

What is Lectio Divina?

Lectio divina (pronounced "lec-tsee-oh di-vee-nah"), Latin for "sacred reading," "divine reading," or "holy reading," is a spiritual practice that has been in use for over a thousand years. It was originally practiced by monks who spent a large portion of their days praying and reading Scripture. While reading they noticed that at times individual words, phrases, or verses seemed to leap off of the page with a special personal importance. Have you had the same experience? These special words or verses can give a sense of encouragement, comfort, thankfulness, or conviction that often applies to present situations and can draw us closer to God.

Lectio divina is an intimate way of communicating with the Lord. All too often in prayer and worship, we talk to God but don't give him a chance to communicate back to us. Lectio divina employs God's own words to have a personal conversation with him.

Not Magic

Lectio divina is NOT a magical practice that guarantees you'll hear God's voice. Magic attempts to manipulate God into doing what we want. There is nothing magical about Scripture engagement. Lectio divina involves ruminating on God's Word and listening to what he says so that we become more like Christ. This practice has the ability to open us up to daily communication with God as the Holy Spirit illuminates the Bible so that we are supported and sustained in our day-to-day lives.

Four Stages

The four traditional stages of lectio divina are lectio (reading), meditatio (meditation), oratio (prayer), and contemplatio (contemplation). The steps were created simply to provide structure and guidance for people who wish to learn how to perform this practice. Consider how people learn to play a new instrument. A man who is learning piano must go through the steps of reading the notes, putting his hands in the right place, pushing down on the keys, listening to the notes, and then repeating the process. At first, each step seems rigid and awkward, but over time he learns to perform each of these steps as one fluid process leading to the actual art of music.

The four steps of lectio divina have also been compared to "feasting on the Word." Reading is taking a bite of food. Meditation is chewing food. Prayer is savoring food. Contemplation is digesting food and making it a part of your body. Too often we are fast food eaters, rapidly gulping down the Bread of Life (John 6:31). The result is that we are unable to properly absorb our "spiritual meal." Slow down. Savor your time in God's Word and find joy in meeting God.

HOW TO PERFORM LECTIO DIVINA

Choosing a Time and Place

One of the most important factors in practicing lectio divina is setting aside the right amount of time in a place where you are able to focus intently. Though usually carried

out in 15-60 minutes, the amount of time varies between people and spiritual maturity levels.

The setting in which you perform lectio divina can vary as well. Some people prefer to have background noise or something to focus on such as a cross or a nature scene. It simply needs to be a place where you will not be interrupted and can feel relaxed, focused, and comfortable. Try out multiple places to find what works best.

What to Read

Another important factor is choosing a passage of Scripture. Some like to meditate on lengthy passages such as a whole chapter or even an entire book. Others choose to reflect on only a few verses. A smaller portion of Scripture obviously gives you a much more in-depth idea of the passage, which is what lectio divina is all about. But a longer passage can be used for a more general understanding of Scripture as a whole.

What options can you choose from to decide which Scripture to read?

- Use a reading plan that prescribes what to read each day
- Work methodically through a book of the Bible (this is a helpful method because the reader can keep in mind the author's intended audience and purpose throughout the book)

Lectio divina is best practiced with passages that you have at least some familiarity with. Lectio divina is not intended to introduce you to something new in the Bible; its purpose is to allow you to experience and feed on what you know. There are an infinite number of ways to choose daily Scripture readings. Be creative and use your resources!

Preparation

Before beginning the lectio divina process, it is very important to get your heart in the right place. Do you have an established way of preparing your heart to listen to God's Word?

A great place to start is to simply sit up straight, rest your hands on your lap, and relax your body and breathing. Enjoy this moment of silence and choose to temporarily forget about all the work, duties, and anxieties the day may hold so that you can focus on the task at hand. Once you feel peaceful and calm, say a brief prayer. Invite the Holy Spirit to come and guide you through your experience. Ask him to make known anything he would like to reveal to you. Plead that the Lord will show you his Truth and will keep away Satan and his lies that try to break you down. Calm your mind and heart in any way that will help prepare you to meet God in the Scriptures.

Lectio (reading): It is absolutely vital to remember exactly what you are reading. The Bible is a personalized letter written from a Father to his children. This letter is one of love, grace, and compassion; as well as warning of impending danger. Read it the same way you would read a letter from an adoring Father.

Reading is the first and foremost part of *lectio divina*. First, read through the entire passage very slowly. Take the time to note every specific word. Think about the intentionality of the word ordering. Look for repetition, themes, pictures, and dialogue. Try to picture yourself inside the story. Stay alert for a single word, phrase, verse, metaphor, or message that catches your eye, stirs you, moves you or connects with you emotionally.

