can overcome the flesh if they submit to the leading of the Spirit, with whom victory belongs.”<sup>32</sup>

Third, believers must understand how to actually walk by the Spirit. As important as the Spirit’s guidance and empowerment are, believers must recognize precisely how to walk hand in hand with him in order to resist fleshly temptations and bear spiritual fruit in their lives. The thesis of this project is that Christians walk by the Spirit through a continued faith in Jesus Christ, which is informed by God’s Word, and is vitally connected to intimate prayer. In order to grasp this, one must see the connection between walking by the Spirit and Paul’s statements earlier in his letter to the Galatians regarding the Spirit’s connection to a believer’s faith.

In Galatians 3, Paul relates that these believers originally received the blessing of the Holy Spirit through faith in Jesus Christ upon hearing God’s Word, the gospel. “Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith?” Paul asks rhetorically in verse 2. He then inquires in the same way in verses 5–6: “Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by works of the law, or by hearing with faith—just as Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness?” Paul writes similarly in verse 14: “so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit

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<sup>31</sup> Schreiner, *Galatians*, 343.

<sup>32</sup> Fung, *Epistle to the Galatians*, 143.

through faith.”

Paul’s point in these verses is that the Galatian Christians first received the Holy Spirit through faith in Jesus Christ—by depending upon him from their hearts. The truth about Christ was communicated to them through God’s Word as they heard the gospel proclaimed to them (v. 8). Instead of returning to their old paths, Paul urges the Galatian believers to continue in the same Spirit, through the same faith, according to the same word. As Richard Longenecker argues, Paul wants the Galatians “to continue doing what they were already doing, that is, experiencing the presence of the Spirit’s working in their lives (cf. 3:3–5) and living by faith (cf. 5:5).”<sup>33</sup> Paul wants these believers to continue in the Spirit’s guidance and strength by pressing forward in their faith which comes through the frequent hearing of gospel truth in God’s Word (see Rom 10:17).

In Galatians 4, Paul shows the effect of the Holy Spirit in the lives of believers—those who are “adopted as sons” (v. 5) into God’s spiritual family. He writes in verse 6, “And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba, Father!’” It is clear from this verse that the Holy Spirit has already given the children of God a heart attitude that cries out to their Father with a dependent intimacy whereby they are free of sin’s bondage (vv. 7–8), and are marked by a relational knowledge of God himself. As verse 9 affirms, “But now you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God.” The believer, therefore, already has an intimate connection to God through the Holy Spirit and knows him personally as a loving Father, while expressing his or her faith in God through the warmest of prayers.

These prayers can address God with such intimacy as, “Abba, Father” (v. 6). Bruce explains the relational significance of this word *Abba* by showing its usage by Jesus: “Jesus also spoke of God to others as Abba, thus expressing his sense of loving

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<sup>33</sup> Richard N. Longenecker, *Galatians*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 41 (Dallas: Word, 1990), 245.

nearness to God and his implicit trust in him. In addition, he taught his disciples similarly to call God Abba and to look to him with the same trustful expectation as children show when they look to their fathers to provide them with food and clothes.”<sup>34</sup> Thus, it appears the Spirit has provided believers with the privilege of personal, dependent prayer with their Father God and that these prayers are a vital component to “walking by the Spirit” so as to not “gratify the desires of the flesh” (Gal 5:16).

Furthermore, in Galatians 5:5, Paul also shows the vital connection between a Christian’s faith and the Spirit’s work in his or her life. He writes, “For through the Spirit, by faith, we ourselves eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness.” This hope of righteousness appears to be the hope that righteous deeds will be found in one’s life; namely, the righteousness of love, since Paul proceeds to talk about loving service towards others in the following verses (vv. 6, 13–15). This hope is realized “through the Spirit, by faith” (v. 5), signifying that the instrument the Holy Spirit uses to bring about such righteous deeds is faith itself: dependence of heart upon the personal, saving God. Here in verse 5 the result is called “righteousness,” whereas in verse 22 it is called the “fruit of the Spirit.”

After considering these texts, it is clear that Christians walk by the Spirit through a continued faith in Jesus Christ which is informed by God’s Word and vitally connected to intimate prayer. This continued faith is a dependence in heart upon Christ through his gospel, upon the Father through warm entreaty, and upon the Spirit as he works through them. As Fung relates, “The Holy Spirit is not a perpetual motion machine which operates automatically in the life of the believer, but a Person whose working the Christian can respond to, depend on, and cooperate with.”<sup>35</sup> The primary ways Christians lean upon the Holy Spirit are through the various means of grace which foster greater

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<sup>34</sup> Bruce, *Epistle to the Galatians*, 199.

<sup>35</sup> Fung, *Epistle to the Galatians*, 131.

faith in their hearts. J. I. Packer speaks to these divine resources, writing, “The Spirit works through means—through the objective means of grace, namely, biblical truth, prayer, fellowship, worship, and the Lord’s Supper. . . . The Spirit shows his power in us . . . by making these regular means effective to change us for the better and for the wiser as we go along.”<sup>36</sup>

Christians need to practice joyful communion with God each day in order to walk by the Spirit and not succumb to the desires of the flesh. They need to engage with God daily in intimate fellowship by carefully applying gospel truth through his Word and by pouring out their hearts to him in affectionate prayer. These are vital means which grow a believer’s faith, lead to walking by the Spirit, and result in the resistance of the flesh and the bearing of spiritual fruit.

### **Bible Meditation as an Essential Means (Ps 1)**

Christians need to daily commune with God through Bible meditation, which is receiving God’s biblical revelation with the careful consideration of one’s Spirit-directed mind for the purpose of enjoyed relationship with God, life application, and focused prayer. If believers are to walk by the Spirit in order to overcome the desires of the flesh, and if walking by the Spirit demands living and growing in faith, and if living and growing in faith includes an ongoing application of gospel truth to one’s mind, then Christians must reflect deeply upon the words of Scripture throughout their days. Therefore, a careful consideration of Psalm 1 is necessary to see the importance of Bible meditation for each believer.

Psalm 1 is “a poem commenting on how life works, in such a way as to

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<sup>36</sup> J. I. Packer, *Keep in Step with the Spirit: Finding Fullness in Our Walk with God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 90.

constitute a promise and an implicit exhortation,<sup>37</sup> regarding those who take delight in meditating upon God’s Word. Derek Kidner writes that this psalm stands at the beginning of the Psalter “as a faithful doorkeeper, confronting those who would be in ‘the congregation of the righteous’ (5) with the basic choice that alone gives reality to worship; with the divine truth (2) that must inform it; and with the ultimate judgment (5, 6) that looms up beyond it.”<sup>38</sup> Thus, divine truth that informs worship lies at the heart of this psalm, as its “central purpose [is] to commend joyous and continuous concern with the law of the Lord.”<sup>39</sup> As Sydney Greidanus writes, “Happy are the righteous who delight in the teaching of the Lord, for the Lord watches over them.”<sup>40</sup>

This psalm begins with the word *blessed*—“blessed is the man” (v. 1)—though perhaps more helpfully the word should be translated as “happy,”<sup>41</sup> which better communicates the psalmist’s intention. Willem VanGemeran provides a nuanced explanation of this word *blessed* when he asserts that the term “evokes joy and gratitude, as man may live in fellowship with his God,” and that blessedness is not deserved but “is a gift of God.”<sup>42</sup> He clarifies by stating that though “the word happy is a good rendition of blessed,”<sup>43</sup> one must keep in mind that this joy is more than a feeling. He explains that “even when the righteous do not feel happy, they are still considered blessed from God’s perspective. He bestows this gift on them. Neither negative feelings nor adverse

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<sup>37</sup> John Goldingay, *Psalms*, vol. 1, Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 80.

<sup>38</sup> Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1–72*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), 63.

<sup>39</sup> James L. Mays, *Psalms*, Interpretation (Westminster: John Knox, 1994), 41.

<sup>40</sup> Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from Psalms: Foundations for Expository Sermons in the Christian Year* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 55.

<sup>41</sup> Kidner, *Psalms 1–72*, 64.

<sup>42</sup> Willem VanGemeran, *Psalms*, in vol. 5 of *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017), 53.

<sup>43</sup> VanGemeran, *Psalms*, 53.

conditions can take this blessing away.”<sup>44</sup>

This state of blessedness is vitally connected to the Lord’s affectionate knowledge of his people in verse 6, which says, “The LORD knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.” God’s knowledge of his people goes beyond mere information about them, for, in contrast to the wicked, it includes a genuine concern for them and even an identification of himself with them.<sup>45</sup> As VanGemeran again writes, “The knowledge of God involves not only an objective knowledge about the righteous but also a subjective relationship with them, assuring them that he cares for his own, protects them, and will reward them.”<sup>46</sup> Therefore, the blessedness spoken of by the psalmist is a delight found in relationship with God through his Word.

In verse 1, the psalmist urges his readers to be blessed, first of all by not walking “in the counsel of the wicked,” nor standing “in the way of sinners,” nor sitting “in the seat of scoffers.” This is a reference to the “walk of life with which the whole psalm works.”<sup>47</sup> As Goldingay explains, “walking” here is the “basic form of wrongdoing” where one walks “by the advice of the faithless.”<sup>48</sup> Worse than this is “standing . . . in the path of moral failures, which implies more than simply taking that path but standing firm in it.”<sup>49</sup> In standing, the immoral action has actually “become a way of life”; but even worse than standing is sitting with mockers, which “implies not merely living their way but also taking part in their deliberations.”<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> VanGemeran, *Psalms*, 53.

<sup>45</sup> Kidner, *Psalms 1–72*, 66.

<sup>46</sup> VanGemeran, *Psalms*, 58.

<sup>47</sup> Goldingay, *Psalms*, 82.

<sup>48</sup> Goldingay, *Psalms*, 82.

<sup>49</sup> Goldingay, *Psalms*, 82.

<sup>50</sup> Goldingay, *Psalms*, 82.



But in contrast to this walk of sin, the Psalmist declares the man blessed in verse 2 whose “delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night.” The “law of the Lord” means more than simply the legal demands found in the Pentateuch, for it refers “to the whole body of tradition through which instruction in the way and the will of the Lord is given,” according to Mays<sup>51</sup>; and it is better understood simply as the teaching of the Lord.<sup>52</sup> As Greidanus explains, “Although torah is often translated as ‘law,’ its meaning is much broader than what we usually understand by law. The five books of Moses are called Torah and they reveal not only God’s laws but also God’s works of creation and redemption. Torah basically means God’s teaching or instruction.”<sup>53</sup> So, the blessed individual is the one who delights in the teaching of the Lord.

But this blessed man or woman does not approach God’s teaching casually or listlessly, for “on his law he meditates day and night” (v. 2). Instead, this approach comprises a “constant reflective meditation on the ‘law’ (torah) of the Lord that grows out of delight in it and concern for it.”<sup>54</sup> It involves “continuously meditating on God’s teaching.”<sup>55</sup> Greidanus gives a helpful explanation of this word “meditate”:

The word translated as “meditate” is literally to “recite aloud,” to “murmur.” In those days people did not read silently as we do today. They read aloud. Think of Jews reading Scripture at the Wailing Wall or in their synagogues, murmuring the words while bowing whenever they came across the name of the LORD. So, to meditate on God’s law means to read God’s word and reflect and act on its meaning. As we read, we should ask ourselves, what is God saying here about himself and what he has done for us? Are we living in accordance with God’s teachings? Are we

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<sup>51</sup> Mays, *Psalms*, 41.

<sup>52</sup> Goldingay, *Psalms*, 81.

<sup>53</sup> Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from Psalms*, 46.

<sup>54</sup> Mays, *Psalms*, 41.

<sup>55</sup> Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from Psalms*, 50.

living for ourselves or for God?<sup>56</sup>

Therefore, the blessed man or woman finds delight in the teaching of God in Scripture as they reflect upon it deeply and apply it to their lives and context. The words of the nineteenth-century pastor and writer William Plumer clearly convey the necessity of such deep reflection: “Like prayer . . . meditation is to be pursued day and night, not reluctantly, but joyously, not merely in God’s house, or on the Lord’s day, but whenever other duties do not forbid.”<sup>57</sup> Plumer continues, “He, who would be truly blessed, must become a student of Scripture.”<sup>58</sup>

A key result of this joyful Bible reflection is the blessing of spiritual fruit. Verse 3 declares that the one who meditates on Scripture “is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers.” This individual is in contrast to the wicked, who are like chaff blown away by the wind unto judgment (vv. 4–6). Thus, the one who happily communes with God through Bible meditation prospers by bearing spiritual fruit in his or her life under God. Kidner explains this prosperity: “The phrase ‘its fruit in its season’ emphasizes both the distinctiveness and the quiet growth of the product; for the tree is no mere channel, piping the water unchanged from one place to another, but a living organism which absorbs it, to produce in due course something new and delightful, proper to its kind and to its time.”<sup>59</sup> And the proper produce of this tree certainly includes the spiritual fruit of maturity before God, just as Paul declared in Galatians 5:22–23.

Therefore, it is essential for Christians to commune with God through Bible meditation. As believers take delight in Spirit-guided, careful reflection upon Scripture,

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<sup>56</sup> Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from Psalms*, 65.

<sup>57</sup> William S. Plumer, *Psalms: A Critical and Expository Commentary with Doctrinal and Practical Remarks*, Geneva Series Commentary (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2016), 28.

<sup>58</sup> Plumer, *Psalms*, 33.

<sup>59</sup> Kidner, *Psalms 1–72*, 65.

they will find strength to resist wicked counsel, sinful ways, and scoffing voices. They will also experience blessedness in their relationship with God—a blessedness which will result in spiritual fruitfulness throughout the differing seasons of their lives.

### **Prayer as an Essential Means (Heb 4:14–16)**

It is also essential for Christians to daily commune with God through prayer, especially prayer that is directed by biblical truth. Once again, if believers are to walk by the Spirit in order to overcome the desires of the flesh, and if walking by the Spirit demands living and growing in faith, and if living and growing in faith includes an ongoing application of gospel truth to one's mind, then Christians must dependently pray in light of their deep reflections upon the words of Scripture. Therefore, a careful consideration of Hebrews 4:14–16 is necessary to see the significance of prayer for each believer.

In these verses, the superiority of Jesus' priesthood is declared as well as the need to hold fast to him. Though the Old Testament Levitical priests had their important place in the Lord's relationship with his people Israel, they were merely men and were thus incapable of securing a confident access to God. As sinners, they were unable to provide happy fellowship with the Lord for either themselves or for anyone who transgressed against God's covenant. But "Jesus' priesthood is better than the Levitical priesthood,"<sup>60</sup> and in verses 14–16 the writer of Hebrews resumes an important exposition of the priesthood theme which he began back in chapter 2.<sup>61</sup> He takes up this subject in order to urge Christians to hold fast and not abandon their confession of faith in Christ, the one who provided them with so great a salvation (Heb 2:3). Schreiner

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<sup>60</sup> Thomas R. Schreiner, *Commentary on Hebrews*, Biblical Theology for Christian Proclamation (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2015), 15.

<sup>61</sup> F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 126.

connects these verses to Christ's superiority, the overarching theme of Hebrews, when he writes, "Since Jesus is greater than the angels and Moses and since he grants a better rest than Joshua, then the readers should 'hold fast to the confession' (4:14). The readers should not dispense with the one who has given them such a great salvation."<sup>62</sup>

The entrance of Jesus as priest into the sanctuary of God the Father ("passed through the heavens" Heb 4:14) opens the door for Christians to experience a free, prayerful fellowship with God himself. In fact, "Christ's high-priestly ministry has achieved for believers what Israel never enjoyed, namely, immediate access to God and freedom to draw near to him continually," according to Peter O'Brien.<sup>63</sup> Verse 14 declares Jesus as the "great high priest" and verse 16 commands believers, in response to his priesthood, to boldly "draw near to the throne of grace." So, Christ's high priesthood enables Christians to have unfettered communion with God through confident prayer.

Jesus, the great high priest, is now the believer's sympathetic helper at God the Father's side. Verse 15 says, "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin." This verse makes clear that human beings have weaknesses, and these weaknesses likely range from physical and emotional weakness to ungodly moral deficiencies. O'Brien helpfully communicates that "our weakness is a general expression that may include physical weakness or illness, social pressures, such as abuse or imprisonment, or the general weakness of the flesh through which we often fall into sin."<sup>64</sup> And though these are likely included in this word "weakness" in verse 15, "the moral weakness of imperfect priests is mentioned almost immediately (5:2; 7:28), and the

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<sup>62</sup> Schreiner, *Commentary on Hebrews*, 151.

