
PRAYER 8: PRAYING WITH YOUR IMAGINATION

IMAGINE YOURSELF IN A BIBLE STORY

This technique allows you to get a deeper, more holistic understanding of a Bible passage as well as allowing God to speak to you through the process.

Choose a Bible story (maybe Mark 4 v35-41; Mark 10 v 46-52; John 8 v2-11; Luke 9 v 12-17; Acts 16 v 25-34; Luke 22 v39-54) and begin by centring yourself on God in prayer (see session 7). Read the story slowly. Then choose a character in the story from whose viewpoint you want to witness events. Now imagine yourself as that character and **allow the story to unfold** as you read it slowly. That means, **be there** first-hand as one of the people caught up in the action, *not* second-hand (what I would think if I was there would be... **you are there**, so react first-hand. Pause after every action in the story; ask yourself: how am I feeling now? how are others feeling now? Rely on all of your senses to keep you 'there' first-hand: smell the smells; feel the heat, the cold, the fear etc. How are you reacting to the events as they unfold? How are others around you (inside the story) reacting? At the end of the passage, offer to God your insights, remembering that the whole event has been a prayer shared with God.

This may be hard for those with a strong 'thinking' or 'sensing' personality as they will find it hard not to **drive the story** into their pre-conceived or conventional interpretations; they should be involved with all of their senses to pick up the sights and smells and emotions of the events (ask yourself (for example): is it a hot day by the lakeside? Can smell the catch of fish?).

Those with a strong 'feelings' or 'intuitive' personality will find it easier to let the events and feelings of the story **drive them** to new insights and conclusions. At the end they should check that these are consistent with what it actually says in the text!

"It is important in this type of meditation that we do not try to drive it in one predetermined direction... we need to allow God to use our imaginations as freely as possible to lead us to an encounter with him which will refresh and motivate us" (John Pritchard in *Beginning Again*).

IGNATIAN SPIRITUALITY

Ignatian spirituality is an approach laid down by St Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556), the founder of the Jesuits. It tends to use the imagination and senses to reach a communion of being with God.

It offers 'a way of proceeding' in daily life on our journey *into* God and *with* God. It offers (i) a vision of life (ii) an understanding of God (iii) a reflective approach to living (iv) a contemplative form of praying (v) a reverential attitude to our world (vi) an expectation of finding God in daily life.

The Ignatian spiritual approach is most often learned through a series of 'Ignatian Spiritual Exercises' on a guided retreat or through Spiritual Direction (see overleaf).

An important part of Ignatian practice is the '**Examen**' a reflection on the events and (in particular) the moods of your day, in an effort to discern when you were 'facing' God and 'turning away' from God (called '**consolation**' and '**desolation**'; see overleaf). A popular form of *Examen* is the 'THANK' prayer, which is used to structure 10-30min of reflective prayer in the evening:

- T I thank God for being with me
- H I ask for help to see the day as God sees it
- A I look at my attitudes today
- N I tell God my needs
- K I know God loves me, and I'm OK

IGNATIAN EXERCISES

At the centre of Ignatian Spirituality are the Ignatian Exercises. They are best described as teaching an approach to understanding and living with God in the world. Originally they were undertaken as an individual 30-day silent retreat guided by an Ignatian Spiritual Director. Many now do some of these exercises in an 8-day group retreat. Much of the 8-day version (the Principles and Foundation) can be found in Margaret Silf's immensely practical book *'Landmarks: an Ignatian Journey'*.

In the Principles and Foundations participants are encouraged to look at their lives so far: Where am I? How am I? Who am I? They identify their deepest desires. They look at the things to which they are attached or addicted and learn to achieve a balanced spiritual detachment. They come to terms with authenticity, truth and freedom. They learn to recognise when they are in 'Consolation' and 'Desolation', noticing when they are out of balance and what to do about it. They learn to embrace a prayerfully reflective approach to life, *'tracing the moods of the day'* at the end of it in an *'Examen'*. In short, they learn to identify and be with God in their daily lives.

CONSOLATION AND DESOLATION

The concepts of 'consolation' and 'desolation' have their origins in the teachings of St Ignatius. Silf explains these terms using two images:

- "Imagine for a moment that God is the **sun**. When you stand with your back to the sun, you are directed away from God. You are turned away from the Light of your truest centre. You are in 'desolation'. All you can see is your own shadow, darkness, fear. When you stand facing the sun, you are directed towards God. You are facing the light of your own truest centre. You are in 'consolation'. The darkness is behind you."
- "Imagine the **tide** ebbing and flowing on a beach. The beach represents 'our true centre and home in God and the destination of our journeying'. The tide is either moving towards the beach or away from it. We can swim with the tide or against it. We are in consolation when we are swimming with the tide towards the beach (i.e. journeying towards our destination in God); we are in desolation when we swim away from the beach (further away from our destination of rest in God). Even when we swim towards the beach, headwinds can impede our progress; they make our swimming difficult and blow us away from our destination. Even when we are directed towards God (swimming towards the beach) there are things which impede our progress (headwinds), cause turbulence or force us away from our destination."

Ignatius himself described the moods of the two orientations like this:

- "For those drifting away from God, the action of God in their lives disturbs them and churns up their moods, creating **peacelessness**, while the things that come from their own kingdoms [i.e. from their selves rather than from God] make them feel good and leave them apparently contented."
- "For those whose lives are moving towards God, the opposite effects are apparent; when God is touching them, they **feel at peace** and they know that somehow they are on solid ground; when they are (hopefully temporarily) attending to their own kingdoms, they feel that they are not really 'living true', and they experience inner turmoil."

Learning to discern our moods in this way can help us to determine whether we are moving in the will of God or not.

Ignatius advises that we should **not** make significant decisions when we are in desolation, but move through the desolation to consolation and then alter our course. **"When in desolation, don't take life-changing decisions, and don't go back on a decision that you took in a period of consolation."** Silf likens this to a **barge** moving through a

tunnel on a waterway; it can't turn around safely while it is in the tunnel but must wait until it is in the light at the other end of the tunnel. So too we should not try to alter course radically in the darkness of desolation.