



Week 6: Have A Little Talk With Jesus

Learning The Language of Prayer

Welcome to our sixth week of exploring the rich traditions of prayer. This week, we journey into the sacred practice of imaginative prayer, where we learn to see Scripture not just with our minds, but with the very depths of our hearts.

Week 6: Imaginative Prayer

Seeing Scripture with the Heart

Today we explore two powerful passages: Luke 15 and Mark 4:35-41. These scriptures invite us into God's story in ways that transform how we understand God's presence, power, and deep love for us. Imaginative prayer is an ancient practice that helps us move beyond simply reading words on a page to experiencing the living Word of God.

Through this sacred practice, we learn to use the gift of imagination that God placed within us, not to escape reality, but to enter more fully into the reality of God's kingdom. We will discover how our ancestors in faith used this same practice to sustain hope, envision freedom, and encounter the living Christ in their darkest hours.

Opening Our Hearts: A Sacred Pause

Musical Meditation

"*Steal Away to Jesus*" has been a beacon of hope for generations. Take 30 seconds now to listen quietly, allowing the melody to prepare your heart for what God wants to reveal to you today.

This spiritual, born in the crucible of slavery, carried dual meaning: a call to secret worship and a deeper call to communion with Christ. Let it carry you into this sacred space.

Visual Focus

Imagine a calm sea and a small boat, resting peacefully on the water. This image sets the tone for our practice today: entering the scene, finding ourselves in God's story, allowing the Spirit to speak.

Opening Prayer: "Lord, sanctify our imagination so we may see You in Your Word. Open the eyes of our hearts that we might behold wondrous things in Your law. Amen."

The Sacred Text: Dwelling in God's Story

We have two powerful passages before us today. Choose one to focus on, or if time allows, experience both. These are not just stories from long ago, they are living encounters waiting to meet us where we are.

Luke 15: The Prodigal Son

A story of wandering, homecoming, and radical grace. A father who runs. A son who returns. A feast of restoration. Where do you find yourself in this story? Are you the younger son, tasting the bitter fruits of separation? The older son, struggling with resentment? Or perhaps you see yourself in the father's extravagant love?

Mark 4:35-41: Jesus Calms the Storm

Waves crash. Disciples panic. Jesus sleeps, then speaks peace. This story captures every storm we've ever faced, every moment we've wondered if God sees our struggle. The boat rocks. The wind howls. And Jesus says, "Peace, be still."

Practice: Read your chosen passage slowly, twice. The first time, simply receive the words. The second time, notice which word, phrase, or image stands out to you. This is often the Spirit's gentle invitation to deeper understanding.

Richard Foster on Imaginative Prayer

Richard Foster, in his classic work on prayer, reminds us that God Himself gave us the gift of imagination. This gift is not meant for escapism or fantasy, but for entering into the living reality of Scripture in a way that transforms us from the inside out.

God's Gift to Us

Imagination is not opposed to faith, it is a vehicle for faith. God gave us this capacity to picture, envision, and experience so that we might know Him more deeply and personally. When we read Scripture with sanctified imagination, we move from information to transformation.

Entering the Story

We don't just observe the biblical narrative from a distance. We place ourselves in the story, walking the dusty roads with Jesus, feeling the spray of the storm, hearing the Father's voice. We stay there until the Holy Spirit illuminates truth that changes us.

Heart Knowledge

"The heart imagines what the mind cannot fully grasp." Some truths are too deep, too profound, too personal to be captured by analysis alone. Imaginative prayer allows us to know God with our whole being, not just our intellect.

Foster teaches us that this practice has been used by saints throughout history. From the Desert Fathers to Ignatius of Loyola to countless believers across cultures and centuries, God's people have found that entering Scripture imaginatively opens doors to encounter that mere study cannot provide.

Howard Thurman on Holy Imagination

Howard Thurman, the great mystic and mentor to the Civil Rights movement, understood that imagination is one of the most sacred gifts we possess. In his quiet moments with God, Thurman discovered that the imagination becomes a bridge between the seen and unseen worlds.

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"In the quiet, the mind paints pictures of God's nearness."
Thurman believed that in stillness, when we quiet the noise of the world and our own anxious thoughts, our imagination becomes a canvas where the Spirit paints portraits of divine presence.

