

# Lectio Divina



*Increasing Your Intimacy  
With God*

## Introduction

Praying can be a complex practice. For some, it means spending time with God and doing all the talking. Some even view God as a magician, responsible to clean up messes and fulfill every desire. Jan Johnson in her book *When the Soul Listens* says this, *"I reduced God to a servant or a vending machine. I put my coin of faith (prayer) into the slot and expected to find the prize (happiness, achievement success) in the tray at the bottom.* Thus, it can become very disappointing when answers don't happen as expected. Am I getting through? Is God even listening? Too often, questions like these can discourage us from communicating with the Lord. *The point of prayer*, Oswald Chambers confirms, *it not to get answers from God, but to have oneness with him. If we pray only because we want answers, we will become irritate and angry with God."* Still, the yearning for a deeper connection continues to churn in our soul.

There is a practice of praying Scripture which can satisfy this desire. It's called *Lectio Divina*. *Lectio Divina* is a form of meditation rooted in liturgical celebration which dates back to early monastic communities. It was an approach followed by monks in their daily encounter with Scripture. David Benner describes it *"not so much as way of reading as a way of listening. It is listening to the voice of God, communicated through Scriptures, and revealed by the Spirit. It is, therefore, prayer because it is an opening of self to God."*

Proverbs 1:5 says, *"Let the wise listen and add to their learning, and let the discerning get guidance."* (NIV) The Bible is replete with instances of men and women who listened, conversed, rested, waited and spoke often with God. The idea of a contemplative interchange with him is confirmed over and over again by Scripture which commands, not just listening but also abiding. Jan Johnson indicates *"the point of resting, waiting and listening is to build relationship."* This way of sacred reading will do just that.

As a prayer practice, *Lectio Divina* consists of four basic steps or components to facilitate a living conversation between you and God. It involves connecting with God in mind and heart, through our senses and imagination, through being still yet being active. In other words, we enter the exchange with our whole focus.

The four parts to this practice are as follows:

1. *Lectio* – **READ**. Peruse the text.
2. *Meditatio* – **REFLECT**. Ponder the text
3. *Oratio* – **RESPOND**. Pray the text
4. *Contemplatio* – **RESIDE**. Practice the text.

Every part of *Lectio Divina* is important. However, these phases are not exercises one must perform correctly, in a certain way, to get it right. It doesn't matter if your reading doesn't follow an outline or sequence. It doesn't matter if there are times you hear nothing as you reflect on God's Word. It doesn't matter if your response in prayer is brief or cut short. Prayer is not a product but a relationship. Relax your expectations and just be with God.

Following is a detailed explanation of each phase.



## LECTIO - READ

Lectio Divina literally means 'divine reading.' It's a way to engage with God's Word to hear a personal message from him just for you. Psalm 38:4 says, *"Taste and see that the Lord is good."* (NIV). So, in that sense, think of it as the difference between eating a candy bar and eating a piece of jerky. With a candy bar, you hardly chew it. A few chomps and wham, it's gone. Too often, that's how we read Scripture. In a hurry, which is reading without taking it in. However, when you eat jerky, it takes more than just a few chews. You have to roll it over in your mouth, letting the juices flow, savoring the taste. Chewing it takes time and it's a much slower process.

This is a good picture of what the "Lectio" part of Lectio Divina is really about . . . chewing on the Scripture. It's rolling the verse(s) over in your mind and chewing, like you do with jerky. Savor it, even if you've read it one hundred times! Sit with it for a moment without rushing forward. There is always something the Lord can reveal. How does this help in building intimacy with God? Because building intimacy is a process. It doesn't happen immediately. It takes reading the Word, submitting to the Word and living the Word.

David Benner says, *"Whatever you read, the important thing is to read it slowly and contemplative, several times. Remember, this is not reading for content. It is contemplative listening with openness of mind and heart. Takt a small morsel of Scripture and expect God to give you a word or phrase from it that will nourish your soul and meet your present spiritual needs."*

## MEDITATIO - REFLECT

The second part of Lectio Divina moves us from chewing on the words to ingesting them, letting the images and stories penetrate our mind. It's participation, pondering and listening to hear what God wants to impress on your heart.

In other words, it's being still before the Lord. And it can sometimes be a difficult discipline. Henry Nouwen explains it this way: *"As soon as we are alone, without people to talk with, books to read, TV to watch, or phone calls to make, an inner chaos opens up in us. This chaos can be so disturbing and so confusing that we can hardly wait to get busy again."*

Because of the negative use of meditation by Eastern religions, we are sometimes afraid of even just the word meditate. However, reflecting is a great way to listen, and is not something to fear. There are numerous Scriptures which encourage meditating on God's Word. Philippians 4:8 (NIV) *"Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things."* The Greek word here for *think* is logizomai - to reckon, count, compute, calculate, count over, meditate.

