

Chapter 9

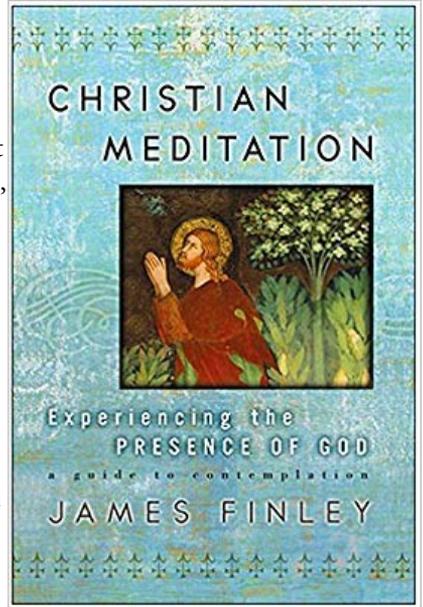
CHRISTIAN MEDITATION:

Experiencing the Presence of God - A Guide to Contemplation

by James Finley

Reviewed by David Bradshaw

“There are two kinds of lives; active life (lower) and contemplative life (higher)... a man cannot be fully active unless he is partly contemplative, nor fully contemplative unless partly active...Active life begins and ends in this life. Contemplative life begins in this life and lasts without end.” - *The Cloud of Unknowing*, Chapter 8



Introduction

James Finley is a lighthearted, joy-filled clinical psychologist and former Trappist monk who studied under modern contemplative leader and author Thomas Merton over fifty years ago. He offers an excellent primer for Christian's seeking to develop a regular contemplative or meditative practice with a Christ-centered focus.

Finley's desire in writing the book is to help those who are seeking to learn how to be more "awake, compassionate and Christ-like human beings" by embarking on a path of interior reflection and contemplation.

Amazingly, this spiritual journey inward is not something we can mentally ascend to, but rather it is something we can only experience as we begin to practice. He says, "Paradoxically, to discover that the oneness with God we seek is wholly present, without our realizing it, in the humble origins of our spiritual journey."

T.S. Elliot's famous poem *Four Quartets* reflects this idea, "The end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time."

Finley defines meditation as "the transformative process of shifting from surface, matter-of-fact ego consciousness to more interior, meditative level of awareness of the spiritual dimensions of our lives."

“Ego consciousness is the subjective perception of being a separate self that has to find God...the ego is not expansive enough to fulfill our hearts... not generous or gracious enough to bring us all the way home...only infinite union with infinite love will do,” says James.

Cynthia Bourgeault says as much in her important book on the subject, *The Heart of Centering Prayer*, “The fruits of Centering Prayer are found in daily life, what happens afterward, such as; greater spaciousness and flexibility in life and personal relationships, the purification or healing of the unconscious, a deepening capacity to abide in a state of attention to the heart (not the head), a deepening relationship with God and with your deepest self.”

In Chapter One, “Divine Destination” Finley offers two metaphors to help explain the already present nature of God’s presence. First, imagine yourself lost on a road seeking a small town which your map says is nearby. Somewhat frustrated you decide to stop at a gas station to ask a local for directions to find your destination. They giggle at the question, saying “Your in it!” The path to God is like that, says James.

Or, imagine you take a little trip to the ocean. You take off your shoes and wade into the water ankle deep. It’s true you are in only ankle deep, but its also true that you are in the ocean. In order to get in deeper, you simply need to move forward and it will get plenty deep soon enough.

Hearts Prepared for Contemplation

Finley believes that our reading of Scripture, other spiritual reading and prayer prepare our hearts for contemplation, in which “we rest in God resting in us...we are at home with God at home with us.”

“We meditate that we might awaken to this unitive mystery, not just in meditation, but in every moment of our lives. This is how Christ lived. We meditate that we might learn to see through Christ’s eyes the divine mystery of all that surrounds us.”

James defines “mysticism” in Christian texts not as having visions, audibly hearing God’s voice or similar extraordinary experiences or events, but rather as a “life-transforming realization of our oneness with God...liberated from our tendencies to derive our security and identity from anything less than God.”

This definition is similar to Franciscan teacher Richard Rohr’s definition in his excellent book, *What Mystics Know ...* “A Christian mystic is anyone who places experiencing God personally as their number one priority, as opposed to

simply knowing about God in Scripture, church doctrine and theology.” Rohr advocates prioritizing God-centeredness to rule over self-centeredness.