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For Thurman, imagination was never about making things up or creating false realities. Instead, it was about opening ourselves to the deeper reality of God's presence that surrounds us always, even when our natural eyes cannot see it.

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Thurman taught that imagination helps bridge the seen and unseen. In a world that often feels dominated by harsh realities and visible injustices, the sanctified imagination allows us to perceive the greater reality of God's kingdom breaking through. We learn to see with the eyes of faith, to perceive God's movement even in difficult circumstances.

- ❏ **Thurman's Wisdom:** Use imagination to open yourself to God's presence, not to invent fantasy. The goal is always encounter with the true and living God, not creation of comfortable illusions. Our imagination should lead us deeper into reality, not away from it.

James Cone on Imagination and Liberation

James Cone, the father of Black Liberation Theology, understood something profound about the Black imagination: it has always been a form of holy resistance. The ability to see freedom before it existed physically, to imagine liberation while still in chains, to envision dignity in the face of dehumanization, this is not mere fantasy. This is prophetic vision. This is the Spirit at work.



Scripture as Liberation

Cone showed how our ancestors read the Exodus story and saw themselves. They weren't just reading ancient history, they were experiencing present hope. The imagination transformed Scripture from distant past to immediate promise.



Spirituals as Vision

The Spirituals turned biblical narrative into liberating vision. "Go Down Moses" wasn't nostalgia, it was prophecy. "Wade in the Water" wasn't just a song, it was a map to freedom, both spiritual and physical.



Imagining Freedom

"Before we were free, we imagined ourselves free." This is the power Cone identified: the sanctified imagination as an act of resistance against every force that would deny our humanity and God's promises.

Black imagination is holy resistance because it refuses to accept present oppression as final reality. It insists on seeing what God sees: beloved children, inheritors of promises, people destined for freedom and flourishing. This imagination, rooted in Scripture and empowered by the Spirit, sustained our ancestors and continues to sustain us today.

Scripture Safety Check: Staying Grounded in Truth

Imaginative prayer is powerful, but like any spiritual practice, it requires wisdom and discernment. We must ensure that our imagination serves the truth of Scripture rather than our own desires or biases. Here are essential guidelines to keep our practice healthy, holy, and grounded in God's Word.



Keep Jesus Central

Every vision, every insight, every imaginative encounter must ultimately point to Jesus Christ. He is the Word made flesh, the full revelation of God. If our imaginative prayer leads us away from Christ's character, teaching, or gospel, we've wandered off the path.



Stay Within the Biblical Text

Our imagination should illuminate and personalize Scripture, not add to it or contradict it. We enter the stories that are given to us in God's Word. We don't create new stories or claim new revelations that go beyond what Scripture teaches.



Confirm with Community

Share your insights with mature believers. The body of Christ provides essential wisdom and accountability. What seems like divine revelation to us individually should resonate with the broader witness of Scripture and the discernment of faithful community.



Avoid Projection

This is perhaps the most subtle danger: projecting our own wants, fears, or biases onto God and calling it God's voice. We must humbly recognize the difference between divine illumination and our own wishful thinking. True encounter with God often challenges us rather than simply confirming what we already wanted to believe.

Remember: The goal of imaginative prayer is not to hear what we want to hear, but to encounter who God truly is. Humility, accountability, and faithfulness to Scripture keep our practice healthy and life-giving.

Scripture Witness: Biblical Foundation for This Practice

Imaginative prayer isn't a modern invention or human technique, it flows from Scripture itself. The Bible repeatedly shows us that God speaks to the eyes of our hearts, that spiritual truth often comes through vision and imagination sanctified by the Holy Spirit. Let's look at three powerful witnesses from Scripture.

Luke 24:32 – Hearts Burning Within

"Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?" The disciples on the Emmaus road experienced Scripture coming alive in a way that set their hearts on fire. This is what imaginative prayer seeks: not just information, but transformation that makes our hearts burn with recognition of God's presence.

John 21 – Breakfast with the Risen Christ

The scene of Jesus cooking breakfast on the beach for His disciples shows us divine nearness made tangible. The smell of fish cooking, the feel of the morning air, the sound of waves, the taste of bread. John invites us to imagine ourselves there, experiencing resurrection presence through concrete, sensory details.

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Psalms 119:18 – Eyes to See Wonders

"Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your law." The Psalmist prays for more than physical sight, he asks God to open the eyes of his heart and imagination. He recognizes that God's Word contains wonders that require spiritual vision to perceive. This is the prayer we echo when we practice imaginative engagement with Scripture.

