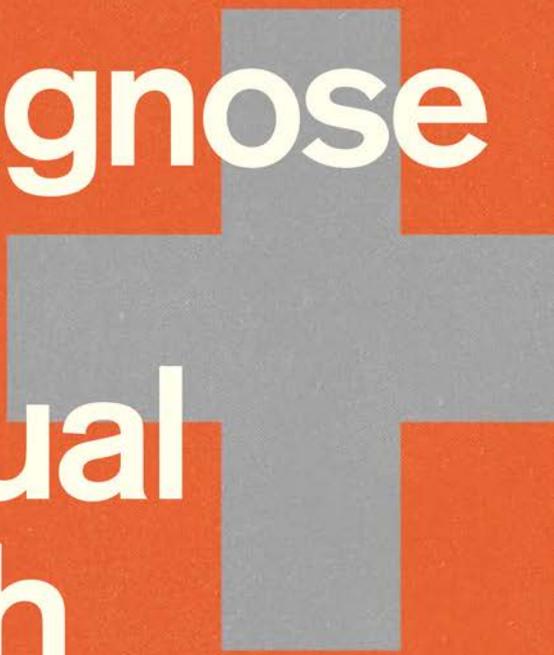


# Ten questions to diagnose your spiritual health



**DONALD S. WHITNEY**

*Author of *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life**

# Ten questions to diagnose your spiritual health

DONALD S. WHITNEY



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with Tyndale House Publishers



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# Introduction

“HAVE YOU HAD ANY TROUBLE SLEEPING?

“Have you experienced any shortness of breath?

“Any changes in your eyesight?

“Have you experienced any unusual fatigue?

“Has the technician drawn your blood yet?

“Now for this next test . . .”

This is the way it goes during my annual physical checkup. The doctor always evaluates my bodily health by two means: questions and tests.

The English Puritans of 1550 to 1700 sometimes referred to ministers as “physicians of the soul.” In our day as in theirs, the timeless process of discerning one’s *spiritual* health likewise involves questions and tests. My purpose in these pages is to act as a physician of the soul, asking questions and suggesting spiritual tests which can, by the help of the Holy Spirit, enable you to self-diagnose your spiritual health.

For there to be health, of course, there must be life. I wrote this book with the assumption that its readers would possess the eternal life given by grace to those who know God through faith

in His Son, Jesus Christ. The night before He was crucified, Jesus prayed, “And this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent” (John 17:3). Stressing the necessity of knowing Jesus, the Son of God, in order to have eternal life, the apostle John adds, “Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life” (1 John 5:12).

I realize, however, that many who begin reading this book will do so with a false sense of assurance that you know Jesus and that God has given you eternal life. Nothing in the world is more important than an eternal, life-giving knowledge of God through Jesus, who is the only way to the Father (see John 14:6). I urge you not to take the existence of such a relationship between yourself and God for granted. The Bible itself implores you, “confirm your calling and election” (2 Peter 1:10).<sup>1</sup>

Where eternal life through Christ does exist, there should also be health and growth. That’s what this book is about—evaluating spiritual health and growth. Throughout, remember that as Jesus is the source of spiritual *life*, so He also is the standard of spiritual *health*. And regarding spiritual *growth*, we are to “grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ” (Ephesians 4:15). As Jonathan Edwards said so emphatically,

Christians are Christlike: none deserve the name of Christians that are not so, in their prevailing character. . . . The branch is of the same nature with the stock and root, has the same sap, and bears the same sort of fruit. The members have the same kind of life with the head. It would be strange if Christians should not be of the same temper and spirit that Christ is of; when they are his flesh and his bone, yea are one spirit (1 Cor. 6:17), and live so, that it is not they that live, but Christ that lives in them.<sup>2</sup>

So, whatever the present state of your spiritual health or rate of your spiritual growth, let's begin by "looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith" (Hebrews 12:2), and "press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 3:14). May the Lord be pleased to use this little volume to help you "grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen" (2 Peter 3:18).