<sup>63</sup> Peter T. O'Brien, *The Letter to the Hebrews*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 186.

<sup>64</sup> O'Brien, *Letter to the Hebrews*, 183.

fact of Jesus being tested in every respect like other human beings yet without sin implies that moral weaknesses are in view.”<sup>65</sup>

But Christ has assumed a sympathetic role for his people as their great high priest. Since he was tempted as they are tempted, yet without sin, he can not only empathize with them but actually help them in their weaknesses. As the Savior who has personally experienced what his people face each day, Jesus can now, through the power of his priesthood, offer them the precise aid that they need. And he does this by spiritually empowering them in the midst of all their inherent limitations and vulnerabilities to temptation.<sup>66</sup> Schreiner sheds light on Christ’s sympathetic role for his people when he explains that “the word sympathy is not limited to compassion and empathy but also denotes Jesus’ ability to help those who are afflicted. . . . As a human being he knows the frailties and groaning that beset the human race. He is not a distant and aloof high priest but is himself intimately acquainted with the human condition.”<sup>67</sup>

Jesus, the great high priest of God’s people, now graciously helps them as they face sinful temptation. When they are lured towards sin, he strengthens them to resist. When they are struggling with aimlessness, he emboldens them to bear spiritual fruit. And when they are tempted to walk away, he encourages them to hold fast. Bruce declares God’s gracious provision through Christ which includes “the power to overcome temptation and to live faithfully in all the circumstances of life. God’s ‘help’ is ‘timely’ because it is available twenty-four hours a day—whenever his people face trials and temptations.”<sup>68</sup>

The way this help is realized is by boldly and continually drawing near to God

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<sup>65</sup> O’Brien, *Letter to the Hebrews*, 183.

<sup>66</sup> Bruce, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 127.

<sup>67</sup> Schreiner, *Commentary on Hebrews*, 153.

<sup>68</sup> Bruce, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 128.

in prayer. Verse 16 actually commands boldness when it says, “Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.” According to William Lane, this word *boldness* (*παρρησίας*) connotes the “free open speech” that Greek citizens had with one another. And “this is precisely the attitude that the hearers of Hebrews are encouraged to adopt in speaking to God. Because they have a high priest who empathizes with them, they can go with frankness to the throne of grace and receive timely help in their distress.”<sup>69</sup> O’Brien notes, “The throne of grace is the place of God’s presence from which the grace is given to his people.”<sup>70</sup> Believers are to confidently go to this welcoming place in continual prayer.

The exhortation, “Let us draw near” (v. 15), according to George Guthrie, “translates a present tense form of the verb, indicating that drawing near to God constitutes an ongoing aspect of the Christian’s relationship with God: ‘let us constantly approach.’”<sup>71</sup> Schreiner affirms the Christian’s ongoing access when writes that believers “confidently and gladly ask God to grant them ‘mercy,’ presumably for sins they have committed. At the same time, they petition God for ‘grace’ for the strength and power to face every situation in life.”<sup>72</sup> Therefore, the Christian must recognize the constant access provided by Christ’s high priesthood and respond by boldly going in his name to the Father with the expectation that mercy and grace will be found each time.

However, believers would be ignorant of their free access to God and ability to approach him boldly if it were not for Scripture. Without the important truths found in

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<sup>69</sup> William L. Lane, *Hebrews 1–8*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 47a (Dallas: Word, 1991), 115–16.

<sup>70</sup> O’Brien, *Letter to the Hebrews*, 185.

<sup>71</sup> George H. Guthrie, *Hebrews*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 176.

<sup>72</sup> Schreiner, *Commentary on Hebrews*, 154.

Hebrews 4, Christians would not comprehend the full significance of Christ's high priestly ministry on their behalf, nor would they know to pray to God with such tremendous confidence and expectation. Therefore, it is vital for the truths of the Bible to guide a believer's understanding of prayer along with his or her motivations to petition God, the manner in which he is addressed, and even the words that are spoken to him.

So, it is essential for Christians to commune with God through Bible-directed prayer. As believers take delight in Spirit-guided, careful meditation upon Scripture, they should respond to God prayerfully as their gracious, welcoming Father. In this way, they will both experience tremendous joy in their relationship with him while experiencing spiritual fruitfulness in their battles against temptation.

This chapter has provided a biblical rationale for communion with God through the means of Bible meditation and prayer. It has demonstrated that God has made intimate communion with him possible, that each Christian needs to practice communion with God daily, and that both biblical meditation and prayer are essential means provided by God for communion with him. In the next chapter, the theoretical, practical, and historical issues related to communion with God will be considered.

## CHAPTER 3

### THEORETICAL, PRACTICAL, AND HISTORICAL ISSUES RELATED TO COMMUNION WITH GOD THROUGH BIBLE MEDITATION AND PRAYER

This chapter communicates the biblical mandate to practice communion with God through Bible meditation and prayer, which was clearly valued and demonstrated in Puritan teaching and practice; it is also supported by contemporary reflection and the practice of modern-day Christian teachers. First, it will be shown that communion with God was a key aspect of Puritan teaching and living. Second, it will be revealed that the Puritans considered Bible meditation as central to a believer's ongoing communion with God. Finally, it will be demonstrated that the Puritans also considered Bible-directed prayer as central to that same communion.

#### **Communion with God: A Key Aspect of Puritan Teaching and Living**

The Puritans were a diverse group who have been difficult to define and who have been the subject of much debate.<sup>1</sup> According to Joel Beeke and Randall Pederson, the Puritans were a devout group of sixteenth and seventeenth-century English-speaking Christians who, “worked to reform and purify the church and to lead people toward godly living consistent with the Reformed doctrines of grace.”<sup>2</sup> The Puritans considered communion with God to be pivotal to the Christian life. It was not simply one aspect of

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<sup>1</sup> For more information see Michael P. Winship, *Hot Protestants: A History of Puritanism in England and America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019); David D. Hall, *The Puritans: A Transatlantic History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019); and Patrick Collinson, *The Elizabethan Puritan Movement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).

<sup>2</sup> Joel R. Beeke and Randall J. Pederson, introduction to *Meet the Puritans* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage, 2006), xviii.



Christian living to them but was at the heart of what it means to be a Christian. Though Christianity has in the past been conceived in different ways, J. I. Packer argues that “the Puritans as a body defined it precisely in terms of communion with God—more precisely still, communion with the triune Lord through Jesus Christ as the Mediator.”<sup>3</sup> According to Kelly Kopic and Randall Gleason, “Puritanism, at its heart, lays stress on experiencing communion with God. . . . For the Puritan, intellectual assent to Christian doctrine has to be balanced with the practical outworking of God’s grace in life experiences.”<sup>4</sup> Although they were “deeply concerned with the many-sided problem of man . . . to their minds the whole end and purpose of man’s existence was that he should have communion with God.”<sup>5</sup> Communion with God was not simply important to the Puritans, it was central.

These devoted Christians associated communion with “spiritual communication” with God; or, as they often described it, as “intercourse with God.”<sup>6</sup> This communication with the Lord was considered to be the greatest of delights. As the Puritan Thomas Watson (1620–1686) writes, “There is that sweetness in communion with God that makes the soul say, ‘Oh, that I might be always thus! Oh, that what I now feel I might feel forever!’ He who delights in God does not complain that he has too much of God, but rather too little.”<sup>7</sup> To the typical Puritan, this joyful, spiritual communication with the Lord was at the core of their conception of worship. A key aim in the Puritan understanding of worship was, as Watson declares, to enter “into the sunshine of communion with God—a true foretaste of heaven, in which all spiritual souls find their

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<sup>3</sup> J. I. Packer, introduction to *Keeping the Heart*, by John Flavel (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2021), 7.

<sup>4</sup> Kelly M. Kopic and Randall C. Gleason, *The Devoted Life* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), 25.

<sup>5</sup> J. I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 202.

<sup>6</sup> Kopic and Gleason, *The Devoted Life*, 169.

<sup>7</sup> Thomas Watson, *The Christian on the Mount* (1657; repr., Orlando, FL: Northampton, 2009), 20.

highest delight.”<sup>8</sup> So, to the typical Puritan understanding, “Communion between God and man is the end to which both creation and redemption are the means; it is the goal to which both theology and preaching must ever point; it is the essence of true religion; it is, indeed, the definition of Christianity.”<sup>9</sup> Spiritual communication with God was at the very core of Puritan spirituality.

The Englishman John Owen (1616–1683) was a reformed scholar who deeply embraced and wrote with Puritan convictions.<sup>10</sup> Owen is especially notable for his thoughts on communion with God. In his masterful book on the subject, Owen not only communicated a helpful definition for communion with God, but he also explained the believer’s distinct communion with all three persons of the Trinity, revealing the trinitarian nature of Christian fellowship with the Lord. His ultimate aim was to convey the joyful intimacy that each believer can and should enjoy with each member of the Godhead.

Owen began with a general definition of communion between two or more persons. Communion involves “a joint participation in any thing whatever, good or evil, duty or enjoyment, nature or actions” and that “a common interest in the same nature gives all men a fellowship or communion therein.”<sup>11</sup> According to Owen, all human beings share a form of communion with each other simply because they jointly participate in the same human nature. However, for human beings to commune with God, it is necessary for them to be united to God through Christ, the one who took on human nature in order to redeem his people. Owen defined communion with God and connected

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<sup>8</sup> Watson, *The Christian on the Mount*, 20.

<sup>9</sup> Packer, *A Quest for Godliness*, 202.

<sup>10</sup> Beeke and Pederson, *Meet the Puritans*, 455.

<sup>11</sup> John Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, vol. 4, *Communion with God* (1850–1853; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1965), 7.

to it to the believer's union with Christ, writing, "Our communion with God consisteth in his communication of himself unto us, with our returnal unto him of that which he requireth and accepteth, flowing from that union which in Jesus Christ we have with him."<sup>12</sup> Communion with God, then, is God's communication of himself to his people who respond to him in all the ways he requires. And this communion is grounded upon the union that believers have with God through Jesus his Son.

But communion with God is enjoyed distinctly with each person of the Trinity, according to Owen. He emphasized that "there is no grace whereby our souls go forth unto God, no act of divine worship yielded unto him, no duty or obedience performed, but they are distinctly directed unto Father, Son, and Spirit," and that believers have this "communion distinctly,"<sup>13</sup> with each person of the Godhead. Owen did not mean that when a believer enjoys communion with one person of the Godhead, the other persons are excluded from the relationship. Rather, though the communion be chiefly enjoyed with one distinct person of the Godhead, this communion is also enjoyed indirectly with the other persons, for to commune with one is to commune with the full nature of God. Owen explains, "Principally . . . we have . . . communion with some one person; and therein with the others secondarily . . . for the person, as the person, of any one of them, is not the prime object of divine worship, but as it is identified with the nature or essence of God."<sup>14</sup>

Owen's understanding of these distinct directions for communion included the believer's special communion with the Father, primarily through his love, the Son, primarily through his grace, and the Spirit, primarily through his consolation. Regarding communion with the Father, he writes, "I come now to declare what it is wherein

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<sup>12</sup> Owen, *Communion with God*, 8–9.

<sup>13</sup> Owen, *Communion with God*, 15.

<sup>14</sup> Owen, *Communion with God*, 18.

peculiarly and eminently the saints have communion with the Father; and this is LOVE—free, undeserved, and eternal love. . . . this they are immediately to eye in him, to receive of him, and to make such returns thereof as he is delighted withal.”<sup>15</sup> Believers are first to “receive” the love of the Father through “faith” and then they are to “make suitable returns unto him.”<sup>16</sup> As Owen again declares, “When the soul sees God, in his dispensation of love, to be love, to be infinitely lovely and loving, rests upon and delights in him as such—then hath it communion with him in love. This is love, that God loves us first, and then we love him again.”<sup>17</sup> So, believers commune with the Father primarily by delighting in his love.

Regarding communion with the Son, Owen maintains that the saints have “particular communion with him” through “grace,”<sup>18</sup> which is realized through his “office of mediation,” whereby he brings “home all of his elect unto his bosom.”<sup>19</sup> According to Owen, “The uniting of the natures of God and man in one person made him fit to be a Saviour to the uttermost,” for as the Son partakes of both the divine and human natures he has become “a days-man, or umpire between both. By this means he fills up all the distance that was made by sin between God and us; and we who are far off are made nigh in him.”<sup>20</sup> So, through the Son’s gracious mediatorial work, sinners are brought near into communion with God.

Finally, regarding communion with the Spirit, Owen believed that it consists in

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<sup>15</sup> Owen, *Communion with God*, 19.

<sup>16</sup> Owen, *Communion with God*, 22.

<sup>17</sup> Owen, *Communion with God*, 24.

<sup>18</sup> Owen, *Communion with God*, 46.

<sup>19</sup> Owen, *Communion with God*, 48.

<sup>20</sup> Owen, *Communion with God*, 51.

his “sending to be our comforter.”<sup>21</sup> He is first sent by the Father and the Son to “convert” the elect and “make them believers.”<sup>22</sup> But secondly, he is sent as a “Spirit of consolation to believers to give them the privileges of the death and purchase of Christ.”<sup>23</sup> Owen explained that “when the Spirit came, how full of joy did he make all things to them! . . . And this is his work to the end of the world,—to bring the promises of Christ to our minds and hearts, to give us the comfort of them, the joy and sweetness of them.”<sup>24</sup> So, communion with the Holy Spirit is enjoyed primarily as he communicates to believers the comforts found in Christ.

The Trinitarian nature of Christian communion with God is supported by the modern-day scholar William VanDoodewaard, who explains that when Adam and Eve fell into sin, mankind’s “communion with God was broken”—that human beings exchanged “communion with God for a communion with deceit.”<sup>25</sup> However, by Christ’s “incarnation, our humanity . . . is exalted in Him into the heart of Trinitarian communion between the Father, Son, and Spirit.”<sup>26</sup> He writes, “In and through Christ, the Father welcomes us freely into communion with the Trinity. The Holy Spirit continues to work by sovereign, omnipotent power, effectively calling us by the Word, regenerating us, giving us the gift of faith, and uniting us to Christ.”<sup>27</sup> According to VanDoodewaard, through the work of Christ on the cross, the believer is first “united to” and then has “communion with God,” as the Son “removes our enmity, blindness, and deadness, which

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<sup>21</sup> Owen, *Communion with God*, 222.

<sup>22</sup> Owen, *Communion with God*, 226.

<sup>23</sup> Owen, *Communion with God*, 226.

<sup>24</sup> Owen, *Communion with God*, 237.

<sup>25</sup> William VanDoodewaard, “Growing in Communion with the Triune God,” in *Growing in Grace*, ed. Joel R. Beeke (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage, 2020), 176–77.

<sup>26</sup> VanDoodewaard, “Growing in Communion with Triune God,” 178–79.

<sup>27</sup> VanDoodewaard, “Growing in Communion with Triune God,” 178–79.

separated us from Him even as we lived in His omnipresence. We are welcomed into the blessed presence and fellowship of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.”<sup>28</sup>

### **Bible Meditation: A Central Puritan Teaching of Ongoing Communion with God**

The Puritans viewed biblical meditation as essential to enjoying Trinitarian communion with God. According to Joel Beeke and Mark Jones, they “never tired of saying that biblical meditation involves thinking upon the triune God and His Word,”<sup>29</sup> for they anchored their approach to meditation both in the person of Jesus Christ and in the written Word of God. Their approach to biblical meditation always had life application in mind. “For the Puritans, meditation exercised both the mind and the heart,” and as each believer approached the Scriptures, he was to employ his “intellect as well as his affections.”<sup>30</sup> The Puritans insisted that a believer must meditate on Scripture, allowing it to affect their minds, hearts, and lives, in order to rightly commune with God.

Furthermore, the Puritans were not casual about biblical meditation but considered it the daily duty of every Christian. They were convinced that it “enhanced every other duty of the Christian life.”<sup>31</sup> “As oil that lubricates an engine,” they believed meditation “facilitates the diligent use of the means of grace (reading of Scriptures, hearing sermons, prayer, and all other ordinances of Christ), deepens the marks of grace (repentance, faith, humility), and strengthens one’s relationships to others (love of God, to fellow Christians, to one’s neighbors at large).”<sup>32</sup> Regarding the hearing of sermons

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<sup>28</sup> VanDoodewaard, “Growing in Communion with Triune God,” 178–79.

<sup>29</sup> Joel R. Beeke and Mark Jones, *A Puritan Theology* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage, 2012), 890.

<sup>30</sup> Beeke and Jones, *A Puritan Theology*, 890.

<sup>31</sup> Beeke and Jones, *A Puritan Theology*, 891.

