



Prayer: The Power of God in Your Hands

Six Bible studies to help you learn to pray

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<p>Power of Prayer – 6 studies on the power and help that we receive in prayer. Follow the saints in their prayers and learn from them how valuable prayer can be for you.</p>	

Introduction

Prayer fills the pages of scripture and is the power of God's people and our savior Jesus, himself. It is Elijah believing that the Lord will do a miracle against all odds. It is Paul waging war against the forces of evil. It is Abraham needing a breakthrough and finding that the Lord is ready to work a miracle of monumental proportions. Prayer can be for yourself or it can be for others. It can help others whose lives are broken or who are just starting to doubt whether God cares. Prayer is a connection with God that helps us to harness God's power to change our hearts and to change the world. No one is too strong in their faith for prayer. Jesus prayed so much that the disciples asked Him to teach them to pray. Every great man and woman of scripture became great because of the connection in prayer.

Have you ever noticed how the church today seems to struggle more than the great saints did Acts or in the Old Testament? We practice programs based on our wisdom and strength, but it is hard to gather a group of saints for an evening of prayer. We are in a battle against Satan and we don't use the power of prayer. I know prayer is hard work and that it requires faith that God can do anything. Those who are willing to take the time for prayer and who believe in the Lord will see miracles. They will be able to defeat Satan in the church and the world. They will find that breakthroughs come for the family of God and the broken around them. God hasn't changed. He is always willing to answer our prayers and to help those in need.

Prayer starts with a faith that believes God keeps His promises as much now as He did long ago. It is honed by practice just as one might learn to play the piano. It grows when you pray again and again and when your prayers last hours instead of minutes. Prayer is worth the effort because it is your defense against Satan, your avenue for God's help and blessings, and your tool to change the world around you. When God's people are willing to come to Him with their fears and worries, God can do the impossible and start revolutions that will change your life, your church, and your world. The church needs the breakthroughs of prayer. Our world needs the help that only the Lord can give. Those will not come by our hands but by the hand of God summoned by His people in prayer.

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How to use this Bible study

Each of the six chapters contains an introduction to help you get the big picture and is followed by thirteen questions to help you dig into the truth. The questions will help you understand what is going on and apply it to your own lives. The leader's guide provides answers for the questions that can be used in a Sunday Bible class or a small group. In a small group setting, you may find it helpful to copy the four-page leader's guide for each person. There are also student guides provided in the back of the book. In a large setting, it may be easier to copy those guides so that each of the members of the class has a student guide for personal use. Notice that there are also three questions at the end of each lesson that can either be discussed as you meet together or assigned for people to think about in the coming week.

My prayer is that you and the members of your group or class can grow through these studies. The answers in the leader's guide may challenge you to find deeper meaning and application for your lives. Life as a Christian can be difficult. It becomes even more difficult as we try to actively serve our Lord in ministry. The lessons that Jesus gave to help His disciples as they began the ministry of the new church are still important for us today. They can provide strength and help with our fears. As you study, realize that many of the questions have no single answer but are meant to help people find God's help in your trials. If you need to take more than one week per lesson, do so and enjoy the discussion and the learning.

Bibliography

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The Power of Persistence by Michael Catt

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May the Lord bless you as you learn and grow in His grace.

1. Profitable Prayer

1 Kings 18: 16-46

Big idea: Prayer is powerless when you don't believe

Prayer can be powerful, but it is worthless if you don't believe in the Lord. For Elijah up on Mt. Carmel, prayer was not a wish or a hope. It was a belief that God wanted the unbelieving nation to bow down and worship Him. Elijah believes with every ounce of his body that God will answer his prayer with a miracle. He understands that this is a duel between God and Satan and that God must and will win. The people needed to see who the real God was. The prophets of Baal may have had the force of the king and the power of numbers. Elijah had the connection of prayer with the true God, and he was willing to put himself on the line that everyone might worship God.

I have seen a few Christians pray like that. We pray for people in the community, but we seldom have the confidence that God will powerfully answer with a miracle. Prayer is based on God's promises and believes that God wants what we are asking. Lord, forgive us for the prayers that are nothing more than hopes or wishes. Lord, forgive us for being surprised when prayer makes a difference. We have the power of God available to each of us, but we seldom put ourselves on the line, as Elijah did in the text. No wonder the church accomplishes so little in the world. It is time for powerful prayers that know what God can do and trust that He will come through.

God's people change the world when they pray. Nehemiah prayed, and God rebuilt Jerusalem. The disciples prayed, and God launched a church on Pentecost. You and I need to explore what God says He will do in the Bible and pray with all our hearts that God might do His will through us. Powerful prayer begins with knowing God. It continues with a faith that is willing to stand up and be counted when everything seems against you. That may seem like a lot to ask of any Christian, and so I would ask just one thing as we look at Elijah. Commit to praying daily and asking God for a little more each day. God will teach you and give you the faith to ask for miracles. God wants to do wonderful things through you and me today.

1. When have you prayed for something that seemed impossible? What gave you hope that God would answer your prayer?

I have been in the hospital when someone prayed for the impossible cure, and it happened. I have sat through Voter's meetings where a church did the unthinkable and went forward with an impossible vision that they completed. Miracles do happen, but they seldom happen without prayer. Let the group discuss times that God did the incredible. Be sure to discuss what they prayed for and what happened. Be sure to talk about the hope that people have when they pray. For me, expectation arises because I have seen God do incredible things beforehand. Somehow, when you see God do a miracle, you start believing that nothing is impossible for God.

Read 1 Kings 18: 16-46

2. Verse 19. How does Elijah put himself on the line in response to God's call in 1 Kings 18:1? What is the cost if he fails?

Elijah comes to the King at God's command in 18:1. It was a show of power. Notice that Ahab did not arrest Elijah or try to kill him even though he would have liked to do so. He needed Elijah. His kingdom was under an intense famine that Elijah had predicted was coming from God. Ahab needed Elijah because this "troubler" was his best hope for getting rain to fall out of the sky again. That didn't make it any less dangerous. This moment was a show of power. Elijah stood for God, and Ahab had chosen Baal as his

god. If the test that he will propose fails, Elijah will surely be put to death. Elijah was confident that God would make Himself known and show Himself more powerful than Baal. Elijah believed in God and His abilities we will see.

3. Verse 19. What does it take a church or person to put themselves on the line and ask for a miracle?

I often think it depends on a person believing that God has the power to do miracles and that He cares enough to do the miracle that we want. So often I encounter someone who gives up when a loved one is ill telling me that they guessed it wasn't God's will to save them. That may be true, but I find it hard to accept from someone who prayed once or twice and gave up. Elijah believed in God's abilities and knew that God cared enough about the people to do a miracle to show them that He was God. Too often, we give up on ministries of the church like reaching our community when God is just begging us to trust Him enough not to give up. Imagine what a church could do in their community if they would pray about people individually or the needs of a neighborhood collectively. We have to believe that God can do wonders so that we stop getting in the way of God's work in people's lives.

4. Verse 21. According to Elijah, what is the problem that needs to be addressed by a miracle?

The people were lukewarm in their faith and felt guilty before the great prophet who could command the skies not produce rain. They danced between the two options as if they were equals. Elijah would prove that there was a significant difference between God and Baal. It had been three years of famine, and the people had still not acknowledged their sin. His words, "how long," asked how much more it would take to convince them that prosperity and abundance came from the Lord and not from the false Gods that Jezebel had promoted. Having abandoned the Lord, they could not expect His blessings. Sadly, the people could not defend their position for Baal had not made it rain. They also were not willing at this point to repent for their view of God was so weak. It is as if Elijah is demanding that they make a choice of which God they will follow.

5. Verse 23. What are the conditions put forward for the test? How do they ask for something that only a true God could do?

Baal was the Sun god who was the giver of lightning, and so it was natural to ask that this false god answer by fire from a blazing sky. Each side would prepare a bull and lay it on wood for their god to answer by fire and accept their offering. Elijah caught the priests of Baal in a trap. He let them pick the bulls for themselves and God. He made them prepare their bull under the eyes of the people so that there could be no tricks. After they prepared the beast, the people sat down to wait and see what happened. This challenge was a test between the true God and Baal. Elijah depended on God to answer his prayers and demonstrate His power. Putting God on the line before the people took a lot of faith. Elijah had seen God's power in providing him food for three years and granting his prayers when the widow's son had died (1 Kings 17:7f)

6. Verses 21-24. What is the purpose of this demonstration? How does the answer of the people show about where their hearts were?

For Elijah, this was a battle for the hearts of the people. It was a chance to show everyone present who the true God was. He wants God to be glorified so that this unbelieving nation will bow down and become the children of God once again. The lack of an answer to Elijah shows the sad state of the people. The three years of famine affected the people and caused them to doubt the pagan gods who have failed to bring harvests and prosperity. Sadly, they don't know God well enough to believe in Him. The nation has been away from the true God so long that they don't know Him as their ancestors did. Several decades have passed since the Northern Kingdom was formed, and people stopped worshipping in Jerusalem. This mighty miracle was to spur the people to return to their God that they had forgotten.

7. What do you think God's purpose is for the church? What do you think God is just waiting for you and your church to ask for from Him?

