



PRAYER OF RECOLLECTION

Guided meditation based on Saint Teresa of Avila's prayer method.

OVERVIEW

This lesson provides an introduction to Saint Teresa of Avila and offers a guided meditation based on her method of praying.

Scripture

MATTHEW 26:36-44

Then Jesus went with them to a place called Gethsemane; and he said to his disciples, "Sit here while I go over there and pray." He took with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to be grieved and agitated. Then he said to them, "I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and stay awake with me." And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want." Then he came to the disciples and found them sleeping; and he said to Peter, "So, could you not stay awake with me one hour? Stay awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak." Again he went away for the second time and prayed, "My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done." Again he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were heavy. So leaving them again, he went away and prayed for the third time, saying the same words.

Quotations

Prayer is nothing else than being on terms of friendship with God.

— *St. Teresa of Avila*

Prayer is an act of love. Words are not needed. Even if sickness distracts from thoughts, all that is needed is the will to love.

— *St. Teresa of Avila*

Introducing the Practice

Saint Teresa of Avila (1515-1582) was a Spanish Carmelite nun and mystic. Teresa is widely known and revered for her teachings on prayer and contemplation. She was recognized during her life as a person of great spiritual wisdom, and she was declared a saint shortly after her death. Teresa's devotion to God and commitment to a life of prayer come through powerfully in her writings, and the descriptions of her mystical experiences are profoundly moving. Teresa played a major role in reforming monasticism during the 16th century. Seeing the need to make prayer and contemplation

a more central part of monastic life, Teresa founded a new convent and helped establish a new religious order that focused primarily on the contemplative life of prayer.

Despite her reputation as a great teacher of prayer and woman of great spiritual wisdom, Teresa did not always have an easy time praying. She struggled with the traditional methods of prayer and was often distracted by other things happening in her life. Eventually, Teresa discovered a method of praying that she called the prayer of recollection. She explains,

My method of prayer was this. As I could not reason with my mind, I would try to make pictures of Christ inwardly; and I used to think I felt better when I dwelt on those parts of His life when He was most often alone. It seemed to me that His being alone and afflicted, like a person in need, made it possible for me to approach Him. I had many simple thoughts of this kind. I was particularly attached to the prayer in the Garden, where I would go to keep Him company. I would think of the sweat and of the affliction He endured there. I wished I could have wiped that grievous sweat from His face, but I remember that I never dared to resolve to do so, for the gravity of my sins stood in the way. I used to remain with Him there for as long as my thoughts permitted it.

Teresa's method displays a unique mixture of imagination and simple awareness. Unlike Ignatian contemplation, imagining the Gospel scene is not the main point of this prayer. Rather, the prayer of recollection is first and foremost about experiencing the real presence of Christ within oneself. Recalling a Gospel scene can be a helpful way to attain to an awareness of Christ's presence, but the awareness of Christ's presence is the ultimate intention here. By bringing to mind a Gospel story, we are able to cultivate a deep awareness of Christ's presence within our lives at this very moment.

Teresa of Avila, "The Life of the Holy Mother Teresa of Jesus," in *The Complete Works of St Teresa of Avila vol. 1*, trans. E. Allison Peers (New York: Burns & Oats, 2002), 54-55.

Preparing for the Practice

Have everyone spread out to find a comfortable place to sit where they can still hear the voice of the person guiding the practice.

When you have gathered yourselves and are ready to begin, open this time by reading the Scripture passage for this lesson. Beginning our time of prayer and meditation with Scripture grounds our practice in the foundations of our tradition. The prayer practice today is specifically related to this Gospel passage, so it is particularly important to read for those who are not as familiar with this story. You may then go on to read any of the quotations from St. Teresa of Avila. These readings will help to prepare our hearts and minds for the spiritual practice that follows.

The Spiritual Practice

Prayer of Recollection

Begin by finding a comfortable place to sit and closing your eyes. As your breathing becomes slower and deeper, center yourself in this moment, recalling that you are in the presence of God and the presence of Christ is within you.

(2-3 min of silence)

Recall the Gospel passage read earlier, where Jesus is praying in the garden of Gethsemane. Scared, afflicted, and troubled, Jesus prays alone in the garden while he awaits the soldiers who are coming to arrest him and crucify him.

Inwardly place yourself in the garden with Jesus. Without concerning yourself with too much detail, imagine whatever things about the garden or about Jesus that are helpful for you to be present with him in this scene. (pause)

Offer yourself to Jesus as a friend. Sit with Jesus as one sits next to a sick friend, knowing there is nothing you can do or say to change what will happen. All you can offer to Jesus in this moment is your presence. Lovingly sit with Jesus in the garden, showing that you care enough to just be with him in his time of suffering.

(5-7 min of silence) If you find your mind wandering, simply bring your mind back to the garden scene, recalling Jesus' presence with you and your presence with Jesus.

Slowly come back to the present moment, still sitting silently and centered, but aware that you are no longer in the garden. (pause)

Now imagine Jesus is sitting next to you here in this room. Focus on the feeling of the presence of Jesus - the kind of presence you feel when you are in a dark room with a friend. There isn't a need to look at him. You just know he is there.

(2-3 min of silence)

Now, as you become aware of the presence of Jesus with you here, you may feel moved to speak to him. If you feel called to do so, speak to Jesus either silently in your head or softly out loud. There is no need to think about, edit, or compose what you say. Just be patient and wait for the Spirit to subtly prompt an idea in your mind of what to say.

Maybe you have something that you've been holding inside for a long time. Maybe you're worried about a friend and need to tell someone about it. Maybe you just want to tell someone about your day. Speak whatever comes into your heart and then attend to how Jesus responds. Does he say anything back to you? Or does he just sit silently with you - hearing and understanding the thoughts on your heart?

(3-5 min of silence)

Slowly and in your own time, open your eyes. As you do so, know that the presence of Christ does not leave you when we close this meditation. Though you may wonder if the presence of Christ was only imagined, this is not so. Your imagination merely helped you to be aware of the presence that was already here and will continue to be here. The presence of Christ that you experienced was not imagined but realized. In faith, Christ is really present, and you can carry that presence with you as we go out from this time of prayer.

Duration: 15-20 minutes

Discussion Questions

- What did it feel like to offer yourself to Jesus in his moment of need?
- What did it feel like to communicate your thoughts or feelings with Jesus? How did Jesus respond to you when you did?
- What does the presence of Christ feel like?
- How can we carry this practice with us throughout our daily lives?