<sup>32</sup> Beeke and Jones, *A Puritan Theology*, 891.

especially, “Puritan preachers stressed the need for their listeners to cultivate an intense appetite for the Scriptures,” considering both the “spoken and written sermon as a means to communicate and meditate upon the Scriptures.”<sup>33</sup> The Puritans considered deep reflection upon Scripture to be each Christian’s regular duty.

John Owen writes of meditation as a Christian’s time when the “heart goes over, in its own thoughts”<sup>34</sup> to matters that draw it into greater fellowship with God. Sometimes the mind dwells upon its “sinfulness, and filling itself with shame and self-  
abhorrence on that account.”<sup>35</sup> At other times, it is “filled with thoughts of the righteousness of Christ, and with the joy unspeakable and glorious on that account.”<sup>36</sup> But all of this is meant to “drive things to an issue with God, and takes up the peace that Christ hath wrought for him.”<sup>37</sup> Meditation then, according to Owen, is a key means to leading a Christian’s mind toward peaceful fellowship with God. Packer connects Owen’s presentation of communion with God with the importance of biblical meditation: “This . . . according to Owen, should be the pattern of our regular communion with the three persons of the Godhead, in meditation, prayer, and a duly ordered life.”<sup>38</sup> Packer further explains Owen’s conviction regarding meditation, or dwelling upon God in this way: “We should dwell on the special mercy and ministry of each person towards us, and make our proper response of love and communion distinctly to each. Thus we are to maintain a full-orbed communion with God.”<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Kopic and Gleason, *The Devoted Life*, 26–27.

<sup>34</sup> Owen, *Communion with God*, 197.

<sup>35</sup> Owen, *Communion with God*, 197.

<sup>36</sup> Owen, *Communion with God*, 197.

<sup>37</sup> Owen, *Communion with God*, 197.

<sup>38</sup> J. I. Packer, quoted in Beeke and Jones, *A Puritan Theology*, 114.

<sup>39</sup> J. I. Packer, quoted in Beeke and Jones, *A Puritan Theology*, 114.

John Flavel (1627–1691) was an English pastor who exemplified the Puritan spirit.<sup>40</sup> He connected communion with God to a believer’s ongoing, relational response to the Lord. He notes that “communion with God, properly and strictly taken, consists in two things . . . God’s manifestation of himself to the soul, and the soul’s answerable returns to God.”<sup>41</sup> Flavel urges Christians to make such answerable returns to God and to keep their hearts ever before him by considering “the many precious promises which are written for your support and comfort in all dangers.”<sup>42</sup> These many promises are found in Scripture. He further expresses the importance of biblical meditation when he challenges Christians to “draw your armour from the word of God,” and to “let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, in its commands, its promises, its threatenings.”<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, he challenges believers to let biblical truth “be fixed in your understanding, your memory, your conscience, your affections.”<sup>44</sup>

Flavel was particularly convinced that Christians should frequently meditate upon God’s providential workings in and around their lives, especially “in times of difficulty and trouble.”<sup>45</sup> As Christians consider God’s providence, they are to “have special respect to that Word of God which is fulfilled and made good to you by them.”<sup>46</sup> Flavel understood that no act of God in a believer’s life can be rightly understood apart from the Word of God. As he writes, “This is a clear truth that all providences have

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<sup>40</sup> Beeke and Pederson, *Meet the Puritans*, 245.

<sup>41</sup> John Flavel, *The Mystery of Providence* (1678; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2016), 144.

<sup>42</sup> Flavel, *Keeping the Heart*, 60.

<sup>43</sup> Flavel, *Keeping the Heart*, 117.

<sup>44</sup> Flavel, *Keeping the Heart*, 117.

<sup>45</sup> Flavel, *Keeping the Heart*, 113–14.

<sup>46</sup> Flavel, *Keeping the Heart*, 121–22.



relation to the written Word.”<sup>47</sup> Therefore, he offered this encouragement to believers: “In all our reviews of Providence consider what Word of God, whether it be of threatening, caution, counsel or promise, is at any time made good to us by His providences. Doing this will greatly confirm to us the truth of the Scripture.”<sup>48</sup> Thus, Flavel encouraged believers to connect their meditations upon God’s providence with their meditations upon God’s Word.

Thomas Watson was a Puritan who clearly connected the believer’s ongoing communion with God to the important disciplines of biblical meditation and prayer. He viewed Bible meditation as an “excellent means of fixing the heart on God.”<sup>49</sup> He called it “the wing of the soul that carries the affections to things above.”<sup>50</sup> Through meditation, believers “hold fast to the things we have learned. We awaken our faith, inflame our love, strengthen our hope, revive our desires, increase our joys in God.”<sup>51</sup> Furthermore, through the discipline of biblical mediation, “we furnish our hearts and fill our mouths with material for prayer.”<sup>52</sup> So, not only did he consider biblical meditation as a vital practice, but he also saw it as an important catalyst for a prayerful response to God.

Watson wrote compellingly of the sweetness of communion with God through biblical meditation. He first defines it as “the soul’s retiring of itself so that, by a serious and solemn thinking upon God, the heart may be raised up to heavenly affections.”<sup>53</sup> So, for Watson, the goal of biblical meditation is elevated affection for God. He also explains

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<sup>47</sup> Flavel, *Keeping the Heart*, 121–22.

<sup>48</sup> Flavel, *Keeping the Heart*, 121–22.

<sup>49</sup> Watson, introduction to *The Christian on the Mount*, x.

<sup>50</sup> Watson, introduction to *The Christian on the Mount*, x.

<sup>51</sup> Watson, introduction to *The Christian on the Mount*, x.

<sup>52</sup> Watson, introduction to *The Christian on the Mount*, x.

<sup>53</sup> Watson, *The Christian on the Mount*, 25.

that whatever a person delights in, that thing will occupy that person's mind; and, "if there is a delight in the things of God, the mind will be musing upon them,"<sup>54</sup> and this will provide that person the deepest joy. As Watson declares, "Oh, what a rare treasure is the Word of God! It is the field where the pearl of great price is hidden. How precious are the promises? They are the conduit that holds the water of life."<sup>55</sup> He even insists that one cannot find too much delight in biblical meditation, for "it will not breed excess."<sup>56</sup> He further explain this bottomless delight, "Carnal objects often cause a loathing and nauseating; we soon grow weary of our delights. . . . Too much pleasure is a pain; but spiritual objects do not cloy or tire the soul. The more we study the law of God, the more delight we find."<sup>57</sup> Nothing is sweeter than communion with God by meditating upon His Word.

Biblical meditation is a Christian necessity for four reasons, according to Watson. First, "the end why God has given us His Word written and preached is not only to know it, but that we should meditate on it."<sup>58</sup> It is like "a love letter that the great God has written to us. We must not run it over in haste, but meditate upon God's wisdom in writing, and his love in sending it to us."<sup>59</sup> Second, without Christians will not have what they need to grow spiritually. Watson refers to a Christian without meditation as "a soldier without weapons or a workman without tools. Without meditation, the truths of God will not stay with us. The heart is hard and the memory slippery; and without

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<sup>54</sup> Watson, *The Christian on the Mount*, 11.

<sup>55</sup> Watson, *The Christian on the Mount*, 11.

<sup>56</sup> Watson, *The Christian on the Mount*, 19–20.

<sup>57</sup> Watson, *The Christian on the Mount*, 19–20.

<sup>58</sup> Watson, *The Christian on the Mount*, 65–66.

<sup>59</sup> Watson, *The Christian on the Mount*, 65–66.

meditation all is lost!”<sup>60</sup> He declares that “meditation imprints and fastens a truth in the mind . . . like the engraving of letters in gold or marble that endures.”<sup>61</sup> Third, if believers do not meditate God’s truth will never impact their hearts and lives. Watson helpfully illustrates this point: “It is not the taking in of food, but the stomach’s digesting it that turns it into nourishment. Just so, it is not the taking in of a truth at the ear, but the meditating on it, that is the digestion of it in the mind, that makes it nourish.”<sup>62</sup> Lastly, Watson states that “without meditation we make ourselves guilty of slighting God and his Word.”<sup>63</sup>

However, Watson also offered practical advice for the discipline of biblical meditation. He provides fifteen topics in the Word of God that believers should meditate upon frequently: (1) “God’s attributes”; (2) “the promises of God”; (3) “the love of Christ”; (4) “sin”; (5) “the vanity of the creature”; (6) “the excellency of grace”; (7) “your spiritual state”; (8) “the small number of those who shall be saved”; (9) “final apostasy”; (10) “death”; (11) “the day of judgment”; (12) “hell”; (13) “heaven”; (14) “eternity”; and (15) “your experiences.”<sup>64</sup>

While Watson is very specific about the content of meditation, it was more difficult for him to dictate a certain time of day. However, he did declare mornings to be the most fitting time for meditation. “The best time to converse with God is when we may be most in prayer, that is, before worldly concerns stand knocking as so many suitors at the door to be let in. The morning is, as it were, the cream of the day; let the cream be

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<sup>60</sup> Watson, *The Christian on the Mount*, 65–66.

<sup>61</sup> Watson, *The Christian on the Mount*, 65–66.

<sup>62</sup> Watson, *The Christian on the Mount*, 65–66.

<sup>63</sup> Watson, *The Christian on the Mount*, 65–66.

<sup>64</sup> Watson, *The Christian on the Mount*, 32–64.

taken off and let God have it.”<sup>65</sup> And Watson advises believers to “mediate so long until your find your heart grow warm in this duty,”<sup>66</sup> which is in keeping with his conviction that the purpose of meditation is the elevation of the heart’s affection for God. So essentially, a Christian should meditate until his affection for God begins to grow.

Finally, Watson provides six helpful rules to keep in mind regarding biblical meditation. First, he encourages Christians to “be very serious in the work” by setting “yourself into a posture of holy reverence” and laboring “to possess your thoughts with the solemnity and greatness of the work you are now going about.”<sup>67</sup> Second, “read before you meditate,” as reading Scripture “is the oil that feeds the lamp of meditation.”<sup>68</sup> Third, “do not meditate on too many things at once, like the bird that hops from one branch to another and stays in no one place. Rather, single out some one topic at a time that you will meditate upon.”<sup>69</sup> Fourth, add to your meditation “examination. When you have been meditating on any spiritual subject, put an inquiry to your soul; and though it is short, let it be serious.”<sup>70</sup> Fifth, “seal up meditation with prayer. Pray over your meditations. Prayer sanctifies everything: without prayer they are but unhallowed meditations.”<sup>71</sup> And sixth, “let meditation be reduced to practice. Live out your meditation. . . . Christians must not only fly upon the wings of meditation, but they must be active in obedience; they must have hands under their wings!”<sup>72</sup> It is clear that Watson

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<sup>65</sup> Watson, *The Christian on the Mount*, 80.

<sup>66</sup> Watson, *The Christian on the Mount*, 84.

<sup>67</sup> Watson, *The Christian on the Mount*, 97–102.

<sup>68</sup> Watson, *The Christian on the Mount*, 97–102.

<sup>69</sup> Watson, *The Christian on the Mount*, 97–102.

<sup>70</sup> Watson, *The Christian on the Mount*, 97–102.

<sup>71</sup> Watson, *The Christian on the Mount*, 97–102.

<sup>72</sup> Watson, *The Christian on the Mount*, 97–102.

encourages Christians to take biblical meditation seriously.

Edmund Calamy (1600–1666) is yet another Puritan who wrote helpfully in promotion of communing with God through biblical meditation. Like many of his day, he distinguished between two types of Christian meditation: occasional meditation, which happens sporadically when believers consider the Lord’s hand as they walk through life, and deliberate meditation, which is an intentional focus on the Lord at a time that has been purposefully set aside. As Calamy explains, “Now you must know there are two sorts of Divine meditation, there is a sudden, short, occasional meditation of heavenly things; and there is a solemn, set, deliberate meditation.”<sup>73</sup> In occasional meditation, “a man takes an occasion by what he sees, or by what he hears, or by what he tastes, anything that is sensitive, in this he raises up his thoughts to heavenly meditation.”<sup>74</sup> As Calamy illustrates “occasional meditation is when a man makes use of the creature, as a footstool to raise him up to God, as a ladder to heaven. It is when a man, all of a sudden, makes use of what he sees with his eyes, or hears with his ears, as a ladder to climb to heaven with.”<sup>75</sup> So, Christians should meditate as they walk-through life and also with careful intentionality as they set aside regular time with the Lord.

However, Calamy’s primary focus was upon deliberate meditation. “This is which I call set, solemn and deliberate meditation. When a man sets apart an hour a day . . . and goes into a private closet, or a private walk, and there solemnly and deliberately meditates on the things of heaven.”<sup>76</sup> He refers to this as a “holy meditation . . . on things that are holy,” and that it is “not only a knowing of God, and a

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<sup>73</sup> Edmund Calamy, *The Art of Divine Meditation* (Crossville, TN: Puritan, 2019), 30.

<sup>74</sup> Calamy, *The Art of Divine Meditation*, 32.

<sup>75</sup> Calamy, *The Art of Divine Meditation*, 32.

<sup>76</sup> Calamy, *The Art of Divine Meditation*, 46.

knowing of Christ, but it is a dwelling on the things we know.”<sup>77</sup> Calamy likens deliberate meditation to a “bee that dwells and abides on the flower, to suck out all the sweetness that is in the flower” since “to meditate on God and Christ” is “to suck out all the sweetness we can in the things we meditate on.”<sup>78</sup> Furthermore, Calamy maintains that such meditation “is an act of the heart as well as of the head; it is not only a speculative knowledge of divine things, but a practical knowledge. It is not only an act of the intellect and understanding, but of the will and affections.”<sup>79</sup> Similar to Flavel, Calamy declares, “A true meditation is when a man so meditates on Christ as to get his heart inflamed with love of Christ. So, meditate on the truths of God to be transformed into them . . . Be musing about God in such a way as to kindle a fire in the whole soul.”<sup>80</sup> This deliberate meditation was considered to be of utmost importance.

Calamy teaches that to practice meditation beneficially one must approach it by way of three doors. First, “it must get into the door of the understanding, and there it is seated, there is the proper place of meditation; but if it rests there, you are never better for it.”<sup>81</sup> So, though the understanding is vital for such meditation, one must go beyond simply comprehending a given text or an aspect of God’s character. Second, “it must get into the door of your heart, and of your affections; and you must never leave meditating until it gets into that door as well.”<sup>82</sup> Meditation must therefore impact one’s love for God if it is to have any usefulness. And third, “the door of your conversation; for your meditation must not rest in the affections. It must also have influence into your

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<sup>77</sup> Calamy, *The Art of Divine Meditation*, 46.

<sup>78</sup> Calamy, *The Art of Divine Meditation*, 46.

<sup>79</sup> Calamy, *The Art of Divine Meditation*, 46.

<sup>80</sup> Calamy, *The Art of Divine Meditation*, 48–49.

<sup>81</sup> Calamy, *The Art of Divine Meditation*, 50.

<sup>82</sup> Calamy, *The Art of Divine Meditation*, 50.

conversation, to make your conversation more holy.”<sup>83</sup> By conversation, Calamy was referring to activity of life: the words a believer speaks and the actions a believer performs. He writes, “You must so meditate on God as to walk as God walks; and so, to meditate on Christ as to prize him, and live in obedience to him.”<sup>84</sup> Meditation is then to have an effect upon every part of a believer’s existence.

Such meditation was considered highly useful by Calamy. It helps believers on their path toward holiness: “It is a mighty help to work in us repentance and reformation of life.”<sup>85</sup> It helps Christians display an ongoing spirit of gratitude towards God: “Divine meditation is a mighty help to work in us the grace of thankfulness for the mercies and blessings we receive from God. . . . He that forgets the mercies of God, cannot be thankful for them.”<sup>86</sup> And Calamy further exhorts that meditation draws the believer into a more joyful intimacy with God.<sup>87</sup>

Modern-day writer David Saxton displays a Puritan spirit as he writes in support of their convictions regarding biblical meditation: “What does it mean to meditate? It means to think personally, practically, seriously, and earnestly on how the truth of God’s Word should look in life. . . . When he meditates, the believer fills his mind with truth so that his life becomes governed by the attitude of the Savior.”<sup>88</sup> Like the Puritans, Saxton sees the high value of biblical meditation, declaring that it “acts as a believer’s medicine because God’s Spirit always uses the balm of His truth to provide

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<sup>83</sup> Calamy, *The Art of Divine Meditation*, 50.

<sup>84</sup> Calamy, *The Art of Divine Meditation*, 50.

<sup>85</sup> Calamy, *The Art of Divine Meditation*, 62.

<sup>86</sup> Calamy, *The Art of Divine Meditation*, 70.

