



# Imagining GOD

**Study Guide**

**Darren Cushman Wood**



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# Introduction

What is it about humans that we like to create metaphors and other forms of figurative speech? According to a neuroscience study that appeared in a 2014 issue of “NeuroImage,” a research group summarized its findings:

“We found that metaphor production was associated with focal activity in predominantly left-hemispheric brain regions, specifically the left angular gyrus, the left middle and superior frontal gyri — corresponding to the left dorsomedial prefrontal (DMPFC) cortex — and the posterior cingulate cortex.”<sup>[i]</sup>

That may be an apt scientific description, but for biblical studies the answer is faith, with some help from God. This study explores the diverse ways God is described in the Bible. Two things are true: God is beyond our human comprehension, and God wants to be known by us. So, God communicates in ways we can understand — quite literally, the way our brains are wired. Thus the scriptures are full of similes, metaphors, analogies, and images to help deepen and expand our faith. This study will explore six of them. Some are very familiar and others may be new to you.

In his book, “An Unsettling God: The Heart of the Hebrew Bible,” Walter Brueggemann describes how this works. Most often we think of scripture as a divine monologue — God speaks and humans listen. But he points out that the scriptures also contain dialogue between God and humans. These dialogues

arise from God's relationship with Israel (and later, the church) as God's partner (to be sure, an unequal partnership but a partnership nevertheless). The dialogues between God and the people are sometimes praise and sometimes protest, sometimes questions and sometimes pledges, all of which take place within a covenant relationship of God's unconditional faithfulness.

An intrinsic part of this divine-human conversation is imagination. He writes,

“What we have in the biblical text is a *human* document, a product of daring evocative human imagination. But serious readers of this text of human imagination regularly are recruited, in the process of being addressed, to the conviction that what is surely daring artistic human imagination is, at the same time, an act of divine revelation. There is something different here that insists always on being ‘strange and new.’ What is *revealed* here is a Holy One who is undomesticatedly available [to us].”<sup>[iii]</sup>

The goal of this inspired conversation of imagination is the full maturing of our faith.

This study is designed for individual reflection or small group discussion. Each session includes an overview of the theme, a weekly hymn, daily scripture readings, and reflection questions. Each session concludes with a meditation exercise to help you experience God's Spirit through the biblical imagery. Let the Spirit inspire your imagination to see God in a new way.

# Session One: God the Rock

## Overview

What does the 18th century Anglican cleric Augustus Toplady have in common with contemporary musicians Bob Seeger and Paul Simon? All three used “rock” as a metaphor in a song to describe someone who provides safety and security. Toplady wrote the hymn “Rock of Ages” about God. Simon wrote and sang “Loves Me Like a Rock” about his mother. And Seeger sang about his younger self in “Like a Rock.”

According to the psalmist, “The Lord is my rock, my fortress, and my deliverer, my God, my rock in whom I take refuge” (Psalm 18:2). Rock is a common and ancient image of God in the Old Testament, especially in Psalms. Hannah addressed God as her rock when she gave thanks for the birth of Samuel. The last words of King David before he died praised God as “the rock of Israel.”

Closely linked with the imagery of God as rock is God as a fortress. Both metaphors emphasize God’s protection and deliverance from harm. God our rock gives us refuge from the turmoil and challenges we face like a cleft in a rock or a fort in the desert. Rightfully so, the psalmist celebrated God as “my rock and my salvation” (62:2,6).

Rocks and cliffs figure prominently in the biblical

stories. It was out of a rock that God provided water for the Hebrews who were on the brink of death as they wandered in the wilderness (Exodus 17). While receiving the Ten Commandments, Moses took shelter in the cleft of the rock as God's presence overwhelmed Mount Sinai (Exodus 33:22). God the rock is related to the theme of mountains in the Old Testament, such as Mount Sinai, which connote God's strength. God as our rock and fortress affirm that God uses divine power to protect us and deliver us.

While not as prominent an image in the New Testament, Jesus urged his believers to build their lives on faith in God like building a house on a solid rock (Matthew 7:24-27). Echoing the Exodus story, Paul said that Jesus is the rock from which we draw spiritual water (1 Corinthians 10:4).

The image of God as our rock is an affirmation of faith in God's loving strength to protect and deliver us, to give us refuge from life's troubles and renewal for faith's struggles.

### **The Weekly Hymn — “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God”**

As part of your daily devotions, read or sing “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God.”

