

An Exercise to Practice Imaginative Prayer

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Jesus was a master storyteller. He often taught using parables. The four Gospels record forty-six occasions when Jesus used a story to teach a lesson. He used simple, culturally relevant stories that engaged the listeners' imaginations to illuminate a spiritual truth. He revealed the heart and nature of God to his listeners through these parables.

As people listened, they could visualize exactly what Jesus was talking about; they would be fully engaged, picturing the many day-to-day objects, people, situations, and activities that Jesus referred to. As Jesus told his stories, those who listened engaged their imaginations, perhaps picturing themselves in the settings he described. Just as this helped them to understand the point Jesus was trying to make, our imaginations will help us when it comes to engaging with the stories in the Bible.

Try this as an exercise.

- 1** Find a passage from one of the Gospels where Jesus is connecting with or spending time with other people. This could, perhaps, be one of the miraculous events or a discourse as they walk along a dusty road. It doesn't matter if the incident is long or short, but at this point, it would be good to have Jesus in it.
- 2** Remember that you are engaging with and encountering the Word of God. Remember that the Word of God brings life and has power.
- 3** Be still and remember God is present. You need God to illuminate what you are about to read. It is helpful to prayerfully acknowledge his presence by saying a simple *Thank you, God, that you are here.*
- 4** Name and tame any distractions and think about your breathing and posture.
- 5** Read through the passage three or more times, until you start to become familiar with the story. Try to picture the details.

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6 Once you have this passage pretty well locked in, it's time to move to the main part of the exercise. I have a super active imagination and like the idea of constructing a movie-like setup. Some people take a more verbal approach or mull over some specifics.

- Close your eyes and reconstruct the scene in your imagination; take your time and try to move through the scene chronologically. Observe what is happening. Watch the people—the children, women, and men in the scene.
- Ask yourself questions like these: *What time of day is it? What temperature is it? Are people tired? What are the environmental conditions like? Is there a lot of noise? What can you smell? What does Jesus look like? How are other people reacting to and interacting with him? What are people chatting about among themselves? Is there emotion in their words—sadness, anger, curiosity, joy, judgment? Is Jesus doing anything specific? Who is he focusing on? Who is he praying for, and what does that look like?*

7 Place yourself in the scene in whatever way you want—as a member of the crowd, a person receiving healing, one of the disciples, a friend of the person needing healing. Probably best not to make yourself Jesus—we don't want anyone coming out of this with a Messiah complex!

8 When you have finished this time, it is helpful to pray, to speak with Jesus. Express your heart, what you have seen and felt from this time, what you've observed, what's made you happy, what's made you sad, what other emotions you've felt.

9 Writing about your encounter in your journal will be helpful if you have time.

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