

A coastal scene with a lighthouse on a cliff overlooking the ocean under a dramatic, cloudy sky. The lighthouse is a tall, white tower with a black top, situated on a dark, rocky cliff. The ocean is turbulent with white-capped waves crashing against the shore. The sky is filled with heavy, grey clouds, with some light breaking through near the horizon. The overall color palette is dominated by blues, greys, and whites, with a touch of brown from the cliff and sand.

A HANDS-ON GUIDE TO LECTIO DIVINA

40 GUIDED MEDITATIONS

MEETING

G O D

IN

SCRIPTURE

Jan Johnson

MEETING
G O D
IN SCRIPTURE

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LECTIO DIVINA

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Introduction

I've been leading groups of people in meditating on Scripture for twenty years, helping them enter into the biblical text, notice what resonates with them and then reflect on that. People tell me they get a sense of hearing God speak to them in the group setting, but they struggle to do the same type of study and meditation on their own. The historical and cultural background I provide helps them, and I help them picture details of the scene for narrative passages. People seem to focus better when I ask them questions to guide them through the process of meditation.

This book does all those things, coming alongside to help people interact with the Holy Spirit as they meditate on Scripture passages.

Each session provides

- an introductory space of silence to help you relax and refocus, and an optional question or exercise if you need more help in settling in;
- the full text of a Scripture passage with explanations of unusual or important words;
- meanings of some important words in Hebrew or Greek (including the reference numbers for *Strong's Hebrew and Greek Dictionary*);
- questions to help you enter the text;
- questions about what resonates with you in the text, discerning what God's invitation might be (this is the *lectio divina* approach: read, reflect, respond, rest);

- cultural or historical background as needed;
- connections with other Scripture as needed;
- cues to help you picture how the story unfolds in narrative passages (an Ignatian approach);
- space to respond to God in prayer;
- space to prayerfully contemplate the ideas of the passage and the person of God; and
- an exercise to “try on” one of the main ideas of the passage later.

You may wonder whether all these helps might somehow interfere with or obscure what the Spirit is saying to you. I wondered the same thing myself, even though most people find that the helps clarify what the Spirit is saying. So I conferred with others who are well-practiced in leading Scripture meditation. They agreed that many Christians want to do this type of spiritual exercise but need some direction. One colleague urged me to write this book to provide “training wheels” to help people move into Scripture meditation.

USING THIS BOOK ON YOUR OWN

You may use the forty meditation exercises in this book in any order you wish. They are organized by topic to help you choose the meditations that will best meet your needs. The eight sections address needs that most people experience. For example, I began meditating on Scripture many years ago because I sensed I had a “delight deficiency.” I did not *truly believe* that God delighted in me, so I meditated on passages that addressed that issue (see the meditation in this book titled “Knowing I Am Loved”).

When attempting any spiritual practice, it’s wise to consider how the Christian community throughout history has done it so that we can learn from them. For example, when you want to study a passage, you might have a look at Bible studies or commentaries that other Christians have written about the passage at different times and places.

At least since the fifth century, one of the primary ways Christians have meditated on Scripture is by reading a passage and then following the Jewish idea of “taking hold” and “keeping” God’s words (Proverbs 4:3-4). Christians began calling this process *lectio divina*, which is a Latin phrase for “divine reading” or “sacred reading” (from ecclesiastical Latin, pronounced *LEX-ee-oh dib-VEE-nuh*). The central idea of *lectio divina* is *invitation*. *Lectio divina* assumes that God is inviting us into interaction and conversation as we read Scripture.

There are four traditional steps in *lectio divina*—Read (*lectio*), Reflect (*meditatio*), Respond (*oratio*) and Rest (*contemplatio*). For these meditations I’ve added two more: Relax and Refocus (*silencio*), and Trying It On (*incarnatio*).¹

Relax and refocus (silencio). Each exercise begins with brief guidance to slow down, quiet your inner self and let go of distracting thoughts. This is important because most people spend all day responding to stimuli—answering the telephone, following schedules and evaluating what needs to be done next. Even when they wake up the first thing they do is check their phone for messages. So when they try to meditate on Scripture, these activities become traffic in their heads that keep them from focusing on God.