A mighty fortress is our God,  
a bulwark never failing;  
our helper he amid the flood of mortal ills prevailing.  
For still our ancient foe doth seek to work us woe;  
his craft and power are great,  
and armed with cruel hate,  
on earth is not his equal.

Did we in our own strength confide,  
our striving would be losing,  
were not the right man on our side,  
the man of God's own choosing.  
Dost ask who that may be? Christ Jesus, it is he;  
Lord Sabaoth, his name, from age to age the same,  
and he must win the battle.

And though this world, with devils filled,  
should threaten to undo us,  
we will not fear, for God hath willed  
his truth to triumph through us.  
The Prince of Darkness grim, we tremble not for him;  
his rage we can endure, for lo, his doom is sure;  
one little word shall fell him.

That word above all earthly powers,  
no thanks to them, abideth;  
the Spirit and the gifts are ours,  
thru him who with us sideth.  
Let goods and kindred go, this mortal life also;  
the body they may kill; God's truth abideth still;  
his kingdom is forever.

“A Mighty Fortress Is Our God” was written by Martin Luther, the father of the Protestant Reformation, around 1527-‘29. He likely penned the lyrics in response to the martyrdom of his friend, Leonard Kaiser. Kaiser, who came from a wealthy family in Bavaria, became a friend and follower of Luther while studying at the university in Wittenberg, Germany. In order to see his dying father, Kaiser returned to Bavaria, which was dominated by the Catholic Church. While

there he was arrested and found guilty of heresy. He was burned at the stake on Aug. 16, 1527.

### **Daily Readings**

Exodus 17:1-7

1 Samuel 2:1-2 (for the backstory on Hannah's prayer, read 1 Samuel 1)

Psalms 18

Psalms 31

Psalms 62

Isaiah 26:1-4

1 Corinthians 10:1-4

### **Reflection Questions**

What threats did the Israelites face? How did they experience God as their rock and fortress?

Think of a time when you faced a crisis. What or who gave you relief from the stress of the crisis? Have you ever thought of them as an expression of God's protection or deliverance?

What makes it hard for you to trust in God as your sheltering rock?

If God protects us, what then should be our attitude?

God our rock expresses God's protection, care, and ultimately, deliverance. What might be other images (biblical or contemporary) that signify this?

### **Imagination Exercise: Envisioning a Safe Place**

Begin by reading, "For God alone is my rock, my salvation, and my fortress; I will never be shaken" (Psalm 62:2).

Center yourself with silence. Pause for an extended moment before taking the next steps in this exercise. Slow down your breathing and relax your body.

Use your imagination to think of a place of safety. It may be a real place, perhaps from your past, or it may be an imaginary place. It can be a place that could exist but has yet to be. Think about what you might experience through your five senses in this safe place. What makes it safe for you? Then, imagine your safe place is part of the presence of God, who surrounds and infuses the place with safety.

Conclude by reading, "For God alone is my rock, my salvation, and my fortress; I will never be shaken" (Psalm 62:2).





## Session Two: God the Light

### Overview

Have you ever stood in total darkness in a cave? The first time I did was when I was a child on vacation at Mammoth Cave. In the middle of the tour, the guide gathered us in an underground “room” and instructed us to cover our watches and anything else that might emit light. Then he turned off his flashlight. At first it seemed like you could see things, but slowly as your eyes adjusted, nothing was visible.

Darkness has evoked people from the beginning of time to associate candles, fires, and stars with divine illumination and assurance.

The evocative symbols of God as light and the light of God are at the beginning of both the Old and New Testaments. God creates order out of the primordial darkness on the first day of creation by saying, “Let there be light” (Genesis 1:3). The Gospel of John introduces Jesus as God’s word, who brought everything into being because “in him was life, and the life was the light of all people” (1:4). Sometimes scripture talks about light as something God or Christ gives the world, but sometimes scripture goes further and identifies God or Christ as light, such as Psalm 27:1, “The Lord is my light and my salvation,” and John 8:12, “And Jesus spoke to them, saying, ‘I am the light of world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life’.”

Both ways tell us about God and our relationship with God. The imagery of light is always about life. God is the source of life as the creator and sustainer of the world, and Christ is the source of renewed and everlasting life.

The imagery of light is related to truth. God reveals truth to us and enables us to distinguish between what is true and what is false. God our light expresses that we learn from God, and our faith development is a process of growing in knowledge.