# 1

## Do You Thirst for God?

*So holy desire, exercised in longings, hungerings, and thirstings after God and holiness, is often mentioned in Scripture as an important part of true religion.*

JONATHAN EDWARDS

“LORD, I WANT TO KNOW YOU MORE,” sang Mike, just before the sermon. One of my seminary professors from years back, who was guest preacher at our church that Sunday morning, sat next to me on the front pew and listened, transfixed. As Mike continued to sing, I could hear my older friend sigh occasionally. When the song was over, T. W. sat motionless for so long I thought he had forgotten that he was now supposed to preach.

As I turned to remind him, I saw his shoulders lift and fall with the slow draw and release of his breath. Finally, he opened his eyes and stepped thoughtfully to the pulpit. He looked down for what seemed to be a full minute before he could speak. And then, “Lord, I *do* want to know You more.” Departing from his prepared words for a while, T. W.—the most prayerful man I’ve

ever known—spoke of his thirst for God, his longings to know Christ more intimately and to obey Him more completely.

Here was a man who had followed Christ for more than fifty years still captivated by the sweetness of the quest. Although into his second half-century as a disciple of Jesus, the grace of growth still flourished in him.

It's been many years since that Sunday morning. For more than a decade afterward I would see T. W. at least annually, and the things of God never diminished their magnetic pull on his heart's aspirations. One of the last times I saw him happened when I found myself sharing a shuttle-bus ride with him from a denominational convention back to our hotel. Though nearly seventy by then, and weakened by cardiac surgery, his eyes flashed as he talked for half an hour about what he was learning about prayer. Even as his body declined, his longings for God displayed the growing strength of his soul.

The apostle Paul must have similarly impressed others in his day. Despite all his maturity in Christ, all he had seen and experienced, late in life Paul wrote of the passion that propelled him: "that I may know him" (Philippians 3:10). What? "That I may *know* him"? What is he talking about? Didn't he already know Jesus more closely than perhaps anyone else ever will? Of course he did. But the more he knew Jesus, the more intimately he wanted to know Him. The more Paul progressed in spiritual strength, the more thirsty for God he became.

With a similar thirst, the writer of Psalm 42:1-2 prayed,

As a deer pants for flowing streams,  
so pants my soul for you, O God.

My soul thirsts for God,  
for the living God.

When shall I come and appear before God?

Does this describe your thirst for God? If so, be encouraged: Whatever else is transpiring in your Christian life, your soul-thirst is a sign of soul-growth.

## Three Kinds of Spiritual Thirst

Though it is not felt in every moment, in some sense there is a thirst in every soul. God did not make us to be content in our natural condition. In one way or another, to one degree or another, everyone wants more than he or she has now. The difference between people is in the *kind* of thirsty longing in their soul.

### *Thirst of the Empty Soul*

The natural (that is, unconverted) man or woman has an empty soul. Devoid of God, he or she is constantly in pursuit of that which will fill the emptiness. The range of this mad scramble may include money, sex, power, houses, land, sports, hobbies, entertainment, transcendence, significance, education, et cetera, while basically “carrying out the desires of the body and the mind” (Ephesians 2:3). But as the famous fourth-century theologian Augustine attested, “You have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.”<sup>1</sup> Always searching, but never resting, the empty soul turns from one pursuit to another, unable to find anything that will fill the God-shaped vacuum in the heart.

Thirsting and searching, the empty soul is blinded to its real need. Nothing or no one on Earth fully and lastingly satisfies such a person, but he doesn’t know where to turn except to someone else or something else “under the sun” (as opposed to the One beyond the sun). Like Solomon, he discovers that no matter who or what he initially finds exciting and satisfying, ultimately “all is vanity and a striving after wind” (Ecclesiastes 1:14).