God desires that our families, friends, and community come to know Him and to become His people. He is just waiting for you and your church to ask Him to work the miracles that are necessary for such wonders to happen. Like Elijah, God often sends us to a people who often say nothing when we ask them what they know and believe about God. God is waiting for us to ask for the Holy Spirit to come in power on the people we know. God is just waiting for us to be bold enough to stand up for Him and to proclaim Him among the people we know. What a difference it would make if we prayed daily for one person we love to come to faith. Churches would grow, and the world would change so that people have God's values and heart. Ask, and it will be given to you. It is a matter of believing so that God can work through you.

8. Verse 30. In contrast to the frenzy of the pagans, how does Elijah prepare for the miracle? How does he make it more challenging so the power of God is evident?

He was as calm as they had become fanatical. He summons the people to gather around while he repairs an old altar probably broken down by Jezebel or the false prophets. He restores it with twelve stones so that it harkens back to the days when the Northern Kingdom did worship the Lord. He wants to revive something that the people had forgotten. The God who will work this miracle had been the God of their ancestors. Then Elijah prays. He calls God the God of their ancestors and asks not for personal praise but that the people might know who the true God is. The prophet acts with a faith that contrasts with the doubts of the people and the false priests. He has such a belief in God that he makes it easier for the prophets of Baal and harder for God. The prophets of Baal get hours to call down lightning. Elijah only approaches God as the day is drawing to a close. Elijah lets the false prophets pick the bulls. He takes what they give him. He then pours water over the sacrifice so that everyone knows that there can be no tricks.

9. Verse 36-37. How does the prayer draw the attention of the people to God? Why is it necessary for us to draw attention to God and not to ourselves if we want miracles to happen?

The prayer focuses on God's glory before the people and on God's command to hold this contest. No one here would believe that Elijah had done this or that it was his bright idea to hold such a competition. He makes sure that people know he is only the servant doing the work that the Lord commanded him to do. It is crucial that what we do as a church brings glory to God and not to us. Thinking highly of us will not save anyone. Seeing God in all His glory and worshipping Him alone will change lives. We also need to make sure that we have prayed long enough to know what God would have us do. I think of Nehemiah, who prayed for four months (Neh1-2) before asking the king with confidence for the permission and materials to build the wall. Prayer will lead us to what God wants to do and gives us a chance to be His servants completing His mission.

10. Verse 38. What is God's response to Elijah's prayer, and how does that response affect the people present?

In answer to Elijah's prayer, fire fell from heaven. God immediately answered his calm and fervent prayer in contrast to all the passion and frenzy of the pagan priests who received nothing. The lightning consumed everything in one burst of divine power that was to leave no doubt who was the true God. While Elijah had made the test harder for God, God exceeded the expectations of everyone there and gave a peek at the immense power that God can use for His people. The people were terrified, and all fell to the ground crying out in worship to God. The contest left no doubt in their mind who was the powerful God. They seized the prophets at Elijah's command and put them to death following God's command in Deut. 13 and 18. Sadly, the great miracle does not seem to have lasting effects. Ahab did not repent (see 1 Kings

21), and the people did not have a permanent revival either. They returned to the false gods, and Israel was destroyed in 722 BC.

11. Verse 43-44. What does Elijah do when the thing God promised in 1 Kings 18:1 doesn't come immediately?

God had promised that rain would return to the land (1 Kings 18:1), and Elijah promised Ahab that rain would come because God had said it would. The rain did not happen right away, even though Elijah prayed. Despite the slowness of the promise, Elijah kept praying. His actions show persistent prayer at its best. Elijah was claiming the promise God had made to His people. Famine had come so that the people would look to the Lord and this miracle could happen. Now it was the time to keep God's promises. He prays seven times, confident that the Lord will bring rain. He will not be dejected. He knows that for the people to believe the miracle, rain must follow. The rain began as a small black cloud and filled the sky with black clouds and heavy rain. It is easy to become discouraged when God's promises take longer to come true than we would wish. Faith believes in God and knows that God will keep every request at the appropriate time. Faith keeps praying until that happens. Like Elijah, faith isn't hoping. It is expecting.

12. Why do you think people give up when miracles don't happen as soon as we want them?

Patience is so hard for most Christians. Our problem is that we have not studied God's word to know what God wants to do. We have also not been close enough to God to believe that He will always keep His word. Prayers are too often just wishes. We pray and hope that God will answer. When God doesn't do what we want, we assume that it was not God's will. We need to pray for God's will. We need to pray that community outreach brings even one person to faith. That is God's will. We need to pray that Sunday school impacts the people in classes as the word of God touches them. We often pray for big numbers and spectacular results. We want glory for the church and the program and are often disappointed. Pray for God's will in His time because miracles are about Him and not about us. Keep praying, and maybe the seventh or seventieth time, you will see a small cloud come from the horizon, and blessings will rain on your ministry.

13. What does God want us to expect from prayer? What could happen in your life and the life of the church if we prayed as Elijah did on Mount Carmel?

If we are honest, we often don't expect great things to happen when we pray. We pray because we feel that is the right thing to do or because we don't know what else to do. We pray out of fear, not faith because life has fallen apart. Effective prayer has a specific result in mind. Hope builds on what God has promised in His word. If we were in God's word so that we know what God wants to do, it would change our lives and ministry. If we were persistent in prayer like Elijah, we would be powerful tools for God to use to get His ministry done here on earth. God calls us to pray with faith, asking God to accomplish the things that He has promised to do through us. Pray with confidence and knowledge of God's will, and you and your church will change the world.

For now or later - taking the next step

Deep 1 When do you waver in your prayers and your faith in God? How does that affect the results that you have in your petitions?

Deep 2 How well do you know God? What impact do you think it would have on your prayers if you knew God well enough to know what He has promised and how He has helped others?

Deep 3 After reading about Elijah, what part does patience have in answered prayer? Why do you think God waits to answer prayer instead of always giving us what we want immediately?

2. Lord teach us to pray

Luke 11:1-13

Big idea: Prayer is hard work and honed by practice

Jesus made it a habit to pray. The disciples were used to Jesus withdrawing from them to pray out in a quiet place. The gospel of Luke mentions eight times that Jesus went off to pray. You wonder how many hundreds or thousands of times that the disciples saw Jesus praying during their three years together. It was part of His life and defined Him as much as His miracles or teaching. What was it that they noticed about Jesus when He came back from prayer? Did they observe that prayer calmed Him or that he had a stronger sense of ministry? Something was happening when He went off to be with the Father in prayer, and they wanted what Jesus was receiving in prayer. Significantly, they didn't ask Jesus to teach them how to preach or do miracles. They wanted a connection that was the source of His power and His confidence. They wanted Him to teach them to pray. It was a gift that only Jesus could give.

What have you noticed about people who pray regularly? Do they seem calmer and less worried? Do they have a heart or values that you would like to emulate? Do they seem more confident about the future? I believe those can happen, but it is not a simple thing to be that kind of prayer. For me, prayer is a learned activity. You can learn a little from books, but you have to learn it from a master and practice it in your life. Life has taught me that the more that you pray, the better that you will be at prayer. It is kind of like playing music. Most people know that they can't just sit down and play the keyboard or the guitar. You will have to work at it. You have to commit to it. Maybe most of all, you have to see the blessing of it. Prayer is not for wimps. It is to be from the heart, and you want the outcome and believe that the Lord can give that outcome. For most, the question is whether you are willing to do the hard work that it takes to learn how to pray like Jesus.

Why would you want to work that hard? Why would you waste four years of your life going to college? Why would you spend the time to learn a language or a musical instrument? You do all of those because you see the benefits. Prayer is access to God with all the blessings that He can provide and all the love that He can give. God wants to provide you with gifts, just like any parent or grandparent does. You just have to learn how to ask. Think of what life would be like if you had less stress and worry. Think about how it would be to live without guilt from past sins because you had God's forgiveness daily. Prayer is the place where God touches your life. It is an opportunity to ask for spiritual things that will change the course of your life and not just a better job or a new car. Those who practice their prayer and are bold will have blessings in life that others can only dream about. They will see miracles and dream great dreams. Prayer is their chance to be at the throne of God.

1. When has someone asked you for advice or help with a tough situation? Why do you think that they asked you?

I remember my children asking me for financial help. They had some opportunities and wanted advice on how to manage the money that they had. It was gratifying to have them ask me, and I suppose it was because they thought that their mother and I had managed our money well. Discuss in your group the times that people have asked you for advice and what made you an "expert" whose opinion had value. In the text, the disciples see Jesus as an expert on prayer. What are you an expert on in life?

Read Luke 11:1-13

2. Verse 1 What does this verse tell you about the importance of prayer?

Read the gospel, and you get the feeling that Jesus was always praying. Luke mentions eight times that Jesus is off praying. He is praying when the disciples face wind and waves in a boat. Our Lord is praying when He is transfigured on the mountain. He prays in Gethsemane as He is ready to go to the cross. His actions tell the disciples and us how vital prayer is. Something happens when Jesus prays. He seems more certain of His ministry (Mark 1:38). He is more confident after the Garden of Gethsemane (Matt. 26:46). One has to believe that the disciples saw a change in Jesus after lengthy times in prayer and that they wanted it for themselves. We often pray for a few moments and call it done. Jesus knew the importance of prolonged and frequent prayer.

3. Why do we need to learn to pray? What can be so hard about prayer?

Think about someone you know who you believe prays regularly. Do those who pray seem calmer and less worried? Do they have a more profound concern for others and a stronger value system? Contrast their life with the person thrown into crisis who seldom prays. They are stressed out when someone they love goes into the hospital. They fumble to find the words to pray and claim that God doesn't respond when they pray. Prayer is like learning a musical instrument. Few people can sit down and play a keyboard in just a few minutes. It takes work and a commitment to practice. Prayer comes when we learn from a mentor and take the time to practice prayer regularly. Prayer becomes second nature in crisis times when you have been praying daily through good and bad times in life.

