

# Using Scripture in Prayer and Spiritual Direction

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*The subtleties of biblical exegesis and interpretation should not frighten us away from praying with Scripture nor smother imaginative application to our lives.*

HOW does one pray with Scripture? How is that method of prayer helpful in spiritual direction? While we believe in faith that God is always present to us wherever we are (cf. Ps. 139), we do not always pay attention to the presence of God. Sometimes we need to turn to some special places which help us put ourselves consciously in God's presence. Nature, for example, is one of those special places for many people. For others, personal experiences of family life or professional life, as well as historical events of world significance or the less spectacular moments of the days very human situations, become starting points for prayer and places of encounter with God. Dreams serve this purpose for still others. Yet, even with all these, the Bible remains a privileged place for meeting God, since it is filled with stories of God's deepest desires for us. So it is worth knowing how to pray with the Scriptures.

In prayer we purposefully pursue our relationship with God. The aim of spiritual direction is to help believing persons deepen their relationship with God and to live freely and creatively the consequences of that relationship. Through the process of direction, believers hope to become more consciously aware of the presence of God in their life, more deeply in love with God, and more alive in the Spirit of God.<sup>(1)</sup> Since praying with Scripture can be a special place of encounter with God, it can serve as a special resource for spiritual direction. Before taking up how to pray with Scripture and how to use this sort of prayer in spiritual direction, however, I wish to make some observations about prayer in general as a privileged context for experiencing God and as a prerequisite for spiritual direction.

The prayer of many who come for spiritual direction for the first time is often not the kind of prayer most conducive to conscious growth in one's relationship with God. I have found two kinds of prayer to be predominant among beginners in spiritual discipline. These are prayer as talking to God and prayer as thinking about God. A third kind of prayer, however, seems more conducive to the goals of spiritual direction and spiritual growth. This is contemplative like prayer, or prayer as attentive listening to God. A word on each.

Prayer as talking to God is the notion of "saying" prayers. This is usually expressed through reciting formula prayers, like the Our Father, the rosary, litanies, and novenas. Or it is primarily a kind of prayer that asks for things so that petitioning makes up most of one's prayer. Formula prayers and petitions are valuable and valid forms of prayer which have sustained the lives of many. Some people who use these forms of prayer are able to be quite attentive to God's presence to them. In these instances, this form of prayer is apt for spiritual direction since it is conducive to a conscious growth in relationship with God.

For many other people, however, this is not the case. For them this form of praying has become quite mechanical and is done with little attention. What was supposed to be a conversation with God quickly becomes a monologue. When this happens, this form of praying does not serve well the purposes of spiritual direction and spiritual growth. The reason is that these formula prayers have lost touch with the immediacy of personal experience of the living God. This is one of the great dangers in praying memorized formula prayers. What was once a

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meaningful expression of a genuine religious experience has become rigid and now conceals the experience. When this occurs, prayer becomes an activity totally detached from personal experience. Prayer is no longer a personal response to the presence of God in one's experience, but becomes a world in itself, drawing the pray-er out of his or her own world and away from the nourishing contact with God there. Prayer then dries up. One day the pray-er awakens to the startling awareness, "There is nothing here for me!" and abandons praying in any form. The serious challenge to such persons is to find God in the immediacy of experience and to express one's awareness and response to God in a way that is personally meaningful.

## THINKING ABOUT GOD

The second kind of prayer, prayer as thinking about God, regards prayer as time to solve problems or to think thoughts about God. In either case, prayer becomes a strictly intellectual affair marked by the precision of rational analysis. When this kind of prayer lacks passion and keeps one analytically distant and uninvolved in experiences, it is not conducive to spiritual direction's concern with conscious growth in one's relationship with God.

This kind of prayer is also very frustrating, especially if the prayer is not good at rational analysis. It can also be very fatiguing, especially for someone who spends most of the day working in the head. These people tend to value the worth and strength of prayer on the basis of the keenness of the insights discovered about whatever one is "praying" about. This kind of prayer is very common and encouraged by our culture which values mastering the world through the intellect. We live with a sense that everything can be understood in clear ideas. What can be understood can be controlled-everything from the structure of the atom to the mystery of God.

