

LIFE with Jesus in Worship

Immanuel Prayer

“Prayer is above all listening to the voice of Jesus, who dwells in the depths of the heart. Jesus does not force himself on us; his voice is reserved. Whatever we may do in our lives, let us never fail to listen to the voice of the Lord in our hearts. Because in our restless, noisy world the loving voice of God is easily drowned out.” – Henri Nouwen.

INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of his gospel, Matthew tells the story of the angel Gabriel visiting Mary, announcing to her that she will bear a son from the Holy Spirit. He finishes this account by pointing to the words of the prophet Isaiah: “This took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: ‘Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name *Immanuel*,’ which means, *God with us*, (Isaiah 7:14; Matthew 1: 22-23).

Matthew closes his gospel with Jesus promising his friends, “I will be *with you* always, to the end of the age,” (Matthew 28:20).

Jesus is God-with-us, *Immanuel*. He goes so far to say that he lives inside us and us inside him. “In that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you,” he says (John 14:20).

Our closeness with Jesus reflects Jesus’ relationship with his Father, whom he knew was always with him. When he tells his disciples they will all abandon him, he says, though they all will fall away, he will not be left to himself: “Yet, I am not alone,” he says, “for my Father is with me,” (John 16:32).

If the king of the heavens who spoke creation into being lives inside of us, it only makes sense that we could learn to become aware of his presence, enjoy his company, and communicate with him. This is the goal of Immanuel prayer, God-with-us prayer.

THE PRACTICE

The Immanuel Moment¹

Imagine you are sitting on a rock next to a gurgling mountain stream. It’s spring, so the leaves on the trees rising all around you glow bright green in the sunlight. Feel the mountain air on your face—it’s fresh, but not cold. Now imagine Jesus takes a seat next to you. What if he has something he would like to say to you? And what would like to say to him? Ask him?

If prayer is, as Nouwen says, “listening to the voice of Jesus,” then the Immanuel Moment is a way to allow the Holy Spirit to use the eyes of our heart (our imaginations and memories) to create a space, perhaps like the scene above, where we can actively listen to him and even interact with him.

We can do this because of two realities:

- Jesus lives in us, nearer to us than our own breath (John 14:20); he is “with us always, to the end of the age,” (Matt 28:20).

¹ This model of Immanuel prayer, called *The Immanuel Moment*, was developed by Dr. Karl D. Lehman.

- God created us so that expressions of gratitude and appreciation warm and enliven our neural pathways, preparing us for connection. God says we gain access to Him through thanksgiving: “Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise! Give thanks to him; bless his name,” (Psalm 100:4).

Putting these realities together, we can use the Immanuel Moment exercise to intentionally engage in deep and personal expressions of gratitude and appreciation to God, preparing ourselves to connect with him. And then we can ask him to allow us to perceive his presence and to hear his voice. The goal is to establish an interactive intimacy with God that carries on into our everyday lives. You may use this exercise as often as you like. It can also be useful and powerful to do this exercise together with a prayer partner or small group.

Immanuel Moment Exercise

Adapted from Rev. Kathleen Christopher and Dr. Karl D. Lehman

1. Opening prayer

“Lord, thank you that you are always with me. I consecrate myself to you today and give you access to every part of me. Please prepare my mind and heart to hear your voice and to know and love you as you truly are. Please be Lord over all my thoughts, memories and emotions. Please bind and silence my spiritual enemies by the power of your name. Please also quiet the voice of my flesh. I ask you to sanctify and enliven the eyes of my heart—my imagination—for your purposes. I put my trust in you, the great shepherd and lover of my soul, and ask you to create a safe place for me experience your presence with me. In your holy name, Amen.”

2. Quiet your heart and body.

Make yourself comfortable. Breathe slowly in and out. Notice any areas of your body that are tense. Relax.

3. Express gratitude and appreciation.

Ask the Lord to take you either in your memory or your imagination to

- a. A memory of a time when you felt especially close or connected to him, *or*
- b. A memory or place where you felt especially grateful, *or*
- c. An imaginary place he might give to you to meet with him.

From that place in your memory or imagination express your gratitude and appreciation to God. Please thank him for everything you can think to thank him for. If you are remembering a blessed memory, look around at what you see in the moment and thank him for every gift. If you see yourself at the shore, thank him for every beautiful, created thing you see and experience—the wind in your hair, the sun on your face. Bless him with any words of appreciation for who he is that you can think of. Please do this for at least three minutes.

4. Ask the Lord to allow you to be aware of his presence

If, in this place of thanksgiving, you are not yet aware of the living presence of the Lord, ask him if he would allow you to perceive his presence with you in that imaginary place or memory. Then pay attention. Some people have a sense of his bodily presence in the memory. Some people see his eyes. Others have a sense of warmth or light.

5. If you are aware of his presence, please ask him if there is anything he would like to show you or say to you. Listen carefully.

Note: Whatever we believe we hear from the Lord must be consistent with Scripture and should also resonate with our mature Christian friends or mentors.

6. Please ask him anything you would like to know.

7. If you cannot perceive him, please ask him if he will show you if there is anything in the way. Respond accordingly.

If you are unable to sense the presence of the Lord, it's okay. You can try again. The truth is, he doesn't always manifest himself to us. All Christians go through seasons of awareness and seasons of seeming silence. However, he might surprise you with that sense of his presence at another time of the day. By making space for him, you are working your awareness muscles! However, if this continues for you and distresses you, please reach out to one of the pastors or prayer ministers at Greenwood.

HELPFUL VERSES

"I keep my eyes always on the Lord. With him at my right hand, I will not be shaken." Psalms 16:8

"I am not alone, for my Father is with me." John 16:32

"The one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone." John 8:29

"Behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age." Matthew 28:20

"I will never leave you nor forsake you." Hebrews 13:5

"The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him 'Immanuel,' (which means 'God with us.')." Matthew 1:23

INTERESTING QUOTES

"The continuous and unembarrassed interchange of love and thought between God and the soul of the redeemed man is the throbbing heart of New Testament religion," A.W. Tozer.

"We are always in the presence of God, yet it seems to me that those who pray are in his presence in a very different sense." – Teresa of Avila

"Learning to hear his voice is at the center of all that matters in life." – John Mark Comer

"I put aside my weighty cares and leave my wearisome toils for a while. I abandon myself to you, O God, and rest for a little in you. I enter the inner chamber of my soul and seek only God and the things that can help me in my quest for you. Come then, Lord my God, teach my heart where and how to look for you, where and how to find you." – Anselm (1033-1109)

"O Christ Jesus, when all is darkness and we feel our weakness and helplessness, give us the sense of your presence, your love, and your strength." – Ignatius of Loyola