4. Verse 2. What is the attitude needed for prayer?

In answer to the question from the disciples, Jesus shares with them a pattern for prayer. The design begins with having the right attitude. Neither of the first two petitions is something that we can bring about. Luther says in the small catechism that "God's name is certainly holy in itself, but we pray in this petition that it may be kept holy among us also." Notice the order in this prayer. Jesus praised God first, and then He made His requests. We need to respect and honor God, believing that He is worthy of our prayer. We also want God's kingdom and His desires for our life. We are not asking for God to follow us. We are saying that we will follow Him and that everything we ask for ourselves must bring honor to God and further His kingdom in this world. Prayer is to be God-focused so that our lives accomplish what He wants in us.

5. Verse 3. What are the essential requests in prayer listed here by Jesus?

Having focused on God, we are ready to ask Him each day for our bodily needs, for forgiveness for our failures, and His guidance in the future. The three requests encompass our needs physically, morally, and spiritually. We are asking God to care for us in all the aspects of our lives. It is essential that our prayers not just focus on physical needs or a personal crisis like illness or pain. God wants to help us in every aspect of life. The spiritual is even more important than the physical. It would be worse to die without faith than to die without an arm or leg. We can ask for daily bread because we know that God will be with us to take care of us tomorrow. We don't need a store of food for the future. We also can ask the Lord to help us with future trials because we know that He has the power to deal with the future and that He will not forget us when we face those challenges.

6. Verse 8. What is the point of the parable? What does it tell you about our need to pray?

The parable points out that we must persist in our prayers. Even a friend will help you out if you are persistent. How much more will a loving God help if people just take the time to ask? The challenge is that many people pray once or twice about something vital to them and then give up. They either feel that God can't help or that God doesn't want to answer our request. Persistent prayer builds a relationship so that we know what God does want. As we pray, again and again, God uses our prayers to teach us so that we understand what will be beneficial for all the people involved. God sometimes waits to give us what we need because we are not ready for it. We are like the 16-year-old who asks for a car. We are not

prepared for the request. God will give it to us at a time when we will not hurt ourselves or others with His gift.

7. Verse 8. Does God need convincing, or is there a different reason that we should be persistent in our prayers?

Realize that God is never reluctant to help. He may be hesitant because something is not suitable for you. We may think that a particular job will be the answer to all our prayers. God may know how the responsibility will be harmful to you or others in the long run. Persistent prayer is our opportunity to learn the big picture from God. It is a chance for us to learn from God. It is a chance for God to keep working behind the scenes and putting all the pieces in place. We want it now. God knows that sometimes you or others may not be ready for your request. He will give it in the best time. Prayer is a chance for God to mold you so that you can handle the answers you want.

8. What truth is expressed in these verses 9-10? What does it teach you about why to pray each day?

The emphasis is on continuing to ask, seek, and knock. Prayer is never a one-time event. You have to believe in God enough to ask for what you need. You need to seek out things that you do not understand, being confident that the Lord will teach you. Finally, you need to knock on closed doors convinced that the Lord will open the doors of opportunity and do the impossible. God is accessible and willing to give us the things that we need. Jesus is emphasizing that those who trust the Lord and bring their needs to Him will find that He is more than willing to help. One just has to keep praying. God has a plan. We just have to be ready to be patient and trust His love for us. These words are not a blank check, however. We must view them in the context of honoring God's name and wanting His kingdom (verse 2). It must be God's will that is done and not ours.

9. Verse 11. Why can we depend on God to answer our prayers? Why do we know that He will always give us what is best, not just the easiest?

The second parable reminds us of God's character. God is not selfish or stingy. We don't have to beg Him to help us any more than a child has to ask a loving parent. God loves us and wants to give good things to His children. In this parable, we can see that prayer is learning to trust God and to depend on Him. We believe that He will give us what is right, even if we don't ask for it. We may ask for one kind of job, and he will provide us with another that is better for us. We may ask for a unique opportunity to come in ministry, and God gives us something better that is more suited for us. We learn to pray and depend on God to provide us with what is best for us and not always what we want. We also learn to rely on him so that we continue to ask again and again. No loving parent gets tired of his children requesting the things that they need, and neither does God. God loves to provide for and care for His children. It is part of His nature.

10. Verse 11. How is prayer an act of dependence on God and learning to trust Him in every situation?

We come to the Lord for things that we can't provide for ourselves. Who of us can provide our daily food without the Lord? It is God who gives the harvest? How can we receive forgiveness without the cross? Even the pagans know that the future is uncertain. Prayer is a time to focus on the Lord and trust Him in all the crises of life. We walk beside Him in prayer so that we might become stronger in our faith and learn what His will is for our future. Just as we have learned that our parents will provide what we need, we learn to depend on God in every situation. God helps us and helps us look at how we are living so that we have a life filled with His joy and peace.

11. Verse 13. What is the gift promised here when you pray? How do you think God feels when you pray regularly to Him?

The promised gift is the gift of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the highest gift that God can give to His people. It is the promise that God will live with us and will be there every day to care for and comfort us in life. Realize that if God is willing to give that gift, all the other benefits that we might ask for will be provided as well. Why would God do this? It is because of His great love for us. I picture God being like a grandparent who enjoys every visit that they receive from their grandchildren. Grandparents look forward to hearing the child tell about what is going on in school, even if they have heard it before. They enjoy the chance to mold the kids and build a lifelong relationship with their grandchildren. God is no different. He wants to spend time with us and never tires of hearing about our dreams, our joys, and our needs.

12. Verse 13. What do you think God wants you to ask from Him? What will constant prayer teach you about the character of God and His willingness to help?

God wants you to ask for big things as well as everyday things. He wants you to learn to be bold and ask for something that may seem impossible but are part of His will in scripture. Often we pray for healing, a special gift, or help when we are in trouble. Those are good, but God wants us to ask for things that will last. Let us request a deeper faith, gifts that we can use to serve others, or a stronger character. God wants to make us more like Him so that we become a blessing to ourselves and others. Those who practice prayer and dwell on spiritual things, as well as physical needs, will find that they have advantages that others can only dream about. They will have gifts that change the course of their lives.

13. What benefits would a stronger prayer life bring to you?

Back in question 2, we described the effects of prayer on those who you know who pray regularly. They were calmer, more loving, and had a strong character. They were not fumbling or stressed out when troubles came. They had come to depend on God and know what God had promised to do for them. That person could be you. It won't happen overnight. It will happen if you let the Lord teach you how to pray by building a strong relationship with Him and by daily practicing the act of prayer. The disciples saw the significant effects of prayer in the life of Jesus and wanted such character for themselves. You can have such an experience for yourself. It would please your heavenly father to lead you closer to Him and to give you such peace and joy. It is worth the effort, for it opens up doors for your life as you dwell with the Lord and live in His kingdom.

For now or later - taking the next step

Deep 1 Who can you ask to pray with you so that you can learn from them about prayer? Is there someone at your church or in your family whose prayer life you admire?

Deep 2 Why is God dependable? How will confidence in the Lord change the frequency and requests of your prayers?

Deep 3 What steps could you take to develop your prayer life? What is your greatest weakness? Is it frequency, faith, desiring God's will, or something else?

3. Warfare praying Ephesians 6:10-20

Big idea: The battle for your mind is won or lost by prayer.

This is war. It is a knockdown, drag-out fight for your mind, which Paul knew well. Demas who had served with Paul on his journeys was tempted away by Satan. Judas, one of the twelve disciples, was tempted by Satan. Even men like Moses, Elijah, and Peter had times where Satan played mind games. Satan is a schemer. He has come to wage war on Christians so that he can keep as many people from heaven as possible. He wants to give the Lord pain when he sees people falling away from the faith. Paul wants us to know that all the resources needed by a believer to fight this battle have been given to them by Christ. He pictures these weapons like the Roman armor of a soldier. The most prominent part of this armor is prayer. If we are to stand firm against Satan, we will do so with prayer. In one sense, prayer is what makes all the other pieces of armor useful. We are only righteous, faithful, and able to use God's word if we are dependent on God in prayer.

We think we are in control. We never plan to get angry at other Christians over the way they treat us. We never expect to have doubts when God doesn't give us what we want. Yet it happens to people in churches all the time. Satan wants to use our minds as his playground. He will fill the minds of Christians with all kinds of fears, doubts, and anger. He sows worry and guilt so that people think that there is no value in being a Christian. Why? He wants them to leave the church and hurt themselves and their families. Everybody says it won't happen to them. Yet, how is your armor? The average Christian spends less than five minutes a day in prayer. Many Christians haven't opened their Bibles in weeks or months. Satan has easy pickings because people are unprepared. Paul gives a call for every Christian to be prepared like a soldier amid battle. God has made available the tools. It is time to put them on. It is time to pray as if your life depends on it for, in truth, it does.

If you want to win the battle with Satan, you have to make prayer a habit. Prayer is the power that enables every Christian to wear the armor of God and keep it secure. We pray for the Holy Spirit that he might use his power to fight for the control of your mind and your life. Realize the hardest victory to win might be the victory of your mind. Satan will tempt you daily with sins like lust, greed, and anger. Every day, he will fill your soul with doubts and fears. Such emotions seem to pop out of nowhere. Prayer each day will keep you connected to the Lord and make it harder for Satan to defeat you. Prayer partnered with the study of God's word will not only protect you but also slay Satan when he or his minions try to enter your life. Prayer is a powerful weapon and worth our time and effort if we don't want Satan to rule our lives.