Then read through the passage again. Stop at whatever it was that really tugged at your heart and reread that significant piece over and over. Repeat it (some people even say the phrase out loud), lingering over the phrase. Pretend that the original author is speaking it to you and try to imagine the tone of voice he might have used. The goal is not only to see the words with your eyes but to feel them with your heart, mind, and soul.

Meditatio (meditation): Much of this stage is about using your imagination. God gave us the ability to think deeply for a reason. Use this tool! Think about what the phrase that stood out to you meant to the original audience, and what the author might have been thinking when he wrote it. Picture yourself in the setting and context of the passage. Play out the scenario in your head. Think about the specific part of the passage that spoke directly to you. Focus intently on why the Holy Spirit might have chosen these words to speak to you today. Reflect on how it might apply to your life. Is it relevant to something that you are going through? Does it bring to mind a struggle that you have been dealing with? Do certain people come to mind that God may want you to reach out to or reconcile a relationship with? Is there a strong sense of a movement or change that needs to happen? When you are thinking about a passage in God's presence, ask the Holy Spirit to illuminate that passage so that you can grasp the message in terms of your own life.

Why is meditation so important? Meditation helps us keep our memory active. Don't we tend to forget easily? When we enter into the world of the Bible, it starts to influence us and change us. Meditation is a way to guard against splintering our Bible reading into information that is divorced from our lives.

Have you ever thought that Christians are not supposed to meditate? Biblical meditation (e.g., Genesis 24:63, Joshua 1:8, Psalm 1:2, 48:9, 77:3, 119:15, 143:5) is not the same as Eastern meditation. In Eastern meditation the objective is detachment and an empty mind. In biblical meditation the objective is attachment to God and sustained focus on his Word. Have you ever noticed your mind center on something? You have a thought, often unhelpful, that repeats over and over? In biblical meditation, we are retraining our thoughts to mull over whatever "is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable" (Philippians 4:8).

A word of warning is needed here. The purpose of meditation in *lectio divina* is not to make things up about the Bible. Christianity is a faith rooted in history, and we should be on guard against inventing biblical meanings for ourselves. *Lectio divina* is not a good tool to understand what a passage means. To understand the meaning of a passage, we

must study it inductively following the rules of interpretation (see the article on Scripture Engagement Compared to Bible Study⁷ for more details). Instead, biblical meditation is designed to allow a passage to penetrate our understanding with depth. If done wrongly, if we pursue some kind of mystical experience that is not connected to the natural meaning of the text, we turn the Bible into a subjective, individualistic experience for which it was never intended.

Oratio (prayer): The next step is to take all the thoughts, feelings, actions, fears, convictions, and questions you have meditated on and offer them to the Lord in prayer. Praise God for who he is. If you feel convicted about a poor relationship, simply apologize, request forgiveness, and ask for guidance on restoring the relationship. If you feel thankful for something that God has done for you, then pour out those feelings of thanksgiving. If you feel a specific anxiety about something in your life, present it to the Lord and pray for the guidance and peace to be able to submit to God's will. People often feel like this is one of the most difficult steps of *lectio divina*, but there is no reason it needs to be hard. Simply talk to God and tell him what you are feeling, just like you would with a good friend or family member. It is so important to ask God to help us in the areas in which we need improvement. We are a community of broken people and cannot do any good on our own. The whole reason Jesus came to earth is to succeed for us where we fall short. God wants to help us, and we are yearning for help; it's a perfect match.

Contemplatio (contemplation): This final stage (though frequently overlooked) is one of vital importance. The "task" in this stage is to simply be silent in the presence of God (Psalm 46:10). This is one of the most essential aspects for building a growing relationship with the Lord. Many testify that at the end of a *lectio divina* session one has a feeling of closeness and intimacy with the Lord. One of the most valuable things that we can do with this feeling is to relax and embrace it. Just "be" with God. We don't need to always be talking at God. In this stage we are to simply sit in the presence of God and feel His tender love and embrace. We are to continue to resist worrying about our cell phones, work, friends, illnesses, and whatever else holds us back from God and sit in the love that is shared between us and Jesus.

Part of contemplation (some people make this a separate stage called *Incarnatio* – "living") is to commit yourself, with the help of God, to "do" the truth that he has implanted in your heart. It is our submitting to God's Word, our living it out, that God is calling us to (e.g., James 1:22-25, Matthew 7:15-27, Romans 2:12-16). Living out our faith is a following of Jesus that happens naturally as we know Christ and become like him.

At the end of the contemplation stage of a particular portion of Scripture, you will naturally come to a place where you are done. Your choice then is to repeat the process with another passage or phrase from Scripture or simply close off your *lectio divina* session with a prayer of thanksgiving.

Final Thoughts

Lectio divina is a process that will take some getting used to. Try not to quit if you aren't fond of it after your first few attempts. Remember that it is much like learning to play the piano. At first each step may seem rigid and awkward, but after some practice and experience you can learn to have life-giving communication with God.

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