It seems the truly profound things in life are also truly simple. As Finley puts it, “The generosity of God ceaselessly flows through all that is most simple in life... allowing the generosity of God to flow through us into others.”

Learning to Meditate

In Chapter Two, James offers some basic guidelines, while at the same time affirming that there's “no such thing as Christian meditation... formally and officially designated as such.” Instead he affirms that there are a diversity of methods which are strikingly similar over history.

We begin by setting aside a dedicated time to sit - ideally about 20 minutes in the morning and 20 minutes at night. Although once a day is a good way to start the practice.

Find a comfortable chair or pillow allowing you to sit upright with eyes closed and begin mindful breathing slowly with your hands in a meaningful position in your lap. Your mental attitude is one of being open, present, humbly saying “Here I am Lord,” neither clinging nor rejecting your thoughts and feelings.

Finley, like Cynthia Bourgeault and others, recommend designating a special word of your own choice, or a short phrase, to help return your focus as your mind drifts, such as; “Yah-Weh, God, Mercy, Jesus or I love you.”

“Little by little as you continue in the practice you will experience yourself becoming more familiar with the inner landscape of your newly awakened heart,” writes Finley.

As your meditation period ends, silently bow in gratitude, asking God to help you learn how to maintain “the thread of meditative awareness throughout the day,” advised Finley.

Jesus used the metaphor of standing at the “door” of our heart, knocking and waiting. “The good news of the Christian faith is that God has left the door unlocked and slightly ajar - waiting for you to open it and experience oneness with God - who is the fullness of life itself.”

Awakened to God's Love

James uses a great image of how lovers delight in surprising each other with little signs of love throughout the day..."Catching one another off guard with unexpected manifestations of love."

He reminds us that because "God is love" (I John 4:8) God's ways are the ways in which love awakens us again and again, "to the infinite love that is the reality of all that is real."

I love his imagery of a parent getting on the floor to do the silliest of things to revel in the sound of our child's laughter. "'Lovers say and do the simplest most tender and seemingly foolish things to express and embody the depths of their love for one another,'" says Finley. So very true.

"A woman sees her beloved, she holds her beloved. In doing this she is awakened to a love that transcends the concrete immediacy of the beloved (whether or not hair is combed or socks match). Every detail about him is transcended by the love to which his presence awakens in her... She is awakened to the mystery of lived manifesting in and as who he simply is... She settles into who he is and who they are simply together." What a beautiful expression of the rhapsody of God's love!

Finley explains further, "This explains why it rings true for this man and woman to call their moments of sexual union 'making love.' Their 'lovemaking' makes love present in and as their very lovemaking. Seen this way, their making love is a meditation practice." Wow! God is desiring a relationship with us this close!

"God is closer to us than we are to ourselves," said St. Augustine.

"Christ was continually calling out those around him to join him in seeing the Godly nature of everyone and everything he saw...In moments of spontaneous experience we fleetingly realize this closer-than-close presence of God intimately." writes James.

"Lovers often plan their moments of intimacy...but when the premeditated moment of renewed oneness catches fire, it burns with a light that qualitatively transcends anything that could be accounted for by their efforts. The intimacy can drain away if diversions and distractions are not recognized and let go of."

"Yet lovers do not live in a perpetual ecstasy of love. Rather their moments of ecstatic union open their eyes to the true nature of all their ordinary moments with one another." Amen! Lord open our eyes!

“Similarly, as we meditate we are not attempting to will our way toward extraordinary experience of God, rather our moments of extraordinary experience of God’s presence open our eyes to the endless holy nature of our ordinary experiences of ordinary daily life. Our meditative practice embodies our desire to stabilize ourselves as whole and complete in our ordinary experience of ordinary day-to-day lives.”

A Parable of Entering a River

Finley is gifted at telling stories to illustrate rather deep spiritual truths with simplicity. For example, he offers a parable of entering a river to help readers to grasp the alreadiness of our being immersed in God’s kingdom.