1. What was your favorite Halloween costume as you or your children were growing up?

I was personally never very good at costumes for myself or my kids. We went through the "Star Wars" costumes and a bunch of Disney characters over the years. If I had to pin one down, it was the year my son decided to buy a mask of one of the presidential candidates. He didn't like the candidate (and so I won't name him), but he had a lot of fun mocking the candidate and got a lot of praise and guff from his friends. Let the group talk about their experiences. I am sure that someone in your group has been more creative than I have been.

Read Ephesians 6:10-20

2. Verse 12. What is the situation that the Ephesians face?

Paul lives in an era of Roman emperors like Augustus and Claudius. There were men with unrivaled power and were feared, but they are nothing compared to those who work for Satan. These are the powers

of the dark world and the spiritual forces of evil. Paul describes them as a host of spiritual forces arrayed against us. In our day, we are tempted to pretend that these are just creations of fantasy. Paul makes no such mistake. These are real beings who should not be underestimated as they seek to overcome the church. Some in Ephesus practiced magic and witchcraft (Acts 19:19). Others worshipped at the great temple of Diana in Ephesus. Satan was all around the Ephesian Christians, and Paul wants them to see that there is a danger, but there is also hope.

3. Verse 12. How do we face the same struggles with Satan that the Ephesians faced?

We often think that it is the non-Christian who is the enemy of the church. While there may be evil people around us, the real enemy is the same one that plagued the Ephesians. Satan will use evil people, media, and the culture to pull us away from the Lord. It is easy for us to take for granted the fight we have with Satan and pretend that it is not something that should be concerned us. I wish that we could see this evil army just once so that we would take faith and the battle that we face seriously. Paul wants us to know who we are fighting, how strong they are, and the stakes if we lose the battle. Churches lose people every day because we can't get people to take the time to arm themselves. They become sitting ducks because we spend so little time in word and prayer.

4. In what way have you found the Christian life a battlefield against Satan? How does Satan wage war against us, and how good are we at fighting Satan?

We think we are in control. We never plan to get angry at another Christian or at a church voter's meeting. We never expect to have doubts when God doesn't answer our prayers the way we desire. Yet it happens all the time because Satan is at work in our minds. He wants us to be afraid of life. He wants us to be angry at God. The average Christian spends less than five minutes a day in prayer. Many Christians have not opened their bibles in weeks. We make ourselves easy pickings for Satan. Our fight with Satan is a battle, and we are often losing because we have no defenses. Let the group discuss how well they are prepared for the struggle with Satan. Are they in word and prayer? How are they doing with Christian character?

5. Verse 13. Why is it so important to stand firm? Why can't we compromise on the battlefield?

In ancient times, those left standing on the battlefield were the victors. They had stood up to the attack of the enemy and held the enemy back. The context implies that Christians can be victorious. We can't do that by ourselves. The defenses that the Lord gives us in the following verses are the only way we can stand firm when the powerful forces of Satan attack us. Christians must stand their ground rather than being taken prisoner by Satan and his forces. When we give into anger, lust, greed, and other sins, we make ourselves prisoners of Satan who are under his control. To even compromise with Satan is to lose the battle and to let him destroy our lives. A little anger or greed gives control of a portion of our being to the forces of evil.

6. Verse 14. What defenses has the Lord provided for us in this battle?

The list is substantial for the armor that the Lord gives is strong. We have a belt of truth so that we can fight Satan's lies. We have a breastplate of righteousness so that we have self-worth when Satan accuses us. We have footwear ready to overcome Satan's hopelessness. We have faith, so we trust God and know the victory is ours. We have salvation so that we don't doubt God and His salvation. Finally, we have a scripture that can defeat Satan as Jesus did at His temptation with just three Bible passages. Our armor is extensive and will protect us from all the schemes that Satan tries to use against us. The important thing is for Christians to wear God's protection and continue to hone the defenses that the Lord gives us. Our faith can always be stronger, and our knowledge of scripture more comprehensive. Our armor should be getting upgrades throughout our life.

7. Verse 14. Why do you think that Paul used the detailed description of a Roman soldier's armor to describe our defenses from God for this battle?

Paul is under arrest, waiting for his first trial in Rome with an armed guard watching over him. The Roman army is known for its defenses and is strong enough that they can defeat all their enemies. One picture of Paul looking at the soldier guarding him and thinking about how the defensive and the offensive weapons that the Lord has given to us corresponds to what a Roman soldier has. It is an excellent analogy since any person in Paul's day could immediately picture each of the pieces. It is also a fitting analogy in that the Roman army was fierce, and one fully equipped and prepared soldier could subdue several of the enemy troops. As we engage in this battle with Satan, we must be sure to use all the parts of our armor that God makes available so that, as a Roman soldier, we will have the victory.

8. Verse 17. What is the one offensive weapon that we have in our fight against Satan?

The one offensive weapon mentioned is "the sword of the spirit which is the word of God." Most think this is the sharp, short two-edged sword that was ideal for close combat. You could slice an enemy or thrust it to the heart. The word of God is powerful against Satan, especially when we employ the power of the Holy Spirit with it. Know that the Holy Spirit will help you to learn how to use the word just as many saints in scripture did to defeat Satan. Jesus used the word of God to defeat Satan at His temptation, and we can use it as well when we are attacked by the evil one. Peter used the word of God to cut people to their hearts (Acts 2:37) and convince them of the truth about Jesus. The Holy Spirit will give you the words to say at the right time, but you must also be in the scripture so that you "practice" and know how to use this sword effectively

9. Verse 18. What is the last piece of armor mentioned in the text? Why is it given such a place of importance?

Prayer is the final gift mentioned and is the energy that gives us the power to wear the armor and wield the sword. Prayer is assigned a prominent place and several verses because prayer provides us with the guidance and help of the Holy Spirit in using the armor and defeating the enemy. Paul's emphasis is that we are to pray in all situations with all kinds of prayers. Paul is telling us to make prayer a vital part of our life and a daily habit. Praying in the Spirit is to pray empowered by the Spirit, letting the Holy Spirit guide your prayers and control your mind. The hardest victory is the victory over your mind. Every day you will be besieged by Satan as he tries to control your thoughts and desires. Filling our minds with scripture rather than the wishes of the flesh will empower our prayers and help our defenses grow.

10. How could you combine Bible study and prayer in your battle against Satan and why would that be a powerful weapon?

I would suggest that you turn your Bible into a prayer book. Start your daily prayers with a Bible passage. Note the promises mentioned and the commands given. Sing the praises that are mentioned in the psalm or other places of scripture and speak the promises and instructions of God as you begin your prayers. Pairing up word and prayer is powerful. It helps you to pray by letting the Holy Spirit guide you in your prayers. It allows you to ask for things from the Lord based on His promises and directs you to seek out the very things that the Lord commands. Letting the scripture fill your prayers turns prayer from selfish requests or begging God for your answers into prayers filled with God's wisdom and God's will. When your prayers are in tune with the Lord, Satan will find it hard to stand up against you.

11. Verse 19. What is Paul's one request as he wages this battle with Satan in his life?

Paul makes a final request. He asks the Ephesians to pray for him. Remember that he is imprisoned and awaiting trial. He desires that the gospel message may not be bound as he is. Paul wrote several letters of encouragement to churches in Asia and Greece while imprisoned in Rome. He did not ask the Lord to remove his bonds but asked that the message goes freely and not be hindered by Satan. Paul wanted

boldness amid the persecution. Paul's imprisonment did not end his ministry but gave him new opportunities, and Paul wished for these to succeed. God had brought him into the heart of the Roman Empire so that he could be an ambassador for the message of the gospel and let that message flow out from the very center of Paul's world. The prayers of the saints unleash the power of God over Paul's ministry as if reinforcements were unleashing thousands of arrows against the evil foe.

12. Verse 19. How does Paul's request reflect the importance of praying for others in this battle against Satan?

People sometimes ask us to pray for them, and we don't realize the power of what they are asking. Our prayer for others is like air support in the battle. When others are facing a fight in enemy territory, we give support to them by letting our prayers fly overhead and bring God's assistance to them. Our prayers and our faith add a layer of God's support for those around us who are struggling. People have even said that they can "feel the prayers" when you or I pray regularly for those in need. Our prayers also help us be led by the Lord to find ways to help others mentioned in our prayer, physically and spiritually. The Lord leads us to know the person's needs and to be able to answer the call. Paul often calls us to pray for others since God's people are in this battle together and need to support and help each other as we unleash the power of God.

13. What difference does daily prayer make in your battle with Satan?

Your mind is the battlefield. It is the place where Satan wants to sow the seeds of doubt, anger, and temptation. Only those who put on the armor of God and empower it with prayer will survive the battle each day. Satan wants to destroy you and cause pain to a loving God. Prayer is your connection to the Lord. It is a chance to be forgiven so that you stand before God as righteous. It is your chance to let the Holy Spirit come to you so that you might have the truth. It is a chance to fill your life with the Lord so that Satan has more difficulty getting a handhold in your mind and your life. Read the Bible and pray what the Lord is teaching you. Pray for spiritual things, as well as that pain might be taken away. There is much at stake, and God wants to help. That help will come when you daily come before the Lord in prayer.