<sup>87</sup> Calamy, *The Art of Divine Meditation*, 111–12.

<sup>88</sup> David Saxton, *God’s Battle Plan for the Mind* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage, 2015),

lasting comfort and help.”<sup>89</sup> He goes on to declare that “God’s Spirit relieves the heart by applying divine truth through meditation. The Spirit slows down a worrying mind and restores order to the soul of His creatures.”<sup>90</sup> Additionally, Saxton describes the broad usefulness of meditation: “It provides us spiritual discernment; improves our Bible reading and prayer lives; applies the general truths of the Bible personally and specifically; strengthens our hearts by focusing on spiritual truths; and provides a lasting benefit from dwelling on the truths we know.”<sup>91</sup> To meditate then allows the truth of God’s Word to be fleshed out in the Christian life.

### **Bible-Directed Prayer: Another Central Puritan Teaching about Ongoing Communion with God**

The Puritans also viewed Bible-directed prayer as essential to enjoying Trinitarian communion with God. Puritan Thomas Manton (1620–1677) writes that “the word feedeth meditation, and meditation feedeth prayer. Meditation must follow hearing and precede prayer. What we take in by the word we digest by meditation and let out by prayer.”<sup>92</sup> Calamy concurs that letting the Bible inform, and even drive, one’s prayers is crucial: “You must know that prayer and meditation are very well joined together. Meditation is a preparation to prayer, and prayer is a fit close for meditation.”<sup>93</sup> Watson also makes the connection clear: “Meditation is like oil to the lamp; the lamp of prayer will soon go out unless meditation feeds it. Meditation and prayer are like two turtle doves: if you separate one, the other dies.”<sup>94</sup> He explains the nature of this connection as

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<sup>89</sup> Saxton, *God’s Battle Plan for the Mind*, 3.

<sup>90</sup> Saxton, *God’s Battle Plan for the Mind*, 4.

<sup>91</sup> Saxton, *God’s Battle Plan for the Mind*, 5.

<sup>92</sup> Thomas Manton, quoted in Calamy, *The Art of Divine Meditation*, 19.

<sup>93</sup> Calamy, *The Art of Divine Meditation*, 29.

<sup>94</sup> Watson, *The Christian on the Mount*, 87.



follows: “Meditation has a double benefit in it: it pours in and pours out. First it pours good thoughts into the mind, and then it pours out those thoughts again unto prayer. Meditation first furnishes with matter to prayer, and then it furnishes with a heart to pray.”<sup>95</sup> Watson even calls “prayer” the “child of meditation” and declares that “meditation leads the van, and prayer brings up the rear.”<sup>96</sup> So to the Puritans, connecting one’s meditation upon the Scriptures to prayer is crucial for ongoing communion with God.

Perhaps no one better embodied the Puritan commitment to Bible-directed prayer than Matthew Henry (1662–1714). In his book on practicing daily communion with God, Henry argues that the believer should spend deliberate time in communion with God at the start of each day, throughout each day, and at the close of each day. And prayer must be essential in this daily communion, particularly as it springs from God’s Word, God’s providential workings, and God’s employment of a believer’s conscience. As Henry encourages, “God has something to say to us as a friend every day, by the written word, in which we must hear his voice, by his providences, and by our own consciences; and he hearkens and hears whether we have any thing to say to him by way of reply.”<sup>97</sup> So, Bible-directed, daily prayer was considered to be crucial by Henry.

Such truth-inspired prayer comes with certainty that when it is offered faithfully and humbly, God will answer it. Henry writes, “We may be sure of this, and we must pray in assurance of it, in a full assurance of this faith, that wherever God finds a praying heart, he will be found a prayer-hearing God.”<sup>98</sup> He insists that “though the voice

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<sup>95</sup> Watson, *The Christian on the Mount*, 87.

<sup>96</sup> Watson, *The Christian on the Mount*, 87.

<sup>97</sup> Matthew Henry, *Directions for Daily Communion with God*, 3rd ed. (London: M. Lawrence, 1715), 15.

<sup>98</sup> Henry, *Directions for Daily Communion*, 11.

of prayer be a low voice, a weak voice, yet, if it come from an upright heart, it is a voice that God will hear, that he will hear with pleasure.”<sup>99</sup> When a Christian comes to God in this way, Henry argues, “We may be confident of this, that notwithstanding the distance between heaven and earth, and our great unworthiness to have any notice taken of us, or any favor showed us; yet God does hear our voice, and will not turn away our prayer, or his mercy.”<sup>100</sup> Truth-inspired prayer provides Christians with great confidence as they bring their petitions before the Lord.

Henry defines prayer as “lifting up the soul to God, and pouring out the heart before him.”<sup>101</sup> He describes prayer in the most intimate of terms, declaring, “We must speak to God, we must write to him; we say we hear from a friend whom we receive a letter from; we must see to it that God hears from us daily.”<sup>102</sup> Henry gives two primary reasons for lifting up the soul and pouring out the heart to God. First, by prayer, “God will keep us by his authority over us, and keep us continually in mind of our subjection to him, which we are apt to forget.”<sup>103</sup> Truth-inspired prayer therefore keeps Christians mindful of their need to obey God. It keeps them in step with their responsibilities toward the Lord. Secondly, through prayer, God “will testify his love and compassion towards us.”<sup>104</sup> As Henry explains, to show his affection, “as a father does his affection to his child when he is sending him abroad, he gives us this charge, ‘Let me hear from you every day, by every post, though you have no particular business’; which shows that the

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<sup>99</sup> Henry, *Directions for Daily Communion*, 11.

<sup>100</sup> Henry, *Directions for Daily Communion*, 11.

<sup>101</sup> Henry, *Directions for Daily Communion*, 12.

<sup>102</sup> Henry, *Directions for Daily Communion*, 12.

<sup>103</sup> Henry, *Directions for Daily Communion*, 13.

<sup>104</sup> Henry, *Directions for Daily Communion*, 13.

prayer of the upright is his delight; it is music to his ears.”<sup>105</sup> God then takes joy in receiving the prayers of his people when they come to him as humble children. Henry even often employs the language of friendship to describe God’s welcome to the praying believer: “As to a friend we love and have freedom with, such a friend we cannot go by without calling on . . . to such a friend we unbosom ourselves, we profess our love and esteem and with pleasure communicate our thoughts.”<sup>106</sup>

Henry never equivocates in stating that nothing should hinder a Christian from going to God in the communion of prayer. First of all, distance should not be a hindrance: “Though it is true, God is in heaven, and we are upon earth, yet, he is nigh to his praying people in all that they call upon him for; for he hears their voice wherever they are.”<sup>107</sup> Second, fear should not hinder a believer from speaking with God: “There is no occasion for you being thus discouraged in speaking to God; you may come boldly to the throne of his grace, you have there a liberty of speech, leave to pour out your whole souls.”<sup>108</sup> Third, uncertainty of what to say should not hinder prayer: “It is true, all your desire is before God, he knows your wants and burdens, but he will know them from you; he has promised you relief, but his promise must be put in suit.”<sup>109</sup> Finally, earthly busyness should not hinder Christians in their prayerful duty of delight: “It is not necessary to our happiness that we be great in the world, or raise estates to such a pitch: but it is absolutely necessary that we make our peace with God, that we obtain his favor, and keep ourselves in his love.”<sup>110</sup> Henry continues by insisting that “no business . . . will serve to excuse us

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<sup>105</sup> Henry, *Directions for Daily Communion*, 13.

<sup>106</sup> Henry, *Directions for Daily Communion*, 14.

<sup>107</sup> Henry, *Directions for Daily Communion*, 18–19.

<sup>108</sup> Henry, *Directions for Daily Communion*, 18–19.

<sup>109</sup> Henry, *Directions for Daily Communion*, 18–19.

<sup>110</sup> Henry, *Directions for Daily Communion*, 18–19.

for not attending upon God; but, on the contrary, the more important our worldly business, the more need we have to apply ourselves to God by prayer for his blessing upon it, and so to take him along with us in it.”<sup>111</sup> Though it may seem like Christians have numerous reasons for neglecting prayer, Henry insists that no good reason can be found and that believers must make prayerful communion their first duty.

Like many of the Puritans, Henry was convinced that mornings provided the best time for biblical meditation and prayer. He provides eight persuasive reasons why the mornings are so ideal: (1) because God is first over his people in all ways, he should then receive the first part of their day; (2) having rested from a night of sleep, the believer is now capable to commune with God with a fresh mind and heart; (3) early in the day, before others have risen and the busyness of life has commenced, Christians have the opportunity of undistracted access to God in prayer; (4) each morning Christians have new reasons to thank God for both his many mercies of the previous day and even his gift of the present day; (5) each new day brings new reasons to rejoice over God and praise him for his goodness; (6) every new morning allows for fresh thoughts of God that can be offered up to him in prayer; (7) each new morning we reflect upon the sins that occupied our minds the previous night and confess them; (8) each new morning we prepare for the work of day and have much reason to ask God for blessing.<sup>112</sup> Henry is clear: mornings are ideal.

Lewis Bayly (1575–1631) was another Puritan who prized Bible-directed prayer and made it his foremost life activity. He contends that as soon as a believer awakes each morning, he must “keep the door of thy heart fast shut, that no earthly thought may enter, before that God come in first; and let him, before all others, have the

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<sup>111</sup> Henry, *Directions for Daily Communion*, 18–19.

<sup>112</sup> Henry, *Directions for Daily Communion*, 29–40.

first place there.”<sup>113</sup> And if the believer’s heart is not so “dressed, like the lamp in the tabernacle” then, Bayly warns, “Satan will attempt to fill it with worldly cares or fleshly desires, so that it will grow unfit for the service of God all the day.”<sup>114</sup> Bayly also referred to reading and meditation upon God’s Word as the “parents of prayer”; before a believer prays, they should first read Scripture and meditate upon the excellent things they read.<sup>115</sup>

Bayly gives careful instructions regarding how to approach God in prayer once meditation occurs. Before Christians pray, they are to “let God see that thy heart is sorrowful for thy sin, and that thy mind is resolved (through the assistance of his grace) to amend thy faults.”<sup>116</sup> Then, after having prepared the heart, they are to approach God in the most humble fashion: “And then, having washed thyself . . . shut thy chamber-door, and kneel down at thy bedside, or some other convenient place; and in reverent manner lifting up thy heart, together with thy hands and eyes, as in the presence of God who seeth the inward intention of thy soul.”<sup>117</sup> From this place, the believer is to “offer up to God from the altar of a contrite heart, thy prayer, as a morning sacrifice, through the meditation of Christ.”<sup>118</sup> Bayly urges believers not to neglect the duty of Bible-directed prayer due to its life competitors. He urges, “Think not any business or haste, though never so great, a sufficient excuse to omit prayer in the morning: but meditate . . . that the greater thy business is, by so much the more need thou hast to pray for God’s good speed and blessing upon it, seeing it is certain that nothing can prosper without his blessing.”<sup>119</sup>

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102. <sup>113</sup> Lewis Bayly, *The Practice of Piety* (1842; repr., Grand Rapids: Soli Deo Gloria, 2019),

<sup>114</sup> Bayly, *The Practice of Piety*, 102.

<sup>115</sup> Bayly, *The Practice of Piety*, 105–6.

<sup>116</sup> Bayly, *The Practice of Piety*, 108.

<sup>117</sup> Bayly, *The Practice of Piety*, 108.

<sup>118</sup> Bayly, *The Practice of Piety*, 108.

<sup>119</sup> Bayly, *The Practice of Piety*, 117.

Bayly was therefore a prudent teacher regarding Bible-directed prayer.

Donald Whitney is a modern-day scholar who holds strong convictions on Bible-directed prayer.<sup>120</sup> He also connects biblical meditation with prayer when he defines meditation “as deep thinking on the truths and spiritual realities revealed in Scripture, or upon life from a scriptural perspective, for the purposes of understanding, application, and prayer.”<sup>121</sup> Whitney declares that “meditation is the missing link between Bible intake and prayer. Too often disjointed, the two should be united.”<sup>122</sup> He describes many modern-day believers as those who hastily read their Bibles and then attempt to quickly shift into prayer, but discover the transition is challenging. He instead insists that “there should be a smooth, almost unnoticeable transition between Scripture input and prayer output so that we move even closer to God in those moments.”<sup>123</sup> And this occurs through the missing link of meditation.

Whitney outlines a process for how this smooth transition should occur: “After the input of a passage of Scripture, meditation allows us to take what God has said and think deeply on it, digest it, and then speak to God about it in meaningful prayer.”<sup>124</sup> So, once believers have read, meditated upon, and applied God’s word, they can talk to him about what they have “now personalized through meditation.”<sup>125</sup> As Whitney states, “Not only do we have something substantial to say in prayer, as well as the confidence that we are praying God’s thoughts to Him, but we transition smoothly into prayer and with more

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<sup>120</sup> Nathan Finn has recently labeled Donald Whitney a “Neo-puritan” in a survey of modern Baptist spirituality. Nathan A. Finn, “Contours of a Healthy Baptist Spirituality,” *Criswell Theological Review* 12, no. 1 (2014): 5.

<sup>121</sup> Donald S. Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, rev. and updated ed. (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2014), 46.

<sup>122</sup> Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines*, 86.

<sup>123</sup> Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines*, 86.

<sup>124</sup> Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines*, 87.

<sup>125</sup> Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines*, 87.

passion for what we're praying about."<sup>126</sup> Transitioning from biblical meditation into prayer is therefore key for turning quiet times with God into quality times with God.

David Mathis is another Christian writer who supports this approach and helpfully applies this principle. He suggests that believers should “start with some broader Bible reading from which we select a particular verse or phrase that caught our attention, and carve out several minutes to go deep in it.”<sup>127</sup> Through this time of deep reflection, believers are to transition into communal prayer: “With intentionality and focus—often best with pen in hand or fingers on the keys—we seek to better understand God’s words and warm our soul at his fire, and let it lead us into prayer and then into the day.”<sup>128</sup> Understanding God’s Word is therefore vital for prayer to God.

Mathis defines prayer simply as “talking to God.”<sup>129</sup> He states that prayer “is irreducibly relational. It’s personal—he is the Absolute Person, and we are derivative persons, fashioned in his image.”<sup>130</sup> And he declares that “prayer is as basic as persons relating to each other, conversing, interacting.”<sup>131</sup> But Mathis offers a pertinent caveat: “In this relationship, we don’t chat as peers. He is Creator, and we are creatures. He is the great Lord, and we are his happy servants. Yet because of his amazing love and extravagant grace, he invites us to interact.”<sup>132</sup> The way Christians best interact with God, according to Mathis, is through a fellowship that God initiates through his Word: “Prayer, for the Christian, is not merely talking to God, but responding to the One who has

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<sup>126</sup> Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines*, 87.

<sup>127</sup> David Mathis, *Habits of Grace* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 59.

<sup>128</sup> Mathis, *Habits of Grace*, 59.

<sup>129</sup> Mathis, *Habits of Grace*, 94.

<sup>130</sup> Mathis, *Habits of Grace*, 94.

<sup>131</sup> Mathis, *Habits of Grace*, 94.

<sup>132</sup> Mathis, *Habits of Grace*, 94.

initiated toward us. He has spoken first.”<sup>133</sup> And after hearing from God’s mouth in his Word, believers then “speak to the God who has spoken. Our asking and pleading and requesting originate not from our emptiness, but his fullness. Prayer doesn’t begin with our need, but with his bounty.”<sup>134</sup> God therefore begins the interaction as believers continue it with prayerful response.

Based on these convictions, Mathis also provides five helpful suggestions for a believer’s prayer life. First, believers should create their prayer closet by finding a quiet place that they can frequent in order to commune with God.<sup>135</sup> Second, believers must begin with the Bible. As Mathis writes, “Because prayer is a conversation we didn’t start, but a response to God’s initiation and speaking to us in his word, many of us have learned . . . to start with the Scriptures.”<sup>136</sup> Third, believers should establish the pattern of adoring, confessing, thanking, and asking God as they approach him in prayer.<sup>137</sup> Fourth, believers must divulge and develop their desires: “This is free prayer, where we pray our hearts, and what burdens and anxieties are on us that day and in that season of life.”<sup>138</sup> And fifth, believers should attempt to keep it fresh by sometimes changing up their approach.”<sup>139</sup>

The biblical mandate to practice communion with God through biblical meditation and prayer was clearly exemplified by the teaching and practice of the Puritans. It also finds support in the reflections and practices of many modern-day Christian teachers. It finds such devoted application because communion with God is central to

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<sup>133</sup> Mathis, *Habits of Grace*, 94.