A way to interrupt this traffic is to focus on being present in the moment by breathing in and out deeply—even overbreathing. It also helps to relax our body parts one by one: bending the neck, letting the arms go limp, relaxing the legs and ankles. Loosen each part from the inside out. This doesn’t mean you’re setting aside your mind—you’re re-directing your mind away from the busyness that often consumes you. Being present in the moment prepares you to wait on the still, small voice of God.

If you are distracted, you may want to try the palms up, palms down method. Rest your hands in your lap, placing your hands palms down as a symbol of turning over any concerns you have. If a nagging thought arises, turn your hands palms up as a “symbol of your desire to receive

from the Lord.”² If you become distracted at any time during meditation, repeat the exercise.

If you are new to Scripture meditation, a focus question or activity is provided to help you quiet yourself and let go of distractions. As you become more skilled at Scripture meditation you may not need to do this, or you may find that option intrusive, as if the instructions are circumventing something that the Spirit might suggest. In that case, feel free to skip this option.

You may want to develop your own simple “relax and refocus” practice to use each time. Singing a favorite song may be helpful—especially a quiet one, such as the old hymn “Spirit of the Living God, Fall Fresh on Me.” Or you may want to read a good quote, such as this one from Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Say it aloud, slowly.

In our meditation we ponder the chosen text on the strength of the promise that it has something utterly personal to say to us today and for our Christian life. . . . We read God’s Word as God’s Word for us.³

Read (lectio). In these meditations I will often ask you to read the passage aloud, and to read it a few times. That’s because the first time we read a passage, we barely absorb what’s going on. Reading aloud allows the words to “fall on our ear” and increases our perception of what is said. Listen slowly to each word with the “ear of your heart,” so to speak. Be open and attentive to whatever stands out to you.

Reflect (meditatio). Some of the passages in this book are teaching or discourse passages. You are invited to notice what stands out or “shimmers” for you, trusting that this is the prompting of the Holy Spirit. Other passages are stories. Here you are invited to use your imagination to picture the scene using the cues provided. In both cases, the background information and questions will help you immerse yourself in the passage and set aside distractions.

With narrative passages, the questions and cues will help ground you in a concrete way—what are you seeing or smelling?—but don't try too hard to create a careful, detailed picture. Your goal is to let God speak to you, not to do a perfect reconstruction of the event. Establish yourself in the setting and then move through the passage to let God speak to you.

Sometimes much of the scene will elude you, but a particular word or image will stand out. In the story of the woman with the issue of blood (Mark 5:24-34), I was struck once by the words “whole truth,” which she told Jesus. I felt her embarrassment as she spoke out. I saw her being publicly vulnerable to Jesus, the prophet, and it made me see just how real I could be with God.

Respond (oratio). A truly interactive life with God will be one in which God speaks to you (most often through Scripture) and where you respond to God about what you think you have heard. You may wish to ask God questions at this time or even protest what has come to you. If nothing else, you may wish to thank God for speaking to you through Scripture.

Rest (contemplatio). This last phase step provides space to simply be present with God. You can contemplate what has come to you, or to absorb the flow of the conversation with God, or to notice how the interaction affected you. You may also find yourself worshipping God who says and does marvelous things.

Trying it on (incarnatio). Finally, in each meditation I offer a brief suggestion to invite you to take some action that embodies a truth in the passage. If the suggestion doesn't resonate with you, ask God to show you a different way to experiment with living out something from the passage, even in a small way.

Throughout this book you will find call-out boxes that provide information and guidance about how to meditate on Scripture, or that answer frequently asked questions. You may read them all in one sitting or as you move through the book.