For now or later - taking the next step

Deep 1 How would you describe the pieces of God's armor in your own words? What benefit would each piece bring to your life right now?

Deep 2 Where do you feel that you are losing the battle with sin and with evil? How is that impacting the quality of your life?

Deep 3 What blessings do you think you would experience if prayer and Bible study became daily parts of your life? What is holding you back from making a commitment to regular time with the Lord?

4. Praying for others

Col. 1:3-14

Big idea: The greatest help for a friend is a prayer for spiritual blessings

Paul is in prison in Rome when he hears from Epaphras about the church in Colosse. The church is under pressure from arguments and false teachings that threaten to undermine the faith that has been planted. Paul can't go to see this church that Epaphras planted, but he can pray that they have the knowledge and understanding to see through the false teachings. Prayer is at the heart of the early church's ministry and their success. If you look through the pages of the book of Acts, you will see a church on fire with prayer because they know that they can't do the ministry God has given them or overcome Satan's trials without the Lord's help. Paul prays in this text for the people because he is convinced of its power. He has seen firsthand what prayer can do in complex situations. Paul knows that the most significant help you can give to a friend is often prayer.

Why does the church today seem to struggle more than they did in Paul's day? I think part of the answer is that we don't pray as they did. We define ministry by the things we can do with our hands. We have potlucks, gather canned goods for the poor, and pick up trash on the street. All that is good, but it often misses God's power. Sadly we often don't include God in ministry. Try to get people to pray for those in need or to have a prayer service before church to lift their inadequacies to God, and no one comes. Somehow we have come to believe that prayer is passive as if it is something you can do when there is little else to do. Paul knows that unleashing the power of God through our prayers can help people battle the forces of evil and the troubles of life better than anything we can do with our hands.

You have to believe that the Lord still works in the lives of His people. Only then will you see the value of prayer and take time to pray specifically about the needs of others in your prayers. We need to begin with the promises that God has made and ask that God keep them with someone important to us. We also need to pray the promises of God so that we are asking for things that God gladly gives instead of something we just want. Finally, we need to pray for the spiritual needs of people and not only the physical requirements that they might have. Paul didn't ask for healing for a sick person. He prayed that the faith of the Colossians increase so that they would not be swept away with the false teaching. Pray for the Spirit first, and the rest of the person will find healing as well.

1. What one thing would you ask God to grant to your church?

Often we judge a church by larger attendance, bigger budget, or a building project. Those are usually the blessings that people ask for concerning their church. Consider praying for a higher number of people in Bible class or personal growth so that people understand God's grace. Consider praying that people might find their area of service in your church so that they develop character and work with one another. Having a right relationship with the Lord and a love for others is what Paul will pray about in this text. Churches getting bigger is not as important a goal as Christians growing in grace.

Read Col. 1:3-14

2. Verse 3. What does Paul praise in a group that He has never met?

You can hear the gospel and either not believe or not let it change the character of your life. Paul had not been to Colosse, but he had heard of their faith from Epaphras. The gospel had made a significant impact on them. Not only had the people accepted Jesus, but they were also living out their faith in their love for others. They believed in Jesus (faith), which caused them to love one another, and that gave them all hope for the future, which was different than the heresy that was in their midst. Paul is thankful that their future

was affected by the gospel. Since this was a gift from God, Paul thanks God rather than thanking the Colossians themselves.

3. Verse 3. How are faith, love, and hope evident in your life?

All of us need to consider how we show this “holy triad” in our life. Do we believe in God so much that it has changed how we think about others (love) and our future (hope)? In any church, you can find people who get upset about a child crying or a member complaining about things that are not a concern to you. If we have built a solid relationship with the Lord, we will love others despite the things that upset us. They are part of God’s family, and that makes them part of our family who we will want to love and help to grow in their faith. We will also become people of hope because we believe that the Lord will continue to be with us and will help us through all the difficulties that we may face.

4. What would attract you to the Colossian church?

As a group, talk about the things that would be attractive in the Colossian church as Paul discussed it. It might be that this is a church that accepts everyone. It might be that this is a positive church that looks to the future with hope rather than being concerned about the problems that the church has with culture and with persecution. I find this church to be attractive because it is a place to grow in faith and to be loved by others. As Paul says in verse 6, this is a church that is bearing fruit that impacts its community and the world. Colossae is a church where a person can feel blessed as well as be a blessing to others.

5. Verse 5. What is the origin of the believer’s faith and love?

Paul knew that Christ was the source of their faith and love. The message was not our like our society telling them that love or confidence was a good thing. It was a belief in Jesus and what He was capable of that changed their destiny and their character. Such faith and love sprung from hope. You believe in God because you have the promise of eternal life and the confidence that God will walk with you and love you all your life. They could love and share with others because they knew that God loved them and would continue to provide for them. Hope in God comes because of all that Jesus has done for us. Hope brings them blessings that others in their community did not have. If your hope and faith are not built on Jesus, you are going to be miserable. The promises of this world are not something that gives you confidence.

6. Verse 5 What is the difference between God’s hope and the hope of the world?

The hope of the world is more like a wish. “I hope that the weather will be sunny.” “I hope that I get the job that I applied for.” In our everyday language, hope is something that we want but can’t guarantee. Christian hope is a confident expectation. It is based on what the Lord Jesus has done. When we talk about having the promise of eternal life after death, it is true because of the cross and the promise of God. It is certain for those who believe. Other promises of God delineate gifts and blessings that we can be sure of like God’s continued presence or His willingness to listen to our prayers. If you find yourself doubting God’s hope, just look at the source and know that God doesn’t break His promises. Hope in God is sure.

7. Verse 7. Who taught the gospel to the Colossians, and how does Paul describe him?

Paul had not met the Colossians (Col. 2:1) at this time but had heard of them from Epaphras, who was from Colosse and was currently with Paul (Col. 4:12). The text says that Epaphras was the one who taught them the faith and love of Jesus. He may have been someone who learned the gospel from Paul and who brought it back to Colosse when he returned to his hometown of Colosse. Paul describes Epaphras as a faithful minister. He not only won the hearts of the people but taught them the scriptures so that they might grow. Epaphras is one who is praying for them (Col. 4:12-13) so that they might become mature in their faith. Why is he in Rome? Perhaps he went to Rome to get counsel from Paul when he sensed that heresy threatened the people. He wanted to protect them from false doctrines that could destroy their faith and fellowship.

8. Verse 9 What does Paul pray for on behalf of the Colossians?

While the report from Epaphras was a reason for celebration, Paul knew that the Colossians had plenty of room for growth. They would need endurance and patience (v.11) if they were to overcome the challenges that they would face. His prayers don't focus on the persecution going away or on good health for the people. Out of deep love for them, he prays that they might have spiritual gifts from the Lord. He wants them to have real knowledge of the Lord so that they can withstand the heresy in their midst. He wants God to strengthen them so that they have a deeper spiritual life. Paul doesn't ask that their lives become more comfortable. He wants them to be victorious by having the strongest, faith, love, and hope possible. He wants God's greatest gifts for them so that they can lead lives worthy of the Lord and overcome the evil one.

9. Verse 9. What is the focus of your personal and congregational prayers on Sunday? What would we pray for if we followed Paul's example?

The prayers in most churches focus on the illness and pain of the members. We pray that the Lord might remove the problems and make life easier for those we love. Sadly, a lot of Christians focus their prayers on God's help to make life more comfortable or happier. Take away the bad and shower my life with good is often our motto. Paul seems to have a better idea. He prays that those he loves might grow in the knowledge of God so that they understand God's will for them. He wants real change and growth for others, not just an easier life. Only then, will their faith grow so that they depend on God through trials rather than just asking that God take away any pain. Such belief will result in love for others and in a character that clings to the Lord and follows His ways, knowing that God's ways are always the best.

10. Verse 10. What is the purpose of Paul's prayer?

Paul is praying for spiritual growth and life change. The Colossians have made an excellent start. Now Paul asks that they grow so that they might walk with God in faith. He wants them to not only know God's will but also to do it. If they see the truth of God, they will be able to apply it in their lives. The false teachers in Colosse valued the accumulation of knowledge. Paul wants them to have the truth of the Lord so that it might produce good works that please the Lord. Only then would their lifestyle be worthy of the high calling that they have as God's children. Their behavior will match their knowledge, and they will have the character of God's people so that they can endure through difficult times.

11. How would an intense faith walk change your life and the lives of those you love?

Just knowing God is not enough. Our prayers should be that others not only know God but live as his people. Even though there are more Bibles in print today than ever before, people are reading them less and less. They talk about what they think God teaches without really having read the Bible to know what the truth of God is. That hinders their walk with God because they are not following His will. Pray that others have the wisdom and that we know what God's will is. Pray also that others might live with the character and faith of God's people. It will change our destiny because we will avoid many of the problems of the culture and have blessings that come as we follow the Lord. We will even be able to lead others to faith rather than expecting that God will somehow magically lead people to church.

12. Verse 13. How does God enable believers to share in His inheritance?

Just as God delivered his people from Egypt and brought them to the Promised Land, God frees us from the darkness of Satan. His kingdom ultimately comes through the cross as Jesus suffered and died that we might have forgiveness and rose that we might have eternal life in Him. Yet, the kingdom of God exists in the church today. Paul doesn't want the Colossians or us to miss experiencing the joys of salvation now. He wants us to live in the kingdom of God as redeemed people who enjoy the love of God and the fellowship of each other. We have been transferred from the slavery of sin into the freedom of

forgiveness. The crucial thing for Paul is that we can grow in our faith so that we have a more profound inheritance and joy as we live here on earth, walking with God each day.