<sup>134</sup> Mathis, *Habits of Grace*, 94.

<sup>135</sup> Mathis, *Habits of Grace*, 103.

<sup>136</sup> Mathis, *Habits of Grace*, 103.

<sup>137</sup> Mathis, *Habits of Grace*, 103.

<sup>138</sup> Mathis, *Habits of Grace*, 103.

<sup>139</sup> Mathis, *Habits of Grace*, 103.



Christian living and because both biblical meditation and Bible-directed prayer are essential for this communion to take place.

## CHAPTER 4

### DETAILS AND DESCRIPTION OF THE PROJECT

This chapter details the four project goals and describes the project preparation, implementation, and follow-up periods. The purpose of this project was to equip church members to practice communion with God through Bible meditation and prayer at Riverside Baptist Church in New Port Richey, Florida. The means for reaching this objective was to increase the knowledge of communion with God through Bible meditation and prayer among the church membership while equipping them to practice such communion in their daily devotional lives. This project lasted eighteen weeks, beginning on February 13, 2022, and concluding on June 12, 2022.

#### **Project Goals**

This project had four goals. The first goal was to develop a six-week sermon series on communion with God through Bible meditation and prayer. These sermons were developed during the project preparation period and sought to balance theological instruction with practical direction. These sermons were also evaluated by the elders of the church during the preparation period to increase their effectiveness.

The second goal was to assess the congregation's knowledge and practice of communion with God through Bible meditation and prayer. This assessment was accomplished through the creation and administration of the Communion with God Inventory to measure growth in both doctrinal knowledge and the practice of communion with God through Bible meditation and prayer. This tool was created during the project preparation period and was administered during both the preparation and follow-up periods.

The third goal was to increase the knowledge of communion with God through Bible meditation and prayer in the members of the church through the sermon series. The members completed the Communion with God Inventory during the preparation period which included an assessment of their prior knowledge of communion with God. They then heard the six sermons during the implementation period, four of which were primarily aimed at increasing their knowledge.

The fourth goal was to equip the members of the church to practice communion with God through Bible meditation and prayer through the sermon series. The Communion with God Inventory also included an assessment of their prior practice of communion with God. To provide them with training, two of the six sermons were primarily directed towards equipping the members' practice of communion with God.

### **Preparation Period**

The project preparation period lasted for eight weeks and included the promotion of the project, the preparation of the Communion with God Inventory for the members, the preparation of the sermon evaluation tool for the church elders, and the completion of the six sermons on communion with God through Bible meditation and prayer. These sermons pulled both from the biblical sections of chapter two and the theological sections of chapter three of this project. Care was also taken to keep Christ and the gospel central in each of the sermon expositions so that the congregation was encouraged to rest in Christ even as they were urged to commune with him daily.

During the first week of the project preparation, the first sermon outline was written with John 15 and 17 as the sermon texts. The proposition of the sermon was that God has made joyful communion with him possible for believers in Christ. Jesus's metaphorical language in John 15:1–11 was carefully noted, especially where he refers to himself as the Vine while his disciples are the dependent branches. This concept of

dependence upon Christ was central to this sermon, with three relational acts on the part of believers being essential: clinging to Christ's word, making prayerful requests, and practicing loving obedience. I also explained that relational joy with God himself is included in communion with God as described in John 17:1–3. This explanation taught that eternal life is something enjoyed even now by Christians as they walk in delightful fellowship with the Lord.

The second week of the project included writing the second sermon outline with Galatians 5:16–26 as its text. The proposition for this second sermon built off the first by asserting that not only has communion with God been made possible for believers in Christ but Christians need to commune with God daily. It was communicated that Christians are in a constant battle against the temptations of the flesh and must walk by the Spirit in order to win the battle. This concept of walking by the Spirit was carefully exegeted in its relationship to an ongoing communion with God. The sermon declared that faith in Christ, strengthened by daily communion with God, was the key to such a holy walk with the Lord; this is because careful meditation on gospel truth, along with dependent prayer to the Lord, are essential means for walking hand in hand with the Holy Spirit.

The third sermon was written during the third week of the project as the focus of the series turned towards Bible meditation. Alongside a comprehensive walkthrough of Psalm 1, the proposition of the sermon stated that Bible meditation is essential for communion with God. It was noted in the sermon that the blessedness mentioned in Psalm 1:1 was vitally connected to the delight of biblical meditation in verse 2; and this blessedness before God results in fruitfulness as the believer yields spiritual fruit like a tree planted by streams of water. This spiritual fruit is in contrast to those who reject biblical counsel and instead follow the messaging of this world.

During the fourth week of the project, I wrote the fourth sermon outline. This message built off of the third sermon and continued to utilize Psalm 1 along with the

instructional help of several Puritans. The sermon's proposition declared that Bible meditation is essential for communion with God, but believers must know how to do it. After reviewing the past lessons of Psalm 1 and considering some other pertinent texts, I shared certain instructional points by Thomas Watson, which were taught in order to provide clear application to the practice of Bible meditation among believers.<sup>1</sup> Those helpful instructions provide Christians with a framework to daily meditate upon Scripture.

Promotion of the project also began during this fourth week and continued throughout the preparation period. Members received communication in the church's regular news update, weekly worship guide, and pulpit announcements that the project was about to be conducted on the topic of communion with God through Bible meditation and prayer. The congregation was informed that a six-week sermon series was scheduled on this theme and that it was desired that each adult member be evaluated both before and after the sermons to determine whether or not growth in understanding and practice had taken place. Members were asked to respond swiftly to the Communion with God Inventory once sent out and were urged to prioritize attendance during the preaching of the series. It was also communicated that if any member had to miss one of the sermons, they should watch them later through the church YouTube page.

The fifth week of the project preparation included the writing of the fifth sermon outline with Hebrews 4:14–16 as its text. The proposition for the sermon stated that prayer is essential for communion with God, especially prayer that is directed by biblical truth. This sermon declared that the entrance of Jesus as high priest into the sanctuary of God the Father opened the door for Christians to experience a free, prayerful fellowship with God himself. I communicated that the bold access believers now enjoy

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Watson, *The Christian on the Mount* (1657; repr., Orlando, FL: Northampton, 2009), 97–102.

through prayer is vital for Christian joy and growth as they pour out their hearts to God frequently. Such prayer provides them with strength and encouragement in life. Additionally, they were urged to let the truths which they considered in Scripture provide them with both motivation and direction in their prayers to God.

The sixth and final sermon outline was written during week 6 of the project and built off of sermon five as it continued to utilize Hebrews 4:14–16 and several other passages, along with the instructional help of several Puritans and contemporary writers. The sermon’s proposition declared that Bible-directed prayer is essential for communion with God, but Christians must know how to pray as directed by Scripture. Key to this sermon was the applicational instruction provided by the writer David Mathis, who laid out a framework for Christians to pray in light of what they carefully consider in God’s Word.<sup>2</sup> This was meant to train them in praying the Bible as they meditate upon the Bible and to help them make their prayers thoroughly biblical.

During week 7, the sermon evaluation tool was formulated for the church elders to assess the sermon series according to four criteria. The first criteria, biblical accuracy, was intended to gauge each sermon’s interpretation of Scripture as well as its faithfulness to biblical theology. The second criteria, scope, was meant to determine if the content of the sermons sufficiently covered the issues they were written to address. The third criteria, pedagogy, was designed to establish whether or not the sermons were clear, contained a big idea, and persuasively argued for the material. The fourth and final criteria, practicality, was intended to evaluate the sermons as to whether they clearly detailed how to understand and value communion with God and if they would actually help church members to better understand and practice it. This tool allowed for the evaluation of each criterion as one of the following: insufficient, requires attention, sufficient, or exemplary.

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<sup>2</sup> David Mathis, *Habits of Grace* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 103.

The eighth and final week of the preparation period involved the development of the Communion with God Inventory tool which was meant to gauge church members' growth in both understanding and practice of communion with God through Bible meditation and prayer. The Communion with God Inventory was written to be used both before and after the preaching of the sermon series. It began with an explanation, including a statement about confidentiality and directions for how to respond to each line in the survey. The Communion with God Inventory then asked respondents to answer statements with one of six responses, ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." It then asked them to respond to fourteen statements regarding their understanding of communion with God, their current level of Bible intake, their understanding and practice of Bible meditation, their response to the Bible in prayer, and their understanding and practice of praying Scripture. The aim of these statements was to evaluate each respondent's level of understanding and practice of such spiritual disciplines as Bible meditation and Bible-driven prayer, and also to determine whether or not they need more knowledge or further training in these areas.

### **Implementation Period**

The project implementation period lasted for eight weeks and included the implementation of the evaluation tool with the church elders, the Communion with God Inventory for the church membership, and the preaching of the six sermons on communion with God through Bible meditation and prayer. All three were conducted with good participation on the part of church elders and members.

During week 9 of the project the six sermons as well as the sermon evaluation tool were sent to the church elders who promptly read the sermons and completed the evaluation. Most responded with an exemplary mark for the criteria of biblical accuracy, scope, pedagogy, and practicality. However, on certain areas only the response of sufficient was given. These responses, along with several written comments which were

encouraged by the evaluation tool, provided helpful insight and improved the sermons.

For instance, two of the elders thought that the fourth and sixth sermons relied too heavily upon the practical methods of the Puritans and needed more biblical instruction. Another elder thought that the fourth sermon lacked a clear gospel message and wanted to ensure that the good news about Jesus would be central in the sermon. However, the sermon evaluations from the elders were mostly positive, with remarks that the sermons were clearly designed, were practically effective, and that they pointed to the vital need for Christians to commune with God in these important ways. All these considerations were helpful and allowed for the sermon outlines to be enhanced before preaching them to the congregation.

The tenth week of the project involved the implementation of the fourteen-statement Communion with God Inventory to survey the church membership. The survey was turned into an online form through the church's Breeze church management system.<sup>3</sup> It was then both emailed and sent via text message to each church member with the appeal that they answer honestly and promptly. Most members responded quickly and needed little extra encouragement to complete the survey in a timely manner. However, some members required some follow-up text messages or even phone calls. By the end of the week, 42 of 51 church members responded to the Communion with God Inventory. The only members who did not respond were a couple who have now left the church, but have not yet been removed from the membership, as well some who are physically or mentally incapable of responding to the survey.

The results of the Communion with God Inventory were somewhat surprising, as many church members appeared confident that their current practice of communion with God was sufficient, though many admitted to the inadequacy of their prayer lives. According to their responses, most members affirmed that they read the Bible regularly

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<sup>3</sup> Breeze Church Management Software, published 2022, <https://www.breezechms.com>.



and that Bible reading was an important part of their lives. However, fewer members affirmed a clear grasp and regular practice of Bible meditation. The same was true with prayer, as most members admitted to praying daily though far less of them practiced the discipline of praying Scripture.

During week 11 the first sermon, “Communion with God Made Possible,” was preached from John 15:1–11 and John 17:1–3. The aim of this sermon was to impress upon the congregation the pleasant reality that God has made intimate fellowship with himself possible through the saving work of Jesus. This aim for the message was applied through three truths. First, it was declared that people only enjoy communion with God by first being redeemed through Christ’s work on the cross. It was at this truth that the necessity of repentance and faith in Jesus were carefully proclaimed. Second, it was explained that the way to joyfully commune with God is by daily depending upon Jesus. In this truth the congregation was exhorted to hold tight to Christ daily in faith, like little children who cling to a parent’s hand. Third, it was communicated that there are three vital ways to depend upon Jesus in faith: clinging to him through his Word, in prayer, and in trusting obedience. It was this final truth that brought everything home, as it urged the congregation to practice daily communion with the Lord in order to both enjoy God and be fruitful before God.

I preached the second sermon, “The Necessity of Communion with God,” during week twelve of the project, from Galatians 5:16–26. The goal of this sermon was to communicate the ongoing need for Christians to enjoy frequent fellowship with the Lord due to their daily internal conflict with sinful flesh. This sermon was applied through three realities. The first reality was that non-Christians are still on good terms with the flesh—that those who have not embraced Christ in faith have never entered into true, spiritual conflict with their sinful desires and still remain in their sinful condition. Here it was impressed upon the church that in order to walk by the Spirit and overcome the desires of the flesh they must first place their trust in Jesus to be free from the

consequences and enslaving power of sin. The second reality, building off the first, was that Christians are in a constant state of war with their sinful flesh. It was explained that this war must be recognized by each believer along with the admission of self-weakness and the need for the Lord's help. The third reality is that Christians must commune with God daily in order to fight their ongoing battle with sin. This is where the exposition most connected to Christian living as believers were encouraged to walk by the Spirit through daily communion with God in such disciplines as Bible meditation and prayer.

During week thirteen, I preached the third sermon from Psalm 1, "Communion with God through Bible Meditation." The purpose of this sermon was to convey the truth that Bible meditation is essential for a believer's communion with God. Here I argued that merely reading the Bible with a hurried casualness accomplishes little good, while deep consideration of biblical texts provides much lasting benefit. Three certainties were impressed upon the congregation in light of the truths found in Psalm 1. The first certainty was that there are only two ways to live: to either follow the counsel of this wicked world or to follow the counsel of God's Word. It was then declared that the entry point to the superior second way of living is Jesus himself through the gospel. The second certainty impressed upon the church was that happy communion with God is connected to the rejection of this world's false counsel. The point was made that Christians would fail to know the delights of deep intimacy with God if they incautiously filled their minds with the counterfeit delights that are commended by this world. The third reality was that happy communion with God is connected to meditation upon God's good counsel. In order to know the delights of deep intimacy with the Lord, a believer's mind must be absorbed by the teachings, truths, and promises of the Bible. It was at this reality that the essential place for Bible meditation was communicated.

I preached the fourth sermon, "Application of Communion with God through Bible Meditation," during week 14, building upon the previous sermon on Psalm 1. The intention of this sermon was to reaffirm the need for Bible meditation and to promote

helpful methods of how to practice it. Three lessons were provided to the congregation. First, to have happy communion with God believers must meditate upon God's good counsel, found in the Bible. The church was here exhorted to slow down their lives with their many distractions and to instead dedicate time daily to carefully examine the precious words of Scripture. Second, believers should heed six instructions as they practice Bible meditation, as follows: (1) begin with a serious posture through dependent prayer (2) read before meditating; (3) pick one verse, topic, or theme from the reading to carefully consider; (4) meditate with self-examination; (5) prayer over the meditation; and (6) determine how to live out the meditation.<sup>4</sup> The third lesson urged the congregation to utilize Romans 8:31–39 as a practice text in order to carefully consider the marvelous love of God as they apply the instructions from the second lesson.

During week fifteen, I preached the fifth sermon from Hebrews 4:14–16, “Communion with God through Prayer.” The objective of this sermon was to relate the essential place of prayer to communion with God. This sermon conveyed three important truths. The first truth was that the only way to draw near to God is through Jesus Christ himself. The work of Jesus on the cross is the only way that a sinner can be reconciled to God and enjoy prayerful fellowship with him. Secondly, Jesus can sympathize with all the weaknesses of believers for he too was tempted, yet without sin, and is both a faithful and powerful high priest on their behalf. Third, through Jesus, Christians can commune with God in Bible-directed prayer. They can draw near to God confidently when they absorb Scripture into their minds, let its truths warm their affections, and then translate those affections into prayerful communication with the Lord.

The sixth and final sermon was preached during week 16; “Application of Communion with God through Prayer” built off of the sermon from Hebrews 4:14–16. This sermon sought to reaffirm the essential place of Bible-directed prayer while also

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<sup>4</sup> Watson, *Christian on the Mount*, 97–102.

explaining how to do it. It was applied to the church through three lessons. First, to have happy communion with God believers must pray in light of God's revelation, found in his Word. I explained that Christians will know the delights of deep intimacy with God when their minds are filled with his truth and their hearts are poured out to him in trusting supplication. Second, Christians should heed five instructions as they begin to practice Bible-directed prayer: (1) find a quiet place for prayer; (2) begin with Bible meditation; (3) establish a healthy prayer pattern such as the ACTS pattern of Adoring, Confessing, Thanksgiving, and Supplication; (4) freely divulge desires; (5) and keep things fresh.<sup>5</sup> Third, the congregation was again encouraged to carefully consider Romans 8:31–39 while translating its truth about God's love into a prayerful response.

Each of these sermons were interconnected and the later sermons built off the principles of the first two. The expositions were meant to not only impress upon the congregation the possibility and importance of communion with God through Bible meditation and prayer but also to assist them in learning how to put their relationship with God into action.

### **Follow-up Period**

The project follow-up period lasted for two weeks and included the sending and collecting of the Communion with God Inventory to survey the church membership for the second time. It was accomplished in a timely way with good participation from the congregation.

