

Gospel Meditation: A Brief Guide to the Imaginative Reading of Scripture

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It is difficult to read the stories of Scripture without engaging our imagination. We read Luke 1 and “see” Mary confronted with the Angel announcing her God-graced pregnancy. We read Nehemiah 8 and “hear” Ezra reading the book of the Law, giving interpretation, and the crowd weeping as they hear and understand. We “feel” the emotions present in the restoration of the hemorrhaging woman or of Zaccheus. In much of Christian history, the use of the imagination was employed intentionally as a component of a meditative and devotional reading of Scripture. In the sixteenth century, thanks to Ignatius of Loyola and many Puritan writers the “imaginative” reading of Scripture achieved classic expression. Here is a summary of the imaginative approach to Scripture using the Gospels as examples (taken from Evan B. Howard, *Praying the Scriptures: A Field Guide for Your Spiritual Journey*)

Choosing a Story – To practice Gospel meditation, pick a story from Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John. List E [in *Praying the Scriptures*] offers a number of Gospel stories that illustrate various aspects of God’s character. They are arranged by meditation theme and by their location in the various Gospels.

Opening in Prayer – Take a minute to pray and ask God to teach you and guide you in your meditation. Remember: the Lord, whose life is recorded in the Gospels, lives in you today, and the Holy Spirit who inspired the Scriptures inspires you today.

Reading the Passage – Next read the passage you’ve chosen. Read it a few times if necessary to get a sense of the setting and the development of the story. If you have a question (“I wonder what roofs were like in those days”), briefly consult a Bible dictionary. You may wish to do this before beginning, or you can wait around until afterward (you can always do the meditation again with the newly acquired information). Your goal at this stage is to develop a basic mental image of the setting where the events took place.

Picturing the Scene – Now allow the setting of the passage to appear before you as if you were watching a movie, or better, as if you were *there*. Allow your mind to get an imaginative grasp of what would be sensed. If you were meditating on a story of Jesus’ ministry in a village by the Sea of Galilee, you would want to see the expressions on people’s faces as they relate to Jesus. You would hear the comments of the bystanders, the disciples, the religious leaders. Smell the marketplace, the sea breezes; touch the Savior’s garment or the leper; drink from the cup that is passed. Allow your whole person to identify with the story.

Participating in the Story – You may find that you particularly identify with one person in the story. This is perfectly all right. In fact, stories—even Biblical stories—are written to encourage a variety of people to identify with the characters in the story. If it seems appropriate, imagine you are one of the people in the story. Become that person. Perhaps you are the woman who longs to touch Jesus’ garment and be healed. Perhaps you are Peter, who rashly cuts off the guard’s ear when Jesus is threatened. Perhaps you are in the crowd, watching nervously as Jesus is nailed to the cross. Allow your mind to play as you interact with the story. You may even wish to imagine a hypothetical conversation with another person in the story, even with Christ. Because the Lord who lived in the story is alive today, this conversation can become a form of prayer.

Evaluating and recording the experience – As you close your time of meditation, it is helpful to review and summarize the experiences and issues that come up. You could even record your experiences of meditation in a journal for review later. Did your mind stay close to the general plot and teaching of the passage, or did it wander far from the intended meaning of the passage? What do you now more clearly understand about yourself or about God? Into what new steps of faith might God be inviting you?

Of course, this method need not be restricted to the Gospels. It is a wonderful method to glean inspiration from any

of the stories of Scripture.