The goal of this book is to help you interact with God through Scripture in a formative way. As Dallas Willard writes,

I find myself addressed, caught up in all the individuality of my concrete existence by something beyond me. God acts toward me in a distinctively personal manner. This is the common testimony across wide ranges of Christian fellowship and history. . . . We stand within a community of the spoken to.⁴

USING THIS BOOK WITH A GROUP

The book addresses readers as individuals, but it can easily be used in groups with a few modifications. Groups of no more than four or five work best, but if you have more, divide into groups of no more than four or five with one person leading each. The meditation exercises may be led by anyone by simply following the directions, but here are some things to think about.

Relax and refocus (silencio). The group may wish to decide beforehand if they want to use the optional exercises. If they are used, the group leader can read the instructions aloud and participants can speak their responses aloud to the group. Some group members may not wish to share their answers or may not have a response. While verbal answers usually help the others in the group, passing on a response is always allowed.

If the group prefers, they may wish to use a favorite prayer as an opening relax and refocus exercise. They may even wish to use it every time, so that it develops into a comfortable way to settle in.

Here is one possibility. Participants may read this aloud together:

Let us release the cares of our day,
and open our eyes to the wonder of God.
With an attitude of empathy to people of another time,
let us open our hearts and minds to God.

Let us prepare to experience God's Word to us through the presence of the Holy Spirit.⁵

Or,

May the words of our mouths and the meditations of our heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer.

Read (lectio). The leader will read the instructions and then the passage aloud the first time, slowly. Participants may wish to close their eyes to listen, or to follow along in the book. The leader should ask another participant to read the notes below the text aloud. Then either the leader or someone else should read the passage again.

Reflect (meditatio). Participants will read the questions and cues silently and take a few minutes to write down their responses to the questions. Then the leader may read each question aloud and those who are willing can share their answers. Background statements may be read aloud also.

This sort of meditative exercise is not a discussion, however. Commenting on other participants' answers may be distracting. The point is to listen to God in Scripture, not to talk about it with others. If someone is troubled or puzzled by the passage, it's not a good idea to immediately address this. The process allows quiet moments for the Spirit to do that. The purpose is not so much analysis (although that does occur), but to listen to God and to learn to be truly present to each other as group members describe their experiences.

The leader asks someone to read the passage aloud again. Then the leader may read the questions listed in that section, allowing a few minutes after each one for participants to consider their answers silently. Those willing to share can do so after time is given to consider the answer.

Again, this is not a discussion group, but participants are telling others what they believe God might be saying to them. It's wise not to evaluate what others say, as this usually prevents people from hearing God for themselves. It's equally important that participants don't interrupt each

other or make suggestions. Instead, trust the Spirit to illuminate the Word to each person. Frequently, participants understand more as they try to put their experience into their own words.

Respond (oratio). Normal conversation involves back and forth. Since God speaks to us in Scripture, participants need to reply back to God. Some participants may wish to read their prayers aloud, while others will not.

Whatever is spoken or written needs to address God, as in prayer, not the group. The prayer concerns what participants most want to say to God about their experience in the Scripture passage.

Participants may want to ask God questions. The answers to these questions may come through the group or to the individuals later in the week. Writing prayers down can be a powerful way of communicating with God, and at the very least can keep the mind from wandering.

Rest (contemplatio). Participants will most likely wish to do this in silence. However, it's also possible that a participant will wish to reflect aloud on how God seemed during this time of meditation. Did God seem to be present to you? If so, what was that like to you?

Trying it on (incarnatio). The group leader should read this suggestion aloud and ask the other participants to consider whether it fits with their own conversations with God. They may wish to modify it, do something else or do nothing.

A NOTE ABOUT QUIET

This format involves a lot of quiet, and some people find being quiet in a group difficult. In most groups, people talk a lot! This version of group lectio divina provides a different kind of togetherness. A sense of community can be developed without small talk or chitchat. It helps to use fewer words, offering only the words and images that resonate within you.

As stated above, sometimes participants are unable to verbalize their answers or are unwilling to share with the group something that is too personal. It's fine to pass. For some participants, sitting in the quiet is a

little difficult and they may wish to doodle in the margin of their book. Others may find the quietness refreshing because they don't have to come up with something to say. The quiet actually provides the space to hear God more easily.