During week 17, the Communion with God Inventory was sent to all the adult members of Riverside. This survey was essentially the same except members were now also asked how many of the six sermons they had listened to. This survey was promoted by the same means as before through the church's regular news update, weekly worship

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<sup>5</sup> Mathis, *Habits of Grace*, 103.

guide, and a pulpit announcement. Members were again asked to respond swiftly to the Communion with God Inventory once sent out and all received the survey link through both email and text message.

Week 18 was the final week of the project and included collection of the Communion with God Inventory and the tabulation of the results. The Communion with God Inventory was completed by 41 out of 50 members, one less than the before as one church member died and entered heavenly communion with Jesus during the project's implementation period. All six sermons were attended by 66% of the church membership, while 90% listened to at least four of the sermons. The Communion with God Inventory responses from both before and after the sermons were then compared to determine the effectiveness of the project in its purpose of equipping the members to practice communion with God through Bible meditation and prayer.

This project was prepared, implemented, and followed-up swiftly and in an organized fashion. There was good participation by all those who took part, along with some helpful results to report and build off of for the future.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION

This chapter provides an evaluation of this ministry project by assessing the project's purpose, the four project goals, the project's strengths, and weaknesses. It also reflects upon what I would do differently if I were to conduct this project again at Riverside Baptist Church or at another local congregation. Finally, this chapter considers the effect the project had on me theologically and personally as I both conducted the biblical and theological portions and implemented the sermon series to the membership of my local church.

#### **Evaluation of Project Purpose**

The purpose of this project was to equip the members to practice communion with God through Bible meditation and prayer at Riverside Baptist Church. The fulfillment of this purpose was accomplished through the preaching of a particular series of sermons which aimed to both educate and train the church membership in these biblical practices. Evaluating the success of this purpose included assessing whether or not I taught the members effectively and whether or not those members adopted or enhanced the practice of communion with God through Bible meditation and prayer in their daily lives. According to the following assessment, this purpose was successfully accomplished.

The assessment data for this project came from the fourteen statement Communion with God Inventory which was sent to the church membership both before and after the preaching of the sermon series. These surveys were identical and asked for one of six possible responses from the members at each of the fourteen statements:

“strongly disagree; disagree; disagree somewhat; agree somewhat; agree; and strongly agree.” The hope for the Communion with God Inventory was for each respondent to have strengthened their level of agreement with each statement. A t-test for dependent samples was conducted to compare the total data between the two administrations of the Communion with God Inventory. It not only showed the mean for the post-survey data (75.609) as larger than the pre-survey data (69.634), but it showed a significant, positive statistical change among the church membership:  $t_{(40)} = -6.429, p < .0001$ . This reveals that the congregation was greatly impacted by the project as they learned to understand and practice communion with God through Bible meditation and prayer.

Furthermore, the responses to several of the individual survey statements reveal even more clearly the impact the project had upon the church membership. For instance, the second statement on the Communion with God Inventory was, “I am committed to a daily time alone with God.” This statement was provided to determine the eagerness and commitment level of church members to spend time alone with God through a daily devotional time. A t-test for dependent samples was conducted to compare the data for this specific statement and it also revealed a significant, positive statistical change:  $t_{(40)} = -1.982, p = .0272$ . It seems the congregation did grow in their eagerness and commitment to spend time in communion with God each day.

The same clarity applies to the congregation’s general attitudes toward Bible reading and times in prayer. The seventh statement on the Communion with God Inventory was, “I am able to read the Bible knowing that God has revealed himself to me.” This was provided to the membership to determine whether or not they had made the connection between the text of the Bible and God’s gracious self-disclosure through it. A t-test for dependent samples was conducted to compare the data for this statement and it also revealed a significant, positive statistical change:  $t_{(40)} = -2.240, p = .0153$ . Along with this, statement 12 on the Communion with God Inventory was, “I would characterize my prayer life as spiritually healthy.” This was presented to the church to

ascertain whether or not they viewed their approach to prayer as strong and beneficial. The t-test for this statement again showed significant, positive statistical change:  $t_{(40)} = -3.545, p = .0005$ . Thus, it appears the membership at Riverside Baptist Church were significantly impacted by the project with regard to their attitudes toward the Bible and prayer.

Based upon the data assessment, as well as the numerous encouraging verbal responses by many of the members following the sermon series, it seems clear that this project fulfilled its purpose. It equipped the church members to practice communion with God through Bible meditation and prayer.

### **Evaluation of Project Goals**

This project included four goals. The first goal was to develop a six-week sermon series on communion with God through Bible meditation and prayer. The second goal was to assess the congregation's knowledge and practice of communion with God through Bible meditation and prayer. The third goal was to increase the knowledge of communion with God through Bible meditation and prayer in the members of the church through the sermon series. The fourth goal went beyond mere knowledge and sought to equip the members to practice communion with God through Bible meditation and prayer through the sermon series. This section evaluates these four goals in succession.

The first goal intended to create the instrument which I would use to strengthen the congregation. My desire with this first goal was to reach as many of the church members as possible with this important instruction and I therefore chose a sermon series as the tool to both teach and train them. My focus was on the membership of the church as these were the people who knew Jesus and who had committed together to grow in their walks with him. Though other individuals were welcomed to attend and be strengthened by the messages, the emphasis of the project was placed upon the church membership.



I intended to accomplish several objectives through the writing of these six sermons. First, I sought to inform the congregation on the importance of communion with God as I provided teaching from the Scriptures on this topic. Second, I intended to motivate and inspire the congregation through the knowledge given by these sermons to prioritize communion with God in their daily lives. Finally, I intended to provide the congregation with a simple and repeatable methodology for Bible meditation and prayer through these six sermons that would allow them to consistently practice communion with God. I wrote these sermons during the project preparation period, the sermons were reviewed and enhanced by the church elders during the project preparation period, and they were successfully delivered during the project implementation period. Therefore, this first goal was effectively met.

The second goal was accomplished through the creation and administration of the Communion with God Inventory to measure growth in both doctrinal knowledge and the practice of communion with God through Bible meditation and prayer. This goal was successful met when the Communion with God Inventory was successfully created and administered to at least seventy-five percent of the church membership. Since the Communion with God Inventory was completed by 41 out of 50 church members, which is eighty-two percent of the membership, this goal was met.

The Third goal was accomplished through the delivery of the sermon series where I sought to enhance each member's knowledge of communion with God. This was to make them wise in their understanding and to encourage them to learn how to grow in their communion with God. T-tests upon several other statements from the Communion with God Inventory surveys showed important changes at several significant points which leads to the conclusion that this goal was also effectively accomplished.

The first statement on the Communion with God Inventory was, "I would describe my understanding of communion with God to be very thorough." This statement sought to ascertain each member's grasp on the Bible's teaching on this important topic. I

expected a significant increase in agreement between the Communion with God Inventory responses with this statement because, prior to the sermon series, many of the members seemed to not yet grasp the level of relationship provided to them by God. I also thought there was a possibility that the word *communion* might be misunderstood among the church membership. My expectation was met as there was a sizable increase in agreement between the two administrations of the Communion with God Inventory. A t-test for dependent samples was conducted to compare the data for this specific statement and it revealed a significant, positive statistical change:  $t_{(40)} = -3.176, p = .0014$ . It seems the congregation grew in their understanding of the concept of communion with God.

Additionally, it appears that the church membership also grew in their understanding of both the practice of Bible meditation and the practice of praying the Bible. They did not merely grow in the comprehension of the broader concept, but they also grew in their knowledge of these important spiritual disciplines. Their responses to other statements on the Communion with God Inventory show this clearly.

The fourth statement on the Communion with God Inventory was, “I know what is meant by the term Bible meditation.” This statement sought to clearly identify whether or not respondents understood this key part of the project. A t-test for dependent samples was conducted to compare the data for this specific statement and it also revealed a significant, positive statistical change:  $t_{(40)} = -5.003, p < .0001$ . Their understanding of Bible meditation was enhanced.

The tenth statement on the Communion with God Inventory was similar: “I know what is meant by the term praying the Bible.” This also sought to clearly identify whether or not church members understood this other essential part of the project. A t-test for dependent samples was conducted to compare the data for this specific statement and it again revealed a significant, positive statistical change:  $t_{(40)} = -3.354, p = .0009$ . Their understanding of praying the Bible was also enhanced.

Since understanding communion with God through Bible meditation and prayer was clearly improved among the church membership, the third goal of this project was also accomplished. The members grew in their knowledge.

The fourth goal was also accomplished through the delivery of the sermon series where I sought to equip each member to practice communion with God daily. This goal went beyond mere dissemination of biblical information and even past sermonic persuasion, as I sought to train the members to regularly commune with God through Bible meditation and prayer in a simple and repeatable methodology. This was intended to give them confidence that they could put daily communion with God into practice in their lives.

Once again, t-tests upon several of the statements from the Communion with God Inventory showed important changes at several significant points. This leads to the conclusion that this goal was also effectively accomplished. Numerous statements on the Communion with God Inventory were presented in order to gauge growth in respondent's practice in this area. And though they each revealed varying levels of strength they all showed marked improvement in member practice.

For instance, Communion with God Inventory statements 3 and 5 each sought to assess member growth in their practice of Bible reading and meditation. The third statement says, "I read my Bible on a daily basis." A t-test for dependent samples was conducted to compare the data for this specific statement and it revealed a significant, positive statistical change:  $t_{(40)} = -3.584, p = .0005$ . Statement 5 pertained directly to Bible meditation: "I am committed to the practice of Bible meditation on a daily basis. A t-test for dependent samples was conducted to compare the data for this specific statement and it too revealed a significant, positive statistical change:  $t_{(40)} = -5.739, p < .0001$ . It seems the church membership grew in their practice of communion with God through Bible meditation.

Also, Communion with God Inventory statements 9 and 11 each sought to

assess member growth in their practice of prayer and, specifically, praying the Bible. Statement 9 provided the more general statement, “I pray on a daily basis.” A t-test for dependent samples was conducted to compare the data for this specific statement and it revealed a significant, positive statistical change:  $t_{(40)} = -2.314, p = .0129$ . Statement 11 went even further and asked about the practice of praying Scripture: “I am committed to the practice of praying the Bible on a daily basis.” A t-test for dependent samples was conducted to compare the data for this specific statement and it too revealed a significant, positive statistical change:  $t_{(40)} = -3.963, p = .0001$ . It is clear that the membership of the church grew in its practice praying the Bible as well.

Since the practice of communion with God through Bible meditation and prayer was improved among the church membership, this fourth goal of the project was also accomplished. Thus, all four goals of this project were effectively met.

### **Strengths of the Project**

This project included numerous successes during both preparation and implementation. Not only were its purpose and goals met but there were numerous positives that coincided with it. This portion of the chapter outlines some of these successes.

First, this project demonstrated the importance the Scriptures place upon a believer’s intimate, affectionate relationship with God. Through the consideration of Christ’s presentation of communion with God in John’s Gospel, the emphasis the apostle Paul placed upon walking by the Spirit in Galatians 5, and the important place that both Psalm 1 and Hebrews 4 gave to Bible meditation and prayer, it was clearly revealed from Scripture that God wants his people to commune with him. I think this project successfully related this to me personally, as well as the minds of the people of Riverside Baptist Church.

Secondly, this project communicated many keen insights from strong

Christians of both the past and present who spoke into the lives of my church with their conviction, example, and methodology. Men like Thomas Watson, Matthew Henry, Don Whitney, and David Mathis provided helpful instruction on not only the importance of communion with God through Bible meditation and prayer but also ways to practice such communion in a believer's daily life. The church of Christ is well served when it remembers wise teachers from both the past and present, and this project was well served by employing their instructions for the benefit of the congregation.

Third, this project allowed for the entire membership of the church to learn and be equipped in this important area through a sermon series that instructed each church member at the same place and time. Though other instruments were considered to communicate this teaching, the sermon series allowed for everyone in the church to receive the same instruction together as a church family. Though not everyone was able to attend each and every sermon, most members were able to listen to the bulk of the messages. This allowed me to get this important material into the minds of my congregation in a quick and unified way.

Fourth, this project did not attempt to go beyond its limits by covering too many spiritual disciplines in one sermon series. Though other disciplines such as fasting, worship attendance, and Bible memorization could have been included, the fact that this project focused more narrowly on Bible meditation and prayer enabled me to keep the congregation focused. It also kept them from becoming intimidated by being encouraged to do too much too soon in their walks with God.

Finally, this project enabled the church elders to enhance the sermons before they were preached, improving their effectiveness. Thanks to these expert shepherds, I was able to cut out an overabundance of quotes from various teachers of the past and present, I was reminded to emphasize the gospel and make it the heart of each sermon, and I was challenged to keep Scripture as my primary content. This was helpful as there was a great deal of content to choose from and their guidance enabled me to keep the

focus on the overall objective.

### **Weaknesses of the Project**

This project also included several weaknesses that may have undermined its overall effectiveness. Though statistically the project was a success, I wonder if these limitations kept it from being as helpful as it could have been. This portion of the chapter outlines some of these weaknesses.

First, the project did not provide enough hands-on instruction for the membership. Though the sermon series allowed the majority of the congregation to take part, the large number participating prevented more focused, individualized help from being provided. For instance, the members were never allowed to fully observe my own pastoral example of communion with God as it was impossible for over forty participants to directly observe my devotional times. The fact that the project involved a sermon series also prevented my observation of each member's trial and error as they practiced the methodology of Bible meditation and Bible directed prayer throughout the weeks. It also made it hard for me to provide them each with ongoing encouragement. Ultimately, though sermon series had real advantages it lacked the helpful intimacy of teaching a small group.

Second, the project did not include a follow-up period for participants which makes their continued progress in these disciplines uncertain. Though the Communion with God Inventory related significant change in member lives in this area the project did not provide a way to measure their sustained observance of these practices. Perhaps a follow-up sermon could have been delivered weeks later along with some follow-up survey statements to ascertain how well church members are continuing to practice these important disciplines in their lives.

### **What I Would Do Differently**

If I were given the opportunity to do this project again, I would consider either

teaching the material in a small group setting or adding a small group component to the sermon series. Though it was a real success to teach these truths and these methodologies to the entire congregation by way of the sermons, I think something was lost by teaching it to such a large group. As explained above, this project lacked some helpful hands-on instruction, and it did not include any follow-up components for those who participated. If I would have added a small group component to the project, or perhaps even transformed the sermon series into a small group manual, it might have made the effects of this project more long lasting in the lives of the members of Riverside Baptist Church.

If I were to do the project again, I would consider preparing a small group manual based upon the content that I taught during the sermon series. This manual would include all the same biblical and theological instructions as well as all the same methodologies and helps. This manual could also be printed and taught to a select group of committed members over the course of several weeks. This would allow them to practice Bible meditation and Bible-directed prayer with me personally during our instruction times together. They could also attempt to repeat these disciplines on their own time while coming each week to report on their successes and struggles. Ultimately, they could receive personal, hands-on guidance to help them improve in these areas and receive ongoing follow up in the weeks following the instruction.

This small group approach with a teaching manual would have two other advantages. First, it could be used repetitively with different sets of people within the church as group after group among the church membership could be more fully strengthened by these teachings and methods. Second, the two spiritual disciplines of Bible meditation and prayer could eventually be expanded upon as other disciplines could be added to the manual and taught to members after they have been initially trained in the first two priorities.

## **Theological Reflections**

This project taught me a great deal about the Lord. First of all, I was impressed by how closely the relationship with God is connected to one's joy as a Christian. Believers are commanded in Scripture to be joyful, but that command is accompanied by God's own provision. God himself has enabled his children to commune with him through means; therefore, whatever difficulties may come in life, God is always accessible, his promises never fade, and walking with him through those means can provide a profound delight in any storm. Secondly, I grew in my understanding that God has provided some very simple ways for believers to have ongoing access to him, though these ways can be very difficult to lean upon at times due to the many distractions of life. God has given his people the simple disciplines of meditating upon his Word and praying back to him in response in order to walk closely with him. Yet these disciplines can become obscured by the challenges of life, the distractions of this world, and my own impatience with my circumstances. Thankfully, the God who provides these ways to have intimate fellowship with him is the same God who forgives believers when they lose sight of him and confess their waywardness before him. He is the God of amazing grace, for he graciously provides his people with access to him and even forgives his children when they fail to appreciate this astonishing access.