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These passages remind us that God invites us to experience the Word, not just study it. God wants to open the eyes of our hearts so we can perceive the living reality of God's presence and promises. This is biblical, this is holy, and this is transformative when practiced with reverence and discernment.

African American Witness: Our Sacred Heritage

Long before modern teachers wrote about imaginative prayer, our ancestors practiced it as a matter of survival and spiritual depth. In the most dehumanizing circumstances, they used sanctified imagination to enter Scripture's stories of deliverance, to encounter the living God, and to envision freedom. This is part of our inheritance.

The Spirituals: Scripture Made Song

When our ancestors sang "Go Down Moses," they weren't just remembering ancient Egypt. They were entering that story, claiming it as their own, seeing themselves in the Israelites, and claiming God's promise of liberation. The Spirituals used imagination to make Scripture a present reality, a source of hope and resistance.

Hush Harbors: Experiential Scripture

In secret gatherings in the woods, our ancestors didn't just read Scripture, they lived it. They experienced the exodus, walked with Jesus, claimed the promises. These hush harbors were laboratories of imaginative prayer where the Bible became experiential truth, not just ancient text.

James Weldon Johnson's Creation

In his powerful poem "The Creation," Johnson retells Genesis in Black voice and vernacular. He invites us to imagine God as a loving Creator who forms humanity with tender care. This is imaginative prayer in poetic form, making Scripture accessible and personal.

Our heritage teaches us that imaginative engagement with Scripture is not optional luxury, it is essential practice. It sustained our ancestors through unimaginable hardship. It can sustain us through our own challenges as we learn to see ourselves in God's story and God's story in our lives.

Pitfalls and Growth: Navigating This Practice Wisely

Every spiritual practice has potential pitfalls as well as possibilities for growth. Being aware of both helps us mature in our practice of imaginative prayer. Let's be honest about the dangers while celebrating the transformative potential.

⚠ Common Pitfalls

- **Making Ourselves the Hero:** We can subtly rewrite Scripture to center ourselves rather than Christ. We imagine ourselves as the wise one, the faithful one, the victorious one, rather than seeing our true need for grace.
- **Treating Visions as Commands:** We might mistake every imaginative insight as a direct command from God, bypassing discernment, wisdom, and community accountability. Not every thought or vision that comes during prayer is divine direction.
- **Escaping Rather than Engaging:** Imaginative prayer can become a way to avoid real life rather than engage it more deeply. We must ensure we're encountering God's truth, not creating comfortable fantasies.
- **Neglecting Other Forms of Prayer:** Imaginative prayer is one tool among many. If it becomes our only practice, we miss the richness of confession, intercession, thanksgiving, and other essential prayers.

✨ Paths to Growth

- **Sanctified Imagination Makes Scripture Personal:** When practiced humbly, this approach helps biblical truth move from head to heart. The stories become our stories. The promises become our promises.
- **The Word Becomes Alive:** Scripture stops being merely ancient text and becomes living encounter. We meet the living Christ in the pages, not just learn about Him.
- **Deeper Empathy and Understanding:** Entering the perspectives of different biblical characters helps us understand human nature, God's heart, and our own souls more deeply.
- **Sustained Spiritual Vitality:** This practice can reinvigorate our spiritual lives when other approaches feel dry or routine. It keeps our relationship with God fresh and dynamic.

The key to avoiding pitfalls while embracing growth is humility, accountability, and faithfulness to Scripture. When we approach imaginative prayer with reverence, recognizing both its power and our own limitations, it becomes a pathway to deeper communion with God.

A Word from Richard Foster

Sacred Truth

"Imaginative Prayer is not daydreaming but Spirit-led participation in the story of God."

— Richard Foster

This single sentence captures the essence of what we're learning today. There is a world of difference between idle fantasy and Spirit-led participation. Daydreaming is self-directed, serving our own desires and whims. But imaginative prayer is God-directed, inviting the Holy Spirit to guide us into truth, to illuminate Scripture, to reveal Christ more fully.

When we participate in God's story through sanctified imagination, we're not inventing new truths or adding to Scripture. We're allowing the truths already present in God's Word to penetrate more deeply into our hearts and lives. We're joining the great cloud of witnesses who have encountered the living God through the Living Word.