13. What can you learn about praying for others from Paul's prayer here for the Colossians?

Our temptation is to pray for the physical needs of others. While that is proper, we would do well to follow Paul's example in the text and pray for their spiritual needs as much or even more than pains and difficulties. We can also pray some of the requests of this passage for strangers because we know that they are God's will for others and will provide them the largest benefit. Pray that others understand God's will so that they grow in God's knowledge and have greater faith. Pray that this wisdom helps them to please God by doing good works for the Lord and others. Pray that they have God's hope so that they do not fear the future but have the endurance and patience to overcome the crisis that we all face in life. Finally, pray that they have God's joy so that they can always give thanks to God for the marvelous things that He has done for us. Pray these petitions as you pray for healing or help for others, and you have given them a greater gift.

For now or later - taking the next step

Deep 1 How does your prayer life compare to Paul's? Do you have his intensity or his desires for others?

Deep 2 How are spiritual requests for others a more significant benefit to them than just praying for their physical needs and hurts?

Deep 3 How would your life and the lives of those you love change if you had the spiritual blessings that Paul wishes for the Colossians?

5 Praying for the lost
Matt 9:35-38
Big idea: You share when you care

In a world full of troubles and broken people, we often wonder who cares about them. The answer is that Jesus cares. He prayed in the hills and then traveled through all the towns and villages, teaching the good news of the kingdom and healing their broken bodies. His miracles brought the people to Him, but it was the teaching and preaching that changed lives. At the heart of what He did was prayer. Regularly, Jesus would finish his time of preaching teaching and go to a remote area to pray. He prayed about the obstacles that the people were facing and their need for the spiritual food that He could give them. Our Lord also asked others to pray. He wanted people to pray so that they would care enough to help others and share what God alone could give.

The world is still filled with people who are broken and without spiritual hope. Fewer are in worship, and fewer know what God can do for their lives. We wonder if it will ever get better. To reach them, we try programs and build fancy buildings. It is what we humans do best. We multiply programs at federal, state, and local levels. We create organizations to do programs to help with needs in our community, from feeding children to helping those with drug addictions. None of these programs can do what prayer can do. Prayer harnesses the power of God. Prayer can change the lives of those praying and those we pray about in a way that no program can ever do. People around us have their lives and their eternities hanging in the balance. What Jesus still needs is people on His team who will pray so that He can open hearts and lives.

The early church was a revolution that overwhelmed the pagan Roman Empire, and this revolution all began with prayer (Acts 4:23-31). The people of God acknowledged that God was greater than all the kingdoms of the world. The people of God prayed that the Lord would give them boldness so that they continued to speak out during persecution. Finally, they prayed that the Lord would work miracles among the people. The church today accomplishes little because we do not pray for the lost and our mission. Imagine if the church would pray on Sundays so that even half of the members were sent out by the Lord to touch one person. It would change the world. People you love would no longer be harassed and helpless. People who you reach would witness to others about what the Lord had done in their life. The new revolution starts with prayer, for it is God who can change the world through us.

1. Who do you know who could use a little compassion? What do they need most right now?

Most of us know people who are struggling with illnesses like cancer or heart disease. We know people who have just been divorced or who have just lost a loved one. What is not quite as apparent are all the people who are struggling with depression and hopelessness. They tell us that “things are OK” when we ask and hide the problems that they have. Both groups need Jesus. Whether it is a physical problem, a problem with relationships and death, or emotional/spiritual issues, Jesus is the only one that can genuinely help. Encourage the people in your group to think of one person that they will commit to praying for over the next two weeks asking the Lord to help this person in their troubles.

Read Matt 9:35-38

2. Verse 35. How is Jesus’ ministry described in this verse? What was He able to give the people that they were lacking?

Jesus is described as teaching, preaching, and healing throughout all the towns and villages. One pictures the people coming from long distances to be with the one who cared. He would teach them so that they

understood God and saw how much God cared about them. He would preach that they changed their lives and made a commitment to the Lord so that they might have peace. Our Lord healed them because he was concerned with the illness that was dragging them down. The healing showed that He was from God and drew people so that they would listen to His teaching and preaching. He gave them God's truth in such depth that people were often amazed at His knowledge and wisdom. His miracles were so powerful and frequent that even the Pharisees found it hard to deny them. He met the physical and spiritual needs of the people.

3. What does verse 35 tell us about the mission of the church?

It would seem that Jesus models for us what the ministry of the church should be. As he was about the ministry of teaching, preaching, and healing, we should be as well. We need to teach people in our dark age about Him. People don't know the truth and need to know who God is and what He wants for their life. The church needs to preach to people so that they commit to the Lord instead of thinking that they can live as they wish and still receive God's blessings. We need to heal. We have a ministry to bring comfort to those who are grieving and help to those who are broken. Our ministry is not one of entertainment but of bringing the power and gospel of Jesus to the world around us so that they might be restored.

4. Verse 36a. How does Jesus feel when He sees all these broken people?

It just broke His heart. You can sense Jesus' pain. Our Lord was not a politician who was vindicated by a crowd coming to hear Him speak. He saw people with holes in their lives that were the size of Texas, and that caused Him pain. The Greek text uses a word that describes a man who was moved to the deepest depths of his being. There are several places in scripture where Jesus healed and preached till He was worn out. He would go off into the hills to pray and to draw strength from the Father so that He could come back the next day and do it all over again. His heart moved Him to help them remove obstacles and falsehood from their lives that were holding them back. He was motivated to heal one person after another whom disease and demons broke their lives. Jesus didn't ignore the broken people. He gave all He humanly had to help them with their needs because He cared that much.

5. Verse 36a. How does compassion for those around us change the focus of our prayers?

A praying church prays for others as much as it prays for itself. Their heart hurts as they see the needs of others. We need to pay attention to the right order, however. A praying church prays first and then works second. We pray so that we can feel the hurts of people around them and find the Lord's solutions for them. Praying hearts become wise, caring hearts. So often, the church is motivated to take care of the physical needs of others. Jesus took care of the spiritual needs as well. They are the more critical needs to heal. If you feed them, they will be hungry tomorrow. If you teach them, they will have lessons that can change the rest of their life. Pray because you care and share because you want eternal solutions that can come only from God. Doing helps others with human power. Praying involves the Lord and brings His power to the lives of people we learn to care about as we see them through His eyes.

6. Verse 36b. How does the text describe the people who came to Jesus? What sort of troubles do you think that they were experiencing?

The text describes them as harassed and helpless. The word for scattered means to be "thrown to the ground." It shows how powerless they had become. Sadly, it should not have been that way. The Jewish people had spiritual leaders in the priests and Pharisees, yet the woes of Jesus in Matthew 23 show how worthless that these leaders had become. Jesus accuses them of putting "heavy loads" on men's shoulders and "are not willing to lift a finger to move them. It is no wonder these people who struggled to make a decent living and felt no encouragement or hope for the future came to Jesus to be encouraged and loved

by God. They needed someone who would show them that God still cared about them rather than leaders who would lecture them about how badly they kept God's rules.

7. Verse 36b. How would you describe the lives of the majority of the people in your community?

The weary are all around us. The poor are finding life harder, and the middle class is getting beaten up. Even those who we think are at the top of our society often live in depression and loneliness. As our society moves further and further from the Lord, we will continue to find that drug abuse and depression will dominate our culture. We have to believe that God can and will do the impossible for people if we only ask. His wisdom in the scripture will show them how to live. Prayer will give them hope. It is our mission from the Lord to bring hope to our world. The church has to pray that the Lord gives us ways to show their faith and touch the lost. We have the power to heal and help what society can't fix. Let us have the compassion to pray and ask the Lord to heal the hearts of those around us.

8. Verse 37. What problem did Jesus see as He addressed the needs of the people?

As Jesus looked at the large numbers who came to Him broken and needy, He realized that even sending the twelve disciples was not enough. He could only be in one place, and even His disciples could not be in all the towns and villages that needed someone to heal their hearts and bodies. The Jewish nation had become inward-looking and did not care about the needs of those outside their society. The crowds that came to Jesus are just the tip of the iceberg. He thought of those throughout the world who also did not know the Lord. Jesus wanted them to pray that the Father would "send out" that is thrust forth, workers into the field. Many are ready if someone will reach out to them. Their pain has opened their hearts so that they are desperate and willing to accept answers that only God can give.

9. What opportunities does Jesus see in the world around us because people are so broken?

Broken lives produce opportunities. The religious leaders who thought that they were above needing help never came to Jesus. The broken flocked to Jesus, allowing Him to touch many of them with the message of the gospel. Jesus wants us to pray that the Holy Spirit will touch the hearts of people so that they will be open to the comfort of the gospel. Some may come to the Lord for the plate of food or a kid's activity at your church. In their midst are many who will listen to a caring message about Jesus because they are hurting. Many are looking for someone to tell them about Jesus in a world of selfish nonsense and self-promotion. Pray that the Lord would lead you to those people and that He would give you opportunities to speak a message that touches their hearts. Opportunities are lost because we don't pray. Prayer helps us follow the Lord so that we are in the places that do the most good.