The crisis of prayer and spiritual growth is that our minds are filled with so many ideas about God, but our hearts are far from God. The spiritual fatigue and the emptiness of prayer are at base often a matter of the absence of religious experience in a person's life. Religious experience is at the heart of the spiritual life and is the very "stuff" of spiritual direction. How can we understand prayer which will help us be conscious of our religious experiences?

I suggest that the kind of prayer which opens us to religious experience and that is most conducive to conscious growth in our relationship with God is a kind of contemplative prayer.<sup>2</sup> By this I mean the kind of prayer that first listens, pays attention, and opens our hearts to the deeper dimensions of our experiences where we meet God. This is the kind of praying that nurtures a relationship with God. God is always present to us, but we are not always attentively present to God. Contemplative like praying helps us be attentive to God.

Since this contemplative prayer depends on, and is for the sake of, our relationship with God, we can expect it to have some of the same dynamics that establishing and maintaining any relationship would have. Similarly, we can expect it to be as hard or as easy as forming any enduring, trustworthy relationship with another person. Whatever we need to do in order to establish and nurture a friendship we can apply to praying in a contemplative mode. In friendship, as in prayer, we spend time together, we share stories about what happens to us and about what we care about most deeply (especially with regard to each other), and we listen with the heart.

Let me tell a story. Once upon a time, John and Marsha were walking along the beach enjoying a beautiful day in the sun, sand, and surf. As they walked along they were sharing stories about their own lives. While talking, they kept walking. But when John began to tell Marsha how much he loved her, they stopped walking, faced each other, and John spoke more slowly and clearly while Marsha looked lovingly into his eyes and listened intently with her heart.

That was a contemplative moment. There was no looking at watches to check the time, and no planning what had to be done after they left the beach. There was absorption in one another and a forgetting of self. There was

paying attention with the heart by taking along loving look at the other.

Our life of prayer must have those moments, too. We must, from time to time, stop and look lovingly at what is really there in our lives, and pay attention to it with our hearts. Only then will our words and our actions be faithful expressions of the relationship we are experiencing.

The good pray-er is first someone who knows how to pay attention. Paying attention is hard. It takes effort; it does not just happen. When we pay attention, we have to stop being preoccupied with self and make the effort to let the other take our attention. When we pay attention, we first have to pay attention to what is outside us; then we have to pay attention to what is going on inside us as a direct result of paying attention to what is outside us.

Paying attention means stopping long enough and being quiet enough to let go of our preoccupations so that something outside takes our attention. Those who have ever been so absorbed in listening to music, reading a book, or being with a friend that they lost track of the time know what this contemplative experience is like. It is really an experience of transcendence, since we go out of ourselves and become absorbed in something else. Paying attention also involves noticing the affective reactions which arise spontaneously within us from being absorbed in something outside ourselves. This is the kind of discipline we need to bring to our prayer for profitable spiritual direction; and this is the kind of discipline we need to bring to our listening while doing spiritual direction.

One of the tasks of a spiritual director is to help the directee develop a contemplative attitude and contemplative skill. This attitude and skill are difficult to acquire, especially for people who are too absorbed in themselves, or who have a strong need to be in control of others all the time. Being able to forget self and become absorbed in the other is not easy. One way of helping others acquire this attitude and skill is to encourage them to engage in some activity they enjoy doing which has a contemplative aspect to it. For example, for some people this might be listening to music, or walking through an art gallery. For others it might be walking through the ocean surf, or through a Redwood grove, or simply lying on a hillside and looking at the clouds. After such activities, they can reflect on the experience, that is, pay attention to what happened. Asking questions like "What happened when you looked? What did you experience happening to you when you did that?" can help them along the way to acquiring the skill of praying contemplatively.

## PRAYING WITH SCRIPTURE

This contemplative attitude and skill are what we want to bring to praying with Scripture. With Scripture we can take a long, loving look at God's actions toward us; we can look at Jesus and become absorbed in what he is like, what he says, what he does, what he cares about. Scripture is a privileged place where we can go to put ourselves more explicitly in the Lord's presence. If the goal of our spiritual striving is to know the Lord God, to become more deeply in love with God, and to be alive in the Spirit (in short, to be a disciple of Jesus), then Scripture is a special resource for our spiritual striving. It becomes a special place of encounter for our heartfelt knowledge and personal relationship with God to grow.

