

Am I Reading or Am I Studying?

Chapter 8, “Contemplation Develops the Beholder,” in the book *The Contemplative Life*, was originally the August 1961 Infinite Way Monthly Letter. Joel treasured the Monthly Letter, saying, “*If I had to give up all of The Infinite Way activities but one, the one that I would keep is our Monthly Letter. That Monthly Letter is a precious, precious activity, and for this reason: It is to keep us with a fresh message every month, a large enough message to last a whole month, but with specific principles for use and application in our daily experience.*”¹

Joel encouraged students not only to read the Letter, but to **study** it; to find the principles in it and to **apply** them in daily living so that they could make this work **practical**. He thought of the Monthly Letter as an “**outline for study and practice**” and said,

*“Too many people have received the letter and said, ‘Oh, how beautiful,’ or written me a letter: ‘I think this is the best one you ever did,’ all of which really means nothing, because unless they were able to **find what was in that letter, and apply it in the practical experiences of their lives**, the fact that it was beautiful, and the fact that it sounded wonderful, and even sometimes poetic, really has no meaning. It is only when we catch a principle from the Letter, or two principles and **begin to apply them in our experience** that the letter becomes of value.”²*

So we have an opportunity to ask ourselves: “Am I **reading** these chapters or am I **studying** them?” The dictionary says that “study” means “to apply the mental faculties to the acquisition of knowledge,” “to devote time and attention to acquire knowledge,” “to examine something very carefully,” “to investigate and analyze in detail,” “to read intently or meditatively,” “to reflect, muse, think and ponder.”

While our ultimate goal is an *experience* of God, study is an important step in our journey. Joel says, “*When one does not know the correct letter of truth, it is very difficult to acquire the consciousness which leads to the actual God-experience. So the earnest reading and **study** of the letter of truth are steps opening consciousness to the experience.*”³ Study is directed at understanding and remembering. We aim to understand and grasp the intended meaning and significance of what we read; to be thoroughly familiar with the principles presented so that we can apply them; and to see how what we read fits into the larger message of The Infinite Way. We want to remember the essence of what we study so that it is in our treasure box of spiritual truth and we can call it up when we need it.

It is helpful to create a method for studying a chapter that best fits your own learning style. Some of us might read a chapter slowly, stopping frequently to ponder what has been read. Others quickly scan the chapter first, and then go back and consider it thoughtfully. Some take notes as they read, putting the message of the chapter into their own words, and they later review and contemplate their notes. Some may find it helpful to capture the message of the chapter in a drawing, a poem or some other art form. We encourage you to find the method that works for you to ensure that you are truly **studying** these chapters, and not just reading them.

¹ Recording #237A, 1958 Manchester Closed Class, “Spirit, Grace and Meditation”

² Recording #504A, 1962 Capetown Class, “First and Second Meditations”

³ *Living the Infinite Way*, Chapter 2

Example: A Contemplative Study Tool

One study method that has proven very helpful for us is using what we call “a contemplative study tool.” We share it here simply as an example of one possible way to study. The study method you design for yourself may be very different from this one, but it will suit you perfectly.

Upon completing a chapter, we ask, ponder, and answer specific questions. The idea is to use the questions to help us know whether we really understand the key message and principles of the chapter, and to help us identify specific practices that we can apply in daily life. The questions we use are:

1. What is the primary message of this chapter? How would I summarize it in a few sentences?
2. What are the key points in this chapter?
3. What Infinite Way principles are addressed in this chapter?
4. What practices were recommended or reinforced in this chapter?
5. Were any scriptural verses used to support the message of this chapter? (*These can be used for contemplative meditations.*) What other scriptural passages come to me that relate to the message of this chapter?
6. What new insights, revelations, or realizations did I get from this chapter?
7. [*For the Eight Most Important Chapters*] Why did Joel identify this as one of the most important chapters in the writings?

As we study the chapter, if questions arise, we make note of them. If they are not answered in the chapter, we take them into contemplative meditation with an attitude of receptivity, or we research them using the electronic library search tool on the Acropolis Books website.

Example: Notes from Using the Contemplative Study Tool

To illustrate how this particular study tool works, notes for the first five questions are shared below for the chapter “Contemplation Develops the Beholder” in *The Contemplative Life*.

1. What is the primary message of this chapter?

Contemplating truth develops our capacity to be a beholder. As a beholder, we look at the world and all appearances with a sense of detachment. We are as an observer, with no judgment or reaction to so-called good or evil appearances, and with no interest in changing them. We reject *all* appearances, and turn within, listening for the revelation of the Truth.

2. What are the key points in this chapter?

- The spiritual life is a life of discipline based on **rejecting every appearance**, whether good or evil, in the realization that whatever is of God is invisible to the human senses. **We do not judge** what appears to be evil, nor do we accept the appearance of good.