10. Verse 38 What was Jesus' answer to the brokenness of the world?

Jesus asks the disciples to pray for workers and then sends the twelve into the field with the power to heal and cast out demons. He asked the Father for something only possible for Him. It was not possible for men. During Jesus' ministry, the disciples would go out doing miracles and proclaiming the word. In this way, the ministry is no longer one Jesus but thirteen servants. The disciples were to pray and to teach others so that the multiplication would not stop with them. As they healed and trained, they would pray for the Lord to send more workers. In each village, Jesus let the message and miracles touch the hearts. Soon there would be hundreds around the countryside all praying and sharing their faith. One would become many through the work of the Holy Spirit.

11. Verse 38. Why pray to the Lord about the problems of our community before beginning to do something about them?

We pray because God can do what we can never do. Jesus didn't tell the disciples to go and recruit more workers. He told them to pray so that the Lord might send them. God is the one who will send the Holy

Spirit to move the hearts of people so that they serve full-time ministry or are willing to reach out to their neighbors and community. It is also through prayer that you dare to share and have the words to encourage. Revitalized neighborhoods come as we preach and teach God's words and not our own. Finally, it is through prayer that we learn where the fields are white with harvest. God has a plan, and we must pray and be in the word to find out what God's plan is for our community. Often churches and Christians do what they think is needed and are frustrated when it doesn't work well or when Satan can stop the ministry. Those who pray can find out what God is doing and get on His bandwagon. We let Him battle the evil forces and bring success to His ministry that we are doing.

12. How does prayer change and prepare those who are praying for others?

Praying for the lost often begins with a prayer for yourself. You pray that the Lord would help you to be the servant that He can send out. You want the Lord to help you to grow so that you can winsomely share the words of scripture. You understand why the message of the gospel is crucial, and you show Jesus' compassion and character in your life. You want the Lord to give you the courage and patience that you need to witness to your faith. Finally, you want the Lord to lead you to the people that He has prepared for your witness. There is no reason to keep witnessing to people closed to the gospel. Look for the people around you who are open to the message because of the circumstances in their lives. Prayer gives you the power to be a worker. Without that power and heart, your witness will fizzle because you serve based on your abilities rather than the Lord's gifts.

13. The early church was built on prayer (see Acts 4: 23-31). How would continued prayer change the ministry of your congregation or small group?

The church in the book of Acts was a revolution that overwhelmed the Roman Empire by prayer. If you want to win the world for Jesus, you will be a church that prays about the lost. Programs are helpful, for they can help us develop our strategy. Prayers are essential, for they tie our hearts and ministry into the Lord. You have to pray so that your heart develops the compassion of Christ. Witness has to come because your heart hurts for others, and you know what they are missing. Prayer helps you to ponder others and see their burdens as God does. In prayer, God will teach you and give you a direction that can help others, not just put a Band-Aid on their problems. Finally, prayer harnesses the power of the Spirit so that you can give them Jesus Christ and His solutions to their lives. Prayer focuses your ministry on Jesus and not on the person. It is not what they think that they need. It is what the Lord knows that they need and the real solutions that come from His message and His healing. Prayer will lead to real change and healing in a broken world.

For now or later - taking the next step

Deep 1 Who do you know who is broken or struggling whose problems break your heart and could cause you to pray for them?

Deep 2 What barriers often stand in the way of people that keep them from listening to the gospel?

Deep 3 What do you think would be the result if your whole church began to pray for the lost?

6. Breakthrough prayers

Gen. 15:1-7

Big idea: Miracles happen when people pray

Abram is a man in crisis. He has just defeated four kingdoms and their armies to rescue Lot and his property from their control. It was a daring move as Abram defeated four nations with only 318 servants. It seems that he is concerned that the armies will regroup and destroy him and his people. He turned to the Lord and prayed, and God heard him and promised to be Abram's protector and shield. Saving Lot had opened up another wound for Abram. Abram had no heir. God had promised Abram that his descendants would be a great nation (Gen. 12:2) and yet Abram didn't even have a son. He prayed about this fear, and God answered with new promises built upon the promises that He had made before. It was another breakthrough for Abram, whom God would later call Abraham when the promise was fulfilled (Gen. 17:5).

The church needs a breakthrough. Mainline churches across America are dying. Churches in our denomination are dying as they get too small to afford a pastor. Our seminaries are producing less than half the pastoral graduates that they did a generation ago. Local congregations are getting older, and the youth don't see as great a need to be with the Lord. We have forgotten what Abraham knew. If you want help in a crisis, you need to pray. We try to create programs that will solve our problems, but so often they don't work. Abraham could have built an army, but that would not have defended him as God could. He would try to claim God's promise through a son named Ishmael, but his solution to the problem of needing an heir would only cause him greater problems. We pray because only God can help. Breakthrough prayers get past barriers with the power and wisdom of God. They can accomplish more than the work of our hands for such prayers call upon the hands of God.

A man stood before the emperor and the representatives of the church alone. His writings were laid out on a table in front of him as evidence of his tyranny. He was called to renounce them and save himself. He instead asked for an evening to pray. He prayed that night wrestling with the decision. In the end, he decided to stand firm. The year was 1521, and the man was Martin Luther. His crisis with the church led to the reformation movement. Prayer can change everything. When God's people are willing to wrestle in prayer with their fears, worries, and desires; God can do amazing things. God laid out the impossible with Abraham, and he believed. God laid out the truth for Luther, and he changed all of Europe and the future of the church. Wrestle with your fears and crisis in prayer and watch for God's breakthrough that will change everything.

1. What is your greatest fear right now, and what would you earnestly like God to do about it.

As I write this, our nation's leadership is divided and at each other's throats. They are more concerned about bringing each other down than helping with the problems of immigration, health care, poverty, and our crumbling infrastructure. On a personal level, people are struggling with illness, job loss, family problems, and a host of other issues. Let the people in the class talk about what worries them the most. God can help in so many areas that are beyond us. He can do what is impossible for us.

Read Gen. 15:1-7

2. After having defeated the nations that kidnapped Lot (Gen14:15-17), what fear grips Abraham so that he prays to the Lord?

While the text doesn't explicitly say it (but God addresses it), Abram must have been afraid. Singlehandedly, he has defeated four kingdoms and their armies to rescue his nephew Lot. It would be

natural for him to be scared that they will return and annihilate him and his people. Fortunately, Abram must have turned to the Lord, and the Lord hears his cry. We all have emotions. It is unwise to deny or suppress your feelings. The wise will turn to the Lord in prayer with their fears. The Psalms have many examples of God's people turning to the Lord with their fears and worries. Sometimes, those times of despair come after a time of great success, just as they did here for Abram. One can give in to the fear as Elijah will do after defeating the priests of Baal (1 Kings 19:3) or find comfort in the Lord

3. Verse 1. What fears drive people to their knees in your church or small group?

Congregations become afraid as their numbers shrink or are on a plateau. Money becomes short, and we begin to wonder if the congregation will start to fail. People sometimes are brought to their knees by illness, financial setbacks, or difficulties in relationships. Our emotions begin to run wild, and we start leading with our gut instead of our minds. We begin to play the game of "what if" and come up with all kinds of things that can go wrong that may never happen. The answer is to pray. To experience a breakthrough in life, you have to surrender yourself and your emotions to the Lord. You have to start understanding what God can do rather than worrying about what the world can do to you. We can be run by emotions or by faith. Faith will give us the courage to go on, no matter what the odds.

4. What struggles are you having in your church that could use God's help and solutions?

This question gives a chance to get specific about the situation of your church. Many churches are experiencing declining populations and revenues. Denominations are often struggling to find qualified candidates for ministry. Our temptation has been to find programs that will solve our problems. Some of the programs have had minor success, but many have done little to help. Breakthroughs for churches come when we begin with prayer. Programs rely on our actions and knowledge. Prayer seeks God's work and wisdom. God will be able to do in a moment what a whole denomination could not accomplish in a decade. Those who seek out God's solutions in prayer before things get desperate will find answers to problems before they grow so big that they cause us heartache. God wants our ministry of witness and service to communities and members to succeed. We just need to come to Him and ask Him to keep His promises of help.

5. Verse 1. What is the Lord's answer to Abram's first concern? Why is this a better answer than anything that Abram could do for himself?

God answers that Abram should not be afraid. Abram seems to have acted in chapter 14 on impulse and now may have begun to wonder if there had been a better way. God calms Abram's emotions with a reminder of who God was. God was Abram's shield. Abraham didn't have to worry about another battle or a surprise attack. God would surround Abram with a ring of protection that would guard him against dangers that Abram could not begin to see. Abram could have created an army out of his men and mercenaries to protect him from danger. None of that would protect him as much as the armies of the Lord standing guard over God's chosen one. God gives the best reason to put away one's fear, namely the character and power of God himself. He cares and protects His children when they rely on Him.

6. Verse 1. As you think about the history of the church, why are prayers necessary before action if we are to overcome the crisis?

As we study the book of Acts, we see how the early church broke through a crisis after crisis with prayer. In Acts 4, the disciples are arrested and brought before the Sanhedrin. The church prays for the courage to speak the message boldly, and the room shakes. Later, Peter is arrested and imprisoned (Acts 12), and God answers the prayers of his people, and Peter is released. Breakthroughs will come when God's people call on the Lord and depend on Him. We can't do miracles or overcome the evil that persists in the world. Prayer requests the power of God, which can overcome the evil one and work the miracles that we often

need if we are going to accomplish the ministry that God wants us to do. By ourselves, we can do little. With the Lord, nothing is impossible.

