

Four Aids to Heavenly Contemplation

~Other Speakers A-F: Richard Baxter:

Having set your heart in tune, we now come to the music itself. Having acquired an appetite, approach the feast. Come, for all things are now ready. Heaven and Christ and the eternal glory are before you.

Four factors promote heavenly contemplation. The first factor is consideration. By this I mean the reading over and repeating of God's reasonings until His way of thinking becomes our way. We might call this "reflection" or "deliberation." It is to hold a thought in our mind and cherish it. It includes visualizing it, although it is not limited to the sense of sight. This process opens the door between the head and the heart. The intellect having received truths, stores them in the memory; and "consideration" of them sends them into the affections, or emotions and will. If the obstructions between the conscious and subconscious levels of our personality were opened, and our feelings corresponded to our understanding, how helpful education would be.

He is usually the best scholar whose intellectual grasp is quick, clear, and retentive; but he is usually the best Christian whose grasp is most "affectionate." That is, his knowledge of truth sinks down into his emotions and will, and ceases to be merely "head" knowledge, but becomes a sincere "heart" knowledge as well. He not only thinks it, but feels it and wills it. He is the best Christian who has the most open passage, not so much from the ear to the brain, as from ear to heart. The Holy Spirit opens this passage when we consider God's truths by reflecting upon them and by letting them melt through our personality like a lozenger in our mouth.

Such deliberation presents to our view those things which were absent, and brings them to the eye and ear of the soul. Are not Christ and heaven moving thoughts? Would they not work wonders upon the soul, if they were not merely "thoughts," but were clearly seen? It is in the considering of them that the Christian's perspective changes from earth to heaven.

"Consideration" delivers our reason from its captivity to the physical senses. When reason is asleep, the senses dominate. But thinking about God's truth awakens our reason. What strength can the lion exert while asleep? Spiritual reason stirred by consideration exalts the objects of faith. Wicked men continue to be wicked because they do not think about the consequences of their actions. Their reason remains asleep. So also godly men can let their reason and faith lie asleep, and fail to stir them to action. What fears and sorrows will our dreams excite. How much more, then, would serious meditation affect us. What we visualize in a dream stirs our emotions powerfully. So also, what we visualize and hold in our minds for vivid consideration, thoroughly rouses our whole personality. Meditation holds reason and faith to their work, and blows the fire until it brightly burns. An occasional thought of heaven will not produce such spiritual heat, but thoughtful reflection can continue our consideration of heaven until our hearts grow warm. Thus you can understand why this factor of "consideration" is a powerful aid to the soul in heavenly meditation.

Secondly, our attitudes aid us in meditation. We begin by considering the heavenly truths which we intend to make the subjects of our meditation; such as promises of eternal life, descriptions of the saints' glory, and the resurrections. Next we present them to faith's view. If we really believed that there is such a glory and that within a few days we would see it, O, what intense emotions that would raise within us. What love and longing would it excite within us! O, how it would activate our attitudes as we contemplated both the truth of the promises and our own personal interest in them and title to them. Don't expect love and joy to be aroused when faith stands still. Faith must lead the way. When faith leads, then certain attitudes are excited. Some of them are the following.

LOVE is the first attitude to be stimulated in heavenly contemplation. Let your love be kindled by showing your heart the Son of the living God. Draw near and behold Him. He that invited Thomas to come near and see the print of the nails, and put his finger into His wounds—He it is that calls to you (John 20:27). Look well upon Him. Do you not know Him? It is He that rescued you from hell, reversed the sentence of your damnation, bore the punishment which you should have borne, restored you to the blessing you had lost, and purchased the glory which you will inherit forever.

Is there not fuel enough in this for your love to feed on? The field of love is large; it will be your eternal work to behold and love. Reader, hold forth the goodness of Christ to your heart. Plead with your frozen soul, until, with David, you may say, "My heart was hot within me; while I was musing the fire burned" (Ps. 39:3). Deal with your heart as Christ did with Peter, when he three times asked him, "Do you love me?" until Peter was grieved, and answered, "Lord, you know that I love you" (John 21:17). So grieve and shame your heart out of its stupidity, until you can truly say, "I know, and my Lord knows, that I love Him."