In Scripture we find expressions of God's deepest desires for us, of God's attitude toward us, and of God's willingness to be involved with us. The directness of the biblical word's expression of God's desire to be in a loving relationship with us calls for a response. We react to the biblical word in the way we would to any provocative statement addressed to us. If we like what we hear, we respond with approval and enthusiasm; if we do not like it, we want to stop listening and turn away from it. What we cannot avoid is that the Bible expresses the word of a living God who wants to engage in dialogue with us. So we need to approach the Bible in prayer as a word addressed to us personally calling for a response. "What do I hear the Lord saying to me?" is the fundamental question we bring to

Scripture when we pray.

Praying with Scripture depends on two things: (1) what we find in the text and (2) what we bring to the text out of our lives. In prayer we bring these two realities together and, through imaginative play, let them interact, tease each other, illuminate each other.<sup>3</sup> This is how a personal dialogue with God goes on through the mediation of the biblical story. The most important capacity we have in order for this dialogue to happen in a personal way is our imagination.

But can we encourage this imaginative play with a story in these days of modern biblical criticism? How can we integrate a critical understanding of Scripture with the spiritual use of a text for prayer and spiritual direction?

The 1943 breakthrough of scientific exegesis in the Catholic community has brought the use of historical criticism to bear on biblical texts to discover and define what the text meant in its original setting. But an exclusively historical critical approach to Scripture concerned only with discovering what the text meant originally would not be sufficiently nourishing for the spiritual life. At the same time, however, an uncritical concern with what the text means or can mean may easily result in uninformed pietism. We want to avoid both extremes: critical sterility and uncritical piety.

The spiritual use of Scripture, which is concerned with the personal meaning of the text rather than with what the author intended for his original audience, is not trying to undo, replace, or ignore all that historical criticism has brought to us about the Bible. The spiritual use of Scripture recognizes that what the text meant as it came from its author is not the only meaning of the text, and certainly not its complete meaning. Historical criticism is one procedure of interpretation that we must bring to understanding a text, but it is not the only procedure in the interpretive process.

To say that the author's meaning of a text is not the only meaning nor the fullest meaning is not really new to the Catholic community. Nor is it foreign to critical approaches to Scripture. Patristic and medieval uses of Scripture were sensitive to the plurality of levels of meaning in a text, even though those eras did not have the critical tools we have to retrieve what the author meant. Critical scholarship during the 1950s was active in pursuing the theory of *sensus plenior* which claims there are more meanings to a text than that which the human author intended. More recently, biblical scholars who apply the hermeneutical (how to interpret) theory of Paul Ricoeur are interested in the "surplus of meaning" which a text has. Our spiritual use of Scripture falls within this tradition of discovering more meaning in a text than what the human author intended. The way we approach a text today in our spiritual use of it is not to see the text as a "container" of meaning, but as a mediator of meaning. The literary form of the text is a strategy for involving the reader in different ways to discover the personal meaning of the text.

However, saying that there is more meaning to a text than that intended by the author does not make the text open to any meaning whatsoever. The meanings of a text are controlled by the text. This makes historical criticism very important. With the critical exegesis of historical criticism, we do not eliminate the possibility of discovering meanings different from the original, but we are able to establish the text, clarify its literary form, and keep the meanings we do discover in line with what is truly possible.

The critical approaches to Scripture which acknowledge different levels of meaning to a text affirm the possibility for ordinary persons to use Scripture and discover valid meaning in the text. In the spiritual use of the text, we are not trying to understand the mind of the author, but the meaning of the text as it now presents itself to us with our given set of experiences and questions. Critical approaches to interpreting the Bible affirm that anyone who comes to Scripture as a believing member of the community shaped by the Bible can find some personal meaning from the text that is valid, even though it may not be the meaning intended by the author.