USING THIS BOOK WITH SPECIFIC GROUPS

Scripture meditation is not only for those already familiar with Scripture. The meditative approach of this book works well with many ages, including children and teens, and with adults in many situations, although modifications will need to be made. This means taking into account more limited attention spans and reworking or omitting ideas that might not be easily understood. If you usually teach in a specific setting, such as in prisons or among the homeless, you'll already have some idea what modifications need to be made.

With all kinds of groups, it works well to meditate on a narrative passage by reading and studying it first, and then acting it out—even with adults. If you do this, pause (“freeze-frame”) at certain moments in the action of the passage and ask participants to assume the role of certain characters. Then you might ask, “How do you feel about what is happening?” Ask, “What kind of look (would you suppose) is on Jesus' face based on the text and the cues provided?” This can create some riveting moments of encountering Christ as never before.

Why Meditate on Scripture?

Meditation on Scripture was a common activity in Jewish culture. It is mentioned fifteen times just in the Psalms.¹ Those who meditated on the law day and night flourished like trees planted by streams of water. Meditating on Scripture gave the psalmists wisdom that surpassed their teachers and enemies, led to diligent obedience and kept them out of temptation's way. Meditation was a delightful practice—God's words tasted sweeter than honey (Psalm 1:1-3; 119:97-103).

Scripture meditation has been so neglected in the last century that some have come to associate meditation only with Eastern religions. But the fact that meditation is common in Eastern religions doesn't mean it is wrong. Eastern religions practice other disciplines Christians practice, such as fasting, praying and even repeating quotations from Jesus. Perhaps Scripture meditation became infrequent because of the post-Enlightenment emphasis on science and linear thinking, which displaced reflection and rest (two ideas found prominently in the Psalms).

Like all spiritual disciplines, Scripture meditation is another way to become more attentive to the still, small voice of God and to become more willing to respond when we hear it. Paired with the study of Scripture, meditation helps both those who are new to faith and those who feel like they've heard it all before. Even if you're familiar with the words and ideas, in Scripture meditation God speaks the words we need to hear in our life today. Because meditating on Scripture helps us hear God's Word to us, we experience even well-known passages in fresh ways.

Knowing God as Love

1 *Corinthians* 13:4-8

RELAX AND REFOCUS (*SILENCIO*)

Center yourself by breathing slowly in and out. Relax your neck and take time to let your muscles relax.

If a distraction interrupts you (such as remembering something you need to do), rest your hands in your lap with your palms up and offer that distraction to God. Turn your hands over to signify receiving God's peace.

Optional—You may wish to begin by considering this question: When have I felt truly loved?

READ (*LECTIO*)

Read the passage to yourself silently. As you read, do not concern yourself with how your life measures up to what love is. This passage isn't about the kind of love that humans typically exhibit, but about *agapē* love, which is engaging the will for the good of another.¹ Paul is describing divine love here.

1 Corinthians 13:4-8

⁴Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. ⁵It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. ⁶Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. ⁷It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

⁸Love never fails.

Because Paul was writing about divine love, it may help to substitute the word *God* for *love*. As the apostle John wrote, “We know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them” (1 John 4:16). We may infer, then, that whatever love is like, God is also like.

Read the passage aloud a second time, substituting the word *God* for *love*:

⁴God is patient, God is kind. He God does not envy, does not boast, is not proud. ⁵He does not dishonor others, is not self-seeking, is not easily angered, keeps no record of wrongs. ⁶God does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. ⁷He always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. ⁸God never fails.

REFLECT (*MEDITATIO*)

Questions and cues to help you reflect on the passage.

1. Which qualities or actions from the passage surprise you when they are attributed to God? Why do you think that surprises you?
2. Consider these versions of 1 Corinthians 13:4-8. The word *God* has been substituted for *love* and a few adaptations have been made.

Which descriptions of God do you find most engaging? Most disturbing? Most surprising?