A Christian observes the man with the empty, searching soul

and knows that what he is seeking can be found only in the One who said, “Whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again” (John 4:14). Occasionally an empty soul searches in more serious-minded or spiritual ways that lead some Christians to think that this person is thirsting for God. But the world has no such thirst. “No one understands,” God inspired both King David and the apostle Paul to write, “no one seeks for God” (Romans 3:11; see also Psalm 14:2). Until and unless the Holy Spirit of God touches the spiritual tongue of the empty soul, he will never want to “taste and see that the LORD is good” (Psalm 34:8). Just because a man longs for something that can be found only *in* God doesn’t mean he’s looking *for* God. A man may pine for peace and have no interest in the Prince of Peace. Even most of those who claim they are questing for God are not thirsting for God as He has revealed Himself in Scripture but only for God as they want Him to be, or just a god who will give them what they want.

The irony of the empty soul is that while he is perpetually dissatisfied in so many areas of his life, he is so easily satisfied in regard to the pursuit of God. His attitude toward the God of the Bible is like that of the man who said to his complacent soul in Luke 12:19, “Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.” Whatever the empty soul may desire in life, he never has what eighteenth-century pastor and theologian Jonathan Edwards called “holy desire, exercised in longings, hungerings and thirstings after God and holiness”<sup>2</sup> as the Christian does.

The eternal tragedy is that if the empty soul never properly thirsts on Earth, he will thirst in hell, as did the rich man who pled in vain for even the tip of a moist finger to be touched to his tongue (Luke 16:24).

### *Thirst of the Dry Soul*

The difference between the empty soul and the dry soul is that one has never experienced “rivers of living water” (John 7:38) while the other has and knows what he is missing. That is not to say that the dry soul can lose the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. Indeed Jesus said that “the water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life” (John 4:14). If the life Jesus gives His followers could be lost, He wouldn’t have called it *eternal*.

How is it then that a true believer in Christ can become a dry soul when Jesus promised that “Whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again” (John 4:14)? Pastor and author John Piper was reading this verse one Monday morning and cried out, “What do you mean? I am so thirsty! My church is thirsty! The pastors whom I pray with are thirsty! O Jesus, what did you mean?” As he meditated on the text, the illumination from the Lord on His Word was perceived by Piper this way:

When you drink my water, your thirst is not destroyed forever. If it did that, would you feel any need of my water afterward? That is not my goal. I do not want self-sufficient saints. When you drink my water, it makes a spring in you. A spring satisfies thirst, not by removing the need you have for water, but by being there to give you water whenever you get thirsty. Again and again and again. Like this morning. So drink, John. Drink.<sup>3</sup>

A Christian soul becomes arid in one of three ways. The most common is by drinking too much from the desiccating fountains of the world and too little from “the river of God” (Psalm 65:9). If you drink the wrong thing, it can make you even more thirsty.

In particularly hot weather, my high school football coach, following the conventional wisdom of the day, would give us salt tablets intended to help minimize the loss of fluids. During one game he experimented with stirring salt into our drinking water, hoping the diluted form would expedite the benefits of the salt. Bad idea. At halftime I drank until my stomach swelled and I was too heavy to run well, yet I was still thirsty.

Similarly, perhaps it was because the psalmist had drunk too much of the world's briny spiritual water that he wrote twice in one chapter about longing for God with all his heart while closely asserting his resolve *not* to wander (as perhaps he recently had) from the Lord's Word (see Psalm 119:10, 145). Too much attention to a particular sin or sins, or too little attention to communion with God (two things which often occur in tandem), inevitably shrivel the soul of a Christian.

Another cause of spiritual dryness in the child of God is what the Puritans used to call "God's desertions." While there are times God floods our souls with a sense of His presence, at other times we spiritually dehydrate by a sense of His absence. Let me quickly say that His desertion of us is merely our *perception*, for the *reality* is just as Jesus promised: "I will never leave you nor forsake you" (Hebrews 13:5).

When feeling deserted by God, however, the Christian believes himself to be in "the valley of the shadow of death" (Psalm 23:4), or somewhat like Jesus (although on an infinitely lesser level) when He cried from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46). The words of David in Psalm 143:6-7 describe the emotions of those who try to pray from such a spiritual desert:

I stretch out my hands to you;  
my soul thirsts for you like a parched land.

Answer me quickly, O LORD!  
 My spirit fails!  
 Hide not your face from me.

