

Study Guide

Friendship with Jesus
An Imaginative Prayer Journey

by
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Before you Begin

Welcome to this prayer experience! I am so glad that you have decided to read and pray this book with your friends. Imaginative prayer is a beautiful way to encounter Jesus—and that is always better done in community.

I have included here a few questions for each chapter that should help in your time together as a group, sharing your experience with the book and the prayer exercises. You may want to pray with the prayer exercises on your own or with the group when you gather, or one of each. Audio versions of each exercise can be found on the website at www.danheavenor.com/friendship-with-jesus.

Be aware that we all experience Jesus in unique ways. There is no spiritual merit in having the capacity to imagine scenes of Gospel stories. We all have different capacities. Some are more visual, some are more kinesthetic, some more cognitive. Some may have more of an emotional or sense experience. This is a beautiful diversity, and we need each other. God sees the heart and the desire that we bring. That is the most important thing.

This book encourages an imaginative and visual experience of prayer. If this is new and/or difficult for you, then ask the Lord to help you to “see,” to “open the eyes of your heart” as Paul prays in Ephesians 1:18. This “ability” (it is really a gift more than an ability) to imagine myself in these scenes took many months to develop in me. And it can still be a struggle sometimes. Be patient. Go slow. And pay attention to what *is* happening rather than what *isn't*! I want to encourage you to open yourself—mind, body, soul and spirit—as wide as you are able. The whole point of prayer is not mastering a technique but encounter with Jesus!

This Study Guide contains questions for each chapter of *Friendship with Jesus*, including the Introduction and Epilogue. I have combined Chapters 2 and 3. This will give you an 11 week study. Add another week for sharing stories and this will be a 12 week experience—and 12 is a great biblical number!

Introduction

Take some time to share a bit of your story with one another as you begin this journey together. This will enrich your experience immensely. The journey of friendship with Jesus is very closely intertwined with our other friendships. They feed one another!

1. How did you become a Christian? What have been some significant highlights in your spiritual journey? What have been some challenges?
2. What has been your experience of prayer? The author uses the image of prayer as words “crashing to the floor” What kinds of images would you use to describe your prayer life, and why? A lush garden? A desert wasteland? A lonely highway? A distracted monkey brain?
3. Reflect together on the notion of Jesus as a friend. You have decided to take the time to read and ponder this book so it must intrigue you in some way. Can you share your thoughts and your desires about this?
4. What are you hoping for as you embark on this prayer journey?

Closing:

As you pray together, ask Jesus to give you all that you need to pray, watch and listen on this prayer journey.

Chapter 1. The Prayer Journey

1. What has been your experience of imagining yourself in a story from the Gospels? Perhaps you have thought about it like this: “I wonder what Peter was feeling?” or “I was thinking about what it would have been like to see that stone rolled away.” Share an experience you have had like this.
2. What is your response to the discussion about “contemplative prayer” on pages 6–9 as taking a posture of receiving, listening and watching in prayer? How does this compare with your own prayer practice?
3. Share your thoughts about what Jesus’ experience might have been as he said and did only what the Father told him to say and do? Does this have any connection with your life of prayer?
4. The author talks about the common experience of “inviting Jesus into my life” but then invites us to see that, more fundamentally, we are invited into Jesus’ life. (pg. 11). How do you respond to this? What might it mean for you to be invited into Jesus’ life?
5. What does it mean for you that you are invited to *participate* in these stories from the Gospels rather than simply *learn* from them?

Prayer Exercise: *Becoming Rooted in God’s Love* (Psalm 139:1-13 and Isaiah 43:1-7)

Were you able to hear and receive these words as spoken directly to you? What did you experience?

Closing:

Take a few minutes to simply be silent in prayer. If your mind wanders, pray quietly, “Jesus, Son of God, have mercy on me” with your breathing.

Chapter 2 & 3. Engaging our Imagination in Prayer / The Practice Run

(Chapter 2)

1. What is your initial response to the idea of using your imagination in prayer?
2. What has been your experience of intentionally using your imagination in other pursuits like sports training, music, memorization, etc.? What is your response to the connections that researchers have discovered between mental practice and physical changes?
3. Can you recall a personal experience where your imagination significantly influenced your emotions or actions, either positively or negatively?
4. Many people have noted the form the Bible comes to us—stories, symbols, metaphors. What does this tell you about God? How does this challenge our often overly cognitive approach to the Bible and prayer?

