

An Introduction to Imaginative Prayer



DEEPER
CONNECTION

As a Christian, you might wonder what it would be like to meet Jesus face to face to walk with him along the roads, fields, and seashores of ancient Palestine. You could see his miracles and hear his parables. You might even approach him...talk to him, ask him questions, seek his healing touch.

St. Ignatius believed that God intended for the human imagination to draw us closer to him. He was well aware that the imagination can just as easily separate us from God, of course.

But imaginative prayer is different from idle daydreaming in two ways:

It is powered not just by our imagination, but by the Holy Spirit working through our imagination.

It is rooted in the Bible

In imaginative prayer, the same Holy Spirit who inspired the authors of the Gospels also “inspires” (literally “breathes into”) our imaginations in a way that draws us closer to Christ. Prayer is a conversation with God.

Imaginative prayer creates a space for that encounter.

The heart of imaginative prayer, then, is to “meet” the person of Jesus in a personal way.

With all this in mind, let’s go over the basic method of imaginative prayer.

Choose a Scripture text

First, choose a suitable Scripture text. Imaginative prayer can be used with any Biblical passage, but the Gospels, especially the parables, can be very helpful.

Prepare with prayer

Rather than diving right into the Scripture, let’s first prepare ourselves. Find a quiet and comfortable place to pray and take a few moments to settle in. Then, take a few moments to pray along these lines:

Begin by becoming aware that God is already here waiting for you. Rest in his loving presence.

Then, respond to God’s loving presence by giving yourself to him in time. Pray that you might love and serve him in all your thoughts, words, and actions.

Prayer is fundamentally an expression of our relationship with God. When we begin by acknowledging God’s availability to us and by making ourselves available to God in return, we situate everything that happens next within that relationship. This is not a project we undertake on our own for our own benefit; rather, this is a journey we are making with God and for God. You can think of this moment as analogous to the greeting that two friends exchange when they first meet one another; it does not need to last long before you move into the heart of your time of prayer.

Read the scripture

You may wish to ask the Holy Spirit to help you to read the text prayerfully. Given the amount of reading most of us do online, you may be in the habit of skimming the text rather than ruminating on the words. Try to slow down; the Gospels were written slowly and intentionally. Each word and phrase, and each omission, was chosen for a reason. Stay with the words and see what they serve up.

Set the scene

After you have read the story at least once, use your imagination to set the scene. Be as specific about the details as possible, engaging all your senses: touch, smell, sound, sight and taste, if the opportunity arises. Make the Gospel story come vividly to life, almost as if you were directing a movie. The Son of God chose to save us not merely with a word from heaven, but by becoming the Word-made-flesh at a specific time and place in human history. In imagining the Gospel in its physical setting, we honor the reality of Jesus' incarnation, and set the stage for encountering him "in the flesh" ourselves.

One of the most important details to consider is how you will enter the story:

Who will
you be?

Where will you stand
in relation to Jesus?

The role you choose to play will dramatically affect how your prayer experience unfolds. Take, for example, the story of the woman caught in adultery (reading guide John 8:2-11).

Choosing being the woman will lead to a much different prayer experience than choosing to be one of her accusers. And choosing to be an uninvolved observer (one of the disciples, for instance) will place you at a safe distance from the action.

Someone might have good reason to keep their distance—the trauma of a sexual assault, for instance. But in general, you want to take up a position that involves you in the action of the story and brings you into contact with Jesus.

Here are some things to consider as you set the stage for your imaginative prayer experience:

- Who are you in this story?
- What time of day is it?
- What is the weather like?
- What do you see around you?
- Who is present?
- What do they look like, and what are they doing?
- What ambient sounds do you hear?
- How do you feel?
- Hot?
- Hungry?
- Tired?
- What do you smell?
- Above all, be sure to pay attention to Jesus.
- What does he do?
- What does he look like ?
- What does he sound like?

Walk with Jesus

Once you have "composed" the setting of the story, put aside the text and let yourself enter into it. This is the body of your imaginative prayer, so take as much time here as you need.

Before stepping into the Gospel, pray for what you most desire from this encounter with Jesus.

Next, enter the Gospel, letting the action of the story unfold by itself under the direction of the Holy Spirit; do not actively direct or force the actions of the main characters. Your role is to participate in the action of the story in whatever way seems natural. You might offer to help Martha at the cooking fire, for example, or you might lead the colt for Jesus as he rides into Jerusalem. You might find yourself replying to other characters' questions or engaging in conversation with them.

You might even find yourself interacting directly with Jesus.

A word of caution: During imaginative prayer, we are not primarily concerned with achieving historical accuracy; if the Holy Spirit leads you to imagine that Peter's fishing boat bears a strong resemblance to an outboard follow the promptings of the Spirit!

Finally, speak to God directly as you step out of the Gospel story. He invites us to share our thoughts, feelings, and desires with God, much as one friend would speak to another.

It can be helpful to close our time of prayer with the Lord's Prayer. The point is to punctuate the end of this special time with Jesus.

Reflect on the Journey

After you are finished praying, spend some time reflecting on your encounter with Jesus. You can do this immediately after your prayer or as you go about the rest of your day. You might record your reflection in a journal or notebook or share and discuss your experience with a trusted friend.

We meet at St Giles, Church Street,
Copmanthorpe, YO23 3SE
(Behind the Royal Oak) every
Tuesday Evening from 7.30pm

Contact Ian Cartwright
ian@imaginechristianministry.co.uk



DEEPER
CONNECTION