In order for us to learn to walk by faith and not by feelings, or perhaps for other reasons not always made clear to us, the Lord does sometimes withdraw a conscious sense of His nearness. Since this is not the place for a lengthy treatment of the subject,<sup>4</sup> the best concise counsel I could offer is that of the Puritan William Gurnall: “The Christian must trust in a withdrawing God.”<sup>5</sup> When the sun goes behind a cloud, it is no less near than when its rays are felt.

In any case, for the specific purposes of this book and chapter, remember that it is a good thing that you are able to discern the seclusion of God’s presence. Such spiritual sensitivity characterizes spiritual health. It would be worse to be like Samson who, moments before his capture, is described as being *unaware* of the Lord’s withdrawal (Judges 16:20).

A third cause of spiritual aridity in a Christian is simply prolonged mental or physical fatigue. God has made us a unity of both body and soul, and one can affect the other. When you are exhausted, you may not feel very spiritual, and that can distort your perception of the Lord’s presence and blessing. Ever tried to worship on Sunday morning when you haven’t slept on Saturday night? Both cause (exhaustion) and cure (rest) are usually obvious enough in this case of spiritual dryness, so I won’t elaborate on them. What I do want to emphasize is that a believer may not sense spiritual growth when fatigued or burned-out but instead brood under shadowy thoughts about the reality of his relationship with Christ. And yet, much may have been learned in the very battle that caused the fatigue—things which, when the sunlight returns to the soul, may be seen as significant spiritual turning

points. Again, don't forget that the longing for fresh water is itself a sign of progress.

Regardless of the cause, the dry Christian soul is like the believer of Psalm 42:1-2, thirsting for God "as a deer pants for flowing streams." When you are in this condition, nothing but the living water of God Himself will do. My daughter was three when she separated herself from me while we were in a child-oriented restaurant. She wanted to play with some of the game machines instead of eating. Though she had gradually made her way to the far side of the restaurant, I could see her and eventually followed to return her to the table. Suddenly she realized she didn't know where she was or where I was. Panic-stricken, she began crying and calling for me. The store manager could have offered her unlimited play on every machine or every toy prize in the place, but nothing would have appealed to her without my presence. Everything else was meaningless to her at that moment without me. Once we were reunited, for a few moments she was content just for me to hold her; just to be close to me again.

That's the cry of the dry soul. Other things may have distracted you for a while, but once you become aware of your spiritual dryness, the only thing that matters is a return of the sense of your Father's presence.

### *Thirst of the Satisfied Soul*

Unlike the dry soul, and as self-contradictory as it may sound at the moment, the satisfied soul thirsts for God precisely because he *is* satisfied with God. He *has* "taste[d] and see[n] that the LORD is good" (Psalm 34:8), and the taste is so uniquely satisfying that he craves more.

The apostle Paul personifies this in his famous exclamation, "that I may know him" (Philippians 3:10). In the preceding lines

he has been exulting in his present knowledge of and relationship with Jesus.

But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. 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.

PHILIPPIANS 3:7-8

Then, just one verse later, the apostle cries out, “that I may know him.” Paul was soul-satisfied with Jesus Christ, yet thirsty for Him still.

Thomas Shepard, founder of Harvard University and an influential New England minister, explained the cycle of thirst and satisfaction this way: “There is in true grace an infinite circle: a man by thirsting receives, and receiving thirsts for more.”<sup>6</sup>

Knowing Christ well is so spiritually thirst-quenching because no person, possession, or experience can produce the spiritual pleasure we can find in Him. Communion with Christ is incomparably satisfying also because there is no disappointment in what you find in Him. Moreover, the spiritual gratification you find in Jesus initially is never ending.

On top of these, the Lord in whom this satisfaction is found is an infinite universe of satisfaction in which one may immerse himself to explore and enjoy without limitation. So while there is no lack of satisfaction in knowing Christ, neither has God designed us so that one experience with Christ satiates all future desire for Him.