NRSV	N. T. Wright translation*	<i>The Message</i>
God is patient	God is great-hearted	God never gives up
God is kind	kind	God cares more for others than for self
God is not envious	knows no jealousy	God doesn't want what [he] doesn't have
or boastful	makes no fuss	God doesn't strut
or arrogant	is not puffed up	doesn't have a swelled head
or rude	knows no shameful ways	doesn't force [his] own self on others
God does not insist on [his] own way	doesn't force rightful claims	isn't always "me first"
not irritable	doesn't rage	doesn't fly off the handle
or resentful	doesn't bear a grudge	doesn't keep score of the sins of others
does not rejoice in wrongdoing	doesn't cheer at others' harm	doesn't revel when others grovel
rejoices in the truth	rejoices in the truth	takes pleasure in the flowering of truth
bears all things	bears all things	puts up with anything
believes all things	believes all things	trusts always
hopes all things	hopes all things	always looks for the best
endures all things	endures all things	never looks back
God never ends	God never fails	keeps going to the end

*Tom Wright, *Paul for Everyone: 1 Corinthians* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 175.

3. What Scripture passages or stories come to mind that bear out the truth that God is love? For example, consider Israel's behavior from the exodus through the judges, the monarchy, the divided kingdom, the dispersion and Judah's return from Persia. God's persistent love, despite Israel's tendency to depend on other gods and on themselves, shows us that God never gives up.

4. *Setting cue: Paul's point of view.* Picture the apostle Paul writing to the Corinthian church he knew so well, and realizing that "there are quarrels among you" (1 Corinthians 1:11). Even in the early church,

love could be forgotten in the midst of controversy. As N. T. Wright says, “People sometimes talk as if first-generation Christianity enjoyed a pure, untroubled honeymoon period, after which things became more difficult; but there is no evidence for this in the New Testament.”² Paul painted a picture of living life with God’s kind of love.

Perhaps Paul was in tears because of their quarrels as he wrote these words. Or he may have been captivated by a majestic, penetrating view of God.

Reflect on the invitation. Perhaps God is offering you an invitation through this passage to enlarge your understanding or to think and feel differently about what God is like. Read the passage again and then sit quietly for a few minutes, pondering these questions:

- What words or phrases stand out to you?
- Why do you think that is?

Reflect a little further. You may wish to read the passage again. Then consider:

- How does this passage connect with your life?
- Is there some idea, feeling or intention you need to embrace from it? If so, what?
- What might God be inviting you to be, know, understand, feel or do?

Be open to the quiet, and don’t feel pressured to come up with an answer.

RESPOND (*ORATIO*)

Take a few minutes to respond to God in prayer. What do you most want to say to God about this experience in Scripture?

You may ask God questions (the answers to which may come to you later). You may wish to write your prayer down. Sometimes that helps keep our minds from wandering.

REST (CONTEMPLATIO)

Soak in what has stood out to you and consider your overall impression of God from this passage. Notice how it feels to know you are “fully known” by God, as Paul writes later in the same chapter (verse 12).

Spend a few minutes soaking in the thoughts that have come to you. This may take the form of worship, or of simply resting in God’s presence.

TRYING IT ON (INCARNATIO)

Read the passage a few times throughout your day or week, pondering how God shows to you the kind of love described in this passage. How is God patient with you? How is God not rude or pushy with you? How does God always protect you?

Sought After, No Matter What

Luke 15:1-7

RELAX AND REFOCUS (*SILENCIO*)

Take a few deep breaths and let go of the thoughts that have occupied your mind.

Optional—If you wish, consider this question to focus your thoughts on today’s passage: What does it feel like to be found when you’ve been lost? Take a few minutes to reflect. It’s okay if nothing comes to mind right away. Just enjoy God’s presence.

READ (*LECTIO*)

Read the passage to yourself. Then read the notes below it about the key words and phrases. Consider how these details affect your understanding of the story. Then read the passage aloud slowly. Take time to let the words “fall on your ear.”