God our light celebrates the beauty God reveals in the world. Jesus calls us to be “the light of the world” as people who reflect the life, truth, and beauty of God as reflected in our faithful living (Matthew 5:14). The future hope for the world is described in Revelation 22 as the city of God where there will be no night because “they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light” (v. 5).

The metaphor of light is full of multiple meanings, and the imagery of light connects all these themes. Life can only grow in the light, and life is full of beauty which the light of truth reveals. We celebrate that God is our light, who enriches us with life, truth, and beauty.

**The Weekly Hymn —  
“Christ, Whose Glory Fills the Skies”**

As part of your daily devotions, read or sing “Christ, Whose Glory Fills the Skies.”

Christ, whose glory fills the skies,  
Christ, the true, the only light,  
Sun of Righteousness, arise,

triumph o'er the shades of night;  
Dayspring from on high, be near;  
Daystar, in my heart appear.

Dark and cheerless is the morn  
unaccompanied by thee;  
joyless is the day's return,  
'till thy mercy's beams I see;  
'till the inward light impart,  
cheer my eyes and warm my heart.

Visit then this soul of mine;  
pierce the gloom of sin and grief;  
fill me, Radiancy divine,  
scatter all my unbelief;  
more and more thyself display,  
shining to the perfect day.

Charles Wesley wrote “Christ Whose Glory Fills the Skies” in 1740 in the early years of the Methodist movement. It was first published under the title “Morning Hymn,” which bespeaks its purpose as a song of praise for morning prayers.

The younger brother of John Wesley, Charles helped lead Methodism during its first two decades. He wrote between 6,500 and 10,000 hymns. He was married and lived in Bristol, England, and later in London. Of his nine children, Charles Jr. and Samuel became organists and composers, and Samuel's son, Samuel Sebastian, also became an organist and composer whose work appears in our hymnal.

## **Daily Readings**

Exodus 13:21-22

Psalm 27:1-6

Psalm 36:5-10

Psalm 119:105

Isaiah 2:5-11

Isaiah 60:1, 19-20

John 1:4-8; 8:12

## **Reflection Questions**

In this session's scripture readings, what are the different things God does as light? Which of these is most relevant to you?

Light can represent God enlightening us with truth and knowledge. When has your faith been enriched by learning? When has your faith in God changed your perspective (on God, yourself, or others)?

If light is a metaphor for God, then darkness is sometimes a metaphor for sin in the Bible. How is sin like being in the dark?

How does your faith in God help you become aware of

beauty in creation or culture?

God our light expresses God's life-giving truth and beauty. What might be other images (biblical or contemporary) that signify God's life, truth, and beauty?

### **Imagination Exercise: The Christ Candle**

This exercise can be done on your own or with others, such as a family devotion or table grace, in the evening.

Place a candle at the center of a table and light it.

As you light it, one person read, "Christ is the light of the world."

Everyone responds: "And the darkness did not overcome the light."

Pray:

We praise and thank you, O God,  
for you are without beginning and without end.  
Through Christ, you created the whole world;  
through Christ, you preserve it.  
You made the day for the works of light and the night  
for the refreshment of our minds and our bodies.  
Keep us now in Christ; grant us a peaceful evening,  
a night free from sin; and bring us at last to eternal  
life.  
Through Christ and in the Holy Spirit,  
we offer you all glory, honor, and worship,  
now and forever. Amen.

Read one of the scripture readings for this session.

Pause for a moment of silent reflection.

Pray for others.

Conclude by reading this blessing: “The grace of Jesus Christ enfold you this night. Go in peace. Thanks be to God.”<sup>[iii]</sup>

## Session Three: God the Shepherd

### Overview

My first appointment as a pastor was to two rural churches many miles away from the closest grocery store, which was in the county seat. Late one night as I was driving home from the store, the road was blocked by a very anxious and confused sheep. A wire fence had been smashed down, and the sheep had accidentally gotten out but could not figure out how to get back into its pasture. I got out of the car and tried to no avail to get it back across the lowered fence. It was too scared and disoriented to trust me, as I was not its shepherd.

The imagery of God as shepherd is perhaps the most famous biblical metaphor given the popularity of the Twenty-Third Psalm. While the image of a shepherd evokes peaceful settings of pastures, the Israelites and other ancient Near Eastern cultures associated the title with royalty. The king was the shepherd of the nation. It was one of a constellation of images about God's authority to govern the people, such as God the king and God the warrior. The image of God as a shepherd expressed that Israel was created by and continues to be dependent on God: "We are the people of God's pasture, and the sheep of God's hand" (Psalm 100:7). Unlike earthly rulers, God the shepherd provides for people's needs and pro-

protects people from harm: “the Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want” (Psalm 23:1).