Here’s how Jonathan Edwards described the relationship between the spiritual good enjoyed in fellowship with Christ and the thirst for more that it produces:

Spiritual good is of a satisfying nature; and for that very reason, the soul that tastes, and knows its nature, will thirst after it, and a fullness of it, that it may be satisfied. And the more he experiences, and the more he knows this excellent, unparalleled, exquisite, and satisfying sweetness, the more earnestly he will hunger and thirst for more.<sup>7</sup>

Has your public worship or private devotional experience lately provided you with ravishing tastes of what A. W. Tozer called the “piercing sweetness” of Christ,<sup>8</sup> only to leave you with a divine discontent for more? Would the following prayer of Tozer reflect your own aspirations?

O God, I have tasted Thy goodness, and it has both satisfied me and made me thirsty for more. I am painfully conscious of my need for further grace. I am ashamed of my lack of desire. O God, the Triune God, I want to want Thee; I long to be filled with longing; I thirst to be made thirsty still.<sup>9</sup>

Such desires, Christian brother or sister, are marks of a growing soul.

## **The Blessing of Spiritual Thirst**

“How blessed are all those who long for Him,” declared the prophet Isaiah (in 30:18, NASB). “Blessed are those,” reiterated Jesus, “who hunger and thirst for righteousness” (Matthew 5:6). A thirsting desire for the Lord and His righteousness is a blessing. How so?

### *God Initiates Spiritual Thirst*

The reason a person thirsts for God is because the Holy Spirit is at work within him. If you are a Christian, two people live in your

body: you and the Holy Spirit. As 1 Corinthians 6:19 explains, “Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God?” And that other Person within you is not passive.

For example, just as you can choose to put thoughts in your consciousness, so can the Holy Spirit—and He does. For instance, as you can decide to think for a few moments about what you should do tomorrow, so He can plant thoughts in your mind about God and the things of God. Such work is part of how He causes a Christian to be “spiritually minded” (Romans 8:6, KJV).<sup>10</sup>

Another part of the Spirit’s ministry within a believer is to enkindle Godward thirsts and longings (such as “Abba! Father!”; see Romans 8:15), as well as other signs of spiritual vitality.

Charles Spurgeon, the peerless British Baptist preacher of the 1800s, elaborated on the blessing of thirsting:

When a man pants after God, it is a secret life within which makes him do it: he would not long after God by nature. No man thirsts for God while he is left in his carnal [i.e., unconverted] state. The unrenewed man pants after anything sooner than God. . . . It proves a renewed nature when you long after God; it is a work of grace in your soul, and you may be thankful for it.<sup>11</sup>

### *God Initiates Spiritual Thirst in Order to Satisfy It*

God does not ignite within us a thirst for Himself in order to frustrate us. He Himself declared, “I did not say to the offspring of Jacob, ‘Seek me in vain’” (Isaiah 45:19). What was true for the physical lineage of Jacob (Israel) is also true for his spiritual descendants, that is, those who believe in Israel’s Messiah, Jesus. God doesn’t urge us to seek Him without intending for us to find Him. God creates a thirst for Himself so that He can satisfy it

with Himself. “For he satisfies the longing soul,” is the promise of Psalm 107:9, “and the hungry soul he fills with good things.” Jesus assures us, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they *shall* be satisfied” (Matthew 5:6, emphasis added).

Jonathan Edwards argued that the book of Revelation and other passages plainly teach that “The godly are designed for unknown and inconceivable happiness.”<sup>12</sup> In other words, God designed His people to experience a happiness beyond what we could ever know in this world or could even imagine. And, Edwards continued, “No doubt but God will obtain his end in a glorious perfection,”<sup>13</sup> meaning that God will certainly fulfill His plan for us to be inconceivably happy and do it perfectly.