Spiritual directors who encourage the use of Scripture in prayer, but who are not professional exegetes themselves, still carry the responsibility of being biblically informed and aware of the discoveries that professional exegetes are making. The same holds true for directees who use Scripture for prayer. This means that all of us ought to have some grasp of what contemporary scholarship is saying about the various books of the Bible, and not hesitate to consult commentaries to have a fuller understanding of the texts which we use. Our critical knowledge of the Bible is not a stumbling block to praying with Scripture; rather, this knowledge is a valuable support and supplement to our praying with Scripture with the imagination.

David Stanley's *A Modern Scriptural Approach to the Spiritual Exercises*<sup>4</sup> is a good example of the contribution critical biblical scholarship can make to the use of Scripture in prayer. This work makes the meaning of selected texts used in conducting the Spiritual Exercises more available to us and helps us keep the personal meanings we discover in line with what the text allows.

While David Stanley's work helps us step back into the world of the text, we still need to find our way back to our own world with the power of God's word for us now. Only in this way will we be able to experience the living God of today, and not just the God of the world of yesterday. This means that the person praying those texts needs to become imaginatively involved in them. Through imaginative play in the story, the pray-er sees herself or himself personally related to the living God, and can experience the transforming effect the story has to release hidden energies for loyalty and trust as a contemporary disciple of the Lord.

## IMAGINATION AND SCRIPTURE

To say we must be able to approach the biblical text in prayer with the imagination means that we need to be able to pray with the text as left-handed thinkers. Left-handed thinking uses intuition, feelings, and imagination. Right-handed thinking uses logical reasoning and analysis. Right-handed thinkers exegete a text for its literal sense. Left-handed thinkers participate in the story and let the story grasp them and bring meaning to their lives. A left-handed thinker gets involved in the story as an active participant in its action and so allows the characters, emotion, and scene to mediate God. A right-handed thinker stands outside the story as a scientific observer trying to discover what really happened. But what really happened and what the human author intended in the text are of secondary interest to the left-handed thinker when praying with a text. Historical criticism supplements and supports the initial entry into the text through the imagination.

But too many still mistrust the imagination for fear that it ushers us into the world of illusion. "Give us the real world," they say, "the world of hard facts and clear and distinct ideas." Those who want solid rock under their feet think that imagination is for fantasy, and that it is the source of error and deception. To bring the imagination into spiritual disciplines, then, would only give spirituality a bad name. And to say that the imagination is our most important capacity for prayer would be irresponsible. After all, does not the imagination lead to "bad" thoughts, and bad thoughts to sexual fantasies, and sexual fantasies to distractions in prayer, and maybe even sin? So if imagination leads to sin at worst, or distractions at best, why encourage the use of the imagination in prayer?<sup>5</sup>

Certainly imagination can lead to fantasy, illusion, and sin. But it can also lead to grace. We encourage the use of the imagination in prayer because it gives us access to many levels of truth. The imagination is our capacity to see through the obvious to the reality lying beneath. The imagination does not separate us from the facts, but helps illumine the facts so that we can see more than meets the eye. The imagination sees with the heart. For this reason, the most effective approach to the biblical story for spiritual growth is not an intellectual grasp of concepts about God or Jesus, but the imaginative play between the text and our experience through which we come to know God and Jesus with our hearts.

Through our imaginative play we enter into the details of a story to capture the emotion and the intensity of an event. If we only stood back from the story to analyze it in a cool, disinterested way, we could not come to the rich meanings in the story nor be touched by its transforming power. Not until we participate in the concrete details of the story can we grasp its meaning for us. We will not be able to discover the meaning of being a disciple of Jesus for today until we live inside the stories of Jesus and bring our contemporary experiences to them. By imaginatively entering into the stories of Jesus, we can "hear" what Jesus has to say to us in our own situations, or we can "see" what he wants to accomplish through us in today's world. Through this kind of paying attention to Jesus we are fashioned into his disciples.

Our aim in praying with Scripture is to live the biblical story as our own. This means we let the story become the environment we live in for that moment of prayer. When we recognize ourselves within its world, it opens for us new understandings of ourselves and new possibilities for our discipleship. We will only understand the meaning of being a disciple of Jesus from inside the stories of Jesus and his disciples. The biblical story stands before us, then, not only as a source of new information about God and the Lord Jesus, but as an invitation calling us to participate in a living relationship with God. Just as we bring our questions and concerns to the biblical stories, so we let the questions and concerns of the stories address us. "Who do you say I am?" and "Whom do you seek?" are questions not addressed just to disciples of the past, but they are questions addressed right now to us singly. "Do not let your heart be troubled" is spoken not just to the disciples then, but to us now. We get inside these stories with their questions, concerns, challenges, and affirmations through our imaginative play with the text and our own experience.