“When you enter a river you get completely wet. It matters not if you enter after great deliberation or you fall in accidentally. It matters not whether it is the first time or you’ve entered countless times. It matters not if you enter alone in the middle of the night or in broad daylight with thousands of others. It matters not if for a brief moment or a long time. It matters not if a man, woman, old, young, saint, scoundrel, believer or not, rich or poor. Call this the GRACIOUSNESS of the river.”

“Spontaneous meditative experience discloses in a fleeting flash that there is nothing missing anywhere.” Or as Richard Rohr puts it, “everything belongs.” “Anyone at anytime might find themselves falling into the river, completely drenched in a graced and childlike clarity.”

“Jesus is the great ‘River Enterer’...calling others down to the river to discover they are created in God’s image and likeness... they are all God’s children, in whom God is well pleased!” (Luke 3:22)

Finley expands this imagery by explaining how man has so complicated entering the flow of God’s river that we have lost sight of how simple it is to get wet.

Too often we have required river-entering ceremonies, erected tents and buildings over the river-entering path, written river-entering books, libraries, seminaries, created ‘Riverologists’, bottling and selling the river water. Most of which is unnecessary and even distracting from simply jumping into the river of God’s loving presence! We miss the bigger, all-inclusive picture.

“Down the river you come upon a place where the river empties into the vast sea... and you realize you and the river have come to rest in the vast depths toward which all reality and life unceasingly flows... the oneness with God that Jesus 101 proclaims to be the fullness of life itself.”

A Stairway to Heaven

Chapter 4 offers some practical tips about how to grow in your daily practice of contemplation which he feels can revolutionize your life, once the challenging ego-slaying aspects of meditation are overcome.

“You are learning to die to your illusions about yourself... to all that is less than God. The path that lies ahead for spirituality, love and creativity is often paved with the hard work of learning to be a down-to-earth human being, transparently open to ever more expansive levels of self-transformation.”

Finley introduces the readers to *The Ladder of Monks* written by Guigo II, a 12th century monk from Carthusian Monastery in France. Guigo offers four stages of preparing for contemplation which include; 1) Scripture reading, 2) meditation, 3) prayer and 4) contemplation.

“Transformative events that occur in a life devoted to seeking God in meditation often do not occur during times of meditation and prayer, rather during one’s day-to-day life.”

“The ladder to heaven must be solidly placed on down-to-earth loving concern for compassion toward others and our self,” concludes Finley.

In concluding this book review of part one of *CHRISTIAN MEDITATION*, I would like to focus on Guigo’s beautiful imagery of savoring the reading and chewing over the Word of God in our mind, heart and soul as the first step to experiencing the presence of God and ascending this ladder to heaven.

“Imagine a woman opening a letter from a man whom she risked disclosing her deep feelings of love. It is with a sense of excitement that she begins to read, seeking some indication that he feels for her something of what she feels for him...she revels and rests in each self-disclosure, reading his words over and over again ... in doing so the words descend ever deeper into the hidden recesses of her heart.”

So it is in our willingness to let go (kenosis) of our distractions and truly listen to what our loving God is saying that we embark on our journey up the ladder from earth to heaven. “Sustained intimacy rides the waves of deep uninterrupted openness to all love has to offer.” Amen!

According to Finley daily meditative practice goes best as we learn to stand firmly on the first rung of the ladder to heaven. The song *Stairway to Heaven* by Led Zeppelin comes to mind;

“There's a lady who's sure
All that glitters is gold
And she's buying a stairway to
heaven
When she gets there she knows
If the stores are all closed
With a word she can get what she
came for
Oh oh oh oh and she's buying a
stairway to heaven.”



OPEN THE DOOR TO YOUR HEART

(A Ballad/song based on Christian Meditation)

Are you ready for the journey of your life?
It can begin right now, here's the secret of how.
Sit still. Breathe deep. Saying "Here I am Lord,"
Eyes shut, learning to see through the eyes of Christ.
The divine mystery of all that surrounds you,
The secret of transformation is letting go.

Open the door to your heart,
Step into contemplative life,
Which begins where ego ends,
And lasts for time without end.

God is closer to you than your self,
Awaken to God's presence from within.
Read and meditate upon God's Word,
Watch it change your heart from within.
Immerse yourself in the Kingdom of God,
The secret of transformation is letting go.

Open the door to your heart,
Step into contemplative life,
Which begins where ego ends,
And lasts for time without end.