Edwards develops this idea by saying that God has not only destined His people for an unimaginable fullness of joy and implanted longings in us for it but also that He has created us with the ability to experience it:

God has made man capable of exceeding great happiness, which he doubtless did not in vain. . . . To create man with a capacity that he never intended to fill . . . would have been to have created a large capacity when there was need but of a smaller; yea, it makes man less happy, to be capable of more happiness than he shall ever obtain. . . . [C]an any think that man . . . was intended in his creation to be left in this respect imperfect, and as a vessel both partly empty and never to be filled? . . . It appears that man was intended for very great blessedness, inasmuch as God has created man with a craving and desire that can be filled with nothing but a very great happiness. . . . God did not create in man so earnest a desire, when at the same time he did not create for so

much as he should desire. . . . [A] desire that could never be satisfied would be an eternal torment.<sup>14</sup>

What Edwards is saying (and stay with me here, for his insight is as glorious as it is profound) is that God made each of us with what I'll call a "tank" that can hold "exceeding great happiness." You know your "happiness tank" is capable of holding far more happiness than you have yet experienced, right?<sup>15</sup> Well, God did not give you a tank that could hold far more happiness than you have ever known without intending to fill it someday.

To give you a big happiness tank and give you a lifelong desire for it to be filled—not just occasionally, but endlessly—would be a waste if God never intended to permanently fill it. He could have just made you with a smaller tank. In fact, in one sense a big tank, even if it were 95 percent full, would result in "an eternal torment," because no matter how much you enjoyed heaven, you would at least sometimes know a nagging feeling that somehow it could be just a little bit better, that it was less than perfect.

No, says Edwards, the God who created that big happiness tank and gave you the longing for it to be eternally filled with perfect happiness did not do this "in vain." Instead He will fulfill the purpose He designed you for and fill your happiness tank "in a glorious perfection."

Edwards maintained, of course, that what he described as a "craving and desire" for happiness was a Christian's thirst for God, a longing which can be thoroughly and finally satisfied only in the eternal, undiminished, and face-to-face enjoyment of the Lord Himself in heaven. Therefore, writes Edwards,

Seeing that reason does so undeniably evidence that  
saints shall, some time or other, enjoy so great glory,  
hence we learn that there is undoubtedly a future state

after death, because we see they do not enjoy so great glory in this world. . . . [A]ll the spiritual pleasure they enjoy in this life does but enflame their desire and thirst for more enjoyment of God; and if they knew that there was no future life, [it] would but increase their misery, to consider that after this life was ended they were never to enjoy God anymore at all. How good is God, that he has created man for this very end, to make him happy in the enjoyment of himself, the Almighty.<sup>16</sup>

Once beholding His glory, believers will testify that “they feast on the abundance of your house, and you give them drink from the river of your delights” (Psalm 36:8).

Do you thirst for God in these ways, to experience Him forever to the fullness of your God-given capacity? Such thirst is a God-planned part of the growth of a soul toward its heavenly home.

## **Practical Steps for Thirsting after the Thirst-Slaker**

If you possess a true thirst for God, you will long to long even more. As Edwards insisted, “true and gracious longings after holiness, are no idle ineffectual desires.”<sup>17</sup> In other words, one of the indications that your spiritual thirst is true and the result of God’s grace in your soul is that it prompts you to take action to slake that thirst now. Here are some ways I suggest you do that.

*Meditate on the Bible.* Note “meditate,” not merely read. Do you find that you often can’t remember what you read in the Bible just a few seconds ago? The problem is almost certainly not your memory but your method. You probably won’t remember what you simply read, only something you meditate on from your reading. And if you don’t remember anything from your Bible reading, you’ll seldom find your spiritual thirst deeply satisfied by it. That’s

because you tend to *feel* most deeply about what you *think* most deeply about. No one feels deeply about things he never thinks about. If you think little about what you read each day in the Bible, you'll feel little of its power.

This is why I believe meditation is the greatest single devotional need of most Christians, even among those who read the Bible daily. Many languishing souls are assiduous Bible readers. Without the addition of meditation, warned the great man of prayer and faith George Müller, “the simple reading of the Word of God” can become information that “only passes through our minds, just as water passes through a pipe.”<sup>18</sup>

Think of the incessant flow of information through your mind on a daily basis—all that you see, read, and hear. Most of us struggle with “information overload,” unable to keep up with the constant input of data. If we are not careful, the words of the Bible can become just another gallon of words in the ever-increasing current through our thoughts. As soon as it passes by, pushed on by the pressure of the flow in our mental pipeline, we remember little (if anything) of what we've just read, for we must immediately shift our focus to what's now before us. So much processes through our brains that if we don't absorb some of it, we will be affected by none of it. And surely if we should absorb anything that courses through our thinking, it should be the inspired words from heaven. Without absorption of the water of God's Word, there's no quench of our spiritual thirst. Meditation is the means of absorption.