I also learned much about believers and the depth of their need to commune with God. Psalm 1 could not be clearer when it relates the necessity of each member of the church to absorb God's Word carefully into their minds and hearts while at the same time resisting the contradictory messages of this scoffing world. As Jesus related in John 15, he is the Vine and Christians are the branches, and apart from him they can do nothing. If believers fail to heed his instruction to abide in him, by meditating upon Scripture and prayerfully pleading with the Lord as they go, then they have no hope of spiritual success—and they certainly will not walk in the joy of the Lord.

Lastly, this project reiterated to me the simple reality that God's Word is the



source of all truth and is vital for my life each day. Throughout this project, God's Word never pointed me elsewhere as if some other source of knowledge was sufficient for me or others to commune with him. Instead, it pointed me directly back to itself, as I was reminded that if I am going to know God, enjoy God, and grow in God, then I must continually and even constantly go back to the Word of God. I am thankful for the Puritans especially who demonstrated great fidelity to the Scriptures and who so faithfully pointed both their listeners and readers to the Bible for their source of contentment and holiness. The priority they gave to God's Word remains an example for Christians even today.

### **Personal Reflections**

Through this project I was reminded of how necessary God's promises are for my joy and holiness. As I considered Paul's command in his letter to the Galatians to walk by the Spirit, and the connection of this walk to faith in the Lord's promises, I was challenged to be a man of deeper faith. Not deeper because I am capable of making myself more trusting of the Lord, but deeper because I more carefully reflect upon the words of the Lord. I learned that I must slow down, I must read carefully and deliberately, I must drink from God's Word deeply, and then learn to trust his promises as I go. This was not a new lesson for me, but it is a lesson that I need reminded of again and again. And with this, it is a lesson that the people of my congregation need to hear with the same frequency, for they must constantly hear of the promises of God.

I also learned to let God speak before I do. Prayer is pivotal for the Christian life, but I must offer prayer to God from a heart that has already been spoken to. I need his Word to be the choice part of my day and my expressions of adoration, confession, thanksgiving, and supplication must flow from God's revelation to me. It is his lead that I must follow. It is his voice that must direct my life and my prayers.

Throughout this project, I was also reminded of just how busy the people of

my church truly are. Their days are filled with good priorities and bad priorities, time well spent and time wasted, selfless service and selfish entertainments. As one who struggles with these same contradictions, I have learned the importance of ongoing reminder. God's people need to hear again and again that the Lord belongs in first place in all things and that communion with him must be the highest aim. Not only do I need this message regularly, but it must frequently be declared in my preaching ministry to the flock God has put in my care.

Finally, I learned that I have a long way to go. Though I believe I grew in Christian maturity as a result of this project, I have also been reminded of how weak I am in the disciplines. My mind is easily sidetracked, my motivations are often mixed, and commitment is sometimes weak. I have learned how greatly I need God, but I have also learned how self-dependent I can be. Thankfully, the God of all grace continues to work in me and through me.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter provided an evaluation of this ministry project by assessing the project's purpose, goals, strengths and weaknesses, and potential for improvement. It also relates the ways this project shaped my theological understanding as well as the ways the project impacted my own life and ministry.

I am greatly thankful for this project for the reasons just listed under personal reflection. I believe it has made me a better husband, father, pastor, and Christian. God's Word informed my mind and life, the writings of wise men corrected both my thinking and habits, and my congregation was built up with careful teaching and life instruction. I praise God for the ministry he has enabled.

APPENDIX 1  
SERMON EVALUATION TOOL

The following tool was for the elders of RBC to evaluate the six-week sermon series developed for this project.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from William Ashley Mofield, “Developing a Disciple Making Program at White House First Baptist Church in White House, Tennessee” (DMin project, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2013), appendix 2.

Name of Evaluator: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

| <b>Sermon Evaluation Tool</b>  |          |          |          |          |                 |
|--|----------|----------|----------|----------|-----------------|
| <b>1 = insufficient 2 = requires attention 3 = sufficient 4 = exemplary</b>                      |          |          |          |          |                 |
| <b>Criteria</b>  | <b>1</b> | <b>2</b> | <b>3</b> | <b>4</b> | <b>Comments</b> |
| <b>Biblical Accuracy</b>   |          |          |          |          |                 |
| Each sermon was sound in its interpretation of Scripture.  |          |          |          |          |                 |
| Each sermon was faithful to the theology of the Bible.   |          |          |          |          |                 |
| <b>Scope</b>   |          |          |          |          |                 |
| The content of the sermon series sufficiently covered each issue it was designed to address.     |          |          |          |          |                 |
| The sermon series sufficiently covered a biblical pedagogical methodology.                       |          |          |          |          |                 |
| <b>Pedagogy</b>  |          |          |          |          |                 |
| Each sermon was clear, containing a big idea.  |          |          |          |          |                 |
| Each sermon provided persuasive argumentation for the content of the material.                   |          |          |          |          |                 |
| <b>Practicality</b>  |          |          |          |          |                 |
| The sermon series clearly detailed how to understand and value communion with God.               |          |          |          |          |                 |
| At the end of the series, participants will better understand and appreciate communion with God. |          |          |          |          |                 |

Other Comments:

APPENDIX 2  
COMMUNION WITH GOD INVENTORY

The following tool was for surveying the members of RBC before and after they participated in the sermon series.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from Barry Glendon Raper, “Teaching Biblical Meditation as a Means to Prayer to Students of Welch College, Nashville, Tennessee” (DMin project, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2013), appendix 2.

## Communion with God Inventory

The research in which you are about to participate is designed to evaluate your current understanding and practice of certain spiritual disciplines. This research is being conducted by Joe Earle for his Doctor of Ministry project involving the equipping of Riverside Baptist Church members to practice communion with God through Bible meditation and prayer. In this survey, you will answer basic questions about your understanding and practice of select spiritual disciplines for the purpose of evaluating any personal growth that occurs as a result of the six-week sermon series. Any information you provide will be held *publicly confidential*, and at no time will your name be reported or even identified with your responses apart from the one administering this evaluation. *Participation in this study is for all church members but is voluntary.*

**Directions:** Mark your agreement with each statement using the following scale.

- SD = strongly disagree
- D = disagree
- DS = disagree somewhat
- AS = agree somewhat
- A = agree
- SA = strongly agree

|  |    |   |    |    |   |    |
|--|----|---|----|----|---|----|
| 1. I would describe my understanding of the spiritual disciplines to be very thorough. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 2. I have a daily time alone with God.   | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 3. I read my Bible on a daily basis.   | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 4. I know what is meant by the term Bible meditation.                                  | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 5. I practice the discipline of Bible meditation on a daily basis.                     | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 6. I would characterize my approach to the Bible as spiritually healthy.               | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 7. I am able to read God's Word with confidence that he has revealed himself to me.    | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 8. I frequently respond with joyful praise over what I read in the Bible.              | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 9. I pray on a daily basis.  | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 10. I know what is meant by the term praying the Bible.                                | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 11. I practice the discipline of praying the Bible on a daily basis.                   | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 12. I would characterize my prayer life as spiritually healthy.                        | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |

|   |    |   |    |    |   |    |
|---|----|---|----|----|---|----|
| 13. I am able to pray with confidence that God is hearing my prayers.                         | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 14. I frequently receive answers to prayer.   | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 15. I frequently record significant aspects of my life of faith in a journal.                 | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 16. I schedule prolonged periods of time to be alone with God in Bible meditation and prayer. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |



APPENDIX 3  
SERMON OUTLINE SAMPLES

**Sermon 1: “Communion with God Made Possible”  
(John 15:1-11; 17:1-3)**

Introduction

What if God made it possible for his beloved people to have intimate fellowship with him, whereby they would know him, love him, enjoy him, depend upon him, take strength in him, and learn to be like him?

Furthermore, what if God accomplished the greatest of all victories in order to make such priceless fellowship possible—a victory that would come at the expense of his own Son?

And what if God provided certain means (ways, methods) for his people to regularly enjoy fellowship with him.

And what if they lived in ignorance towards those means?

This sermon series seeks to not only combat that ignorance but also to train Christians in how to practice ongoing, intimate fellowship with God.

The aim of this series is to “equip you to practice communion with God through the God-given means of Bible meditation and prayer.”

Let me define communion with God for us:

“Communion with God is receiving God’s loving communication to us while joyfully responding through our union with Jesus.”

Often, this word “communion” is used interchangeably with words like “fellowship” & “relationship.”

John Owen (17th century Puritan) wrote,

“Our communion...with God consisteth in his communication of himself to us, with our returnal unto him of that which he requireth and accepteth, flowing from that union which in Jesus Christ we have with him.”

What Owen means is that communion with God includes two components:

First, it includes God's loving expression of himself to us (which is his revelation of himself to us and his gracious willingness to engage us in a close relationship).

Second, it includes our return to him through both a loving, communicative response and worship (and all this is made possible through God's Son Jesus).

This week, I spent over 26 hours in a car with several other men who love the Lord, and then I spent many more hours fellowshiping with those same men as we attended a wonderful conference together in Kentucky.

We had sweet fellowship, or communion together.

And this is like the Christian's communion with God, but communion with God is something far more: it is the Maker himself willingly condescending in such a way that he makes himself knowable and enjoyable to human beings who are then allowed to respond to him with love, relationship, and praise.

Communion with God is the sweetest of all communions.

Goals of this series:

*#1 Increase your knowledge* of communion with God through Bible meditation and prayer.

*#2 Equip you to practice* communion with God through Bible meditation and prayer.

These goals will be accomplished, Lord willing, through six sermons over the next six weeks.

**Big Idea: God has made joyful communion with him possible for believers in Christ.**

Two ways this is true:

#1 Believers are redeemed through Christ's death on the cross which removes the relational barrier between God and sinners.

**Eph. 2:16** And might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility.

#2 God made it possible for believers to have an *ongoing*, intimate relationship with him through Christ.

This is the heart of this series and this project: that God has provided the means for believers to have soul-satisfying, life-transforming communion with him each and every day.

Today, two passages from the Gospel of John will confirm for us that God has made joyful communion with him possible for Christians:

**Passage #1: John 15:1-11**

Christ's metaphorical language here reveals the tight connection formed between his followers and himself.

Notice (vv. 1-2): Jesus is the Vine, and his followers are the branches.

According to v. 4, these branches are to abide in ("remain with") the Vine.

This communicates a spiritual union wherein each Christian has become intimately connected to Jesus himself and must continue to recognize their need of ongoing connection to Jesus.

As branches, they are connected to the Vine, and they must constantly recognize their need for the Vine in order to have life and growth.

The word "dependence" perhaps best communicates the believer's vital connection to Jesus in this passage.

The branches (Christians) are entirely dependent upon the Vine (Christ) for all good progress in the faith.

Example: Spiritual fruitfulness (or life transformation) – if a Christian is to grow, experience life change, and become increasingly holier both in action and word, then they must abide in the Vine.

v. 4 "Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me."

Every Christian is entirely dependent upon Jesus the Vine, each and every day, to accomplish what God intends for them—which is to have lives transformed for his glory.

However, notice that the Lord Jesus makes clear here that his true followers are already a part of the Vine and that it should simply be their ongoing desire to now abide in him (or remain with him, sticking close to him).

v. 3 “Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you.”

The “word” that Jesus had spoken to them was undoubtedly the teachings surrounding his gospel.

The book of John’s primary message is the good news about Jesus:

**John 3:16** For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

**John 20:30** Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; <sup>31</sup> but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

This amazing gospel message simply demanded faith from its hearers—faith which brought the forgiveness necessary for everlasting life with God.

This “word” (v. 3) of good news from Jesus was already accepted in faith by his followers and this made them spiritually “clean,” as v. 3 mentions.

In the eyes of God, they were spiritually “clean,” though they needed ongoing spiritual cleansing from sin, which is why Jesus speaks of the “pruning” of his branches in v. 2.

And this ongoing cleansing from sin necessitated their continual dependence upon Jesus.

This dependent abiding is marked by *three relational acts* found in this passage: 1) clinging to Christ’s word, 2) prayerful requests for fruit, and 3) loving obedience.

First, dependence (on the part of the branches towards the Vine) is marked by clinging to Christ’s word.

v. 7 “If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.”

To remain closely connected to Jesus is to let his words absorb deeply into one’s mind, heart, and life.

So, to depend upon Jesus Christ includes depending upon his very words by letting his words shape and direct our lives for each and every step we take.

Therefore, the same truthful word that makes a Christian spiritually “clean” before God (v. 3) is the word that must be embraced for a Christian’s ongoing life before God (v. 7).

Second, dependence (on the part of the branches towards the Vine) is marked by prayerful requesting.

Christ followers have free access to God through prayer.

“. . . ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you” (v. 7)

This is not an encouragement by Jesus to treat prayer like a magical lamp that can be rubbed whenever a selfish desire forms.

This encourages believers to specifically, and faithfully, ask for God-given Spiritual fruit in their own lives and in the lives of others (as the next verse, v. 8 suggests).

When a Christian abides in his or her relationship with Christ by clinging to the words of Christ, this opens up the door to relational prayer which leads to lasting spiritual fruit through Christ.

Third, dependence (on the part of the branches towards the Vine) is marked by loving obedience.

Jesus says in v. 10, “If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love.”

Jesus speaks here of his loving connection to his Father in Heaven, as their pristine relationship of intimacy was preserved (while Jesus was on earth) through his keeping of his Father’s commands.

This is similarly true for Christians who express their loving connection to God by keeping the commandments of God.

And the key commandments that Jesus relates, ones which encapsulates all the rest of his commands, is love for God (v. 9) and love for others (v. 12, especially brothers and sisters in Christ).

So, to abide in Jesus includes walking in loving obedience to Jesus.

But don’t think that a Christian’s relationship with the Lord is marked solely for the purpose of service and moral progress, because Jesus relates here the deep and happy intimacy that he desires and has even made possible for his followers.

“These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.” (v. 11)

Jesus wants his disciples of all ages who abide in him to experience the joy that he himself experiences with his Father.

Though remaining close to Jesus through his word and approaching God through prayer will lead to obedient spiritual fruit, we must understand that a key aim of Jesus is that Christians would share in his wonderful, Heavenly joy.

The Puritan Thomas Watson wrote,

“There is that sweetness in communion with God that makes the soul say, ‘Oh, that I might be always thus! Oh, that what I now feel I might feel forever!’ He who delights in God does not complain that he has too much of God, but rather too little.”

God has provided Christians with a relationship of dependence with himself that is marked by unmatched affection and delight

### **Passage #2: John 17:1-3**

In these verses, the joyful communion that God has made possible for Christians is explicitly articulated.

Here, Christ Jesus prays to the Father God and describes the inexpressible gift of eternal life that is now given to his followers.

In pursuit of the glory of God (v. 1), Jesus relates that his Father has “given him authority over all flesh, to give eternal life to all whom [the Father has] given him” (v. 2).

Jesus implies here that it is the sovereign choice of God to save each of his individual children according to his will.

Christ’s authority to save sinners comes from his Father in Heaven directly, and the nature of his authority is to give eternal life to all who belong to the Father as they are given to Jesus the Son.

Notice the clear possessive language that is also found in v. 6: “I have manifested your name to the people whom you gave me out of the world. Yours they were, and you gave them to me.”

So, the Father God gives authority to Jesus his Son to give eternal life to all those who belong to the Father—his elect, beloved children whom he sent Jesus to save.

But Christ's description of eternal life in verse 3 is what is so relevant for this message.

He explains eternal life as something far better than what most people think—something far better than simply acquiring endless days with an unending quantity of breaths.

Instead, eternal life (according to Jesus) includes a relationship with God to be enjoyed by the Christian on an ongoing basis as soon as he or she places faith in Jesus Christ.

This ongoing relationship is related in verse 3 when Jesus speaks of knowing God with present tense language:

“And this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.”

Christians know God now! This is eternal life.

Therefore, there is an immediate enjoyment of this eternal life.

This current, ongoing enjoyment of eternal life is in accord with Christ's past tense language back in John 5:24, where he speaks of eternal life as a reality already enjoyed by a Christian:

[Jesus says there] “Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life.”

Therefore, this eternal life is already experienced by believers in Jesus.

It is not merely something to be enjoyed by a Christian in a day to come but is a relationship of delight in the here and now which will only be experienced more in the day to come.

The reason that eternal life is enjoyed now is because Jesus equates eternal life with the knowledge of God, something that Christians have (in part) even now through his saving word.

“And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent” (v. 3).

Understand, to have eternal life is to know God with a loving intimacy that is given to the believer by Jesus as a gift.

Eternal life is experienced now because the believer comes to know God now, before the arrival of all those future, heavenly blessings.

And this knowledge of God is not merely a cerebral one, as if all that mattered was an intellectual understanding of his existence and nature.

Though this knowledge does involve the intellect, it is a profoundly relational knowledge that is marked by intimacy, love, & joy with God which lasts forever.