We recognize that the only Real is the Invisible, the spiritual. What we apprehend through the senses is not the spiritual creation, but a **finite concept of it.** We are not seeing the world as it IS, but as our conditioned mind interprets it.

- To live life as a beholder and bear witness to the presence of God, **we must learn to be still** in the face of all appearances—good or evil. **We must discipline ourselves to do nothing, think nothing, and withhold all judgment.** But we must **ALSO** have an **attitude of listening within**, realizing “There is neither good nor evil; there is only the presence of God.” This realization lifts us in consciousness, and the appearance seems to dissolve. We are seeing that which truly IS—the perfection and harmony of God.
- We do not have to fight, remove, change, overcome, improve, or destroy anything in the external world. We **look at it with a sense of detachment as an onlooker or a beholder.** We remember, “My kingdom—the place where I live, move, and have my being—is not of this world. Therefore, **I have nothing to do about this world except to know that it is not of My kingdom.**” We just **bear witness, or behold**, with the idea of **letting the Father present the picture** to us. We **do not react to erroneous appearances**, and they do not register in our consciousness.
- Through the contemplative life—a life in which we ponder, reflect, and contemplate Truth and commune with our inner Self—we come to the point where we **look with compassion** on those who are in ignorance of their true identity or do not understand the nature of God’s world. We **no longer sit in judgment on them, condemn them, or misunderstand them.** We know that at some point, they will awaken.
- When we come to the place of being a beholder, **we no longer fear** for our life. We recognize our life as the life of God—indestructible, immortal, and eternal. In the face of danger, we **withdraw judgment** and realize, “Whatever is real is God-maintained and God-sustained, permanent and eternal. I do not have to save it, preserve it, or do anything about it. I merely have to behold God in action.” We are **beholders**, completely without judgment, in the realization that **this is God’s universe.**
- Three scriptural passages were the foundation of Joel’s healing work:
 - **“It is I; be not afraid.”⁴**
Our true identity is one with God. Have this conviction when you see the pictures presented by the world, so that you do not see anything that has to be changed, altered, improved, or removed.
 - **“Cease ye from man, whose breath is in his nostrils.”⁵**
Do not try to change, improve, or heal human man, and certainly do not judge or condemn him. Take no account of him. In other words, be still!
 - **“My kingdom is not of this world.”⁶**
Do not judge by the appearances of this world, because in My kingdom, harmony IS. “My kingdom” is a spiritual kingdom. We cease from all attempts to change, improve, heal, or reform the material picture.

⁴ Matthew 14:27

⁵ Isaiah 2:22

⁶ John 18:36

- We are transformed in only one way: by **coming into the awareness of our true identity**, and **learning to be still and know that “I am God.”** *I* is the secret of the transcendental life. Because *I* is God, that *I* governs Its own universe. It maintains and sustains it. In the awareness of that mystical *I* of our being, we become beholders of the Christ in action, and can pierce the veil of illusion. Then we begin to see Reality instead of the pictures drawn by the conditioned human mind.

3. What Infinite Way principles are addressed in this chapter?

The chapter focuses on the **nature of God**, the **nature of error**, and the **nature of individual being**.

4. What practices were recommended, implied or reinforced in this chapter?

- **Contemplation on truth**, since this is what develops our ability to become a beholder. We become what we hold in our mind.
- Disciplining ourselves to **refrain from judgement or reaction** to any appearance, **AND** maintaining an **attitude of listening within** so that the Truth behind the appearance can be revealed to us. Developing a **sense of detachment** and becoming a **beholder**.
- **Looking with compassion** on those who are in ignorance of their true identity; **refraining from judging or condemning** them.
- **Taking the time to be still**, so that we can be open and receptive, and come into the awareness of our true identity as *I*.

5. Were any scriptural verses used to support the message of this chapter? (*These can be used for contemplative meditations.*) What other scriptural passages come to me that relate to the message of this chapter?

These verses were used in the chapter and support its message:

- “It is I; be not afraid.”
- “Cease ye from man, whose breath is in his nostrils.”
- “My kingdom is not of this world.”

Other relevant verses that relate to the chapter:

- “Choose ye this day whom you will serve—God or material sense.”
- “Abide in the Word, and let the Word abide in you.”
- “Pray without ceasing.”
- “Dwell in the secret place of the Most High.”
- “Resist not evil.”
- “I have overcome the world.”

“These Books Are to Be Worn Out”

Joel said, *“These books are not just to be read. They are books that are to be worn out until new copies are needed.”* We trust this example of one approach to study will be helpful as you develop the study method that feels just right for you.