The reading of large chunks of Scripture—one or more chapters at a sitting—is good and helpful. This is how we get the storyline of Scripture and understand the context of individual verses. But reading without meditation is often unfruitful. So I would encourage you to make it your general rule to “read big and meditate small” every day. Spend 25 to 50 percent of your Bible intake time meditating on some verse, phrase, or word from your reading.

Ask questions of it, including asking how it points to something about Jesus. Pray about it. Take your pen and scribble or doodle on a pad about it. Look for at least one way you should apply it or live it. Linger over it. Soak your soul slowly in the water of the Word, and you'll find it not only refreshing you but prompting a satisfying thirst for more.<sup>19</sup>

*Pray the Bible.* Do you ever catch yourself saying the same old things about the same old things when you pray? Here's a simple, permanent, biblical solution to that. After you read through a section of Scripture, pray through part of that same passage. Whether you read one chapter of the Bible per day or many, afterward choose a portion of your reading and, verse by verse, let the words of God become the wings of your words to Him. Incidentally, this is not only a method of prayer, but another way to meditate on Scripture.

While it is possible to pray through any part of Scripture, I especially recommend—regardless of where in the Bible you have read—that you then turn to one of the Psalms and pray your way through as much of it as you can. The book of Psalms was the God-inspired hymnbook of Israel. In addition, twice in the New Testament (see Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16), Christians are commanded to sing psalms. Unlike any other book of the Bible, the Psalms were inspired *by* God for the expressed purpose of being reflected *to* God.

Say, for example, you begin praying your way through Psalm 63. The first verse is:

O God, you are my God; earnestly I seek you;  
my soul thirsts for you;  
my flesh faints for you,  
as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.

You could enter into prayer by confessing that the Lord *is* your God, thanking Him for being your God and so gracious to you, then simply exulting in God as God (possibly even entering into song at this point). Next, you could express your soul's thirsts and longings for Him, acknowledging what a blessing it is to have a God-given thirst for God, et cetera.

Perhaps then you would ask the Lord to plant a thirst for Himself in your children, or in someone with whom you've been sharing the gospel. On you would go through the psalm, praying about whatever the text said and whatever occurs to you as you read it. If nothing comes to mind while pausing over a verse or if you do not understand it, go on to the next verse.

The poetic, visceral, and spiritually transparent elements of the Psalms often combine in ways that send the soul soaring and that inflame passion for God. They deal realistically with the full range of human emotions and can take you from wherever you are spiritually and lift your spirit heavenward. Nothing so consistently renews my longings for God and catapults me into experiential communion with Him as praying through a psalm.<sup>20</sup>

*Read thirst-making writers.* After the God-breathed words of the Bible, read the time-tested works of those Christians who write with a thirst-making pen. If you can find the collection of Puritan prayers and devotions called *The Valley of Vision*, you will be blessed by reading it meditatively.<sup>21</sup> Don't neglect John Bunyan's classic *Pilgrim's Progress* (Charles Spurgeon reportedly read it a hundred times). Enjoy the more devotional pieces of Puritan writers such as John Owen, Richard Sibbes, Thomas Brooks, John Flavel, and Thomas Watson. Read some of the books and sermons by Spurgeon and Jonathan Edwards, for they will be treasured as long as the church is on the earth. For more contemporary authors, works by Martyn Lloyd-Jones, Jerry Bridges, and J. I. Packer are

both convicting and exhilarating; John Piper's writings are likewise a burning blend of spirit and truth.

As He did with my friend T. W., may the Lord bless you with a great, lifelong thirst for Himself, for surely He intends to satisfy it with Himself.