### THREE TEMPTATIONS

Three temptations stand before us as we approach prayer with Scripture. The first is fundamentalism. By this I mean being insensitive to symbolic language. The temptation of fundamentalism is to regard the language of the stories as mere descriptive reporting. If we do this, we will take the story literally and flatten its poetic, metaphorical nature, thus rendering the story powerless. Fundamentalism of this sort is a great temptation in this computer age. In a computer world, language means only one thing. There is a one-to-one correspondence between language and reality. This works well in computers because it is so precise and unambiguous. But such language has no passion. While it may work wonders in computers, it throws cold water on a story. But the language of a story is more evocative than descriptive. It opens to creative possibilities. Flat, one-dimensional language describes what is and prevents anything new from coming into being. This kind of language cannot "imagine" what is not already present. The language of story, however, wants to form something new. So when we pray with Scripture stories, we must be ready to change. If we don't want to change, we don't pray!

A second temptation is familiarity. We have heard these stories so often that we think we already know what they mean. We cannot "imagine" them meaning anything else. Not until we trust the poetic, metaphorical nature of the language of story will we be able to enter into these stories and meet the living God in a new, fresh, transforming way.

The third temptation is complexity. The vast amount of critical scholarship that has gone into interpreting the Bible can be very intimidating. We fear we do not know enough to understand the story, so we spend all our time studying a text rather than praying with it. We take the stance of an observer and keep a safe academic distance from the text. Not becoming a participant in the story prevents us from ever hearing the story as a call for a personal response. We expect commentaries to give us the meaning of the story, so we never find what the story means for us. Yet, finding personal meaning is what we are about when praying with Scripture. This reminds me of a novice who complained to her director about always telling stories but never revealing their meaning. To this the director

responded, "How would you like me to offer you an apple, but chew it first before giving it to you?" And so it is in praying with Scripture. We seek personal meaning from these stories. No one can find that meaning for us.

We can overcome these temptations when we realize that the biblical stories are filled with metaphors and not flat descriptive words. While always being concrete and rooted in reality, these metaphors are enormously elastic to touch all kinds of experiences. For example, the dead daughter of Jairus can be the child within ourselves that has died; the adultery forgiven by Jesus can be our own forms of infidelity being forgiven; the road to Emmaus becomes our own journey from despair to hope; Jesus' saying not to worry about food and clothes can speak to us about all that disturbs our lives.

As these examples try to show, the meaning of the metaphors in the biblical stories are determined not only by what is there, but also by what we bring to them from our lives. In prayer, we walk around in the metaphor with our own experiences. If we do not bring our own experiences into prayer with Scripture, we will have flat prayers and a sterile spiritual life, because we end up treating the biblical stories as mere one-dimensional descriptions of the way things were.

When praying with the stories by means of the imagination, we move in and out of the stories by freely associating the images of the story with our own experiences. That is the way metaphors and the imagination work. We move naturally from the biblical story to our own lives. For example, to move from a consideration of the temptations of Jesus to our own temptations is not being distracted in prayer. This is how prayer works! When we look at the tempted Jesus being faithful to his Father and his mission by affirming before the glamour of evil that he belonged to God and would be led only by the word of God, we may be brought face to face with our own temptations to use power to manipulate others, to be sensational, to be unfaithful, or whatever else our temptations might be. In our prayer, we move into the past of the story only to be more alert to the present in our lives and open to the future possibilities of ways of being a disciple today. The metaphors of the story do not lock us into line the way railings for crowd control do. But the metaphors are like fireworks which explode in surprisingly new ways to touch new levels of sensitivity in our hearts and to open us to new ways of relating to God and to others.

## GUIDE TO PRAYING WITH SCRIPTURE

Here are a few helpful steps for praying with Scripture by means of the imagination. This method shows a contemplative openness to the world of the story and an awareness of the personal concerns one brings to the story.