So, let's summarize these texts from John's Gospel:

Jesus, the authoritative Son of God, gives eternal life to the people of God, and this eternal life includes an intimate, dependent relationship of love and joy with God.

God has made communion with him possible through Jesus his Son.

**Let's apply all this with three truths:**

Truth #1: You can find communion with God by being redeemed through Christ's death on the Cross.

To be redeemed is to be freed from sin's consequences and power.

Christ makes this redemption possible.

**John 3:16** For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

You can be made spiritually clean through the word of the gospel.

But this gospel message demands faith which brings forgiveness of sins and eternal life.

Will you place your faith in Jesus to have forgiveness for your sins and to have eternal life, which is communion with God?

Truth #2: You can joyfully commune with God daily by depending daily upon Jesus.

Dependence is one of the key words that marks the Christian life.

Like little children who cling to a parent's hand, we must appreciate our smallness in light of God's bigness and recognize our need to depend upon him in all ways.

This is at the very heart of Christian living.



Jesus is the Vine, and his followers are the branches.

And this spiritual union demands that we continually recognize our unending need of ongoing connection to Jesus.

For if we are to both enjoy God and have any real progress in our Christian lives than we must entirely depend upon Jesus through faith.

And this dependence is actually for our joy, for this dependence is the key that unlocks the door to the enjoyment of God.

Dependence upon the Son leads to happy intimacy with the Triune God.

Do realize this, my friends? That we can actually have a close relationship of joyful intimacy with God himself!

Truth #3: You can commune with God by clinging to Jesus in three important ways:

First way (you can commune with God): cling to Christ's word.

As we're going to see in these series, we must not simply read God's word with an inauthentic, skin-deep shallowness, but we must actually savor it—carefully meditating upon it, so that all its wonderful blessings can be applied and appreciated.

This must be our daily task: to deeply absorb God's Word into our minds, hearts, and lives that we might walk in his delights and grow thereby.

Second way (you can commune with God): cling to Christ in prayer.

As vital as it is to absorb Scripture, it must then translate into joyful communication back to the God of the Bible.

Prayer is the glad response of those who have received God's gracious communication: he initiates the relationship with his Word, and we respond in prayer.

So, our daily task must include taking the Word we've absorbed into our minds and then pouring it back out to God in dependent prayer.

Third way: cling to Christ through trusting obedience.

Those who hear the Word and respond prayerfully must translate this relationship into obedience of life.

As trusting children, we must accept the Lord's Word as good, and, with his help, we must seek to follow it every day.

You'll have to tune in over the next several weeks to learn more about how to do this well.

### Conclusion

**God has made joyful communion with him possible for believers in Christ.**

Believers are redeemed through Christ's death on the cross, which makes communion possible.

And through this, God has also made it possible for believers to have an ongoing relationship with him through dependence upon his Son.

As we begin this series, and over the next several weeks, would you please ask yourself: "Do I have communion with God?"

## **Sermon 2: “The Necessity of Daily Communion” (Gal 5:16–26)**

### Introduction

Last week, I began the first sermon in this series by asking some “what ifs.”

What if God made it possible for his beloved people to have intimate fellowship with him, whereby they would know him, love him, enjoy him, depend upon him, take strength in him, and learn to be like him?

And what if God accomplished the greatest of all victories in order to make such priceless fellowship possible—a victory that would come at the expense of his own Son?

Furthermore, what if God provided certain means (ways, methods) for his people to regularly enjoy fellowship with him. And what if they lived in ignorance towards those means?

As I explained last week, this sermon series, “Communion with God,” seeks to not only combat that ignorance but also to train you in how to practice ongoing, intimate fellowship with God.

Once again, the aim of this sermon series is to “equip you to practice communion with God through the God-given means of Bible meditation and prayer.”

And this is how I’ve defined communion: “Communion with God is receiving God’s loving communication to us while joyfully responding through our union with Jesus.”

Communion with God includes his loving communication of himself to us (primarily through his Word) while we return both communication and worship to him, as made possible through our relationship in Jesus.

And often this word “communion” is used interchangeably with words like “fellowship” & “relationship.”

The goals of this six-week sermon series are:

*#1 Increase your knowledge* of communion with God through Bible meditation and prayer.

*#2 Equip you to practice* communion with God through Bible meditation and prayer.

Last week was sermon #1: God has made joyful communion with him possible for believers in Christ.

Today, we build on this idea of communion with God.

**Sermon #2 Big Idea: Christians need to commune with God daily.**

Not only has God made communion with him possible for believers in Jesus, but it is vital for believers to practice communion with God each day.

Paul clearly communicates this truth in his letter to the Galatians.

**Our Primary Text: Galatians 5:16–26**

In this passage, the constant need for Divine fellowship is clearly communicated by the Apostle Paul in this letter to the local churches of Galatia.

Notice, he commands the Galatian believers to “walk by the Spirit” (v. 16), be “led by the Spirit” (v. 18), and to “keep in step with the Spirit” (v. 25).

These instructions strongly encourage intimate, ongoing communion with God as a believer walks with him in relationship.

But to apply this accurately to our lives, we need to understand some things:

#1 We need to know what Paul meant by those words: “walk by,” be “led by,” and “keep in step with” the Holy Spirit.

#2 We need to understand why this activity is so important for believers as they battle against sin in their lives.

#3 We must grasp how to conduct such a “walk” in order to enjoy the great blessings that spring from it.

Notice, all three of these verbs (“walk by” (v. 16), be “led by” [v. 18], and “keep in step with” [v. 25]) essentially refer to the same action towards the Holy Spirit.

Walking by the Spirit, being led by the Spirit, and keeping in step with the Spirit all essentially refer to the Holy Spirit’s guidance and power over a Christian’s life and the Christian’s dependence upon that guidance.

These terms explain the Spirit-controlled life of a believer who has learned to depend upon the Lord at each and every step of life.

To walk by the Spirit, in other words, is to walk hand in hand with the Spirit, in constant reliance upon him.

And the command, “walk by the Spirit” (v. 16), will be the primary focus of this message as walking illustrates well the idea behind the Spirit-controlled life of daily, ongoing communion with God.

Please grasp this: it is crucial for Christians to walk by the Spirit because a spiritual battle rages in and around us.

The internal battle that each and every believer faces daily is called by Paul in v. 16, “the desires of the flesh.”

According to v. 17, the Holy Spirit, who resides inside all believers, wars against their flesh and their flesh wars against the Holy Spirit.

This word “flesh” is particularly important to understand, as it refers to the internal battle that Christians continually face.

Though the word can, and sometimes does, simply refer to the human body, it often represents the limitations of the human condition that have been imposed by sin.

The flesh is that still-broken part of Christians that struggles in opposition towards God—it’s the sinful inclination that believers still face and must battle each and every day.

But in v. 16, Paul writes that if Christians “walk by the Spirit” they will “not gratify the desires of the flesh.”

In other words, if Christians walk under the ongoing guidance and empowerment of the Holy Spirit then Christians will be able to resist the sinful desires of the flesh.

Notice the deeds of the flesh as Paul describes them in vs. 19–21:

“Sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these.”

Any time you lust, any time you erupt in anger, anytime you are bitterly jealous towards another person, any time you sin (essentially) you are committing a work of the flesh.

These evil deeds should be resisted by Christians for they are the exact opposite of the Spirit-empowered graces which should mark the children of God:

Notice these graces in vs. 22–23: “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.”

And the way Christians resist fleshly desires and bear the fruit of the Spirit is by walking by the Spirit.

Once again (v. 16): “But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.”

So, if Christians live under the Holy Spirit’s guidance and control, they will be able to resist temptation and display God-honoring character in their lives.

Over the course of their lives, by walking by the Spirit, believers will be able to battle and defeat fleshly temptations and walk in ever-increasing holiness before God.

BUT...we must understand how to actually walk by the Spirit if we are to defeat the flesh and live lives of increasing holiness before our God.

As important as the Spirit’s guidance and empowerment are, believers must recognize precisely how to walk hand in hand with the Spirit in order to resist fleshly temptations and bear spiritual fruit in their lives.

And I am convinced, based upon Paul’s letter to the Galatians, that Christians walk by the Spirit through a continued faith in Jesus Christ—a faith which is informed and strengthened by God’s Word and is vitally connected to intimate prayer.

In other words, a faith empowered by communion with God.

In order to grasp this, we have to see the connection between walking by the Spirit and Paul’s statements earlier in his letter to the Galatians regarding the Spirit’s connection to a believer’s faith.

### **Chapter 3**

In Galatians 3, Paul is rebuking the believers of Galatia for their willingness to return to the Law of Moses for their direction in life (as urged by some unhelpful teachers), rather than continuing with their Spirit-empowered faith in Jesus through the gospel.

“O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you?” (v. 1)

And he argues that these Christians originally received the blessing of the Holy Spirit when they simply believed in Jesus Christ upon hearing God’s Word, the gospel.

Paul rhetorically asks them in v. 2: “Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith?”

The answer is obvious: they received the Holy Spirit when they believed in Jesus, not when they attempted to obey the Law of Moses.

He then asks them some further provoking questions in vs. 5–6:

“Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by works of the law, or by hearing with faith—just as Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness?”

And Paul writes similarly in verse 14 when he states:

“So that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith.”

Paul’s point in this chapter is that the Galatian Christians first received the Holy Spirit when they believed in Jesus Christ—by simply depending upon Jesus from their hearts.

And the truth about Jesus Christ was communicated to them through God’s Word as they heard the gospel proclaimed to them:

So, instead of returning to their old paths, Paul urges the Galatian believers to continue in the same Spirit, through the same faith, according to the same gospel Word.

Paul wants these believers to continue in the Holy Spirit’s guidance and strength by pressing forward in their faith which comes through the frequent hearing of gospel truth in God’s Word.

**Rom. 10:17** So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.

So, they are to continue with the Spirit by *continually* looking to the gospel Word in faith.

#### **Galatians 4**

In Galatians 4, Paul shows the effect of the Holy Spirit in the lives of Christians—those who are “adopted as sons” (v. 5) into God’s spiritual family.

He writes in verse 6, “And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba, Father!’”

It is clear from this verse that the Holy Spirit has already given the children of God a heart attitude that enables them to cry out to their Father God with a dependent intimacy.

And this intimacy relates that his children are free from sin's bondage and are marked by a relational, personal knowledge of God himself.

**Gal. 4:7** So you are no longer a slave, but a *son*, and if a *son*, then an heir through God. **8** Formerly, when you did not *know* God, you were enslaved to those that by nature are not gods.

As verse 9 affirms, "But now you have come to *know* God, or rather to be *known* by God."

The believer, therefore, already has an intimate connection to God through the Holy Spirit and knows God personally as a loving Father, while expressing his or her faith in God through the warmest of prayers.

These prayers can address God with such closeness as, "Abba, Father" (v. 6).

This expression, "Abba, Father," expresses a sense of nearness to God and deep trust in his acceptance.

So, the Holy Spirit, through the gospel work of Jesus, has provided believers with the privilege of personal, dependent prayer with their Father God and these prayers are a vital component to "walking by the Spirit" so as to not "gratify the desires of the flesh" (Gal 5:16).

## **Galatians 5**

In Galatians 5:5, Paul again shows the vital connection between a Christian's faith and the Spirit's work in his or her life.

"For through the Spirit, by faith, we ourselves eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness" (v. 5).

This hope of righteousness appears to be the hope that righteous deeds will be found in one's life.

The righteousness of love towards others is one example, since Paul proceeds to talk about loving service towards others in the following verses (vv. 6, 13–15).

Notice v. 5 carefully: this "hope of righteousness" is realized "through the Spirit, by faith."



This tell us that the instrument the Holy Spirit uses to bring about such righteous deeds is faith itself: dependence of heart upon the personal, saving God.

Here in verse 5 the result of faith is called “righteousness,” whereas in verse 22 it is called the “fruit of the Spirit.”

Now, let’s summarize what these texts tell us:

Christians walk by the Spirit through a continued faith in Jesus Christ which is informed by God’s Word and is vitally connected to intimate prayer.

This continued faith is a dependence in heart upon Jesus the Son through his gospel Word, upon the Father God through warm, prayerful appeals, and upon the Holy Spirit as he works this faith into action.

So, the primary ways Christians lean upon (or “walk by”) the Holy Spirit are through the various means of grace which foster greater faith in their hearts.

J. I. Packer wrote of the divine resources for the Spirit’s work:

“The Spirit works through means—through the objective means of grace, namely, biblical truth, prayer, fellowship, worship, and the Lord’s Supper. . . . The Spirit shows his power in us . . . by making these regular means effective to change us for the better and for the wiser as we go along.”

Therefore, Christians must practice joyful communion with God each day in order to walk by the Spirit and not succumb to the desires of the flesh.

Believers in Jesus need to engage with God daily in intimate fellowship by carefully applying gospel truth through his Word and by pouring out their hearts to him in affectionate prayer.

These are *vital* means which grow a believer’s faith, lead to walking by the Spirit, and result in resisting the flesh while bearing spiritual fruit.

**Now, let’s bring this home with three realities:**

Reality #1: Non-Christians are still on good terms with the flesh.

My friends, you cannot “walk by the Spirit” if you do not have the Spirit, and the only way to have the Spirit is through faith in Jesus.

“Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith?”  
(3:2)

**Gal. 3:1–2** It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified. **2** Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith?

The Spirit is only received through faith in Jesus, the one who was crucified for the sins of sinners.

The bulk of the people in our world do not have the Spirit and remain on good terms with their fleshly desires because they do not know Jesus as Savior and Lord.

But Jesus has made a salvation possible that not only frees sinners from the consequences of their sins, but it frees them from slavery to fleshly desires.

Listen to these verses, also from Paul:

**Rom. 8:1–2** There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. <sup>2</sup> For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death.

Through Christ, you can be set free from sin: its consequences and its power.

Will you trust in Jesus in order to be free from sin and to obtain the Spirit of God who will enable you to battle your sinful desires?

Reality #2: Christians are in a constant state of war with the flesh.

We must “walk by the Spirit” so as to not gratify the desires of the flesh.

The Spirit and the flesh are in state of constant conflict, one that we experience every day in our bodies, our relationships, and in our aspirations, priorities, and outlook on life.

**Gal. 5:17** For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do.

And these sinful desires, these desires of the flesh, are very strong—stronger than us if we are left in our own strength.

But we are not left on our own, praise God!

For we have the Spirit of God to help us.

But we will get nowhere if we fail to recognize that we are in a war.

We cannot win the battle if we do not recognize the artillery barrage, the tank maneuvers, and the infantry advancements that are happening all around us—yes, even inside of us.

Indeed, we must see that we are at war with sin.

Reality #3: Christians must commune with God daily in order to fight their daily battle with sin.

We must walk by the Spirit in order to not gratify the desires of the flesh.

If we walk under the ongoing guidance and empowerment of the Holy Spirit, then Christians (with ever increasing strength and success) will be able to resist the sinful desires of the flesh.

But this requires us to take up the arms of faith, and the weapons we take up are found squarely in our relationship with God himself.

My friends, our mightiest weapon is to engage the Holy Spirit, and we engage the Spirit of God when we commune with God.

We must build up our faith in Christ by carefully engaging his Word and by pouring out our hearts to him daily (even constantly) in prayer.

For when we cling to God, he strengthens us for the battle and we begin to live out the fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, & self-control.

### Conclusion

#### **Christians need to commune with God daily.**

We must see the great foe that is the flesh, and we must make communion with God our highest priority if we are to defeat this foe.

So, as we continue in this series, would you please ask yourself:

“Do I commune with God?”

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## ABSTRACT

### EQUIPPING MEMBERS TO PRACTICE COMMUNION WITH GOD THROUGH BIBLE MEDITATION AND PRAYER AT RIVERSIDE BAPTIST CHURCH IN NEW PORT RICHEY, FLORIDA

Joseph Michael Earle, DMin  
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2022  
Faculty Supervisor: Dr. Dustin B. Bruce

This project seeks to strengthen the practice of communion with God among the members of Riverside Baptist Church in New Port Richey, Florida, by teaching them the importance of the spiritual disciplines while instructing them in how to perform them. The disciplines of Bible meditation and prayer are the primary focus with this project in an effort to provide the church with a solid foundation for walking with God. This project utilizes a six-week sermon series both to instruct and to equip church members.

Chapter 1 is introductory, describing the purpose and plan for this project. Chapter 2 lays out the biblical and theological foundation for this project. Chapter 3 relates historical and practical issues related to this project. Finally, chapters 4 and 5 describe the details and description of the project, along with an evaluation.

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