The image of God as the shepherd of Israel was popular among the prophets because it expresses both divine accountability and restoration. (See Isaiah 40, Jeremiah 31, Ezekiel 34, Amos 3, Micah 7, and Zechariah 11.) When Israel was freed from Babylonian captivity, it was God the shepherd who led the Israelites back home to re-establish the nation (Jeremiah 31:10; Ezekiel 34:11-16).

Jesus explained his ministry by drawing on the imagery of the divine shepherd. Jesus described himself as “the good shepherd.” Jesus shepherds us into God’s salvation by laying down his life for us (John 10:11-18) and by seeking us out to bring us back into God’s love (Luke 15:1-7).

The metaphor tells us something about our relationship with God and other believers. God as our shepherd expresses that we are God’s own people, the flock of God. God cares for each one of us, even when we wander away from God. Like a shepherd, God provides for our spiritual and material needs. God protects us like a shepherd tending sheep. God guides us to safety and fulfillment just like a shepherd who moves the flock to better pastures.

### **The Weekly Hymn — “Savior, Like a Shepherd Lead Us”**

As part of your daily devotions, read or sing “Savior, Like a Shepherd Lead Us.”

Savior, like a shepherd lead us,  
much we need thy tender care;  
in thy pleasant pastures feed us,  
for our use thy folds prepare.



Blessed Jesus, blessed Jesus!  
Thou hast bought us, thine we are.  
Blessed Jesus, blessed Jesus!  
Thou hast bought us, thine we are.

We are thine, thou dost befriend us,  
be the guardian of our way;  
keep thy flock, from sin defend us,  
seek us when we go astray.  
Blessed Jesus, blessed Jesus! Hear,  
O hear us when we pray.  
Blessed Jesus, blessed Jesus! Hear,  
O hear us when we pray.

Thou hast promised to receive us,  
poor and sinful though we be;  
thou hast mercy to relieve us,  
grace to cleanse and power to free.  
Blessed Jesus, blessed Jesus!  
We will early turn to thee.  
Blessed Jesus, blessed Jesus!  
We will early turn to thee.

Early let us seek thy favor,  
early let us do thy will;  
blessed Lord and only Savior,  
with thy love our bosoms fill.  
Blessed Jesus, blessed Jesus!  
Thou hast loved us, love us still.  
Blessed Jesus, blessed Jesus!  
Thou hast loved us, love us still.

It is unclear who wrote “Savior, Like a Shepherd Lead Us.” “The United Methodist Hymnal” attributes it to Dorothy Thrupp, a British hymn writer.

More well known is the writer of the music, William Bradbury. Bradbury composed music for many well-known hymns, such as “He Leadeth Me” and “Sweet Hour of Prayer.” He worked as a church musician, and along with his brother founded the Bradbury Piano Co.

### **Daily Readings**

Psalm 23

Psalm 100

Isaiah 40:9-11

Jeremiah 31:10-14

Ezekiel 34:11-16

Luke 15:3-7

John 10:11-18

### **Reflection Questions**

Do you have Psalm 23 memorized? If so, who taught it to you?

The Israelites and other ancient peoples called their rulers “shepherds.” How does your faith in God rule your actions

and attitudes?

What makes it difficult to follow God's direction? How do you discern God's direction for your life?

What would it look like for our nation to follow God's will right now?

The image of God as our shepherd celebrates that God provides for our needs. What is the most important thing you need from God right now? What is the most important thing our church needs from God right now?

God our shepherd expresses God's direction, control, and providence. What other images (biblical or contemporary) might signify these aspects of God?

### **Imagination Exercise: Prayer Walk**

This week, take a walk with God. Let it be a time of prayer to God and reflection about God. Begin your walk by reading Psalm 23. As you walk, reflect on these three questions:

- What do I need to thank God for?
- How can I serve God?
- What can I give to support God's mission and ministry?

Before you end, walk in silence for an extended period and listen for God to speak to you.