1. After an opening prayer which asks the Lord to reveal himself, I read the text slowly.
2. I ask, "How does the Lord seem to me in this text?"
3. Imaginatively I construct the environment of the scene. I become aware of the feelings of the characters, the mood of the setting, etc.
4. I allow my personal feelings, associations, etc. to become part of the meditation. Where am I in this story?
5. I complete the statement, "Lord, what I hear you saying to me is ...."
6. I notice what I am feeling when I hear the Lord speak to me this way. What do I say to the Lord in return? I continue my dialogue with the Lord.
7. I close my prayer by asking for the grace I am seeking: "Lord, my greatest desire now is . . . ."

Praying with a biblical story this way is not treating it as a source of new information about God, but as an invitation calling for us to participate in a relationship with God. The purpose of contemplating the biblical stories this way is to come to know the living God, to become an intimate companion of the Lord Jesus. We are not out to

know the text better. We are out to know the Lord better. By entering into dialogue with the Lord through the scene, characters, questions, and action of the story, we bring our personal concerns to the Lord and allow the Lord to speak to us through the action and images of the story in which we are now personally participating. Praying with the imagination this way helps us center our awareness on God's presence within us and around us.

The task of the spiritual director now is to help the directee notice what happens in this prayer and recognize what kind of reactions and responses to God she or he had.<sup>6</sup> The director helps the directee, first, by asking her or him how the Lord seemed in this story. After all, this is the way relationships begin. The purpose of this question, therefore, is to help the directee come closer to the Lord by knowing what the Lord is like for her or him. Asking "What is the Lord like for you?" is trying to get at the contemplative substance of the prayer. Looking at the Lord spontaneously evokes affective responses which gradually lead to a new level of companionship with the Lord.

From looking at the Lord and noticing the affective responses that are evoked in this experience, the directee gradually carries on a dialogue with the Lord which takes in the other segments of the guide questions. In the spiritual direction session, the director encourages the directee to notice interior reactions that come with listening to the Lord in prayer, and then to respond to the Lord from the heart. But the director should not interfere with the dialogue. The director simply encourages the directee to listen to the Lord and to respond, and then to let happen what happens.

The final test of this form of prayer, and any other form for that matter, is whether it leads us to live according to the pattern of Jesus' life. We have Paul's list of the fruits of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23) to help us discern this. As these gifts show, we must rely on our living relationship with others to measure whether we have truly experienced the God of love.

Using Scripture in spiritual direction as I have suggested is primarily through the way of imagination. The imagination enables us to "see" the deeper meaning of a story or of our experiences, as opposed to merely looking upon the surface. The imaginative play with the story and personal experience becomes the medium of God's self-disclosure or revelation. Praying the Scriptures with the imagination depends first on the directee's being able to develop a contemplative attitude and then bringing this attitude into prayer with Scripture. The goal of praying with biblical stories is to get to know the Lord better, and ourselves in relationship with the Lord. The goal is not to get to know the text better. Appreciating the metaphorical character of the stories helps us toward our goal, since, through metaphor, we can enter the stories at different levels and allow the stories to give rise to new awarenesses of ourselves and our relationship with the living God.

#### NOTES

1. This brief summary of the focus and purpose of spiritual direction is influenced by the approach advocated by William A. Barry and William J. Connolly, *The Practice of Spiritual Direction* (New York: Seabury Press, 1982).
2. I am indebted for these ideas to Barry and Connolly, especially chap. 4, "Fostering the Contemplative Attitude."
3. These two realities are creatively brought together with regard to some of the psalms by Walter Brueggeman, *Praying the Psalms* (Winona, Minn.: St. Mary's Press, 1982).
4. (St. Louis: Institute of Jesuit Resources, 1971).
5. We hear an encouraging word for using the imagination in prayer as well as throughout the Christian life in Kathleen R. Fishers very fine analysis and evaluation of the imagination in the Christian life: *The Inner Rainbow: The Imagination in Christian Life* (Ramsey, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1983).
6. Barry and Connolly, *The Practice of Spiritual Direction*, especially chap. 5, "Helping the Person Notice and Share with the Lord Key Interior Facts."