This practice requires both courage and humility: courage to engage our whole selves including our imagination, and humility to submit what we perceive to the authority of Scripture and the discernment of community. It's in this balance that transformation happens.

Discussion Questions: Going Deeper Together

Now it's time to process what we've learned together. These questions are designed to help you reflect on your own experience, share wisdom with one another, and grow in your understanding and practice of imaginative prayer. Take your time with each question. Listen well to one another. Remember that we learn as much from each other's experiences as from any teaching.



Question 1: Personal Experience

What Bible story has ever come alive to you in a new way? Perhaps you were reading a familiar passage and suddenly saw it from a different angle. Maybe a story you'd heard dozens of times suddenly touched your heart in a fresh way. What was that experience like? How did it change your understanding of God or yourself?



Question 2: Imagination and Presence

How does your imagination help you feel God's presence? When you pray, do you picture yourself with Jesus? Do you imagine scenes from Scripture? Or do you use your imagination in other ways to sense God's nearness? Share what works for you and what you're still learning.



Question 3: Healthy Boundaries

What boundaries keep imagination holy and truthful? Based on today's teaching and your own experience, what safeguards would you put in place? How can we encourage each other to use this practice wisely? What warning signs might indicate we've wandered off the path?

 **Discussion Guidelines:** Practice holy listening. Make space for quiet voices. Don't feel pressured to share if you need more time to process. What's shared in this group stays in this group. We're all learners together.

Guided Practice: Entering the Story

Now we move from learning about imaginative prayer to actually practicing it. This is where theory becomes experience, where teaching becomes encounter. We'll use Luke 15, the story of the Prodigal Son, as our text. Get comfortable. Have your journal ready. Open your heart to what God wants to show you.

01

Prepare Your Heart

Take a few deep breaths. Release the tensions and distractions of the day. Ask the Holy Spirit to guide your imagination and reveal truth. Invite Jesus to meet you in this story.

03

Enter the Scene

Now, in silence, imagine yourself in the story. Where are you? Are you the younger son in the far country? The older son outside the party? A servant watching? The father scanning the horizon? Don't force it, just notice where you find yourself.

05

Listen for Jesus

In this scene, what does Jesus want to say to you? Where is He in the story? What is He showing you about yourself, about God, about God's love? Listen with your heart, not just your ears.

Remember, there's no "right" experience to have. Some may have vivid visions. Others may simply sense a gentle truth. Some may feel deep emotion. Others may experience quiet insight. All of these are valid ways God speaks. Trust what happens in your own heart.

02

Listen to the Story

Close your eyes as the leader reads Luke 15 slowly and with expression. Don't try to analyze or figure anything out yet. Just receive the words and let them paint pictures in your mind.

04

Engage Your Senses

What do you see around you? What do you hear? Is there a smell in the air? What are you feeling emotionally? Let the scene become real to you. This isn't about getting every detail historically accurate, it's about entering the spiritual reality of the story.

06

Journal and Share

Write a few sentences about your experience. What stood out? What surprised you? What truth became more real? If you feel comfortable, share with a partner or the group.

Closing: Carrying This Practice Forward

Memory Verse

"Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?"

— Luke 24:32

Key Takeaway

God speaks through the sanctified imagination as we enter the Word with holy attention and open hearts. This isn't about creating false visions or escaping reality. It's about encountering the living Christ in the pages of Scripture, allowing God's truth to penetrate not just our minds but our whole being.

As you go from this place, carry this practice with you. Try entering different Scripture passages imaginatively this week. Notice which stories invite you in. Pay attention to what God reveals. Journal your insights. Share them with trusted friends. And always, always, test what you perceive against the truth of Scripture and the wisdom of faithful community.

Imaginative prayer is part of our heritage as African American believers. Our ancestors used it to sustain hope, envision freedom, and encounter God's presence in the darkest times. Now we inherit that practice, using it not to escape our reality but to see God's greater reality breaking through. We imagine not what we wish were true, but what God promises is true and is coming to pass.

May your imagination be sanctified. May your heart burn within you as Scripture comes alive. May you meet Jesus in new and transforming ways. And may the practice of imaginative prayer deepen your walk with God and strengthen your faith community.

Go in peace. Walk in faith. Pray with your whole heart, including your holy imagination.