## Session Four: God the Gardener

### Overview

I am an accidental gardener. It was always Ginny, my wife, who had gardening aspirations when we moved to North. We bought an old house with an unusual double lot in the St. Joan of Arc neighborhood of Indianapolis, and over the past several years we have planted multiple small gardens. She gets the credit for anything that grows. I am only the hired hand. But over time, my interest in and appreciation for landscaping has grown. Lately, our favorite television show has become “The Garden Chronicles,” which profiles amazing gardens across America. I have come to believe there is a spirituality about gardens that connects us to God, who is the gardener of all creation.

We usually think of God creating the world from on high by just saying a few words. This is the picture of creation in Genesis 1. We assume that God can only be God as long as God is above the fray of human qualities. God cannot get his hands dirty and still be God.

But there is another biblical view of creation in Genesis 2. In this second creation story, God is a gardener who creates a garden in which the first humans live. Throughout the Old Testament, God’s hands are dirty with the work of caring for creation, Israel, and each person.

The Psalms and the prophets often refer to God

“forming” us. God “planted” Israel in Canaan after liberating the Israelites from Egypt (Exodus 15:17). Isaiah portrays Israel as a vineyard that God planted and cultivated. The Israelites’ rebellion against God “yielded wild grapes” which God the vinedresser eradicated by letting it go to rot by being invaded by the Assyrian Empire (5:1-7). Jesus used the imagery of God as the owner of a vineyard to express the radical equality of grace we experience in the Kingdom of God (Matthew 20:1-13).

The metaphor of God as a gardener expresses two related affirmations about God. It affirms that God is the creator of the world. The world was made by God’s generous love and is good because God created it with goodness. It also affirms that God is the sustainer of the world. The gardener keeps tending the garden and providing for its survival and flourishing. Seeing God as a gardener helps us understand God’s active, benevolent presence in our lives.

### **The Weekly Hymn — “Morning Has Broken”**

As part of your daily devotions, read or sing “Morning Has Broken.”

Morning has broken like the first morning;  
blackbird has spoken like the first bird.  
Praise for the singing! Praise for the morning!  
Praise for them, springing fresh from the Word!

Sweet the rain’s new fall sunlit from heaven,  
like the first dew fall on the first grass.  
Praise for the sweetness of the wet garden,  
sprung in completeness where his feet pass.

Mine is the sunlight! Mine is the morning  
born of the one light Eden saw play!  
Praise with elation, praise every morning,  
God's recreation of the new day!

Poet Eleanor Farjeon was commissioned by an editor in 1931 to write a hymn on the theme of thanksgiving, which became "Morning Has Broken." The daughter of a British author, Farjeon won fame for herself as an author by earning the Carnegie Medal, the Hans Anderson International Medal, and the Regina Medal. The hymn won wide popularity when Cat Stevens recorded it, and it climbed to number six on the "U.S. Billboard Hot 100 Chart" in 1972.

### **Daily Readings**

Genesis 2:4-10

Numbers 24:1-7

Psalms 65

Isaiah 5:1-4

Amos 9:11-15

Romans 8:18-25

Revelation 22:1-5

## **Reflection Questions**

How have you experienced God in nature?

How would you describe God's relationship with creation based on what God does in scripture?

What do you think is the relationship between science's view of nature and religious belief in God the creator and sustainer of creation?

If God is the gardener of all life, what then does this belief call us to do?

God our gardener expresses that God created and cares for all of life. What might be other images (biblical or contemporary) that signify these aspects of God?

## **Imagination Exercise: God's Helper**

This week let your prayers and meditations be in your hands rather than your head. Honor God our creator and sustainer by caring for the earth: plant flowers, weed, mulch, water, and so forth. Think of your tasks as ways of being God's helpers. Do not worry about trying to find the right words for your prayers. Instead, be mindful of your work as the prayer itself.



## Session Five: God the Artisan

### Overview

Throughout high school, I prepared a portfolio that I could submit for admission to art school. While I became fairly proficient in painting, drawing, and printing, I never got a handle on pottery. God did not call me to be a potter. Instead, at the beginning of my senior year, I began to sense a calling to ministry that shifted my focus from art to academia.

The Old Testament portrays God as an artisan or artist when it describes God actively shaping Israel. The metaphor of God as a potter expresses that God controls our lives. God is the potter and Israel is the clay whose destiny is being shaped by the divine artist, according to the prophet Jeremiah.

In tandem with the image of God as a gardener, God is also seen as an artisan who builds creation. We hear this in Isaiah, who describes God forming creation and Israel as a potter or artisan creating something with his hands. The Hebrew artisans who built the tabernacle and items for worship saw their work as inspired by God. God fashions who we are, beginning in our mother's wombs, according to the psalmist, like a seamstress (139:13).