Prayer Exercise: *The Widow of Nain* (Luke 7:11–17)

What was your experience praying with this story?
What did you particularly notice and feel?

(Chapter 3)

1. As you read this “nuts and bolts” chapter on how to pray with your imagination, what stood out for you?
2. As you reflect on the story of the pastor’s experience of encountering Jesus on his deck, what does this reveal about our preconceptions of how Jesus should appear or interact with people? How might your expectations limit your experience?

Prayer Exercise: *Jesus’ Birth* (Luke 2:4–7)

Share what you felt as you watched this scene unfold in prayer?
Were there any surprises?

Closing:

Ask the Lord to breathe life into your imagination as you begin the journey.

Chapter 4. Watching Jesus

1. Think of a good friend. What are some things you have noticed about them by watching them over the years? How do these things reveal their personality?
2. When you read that Levi, “dropped everything and followed” Jesus (Luke 5:27–28), what do you feel? What questions come to mind? What was your own experience when you first heard about Jesus?
3. How do you feel about the invitation to simply watch Jesus for a while, as a way to pray, without obligation, only curiosity? How is this different than reading Gospel stories to learn things about Jesus?

Prayer Exercise: *The Synagogue* (Luke 4:14–22)

Share what it was like to imagine yourself in the synagogue, with your friends and family, listening to Jesus. What did you notice about Jesus?

4. The author tells a story on p. 45 about a scene in a film where Jesus flicks water at his friends and then laughs and runs off. Can you imagine Jesus doing this kind of very normal, human thing? How does imaginative prayer help us connect to the humanity of Jesus?
5. What is your response to the story of Jesus playing with the kids? Do you know someone who loves kids and enjoys being around them? What is this person like? How would you describe them? Does your image of Jesus align with this?
6. How does imaginative prayer encourage a more attentive observation of Jesus?

Prayer Exercise: *The Baptism of Jesus* (Matt 3:1–17)

What caught your attention in this story?

What were the feelings you experienced as you watched the scene?

Closing:

Share a little about your experience thinking about and then practicing watching Jesus as a way to pray.

Chapter 5. Meeting Jesus

1. Have you ever felt like you were just observing Jesus from a distance rather than actively engaging with him as a real person? How does this resonate with your experience of faith?
2. How do you respond to this quote (from p. 51):

“It is futile to leaf through the writings of the Old and New covenant in the hopes of coming across truths of one kind or another, unless we are prepared to be exposed to a direct encounter with him, the personal, utterly free Word which makes severe claims upon us.” (Balthasar, *Prayer*, 18-19).

3. Have you experienced your relationship with Jesus like that of a celebrity—you know a lot about the person, but you have never actually met them?

Prayer Exercise: *Jesus Looks at You* (Luke 19:1–9)

Were you able to imagine being the main character in this story?

What emotions did you experience as Jesus approached?

What did you notice about Jesus in this experience?

4. Have you struggled with the sense that so much of your experience of Jesus is secondhand? How do you feel about this?
5. What questions rise up for you as you think about “experiencing” God? What are your thoughts about this section of the chapter, (p.56-58)?
6. How has your personal experience of Jesus shaped your faith?
7. Reflect on a time when you felt a deep emotional connection with Jesus. What led to that experience, and how did it impact your relationship with him?

Prayer Exercise: *The Teacher and the Fish* (Luke 5:1–11)

What caught your attention in this story as you imagined it?

What did you feel as Jesus looked at you and spoke to you?

Closing:

What are your thoughts and reflections about this idea of “meeting” Jesus?

What is it you want to ask Jesus in regard to meeting him?

Chapter 6. Following Jesus

1. Reflecting on the early stages of your friendships, what similarities and differences do you notice between those experiences and the idea of “spending time” with Jesus?
2. How do you respond to the observation that the disciples were simply following Jesus around with very little expectations on them early in their relationship? (p. 67). Has your relationship with Jesus felt more like obligation or attraction?
3. As you think about the difference between having a “relationship with Jesus” as a theological concept versus experiencing Jesus as a living active presence in your life, how might imaginative prayer help you move from the former to the latter?