The next attitude to be excited in heavenly contemplation, is **DESIRE**. Think about heaven—“O blessed souls that now enjoy it, who see a thousand times more clearly what I have seen at a distance. What a difference between my state and theirs. I am sighing, and they are singing; I am offending, and they are pleasing God. I am here entangled in the love of the world, while they are wrapped up in the love of God. They have none of my cares and tears. I must dwell in sinful flesh, when my brethren and friends dwell with God. What poor, feeble thoughts have I of God—what cold affections towards Him. How little have I of that life, that love, that joy in which they continually live. Here we are irritating each other with quarrels, when they are of one heart and voice, and daily sound forth the hallelujahs of heaven with perfect harmony. O what a feast my faith beholds, and yet what a famine is in my spirit. O blessed souls, I am not jealous of your happiness. I rejoice in your prosperity, and only want to be so happy as to be with you. My Lord is gone; He has left this earth, and is entered into His glory. My relatives are gone. My friends are there—my home, my hope, my all is there.” Thus, Christian reader, let your thoughts increase your desire, until your soul longs, as David, “I have longed for your salvation, O Lord” (Ps. 119:174).

Another attitude to be exercised in heavenly contemplation, is **HOPE**. This helps to support the soul under sufferings, enlivens it in service, and is the very spring that makes all the wheels move. If your hope dies, your perseverance dies, your joy dies, and your soul dies. And if your hope is not exercised, but asleep, it is next to dead. Therefore, when you are thinking about heaven, don't forget to give a lift to your hope.

Think like this—“Would I not hope if an honest man had promised me something within his power to give me? And shall I not hope, when I have the contract and oath of God? It is true that the glory is out of sight, but the promise of God is more certain than our sight. ‘Hope that is seen, is not hope; for what a man sees, why does he yet hope for? But if we hope for that we see not, then do we with patience wait for it’ (Rom. 8:24-25). In my greatest sufferings I will say, ‘The Lord is my portion, therefore will I hope in him. The Lord is good unto those who wait for him, to the soul that seeks him. It is good that a man should both hope and quietly wait for the salvation of the Lord’ (Lamen. 3:24-26). If I had to depend on a weak creature, there would be little hope, for how could he raise my body from the dead and lift me above the sun? But what is this to the Almighty Power who created the heavens and the earth out of nothing? Cannot that power which raised Christ from the dead raise me?”

COURAGE, or boldness, is another attitude to be exercised in heavenly contemplation. It leads to determination. Think of it in this way—“In my ascent to heaven, almost everything is against me, but God is for me. Therefore the work will succeed. Do I enter upon this work in my own strength, or rather in the strength of Christ my Lord? And cannot I do ‘all things, through him who strengthens me?’ (Philippians 4:13). Is anything too hard for God? Should I listen to people who would try to talk me out of this work? What if it were father, or mother, or husband, or wife, or friend? Should I yield to the wishes of mortals, and only harden myself against the Lord? Let them beg me on their knees, I will not stop my journey to notice them. I will close my ears to their cries. Let them flatter or frown, let them wag their tongues or wave their swords at me; I am resolved, in the strength of Christ, to break through these barricades.”

The final attitude to be stimulated in heavenly contemplation is **JOY**. Love, desire, hope, and courage all tend to increase our joy. This is so obviously desirable to everyone by nature that I don't think I need to say much to persuade you to cultivate that which will make your life delightful. Think what a reason for joy there is in having God's reliable promises. True, we don't have the joy of heaven itself yet, but is it nothing to live in daily expectation of entering into the kingdom of God? Is it not a delight to the heir of a fortune to think of what he must soon possess, even if at present he endures some poverty? Is not my assurance of being hereafter glorified a sufficient reason for inexpressible joy? Yes, we have good reason for rejoicing “in the hope of the glory of God” (Rom. 5:2).

Here then, reader, take your heart once more and carry it into the land of promise. Show it the pleasant hills and fruitful valleys. Show it the clusters of grapes which you have gathered, to convince it that it is a blessed land, flowing with better than milk and honey (Numbers 13:21-24). Enter the gates of the holy city, walk through the streets of the New Jerusalem. Consider her palaces, that you may tell it to your soul. See the walls of the city. “The foundations of the wall of it were of jasper; and the city was pure gold, like unto clear glass. And the foundations of the wall of the city were garnished with all manner of precious stones” (Rev. 21:18-19). “And the twelve gates were twelve pearls, every several gate was of one pearl—and the street of the city was pure gold, as it were transparent glass” (Rev. 21:21-22). “And I saw no temple therein—for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are the temple of it. And the city had no need of the sun, neither of the moon, to shine in it—for the glory of God did lighten it, and the Lamb is the light thereof. And the nations of those who are saved shall walk in the light of it” (Rev. 21:22-24). Say now to all this, “This is your rest, O my soul; and this must be the place of your everlasting home.”