In the New Testament the image of God as an artisan

expresses God's relationship with the church. The metaphor of a builder takes center stage while the other Old Testament metaphors are not present. God the builder of the church is found in Ephesians, Hebrews, and First Peter. The church as God's eternal building takes the place of the temple as the location of God's presence through Jesus Christ.

The image of a potter denotes God's power to mold our lives and direct the course of our lives. It conveys that God has authority over our lives.

Sometimes God's process of shaping and directing us can be jarring, just as a potter will scrape the clay off the potter's wheel and start over.

In response to God the potter, we surrender our lives to God. We submit to God's will. In turn, the image of God the potter is also reassuring because the one who created us will continue to work with us in ways that are best for us.

### **The Weekly Hymn — “Have Thine Own Way, Lord”**

As part of your daily devotions, read or sing “Have Thine Own Way, Lord.”

Have thine own way, Lord! Have thine own way!  
Thou art the potter; I am the clay.  
Mold me and make me after thy will,  
while I am waiting, yielded and still.

Have thine own way, Lord! Have thine own way!  
Search me and try me, Savior today!  
Wash me just now, Lord, wash me just now,  
as in thy presence humbly I bow.

Have thine own way, Lord! Have thine own way!  
Wounded and weary, help me I pray!  
Power, all power, surely is thine!  
Touch me and heal me, Savior divine!

Have thine own way, Lord! Have thine own way!  
Hold o'er my being absolute sway.  
Fill with thy Spirit till all shall see  
Christ only, always, living in me!

Adelaide Pollard, the author of “Have Thine Own Way, Lord,” struggled with physical ailments and mental illness throughout her life. She worked with various evangelists as a Bible teacher in the 1880s and eventually became an instructor at a missionary training school. She wrote the hymn during a low point in her life after an unsuccessful campaign to raise money for a missionary trip to Africa. She attended a prayer meeting and was inspired by hearing the humble prayers of an elderly woman. Later that night she found inspiration for the hymn in Jeremiah 18.

Eventually she did make it to Africa as a missionary for a brief period prior to World War I. With the outbreak of the war she moved to Scotland before returning to America due to her poor health.

### **Daily Readings**

Exodus 36:1-7

Isaiah 45:9-12

Isaiah 64:8-12

Jeremiah 18:1-6

Jeremiah 19:1-13

Hebrews 3:1-6

1 Peter 2:4-10

### **Reflection Questions**

Ponder each of these biblical images for God:

- Potter
- Weaver
- Builder
- Sculptor

What do each of these tell us about our relationship with God?

God the potter conveys divine direction and control over our lives. When have you experienced God as your potter?

For the prophet Jeremiah, the image of the potter reveals Yahweh's role in the history of Israel during the years before and during the Israelites' exile in Babylon. What does this metaphor tell us about the nature of God?

If God is the one who builds the church, what should be do as members?

God the artisan expresses God's providence over our lives. What contemporary images might signify this aspect of God?

### **Imagination Exercise: Your Pliability**

How pliable is your life to the will of God? Rate yourself in the following areas as to how open and flexible you are to adapting to God's direction and control (1=completely resistant; 10=total surrender):

\_\_\_ Outlook on your future

\_\_\_ Perspective on your past

\_\_\_ Self-image

\_\_\_ Finances

\_\_\_ Rest and leisure

\_\_\_ Food and drink

\_\_\_ Work relations

\_\_\_ Family relations

\_\_\_ Community relations and friendships

\_\_\_ Church involvement

\_\_\_ Occupation

\_\_\_ Education

\_\_\_ Free time

\_\_\_ Physical well-being

\_\_\_ Mental and emotional well-being

To conclude this time of reflection, read or sing the weekly hymn, “Have Thine Own Way, Lord.”

## Session Six: God the Healer

### Overview

The suffering we see in the world often raises the question, “Where is God?”

Even Jeremiah asked this question when he saw Israel’s suffering — “Is there a balm in Gilead?” Will God be the healing balm? The hymn answered yes, “There is a balm in Gilead to heal the sin-sick soul,” because God heals.

According to the Bible, God is working on behalf of those who are suffering and offers opportunities for restoration and healing. The Bible expresses this view by describing God our healer.