Psalms, the Bible's primary prayer book, also emphasizes resting and reflecting on God. In Psalms 62:5 and 116:7, rest is demonstrated by outward silence which translates into listening and meditating. The point of resting (pondering), waiting and silence is to build a relationship with God. And in these moments, you can freely open your heart to him.

Please remember, however, we are all individuals and God treats us as such. The way one person hears God will never be exactly the way someone else hears him. So, never compare your quiet time and sitting before the Lord, with someone else's quiet time. And it doesn't need to be forced. Jan Johnson explains, *"Trying hard to be at contemplative prayer may even sabotage it. When you come to the Lord, learn to have a quiet mind. Cease from any self-effort. Your first priority is no loner to get what you want, but to listen to the heart of God and see what God wants."*



## ORATIO – RESPOND

The third part of Lectio Divina is something we all do - pray. However, there are many perceptions and expectations of prayer. Think for a moment about your expectation and perception of prayer. Do you find your prayers are only full of requests? Do you feel that when you pray, you're spending time with God? Prayer is not merely a way to get things from him. Too often we are so busy asking for something there's rarely time to hear him.

In Lectio Divina, responding with prayer means to embrace the way God met you. It's not a verbal tool for working on God, or a formula for getting our way. It's a way to commune with him. It's not a method. It doesn't even have to start with "Dear Lord." It can be as casual as "Good Morning God." You can pray Scripture; you can sing a praise song, or it can even be a response that includes an act of service. The point is the reply should match the message. Listen and seek what God wants from you.

Jeremiah 33:3 (NIV) *"Call to me and I will answer you and tell you great and unsearchable things you do not know."* Don't get stuck with feeling there is only one way to pray. In reality, there are many. Branch out. There is just no excuse for not praying. In fact, Martin Luther said this, *"The fewer the words, the better the prayer."*

## CONTEMPLATIO - RESIDE

This last part of Lectio Divina is applying what we hear to our lives . . . residing in the read, meditated and prayed text. It's often considered what only monks and nuns do in monasteries. However, it can be what we do in everyday life. David Benner describes it as, *"Allowing prayer to sink to the level of our very being is the gift of the Spirit that results from hearing, pondering and responding,"* This equips us to live our life being with God, or what Brother Lawrence called *"practicing God's presence."*

Contemplatio, however, is not about service. Being busy *for* the Lord is not the same as being busy *with* the Lord. The words 'for' and 'with' are very important and very different. Even though we may think those little prepositions mean the same thing; they don't. One word represents doing something while the other word involves no action, but just being.

There is also a huge misconception that serving equals relationship. While your response to God may include an *act* of service, being busy serving God, doing Bible studies, attending prayer meetings, is not residing in Him. Doing is not the same as abiding. Joni Eareckson Tada, a Christian author and painter, says this, *"God is more concerned with my growing closer to His heart than keeping commitments or public ministry."*

Somehow busyness has become a sign of accomplishment. Truth is, the busyness can cause a disconnect in our relationship with the Lord. God's purpose for us is not that we do more for him, but that we choose to *be* with Him more. Abiding, having a close relationship with the Lord, is what "contemplatio" is all about. Residing in him, allows him to do transformative work in us, so his glory will emanate from within.

## Conclusion

Using Lectio Divina is a way to have flexibility and choices in how you structure your time with the Lord. Days are never the same – there is just too much going on. So, use one or all of these parts of Lectio Divina to help you practice the presence of God daily. There really isn't a formula. To encounter God on an intimate level, it's all about quiet, and taking time to read, reflect, respond and reside with Him. It can be anytime, anyplace, anywhere, and for as long or as short a time as you choose. Henri Nouwen in his book *Making All Things New*, says this, *"It is better to have a daily practice of ten minutes [of] solitude than to have a whole hour once in a while."*



## Suggestions for Further Reading

*When the Soul Listens* by Jan Johnson  
*Opening to God* by David G. Benner  
*The only Necessary Thing* by Henri J. M. Nouwen  
*Making All Things New* by Henri J. M. Nouwen  
*If You Will Ask* by Oswald Chambers  
*The Practice of the Presence of God* by Brother Lawrence  
*Hearing God* by Dallas Willard  
*Invitation to solitude and Silence* by Ruth Haley Barton