The soul that loves God ascends frequently, and runs familiarly through the streets of the heavenly Jerusalem, visiting the prophets, waving to the apostles, and admiring the martyrs. Lead your heart on from street to street. Bring it to the palace of the great King. Say to your heart, "Here I must live. Here I must praise. Here I must love and be loved. My tears will then be wiped away. My cottage of clay be changed to this palace; my prison rags to these splendid robes; my sordid flesh shall be put off, and a sun-like, spiritual body be put on; 'for the former things are passed away'" (Rev. 21:4). What a day that will be to my soul. When the wise men saw the star that led to Christ, "they rejoiced with exceeding great joy" (Matt. 2:10), but I shall see Him who is Himself "the bright and morning Star" (Rev. 22:16). If the disciples "departed quickly from the sepulcher with...great joy" (Matt. 28:8), when they had but heard that their Lord "was risen from the dead" (Matt. 28:7), what will my joy be when I shall see Him reigning in glory, and myself raised to happy fellowship with Him? Why don't I feed on these foreseen delights of glory more? Why isn't my life a continual joy, and the fragrance of heaven perpetually upon my spirit?

Let me here observe that there is no need to exercise these attitudes in exactly this order, or all at one time. Sometimes one of your attitudes may need more stimulation; or, it may be more lively than the rest. If your meditation time is short, one attitude may be stimulated one day, and another the next. You can also exercise opposite attitudes if you wish—such as hatred of sin; godly fear, shame, and grief; sincere repentance; and pity for those who are in danger of losing the everlasting joy.

The third and fourth aids to heavenly meditation are soliloquy and prayer. In a way, meditation can be compared with preaching, in which the mere explaining of truth is not as helpful as the lively application of truth to the hearers. Soliloquy applies the meditation more pointedly to your own soul.

By SOLILOQUY I mean a pleading of the case with yourself. You must in your meditation wake up your own heart. Enter into a serious debate with it. Plead with it in the most moving and motivating language. Urge it with the most powerful and persuasive arguments. It is what holy men of God have practiced in all ages. Thus David said, "Why are you cast down, O my soul; and why are you disturbed within me? Hope you in God—for I shall yet praise him who is the health of my countenance, and my God" (Ps. 42:11). And again, "Bless the Lord, O my soul; and all that is within me, bless his holy name. Bless the Lord, O my soul, and do not forget all his benefits" (Ps. 103:1-2). This soliloquy is to be used according to your need. It is preaching to one's self. Every good Christian is a good preacher to his own soul. Observe the content and delivery of the most effective preachers. Let them be a pattern for your imitation. Use the same methods they use in persuading the hearts of the congregation, in order to persuade your own heart. Do this when meditating.

Explain to yourself the things on which you meditate. Confirm your faith in them by Scripture, and then apply them to yourself, according to your needs. Doesn't God command you to teach the Scriptures "diligently unto your children, and talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise up"? (Deut. 6:6-7). And if you must have some ability to teach your children, so you must have some to teach yourself. If you can talk of divine things to others, why not also to your own heart?

Heavenly contemplation is also promoted by speaking to God in PRAYER, as well as speaking to ourselves in soliloquy. How often do we find David, in the same psalm, sometimes pleading with his soul and sometimes with God. The apostle Paul urges us to speak to ourselves "in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs" (Eph. 5:19), and no doubt we may also speak to God in them. This keeps the soul aware of the divine presence.

The Hebrew word "to meditate" means also "to pray." Thus, in our meditations, to intermix soliloquy and prayer, sometimes speaking to our own hearts and sometimes to God, is, I believe, the highest step to which we can advance in this heavenly work. It is not sufficient to take up prayer alone and lay aside meditation, for they are distinct duties, and both of them must be performed. We need one as well as the other, and therefore shall wrong ourselves by neglecting either. Besides, the mixture, like the harmony of music, will be more beautiful, because the one serves to put life into the other.

Our speaking to ourselves in meditation should go before our speaking to God in prayer. For lack of attention to this proper order, men speak flippantly to God. They speak with less reverence and affection than they would speak to an angel if he should appear before them, or to a judge if they were speaking for their lives. Speaking to the God of heaven in prayer, is a more momentous mandate than most imagine!