

The Emperor's Handbook
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Note: Scholars refer to the individual numbered passages in the *Meditations* as chapters.

Marcus Aurelius lived from AD 121 to 180 and was Roman emperor from 161 to 180. His father, Marcus Verus, died when Marcus was three, and Marcus was raised by his mother and grandfather.

Hadrian was emperor of Rome when Marcus was born. When Hadrian's son died in AD 138, Hadrian adopted Antoninus Pius as his heir and Antoninus adopted Marcus as his. Hadrian died that year and Antoninus became emperor. In 161, Antoninus died and Marcus Aurelius became emperor.

From comments made in the *Meditations*, scholars believe that Marcus wrote them during the last 10 or 12 years of his life, a period when he was on campaign with the army for most of the time. There are many amazing things about the *Meditations*, and this is one—that he found time for writing such profound reflections while on campaign with the army, with all the labor, exhaustion, and distraction that would have involved.

A second amazing thing about the *Meditations* is that, according to Oxford classics scholar R.B. Rutherford, they are unlike anything else written up to that time. The same features that make the *Meditations* unique also make the work attractive to almost everyone who reads it. The book has been a philosophical classic for 1800 years and one of the treasured writings from the tradition of Stoic philosophy. Marcus's frank, personal style, his openness and humility, and other aspects we can discuss, make us believe that if we had been able to know Marcus we would have liked him. He seems like a very good man, one who worked at being just, kind, and forgiving. I don't even mind that he didn't like Christians. I don't much like them either.

I have read the *Meditations* numerous times over the past 20 years, since *The Emperor's Handbook* was published. I keep the book by my reading chair and turn to it often for encouragement and inspiration. Christians believe we are supposed to read the Bible to learn how to live well, but frankly, I am tempted to say that there is more in the brief *Meditations* that helps me to live well than there is in the much longer Bible. For example, the Bible tells us to forgive, and to love our enemies, but doesn't give us much about what this looks like in daily life. Marcus hammers on it, coming back to it over and over so that one gets a vivid picture of what it looks like in daily life and one is persuaded of the rightness of not holding the wrongs of others against them and not letting them affect you. This is really hard to do, which is why it is so helpful to read Marcus over and over for advice and inspiration to make the effort.

There are things I don't like in the *Meditations*, but that doesn't keep me from loving what there is to love. In the *Meditations*, there are certainly a few passages in which Marcus is simply wrong. But it seems to me that Marcus must have had in mind a context that isn't known to the reader. For example, his remark in chapter 55 of Book 8 that a person's wrongdoing only hurts himself and doesn't hurt another is not only wrong; it is one of the dumbest and wrongest things anyone has ever said. I can only imagine that there is missing context here. Possibly Marcus meant this as something like a personal goal for his own attitude and not a blanket statement about humanity. Fortunately, such remarks are few in the *Meditations*. Most of the book is worth reading over and over.

I love Marcus's desire to treat others—including his enemies and those who wrong him—with respect. I love his humility and self-criticism, his profession of simplicity, his desire for

moral purity, and his refusal to be bothered by things he cannot control. I am inspired to imitate him. And one of the most commented on of Marcus' meditations is his equanimity in the face of death—his repeated encouragement not to be sad about the one thing that happens universally and inescapably.

Another of my favorite themes is the control or elimination of anger, the subject of one of the longest chapters (11.18). There are many other noble themes that could be mentioned, but I leave these for the discussion.

Rutherford points out that the quality of the writing varies considerably. Some passages use what Rutherford calls "naive repetition," while many others are compositions or epigrams composed with considerable rhetorical skill. The epigrammatic character of these comes across better perhaps in other translations because the Hicks were aiming for readability rather than concision. To cite just one example, in 4.7 *The Emperor's Handbook* reads

Stop trying to make something of it, and you will rid yourself of the notion, "I've been wronged." Overcome your hurt feelings or injured pride in this way, and you will get rid of the wrong itself.

Rutherford's translation reads

Get rid of the judgement, and you are rid of the 'I am hurt'; get rid of the 'I am hurt', and you are rid of the hurt itself.

I conclude by quoting one of my favorite passages, the opening chapter of Book 10:

Is it possible that one day I shall see you, O my soul, good, simple, indivisible, stripped of every pretense, more solid than the flesh that now covers you? Will you ever know a day of unclouded love and tenderness? Will you ever be content—no hopes, no regrets, needing nothing, desiring nothing, animate or inanimate, not even for a moment's pleasure—nor wanting a little more time to prolong the ecstasy, or a more pleasing room or view or climate, or more sweet accord in your relations with others? When will you be content with your present condition, happy with all you have, accepting it as a gift from the gods and acknowledging that all is well with you and that all will be well? When will you understand that the gods hold dear those gifts (the good, the just, the beautiful) they intend for the preservation of a perfect living whole—gifts that nourish the universe by gathering and binding the primal elements dispersed by dissolution and decay and needed for each new creation? Will there ever come a day, O my soul, when you can live in the company of men and gods, blameless in their eyes, without blaming them at all?