REFLECT (*MEDITATIO*)

Questions and cues to help you enter into the story.

1. Jesus told this parable in response to the criticism of the Pharisees that Jesus ate with tax collectors and “sinners.” Contrast the shepherd’s behavior with the Pharisees’ behavior.

Luke 15:1-7

¹Now the tax collectors and *sinners* were all gathering around to hear Jesus. ²But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."

³Then Jesus told them this parable: ⁴"Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn't he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? ⁵And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders ⁶and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.' ⁷I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over *ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.*"

sinners The tax collectors and sinners were the lowest stratum of society, while Pharisees were among the highest.¹ The Pharisees considered the people of the land "sinners" because they didn't keep the law in great detail.²

ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent Jesus compared the ninety-nine sheep to people who thought they didn't need to repent. Like the older son in the prodigal son parable, they didn't think they had a problem.³

The Pharisees were eager to:

The shepherd was eager to:

2. Underline phrases in the text that show the eagerness and enthusiasm of the shepherd, such as "go after the lost sheep" (verse 4).
3. *Cultural background:* "Leave the ninety-nine in the open country" (verse 4). Instead of following the custom of securing the sheep in a sheepfold or leaving them under the care of another shepherd, the shepherd in this story did neither. This must have mystified hearers. Why would the shepherd do such a thing? Perhaps Jesus intended for the rash behavior of the shepherd to underscore the theme that God pursues each person madly and passionately. If so, this story

would have been a shocking rejoinder to the Pharisees, who didn't like the fact that Jesus was associating with sinners (verse 3), or the idea that God would go out of his way to draw sinners to faith.

4. *Cultural background: The heart of the shepherd.* Shepherd Phillip Keller, who has spent many hours searching for lost sheep, explains that if a shepherd doesn't arrive in time to rescue a "cast" sheep, it could die. Lying on its back, its feet in the air, frantically struggling to stand up, the sheep feels gases build up in its belly and its blood circulation is cut off. It cannot right itself. "This is another reason why it is essential for a careful sheepman to look over his flock every day. If one or two are missing, often the first thought to flash into the shepherd's mind is, *One of my sheep is cast somewhere. I must go in search and set it on its feet again.*"⁴

In what situation do you wish God would find you, and restore you to tranquility?

5. *Fly on the wall cue: Picture the lost sheep.* Picture how a lost sheep would have responded to hearing the familiar call of its shepherd. (Shepherds usually have a distinct call.) Sheep recognize their shepherd's call instantly and obey because they've learned the voice that guides them to their watering place every day, whose staff untangles them from brambles and wild roses, whose voice brings them to shelter before a storm hits.

Reflect on the invitation. Read the passage again and picture what the scene might look like as if you were watching a movie. Hear the words clearly in your mind.

- As you watch the action unfold, what do you see?
- What moment in the story, or what word or phrase stands out to you? What does this cause you to think and feel?
- Why do you think that is? What significance might this have for you?

Reflect a little further.

- How does this passage connect with your life?
 - Is there some idea, feeling or intention you need to embrace from it?
If so, what?
 - What might God be inviting you to be, know, understand, feel or do?
- Be open to the quiet and don't feel pressured to come up with an answer.

RESPOND (*ORATIO*)

Take a few minutes to respond to God about this in prayer. You may wish to ask God questions.

If you're willing, write your prayer, beginning with, Dear God, . . . Then consider, What do you most want to say to God about this experience in Scripture?

REST (*CONTEMPLATIO*)

Soak in whatever stood out to you in this passage. If something stood out to you in particular, absorb that more fully. Perhaps you want to soak in the feeling of being found and cherished by God.

TRYING IT ON (*INCARNATIO*)

Later today or tomorrow, put something on your shoulders—a board or even a towel. Notice how close to your eyes and mouth this object is, just as the sheep would have been very close to the shepherd's face when the shepherd turned to look at it on his shoulders. Consider what this would have been like for a sheep to be held so tightly by the shepherd. What might Jesus have wanted to convey about our relationship with God by using this imagery?