In the Old Testament God is portrayed as healing the nation Israel. Israel’s repeated disobedience eventually resulted in God giving the Israelites over to the Assyrians and then the Babylonians, when they were held in exile for 70 years. The prophets described the hope of national restoration as God “healing their land” (2 Chronicles 7:14). The promise to “heal their disloyalty” indicated that the restoration of Israel was more than the establishment of an independent government but also a change of heart and mind of the people (Hosea 14:4).

The role of God the healer was fully embodied in Jesus’ healing miracles. Jesus (whom Matthew called Em-

manuel, “God with us”) healed individuals. Jesus’ miracles were signs of God’s larger work of salvation to transform society with mercy, justice, and peace (which Jesus called the Kingdom of God). In Christ’s healing ministry we see social healing made personal because every person he healed had experienced discrimination and rejection because of their illness.

The image of God as a healer tells us several things about our relationship with God. God the healer transforms our lives with tender, patient care for us. God the healer reveals the gentle side of God. God works on both the social and personal level to restore our lives and, in turn, restore our relationships. God works on a deeply personal level to reverse the effects of trauma and give us peace.

### **The Weekly Hymn — “There Is a Balm in Gilead”**

As part of your daily devotions, read or sing “There Is a Balm in Gilead.”

Refrain: There is a balm in Gilead  
to make the wounded whole;  
there is a balm in Gilead to heal the sin-sick soul.

Sometimes I feel discouraged,  
and think my work’s in vain.  
But then the Holy Spirit revives my soul again.  
[Refrain]

Don't ever feel discouraged, for Jesus is your friend,  
and if you look for knowledge  
he'll ne'er refuse to lend. [Refrain]



If you can't preach like Peter,  
if you can't pray like Paul,  
just tell the love of Jesus, and say he died for all.  
[Refrain]

Black Liberation theologian James Cone pointed to “There is a Balm in Gilead” as an example of the spirituals that offered African Americans hope in the midst of oppression: “Hope, in the black spirituals, is not a denial of history. Black hope accepts history, but believes that the historical is in motion, moving toward a divine fulfillment. It is the belief that things can be radically otherwise than they are: that reality is not fixed, but is moving in the direction of human liberation.”<sup>[iv]</sup>

### **Daily Readings**

2 Chronicles 7:12-16

Isaiah 57:14-21

Mark 2:1-12

Mark 5:1-20

Mark 8:22-26

Luke 7:1-10

James 5:14-16a

## Reflection Questions

Besides physical healing, what are other types of healing?

The Bible often portrays Jesus' healing as immediate and caused by his command. What might be different ways God heals us today?

What makes it hard to trust in God the healer?

How might illness have a spiritual dimension and healing be an expression of spiritual renewal?

What does it mean for God to be "the healer of the nations?"

God the healer expresses God's compassion, salvation, and restoration. What other images (biblical or contemporary) might signify these activities of God?

## Imagination Exercise: Prayers for Healing

Compile a list of persons you know who need to experience God as their healer (or use North's weekly prayer list and prayer requests: <https://gaggle.email/join/prayers@nn.north-churchindy.com>). Use the following prayer to pray for each person this week:

Almighty God, hear my prayer for [names of persons].

May they be comforted in their suffering and made whole.

When they are afraid, give them courage;

when they feel weak, grant them your strength;  
when they are afflicted, afford them patience;  
when they are lost, offer them hope;  
when they are alone, move us to their side;  
when death comes, open your arms to receive them.  
In the name of Jesus Christ I pray. Amen.<sup>[v]</sup>

Consider one thing you might do to show them God's compassion.

## Footnotes

[i] Mathias Benedek, Roger Beaty, Emanuel Jauk, Karl Koschutnig, Andreas Fink, Paul J. Silvia, Beate Dunst, Aljoscha C. Neubauer, "Creating metaphors: The Neural Basis of Figurative Language Production," "NeuroImage" Volume 90, 15 April 2014, pgs. 99-106, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3951481/>

[ii] (Fortress Press, Minneapolis: 2009), p. 16.

[iii] The prayer and blessing are taken from "An Order for Evening Praise and Prayer," "The United Methodist Hymnal" (Nashville: the United Methodist Publishing House, 1989), p. 878-9.

[iv] In Carlton R. Young's "Companion to the United Methodist Hymnal" (Abingdon Press: Nashville, 1993), p. 646.

[v] Adapted from "A Service of Healing I," "The United Methodist Book of Worship" (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1992) p. 621.

# Notes





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