Prayer Exercise: *Come and See* (John 1:35–39)

What were you feeling as you imagined John talking about Jesus?

When you walked over to Jesus and he stops to look at you, what do you notice about him?

How do you respond to his question, “What do you want?”

4. Respond to this quote from Ronald Rolheiser (p. 73):
“God is not experienced as a living person . . . rather, God is experienced and related to as a religion, a church, a moral philosophy, a guide for private virtue.”
(Rolheiser, *Shattered Lantern*, 16)
5. In your relationship with Jesus, do you find yourself primarily drawn to his divinity or his humanity? How might focusing on one aspect over the other impact your faith?
6. The chapter emphasizes the importance of communication to any thriving relationship. What have been some barriers or challenges you face in your communication with Jesus in prayer? Are any of these challenges similar to ones you face with your other friends?
7. Reflect on this notion that Jesus can often seem more like a good idea than a real person. How is praying with these stories speaking to this for you?

Prayer Exercise: *Calling Matthew* (Luke 5:27–32)

Describe the experience of looking at Jesus looking at you as he calls you to follow him.

Can you imagine inviting Jesus to a dinner party at your house?

Closing:

What is attracting you to Jesus thus far? Can you tell him this in prayer?

Chapter 7. Trusting Jesus

1. How has trust developed and grown between you and your good friends? What role has vulnerability played?
2. Reflecting on the analogy of trust being like a slow growing tree, how do you see your own trust in Jesus developing over time? Can you identify specific moments or seasons where you felt your trust deepen?
3. As you think back over your imaginative prayer experiences so far, what have you noticed about your physical posture in these scenes? Is there a connection with your experience of God in your life? Do you sense an invitation from Jesus?

Prayer Exercise: *On the Water* (Matt 14:22–32)

If you acted out this story in your prayer, what did you notice?

4. Share a story where you felt something deeply as you prayed. What was this experience like for you?
5. As you consider Jesus' emotional responses in the Gospels, which of his emotions do you find most relatable? How does seeing Jesus express emotions impact your trust in him?
6. As we see Jesus expressing emotion, he becomes more real to us. Share an experience you have had with this thus far in your imaginative prayer journey.
7. What has been your experience of expressing your emotions to God in prayer?

Prayer Exercise: *Mary and Martha* (John 11:17–36)

Whom do you relate to more in this story? Were you able to feel what Mary and Martha might have felt? What do you notice about Jesus?

Closing:

Emotions are complicated and we all have different experiences with our emotions. What do you feel you need in your emotional life, especially as it pertains to your faith?

Chapter 8. Surrendering to Jesus

1. What does “surrendering to Jesus” mean to you? What has it looked like in your life? Share a specific time when you were able to surrender to Jesus?
2. Do you have experience trying to “negotiate a peace agreement” with God, rather than a full-fledged surrender? Can you share the story with the group?
3. Reflect on the fact that Jesus returned *three times* to pray the prayer, “Not my will but yours, Father.” As you “see” Jesus doing this, what happens in you? What do you feel?

Prayer Exercise: *Receiving the Humble Love of Jesus* (John 13)

What was your experience in this prayer? Did you sense Jesus coming to wash your feet? What happened?

4. Reflect on this quote from David Benner:
“Paradoxically, the abundant life promised us in Christ comes not from grasping but from releasing. It comes not from striving but from relinquishing. It comes not so much from taking as from giving. Surrender is the foundational dynamic of Christian freedom.”
(Benner, *Surrender to Love*, 60).
5. What are some “idols” in your life that you have been able to surrender? What was that process like? How did God help you?
6. Henri Nouwen used the image of the trapeze artist who allows the catcher to catch him as a metaphor for the spiritual life. Spend a moment and imagine this. What do you feel? Is there something in your life presently that Jesus is inviting you to let go of and allow him to catch you?
7. Joyce Rupp has written, “Who do I think God is that I would be afraid to completely surrender to him?” This is an arresting question. How do you respond?

Prayer Exercise: *The Rich Young Ruler* (Mark 10:17–22)

What did you feel as you “walked away sad” from Jesus? Were you able to express a different response as you prayed the story a second time?

Closing:

Take some time to pray for one another, for courage to let go of those things that are getting in the way of your friendship with Jesus.

Chapter 9. Dying with Jesus

1. The chapter opens with the famous quote from Bonhoeffer, “When Christ calls a man (sic), he bids him come and die.” Talk about this in your group. How do you respond? What has this looked like in your life?
2. How has your growing friendship with Jesus allowed you to hear about “dying with Jesus” in a way that would have been difficult when you first met him?
3. Both Peter and Thomas express their conviction that they are ready to die with Jesus, yet they fail. Can you relate? Share a story from your life where you were very confident you could “do something for God” but then discovered it was beyond you.

Prayer Exercise: *The Courtyard* (Matt 26:69–75)

What did you feel as you placed yourself in Peter’s shoes in this scene?

4. What have been some of the small (or large) “deaths” that you have endured as you have followed Jesus? How have these experiences changed you?
5. Jesus’ message of “deny yourself and take up your cross” is so contrary to our culture’s message. What has this looked like in your life? How have you struggled in this area?
6. If you have been a Christian for a while, the story of the cross is so familiar that it is easy to lose sight of the powerful act of love that it is. How can praying this story imaginatively get us in touch with what Jesus did there?
7. How does this theme of “dying with Jesus” relate to a developing friendship with Jesus?

Prayer Exercise: *Mary at the Cross* (Luke 23:34,43,46; John 19:26–30; Matt 27:46)

What stood out for you as you prayed this scene? What did you feel? What did you notice about Jesus?

Closing:

Spend some time praying for those members of your group who are enduring real pain and suffering at the moment. Try not to “fix” them but, like Mary at the cross, be present to them and love them.

Chapter 10. Rising with Jesus

1. How does the experience of Holy Saturday, the day after Jesus' crucifixion, resonate with moments of profound loss and abandonment in your own life? What has been your experience with the absence and silence of God?

Prayer Exercise: *Praying with Holy Saturday* (Isaiah 53 and Psalm 88)

What feelings do you experience as you wait with the other disciples? What memories or images rise up in your mind?

2. In what ways does resurrection take on new meaning for you because you have been watching Jesus and developing a friendship with him? What does “practicing resurrection” mean for you?
3. Reflect on this question from Dallas Willard:
“How would Jesus live your life if he were you?”
4. What do you make of the fact that Jesus is not recognized, at first, in the post-resurrection stories. How does this relate to your own life, your own experience.
5. Reflect on a time when you experienced a profound shift in perspective, moving from despair to hope, akin to the disciples' transformation after encountering the risen Christ?

Prayer Exercise: *Mary at the Empty Tomb* (John 20:1–18)

How does praying this story help you receive the reality of Jesus' resurrection?

6. How has watching and interacting with Jesus in prayer helped you to imagine living a resurrected life? What kinds of things is Jesus inviting you to consider?
7. As you think about resurrection life, how does the imagery of “letting go” and surrendering to God's grace resonate with your own spiritual journey?

Prayer Exercise: *On the Beach* (John 21)

As you pray with this story, notice the number of connections that Jesus makes to Peter's past experience—meeting Jesus on the beach, the miracle of the fish, the charcoal fire, the three questions. How is Jesus speaking to you about *your* past experiences and his love for you?

Closing:

Pray for more Jesus' Life for each member of your group!

Epilogue

1. What have been some of the gifts of this journey of imaginative prayer?
2. What has been your experience of growing in friendship with Jesus? What does it mean for you that Jesus continues to say to you, “Follow me”?
3. How is God inviting you into community and the cultivation of deep spiritual friendships? What are some moves you might make in this direction?
4. The book ends with an imagined scene of being invited into Jesus’ presence. Can you hear him call you his friend? What emotions rise up for you as you imagine your own story along these lines?
5. What has been the significance of taking this prayer journey with others in your group rather than on your own?
6. What is your prayer now that you have completed this particular prayer journey? What do you need from Jesus? What is Jesus inviting you to ask for?

Closing:

Spend time praying for each member of the group, asking for a deeper love and friendship with Jesus to continue to grow.