7. Verse 3. What is Abram's second concern after having saved Lot, his nephew, even though God has made promises about this issue before (Gen 12:3, 13:16)?

Perhaps it was rescuing Lot and knowing that Lot would never live with Abram that made him think again about the promise that God had made concerning a son for Abram. That promise was a decade old, and there was still no son. Instead of turning from God, Abram turned to the Lord with the prayer of verse 2. You can feel Abram's pain at having vast wealth and success but having no son to inherit. The only solution that he can see is to adopt a servant in the household as his heir. God's response shows how Abram's relationship with God was developing. There would be a friendship that would span 100 years from the call at age 75 to Abraham's death at age 175. Abram is not yet Abraham, but he is willing to listen and trust the Lord with the most significant problem in His life.

8. Verse 3. How does doubt in God's promises increase our fears and worries? Why is constant prayer the tool to overcome such unbelief?

Doubt causes us to worry about the future and fear things that may never come to pass. Faith brings the peace that comes when we believe that God has our future and our lives in His hands. God invites us to come to Him with our fears and doubts in prayer. God doesn't chastise Abram for his concerns. He reaches out in love to comfort Abram and to renew and expand the promises that He has made before. When we try to repress the fears or ignore our doubts instead of praying about them, we cause ourselves great pain and limit what God can do in our lives. Prayer is our great opportunity to let the Lord take our cares and worries. It is the place where we fall on our knees, trusting Him so that we give our decisions and troubles to the Lord. God cares for us and will always do what is best for us in every trial. Prayer is the place where we can learn of His love and overcome the unbelief that will bring us agony.

9. Verse 5: What does God promise that only God can do? Looking back, did God keep His promise?

The scope of God's promise is impressive. Abram asked for one child, and God gave him a glimpse of the Lord's blessings for centuries to come. In an era where children often died, God is promising Abram that his descendants will number more than all the people who were probably living on the earth during his life. He wanted God to give him a child, and God promises to make him a great nation. There are many of the peoples of the Bible that do not exist today, as the Jews do. Where are the Edomites or any of the peoples from the kings that Abram had defeated in chapter 14? God's promise is one of continued care for the descendants of Abram. There are about 30,000 stars listed in the general catalog used by astronomers. The descendants of the Jews would easily number in the millions over the generations. The illustration confirmed the covenant and gave Abram a glimpse of the magnitude of what God had promised.

10. Why do breakthroughs in prayer have a higher chance of happening than advances in science or technology?

We use the word breakthrough in the world of science and technology so often that we have become numb to its use. We will talk about a cure for some disease or a new tool as life-changing. Why don't we use the term breakthrough as often in the realm of prayer? God can do more in a minute than humanity can do in a decade. As the church prays about its ministry and its life before the Lord, we can harness the power of God in the way that no voter's meeting or committee's brainstorming can do. We can't grow a church or build a Sunday school or even bring one person to faith. God can do all those and more. God can do many things to change the future of a church and the Christian life. Pray for breakthroughs. God always wants what is best for His people and when His children depend on Him, miracles do happen.

11. Verse 6. How does Abram respond to God's promises? Why is such a response critical if prayers are going to cause breakthroughs?

God laid out the impossible before Abram and Abram believed. He understood that God could do everything that He said He would do and more. The promises of God are no good if we don't believe in them and live out our lives as if we know they are real. Abram has already trusted God enough to come to the Promised Land. Here he is laying his future in the hands of the Lord. He was leaning wholly into the promises of God. This verse is so important that it is quoted three times in the New Testament (Gal. 3:6, Romans 4:3, and James 2:23). It is a challenge for us because we need to ask ourselves if we believe that God can do all things when we pray. If not, we are engaging in wishful thinking and figuring that prayer cannot harm the situation. If we believe, we trust every word that we hear in scripture and accept that God can do great things with all the problems and opportunities that we bring Him in prayer.

12. Why is faith still necessary if we want the breakthroughs that only God can give?

I think that we are still the greatest barrier to breakthroughs happening in any ministry. If we want to see a breakthrough occur in the church or our lives, we have to have enough faith in God to try things that should not work. We often plan and operate based on whether we think that we can be successful. We have to act based on what we believe God wants to happen, confident that God can do anything to bring about the miracles that He wants. The promises of God produce no good if we don't believe them and put them into action. Abram had already trusted the Lord enough to come to Palestine. We have to trust the Lord enough to do crazy things that should not work but are precisely what the Lord wants to do in our midst. Prayer and the promises of God are the way that we find out what those things are and how we learn to trust the Lord enough to surrender to His will.

13. How does crisis play into breakthroughs in our ministry? Why does it often take a disaster for us to pray enough for breakthroughs to happen?

There are times that every Christian feels in the dark and wonders why God seems so far away and why this horrible thing had to happen to me. A crisis is often a blessing to us. It forces us to look upward and to depend on God because the problem is too big for us to handle. In the text, we saw Abram have such issues, and it caused Him to pray. I am convinced that God may allow bad things to happen just so that people will turn to Him because, in the good times, we often do not rely on Him. How much better we would be if we prayed all the time fervently. We would continuously be praying for opportunities to bring God glory and to let Him rule the world. We would be praying for our churches to bring God glory. Breakthroughs come by praying with faith. Such events are turning points where we are given an opportunity for something that can change the course of lives, churches, and communities. They come when we believe in God's promises so much that we act even in unreasonable times.

For now or later - taking the next step

Deep 1 Where in your life do you need God to tell you not to be afraid?

Deep 2 What are your prayer conversations like when you talk to the Lord? Are they filled with angst or hope?

Deep 3 What breakthrough would you like to see God bring to the church today? Do you have the stamina to pray for it with confidence until God brings His solution?

1. Profitable Prayer

1 Kings 18: 16-46

Big idea: Prayer is powerless when you don't believe

Prayer can be powerful, but it is worthless if you don't believe in the Lord. For Elijah up on Mt. Carmel, prayer was not a wish or a hope. It was a belief that God wanted the unbelieving nation to bow down and worship Him. Elijah believes with every ounce of his body that God will answer his prayer with a miracle. He understands that this is a duel between God and Satan and that God must and will win. The people needed to see who the real God was. The prophets of Baal may have had the force of the king and the power of numbers. Elijah had the connection of prayer with the true God, and he was willing to put himself on the line that everyone might worship God.

I have seen a few Christians pray like that. We pray for people in the community, but we seldom have the confidence that God will powerfully answer with a miracle. Prayer is based on God's promises and believes that God wants what we are asking. Lord, forgive us for the prayers that are nothing more than hopes or wishes. Lord, forgive us for being surprised when prayer makes a difference. We have the power of God available to each of us, but we seldom put ourselves on the line, as Elijah did in the text. No wonder the church accomplishes so little in the world. It is time for powerful prayers that know what God can do and trust that He will come through.

God's people change the world when they pray. Nehemiah prayed, and God rebuilt Jerusalem. The disciples prayed, and God launched a church on Pentecost. You and I need to explore what God says He will do in the Bible and pray with all our hearts that God might do His will through us. Powerful prayer begins with knowing God. It continues with a faith that is willing to stand up and be counted when everything seems against you. That may seem like a lot to ask of any Christian, and so I would ask just one thing as we look at Elijah. Commit to praying daily and asking God for a little more each day. God will teach you and give you the faith to ask for miracles. God wants to do wonderful things through you and me today.

1. When have you prayed for something that seemed impossible? What gave you hope that God would answer your prayer?

Read 1 Kings 18: 16-46

2. Verse 19. How does Elijah put himself on the line in response to God's call in 1 Kings 18:1? What is the cost if he fails?

3. Verse 19. What does it take a church or person to put themselves on the line and ask for a miracle?

4. Verse 21. According to Elijah, what is the problem that needs to be addressed by a miracle?

5. Verse 23. What are the conditions put forward for the test? How do they ask for something that only a true God could do?

6. Verses 21-24. What is the purpose of this demonstration? How does the answer of the people show about where their hearts were?

7. What do you think God's purpose is for the church? What do you think God is just waiting for you and your church to ask for from Him?

8. Verse 30. In contrast to the frenzy of the pagans, how does Elijah prepare for the miracle? How does he make it more challenging so the power of God is evident?

9. Verse 36-37. How does the prayer draw the attention of the people to God? Why is it necessary for us to draw attention to God and not to ourselves if we want miracles to happen?

10. Verse 38. What is God's response to Elijah's prayer, and how does that response affect the people present?

11. Verse 43-44. What does Elijah do when the thing God promised in 1 Kings 18:1 doesn't come immediately?

12. Why do you think people give up when miracles don't happen as soon as we want them?

13. What does God want us to expect from prayer? What could happen in your life and the life of the church if we prayed as Elijah did on Mount Carmel?

For now or later - taking the next step

Deep 1 When do you waver in your prayers and your faith in God? How does that affect the results that you have in your petitions?

Deep 2 How well do you know God? What impact do you think it would have on your prayers if you knew God well enough to know what He has promised and how He has helped others?

Deep 3 After reading about Elijah, what part does patience have in answered prayer? Why do you think God waits to answer prayer instead of always giving us what we want immediately?

2. Lord teach us to pray

Luke 11:1-13

Big idea: Prayer is hard work and honed by practice

Jesus made it a habit to pray. The disciples were used to Jesus withdrawing from them to pray out in a quiet place. The gospel of Luke mentions eight times that Jesus went off to pray. You wonder how many hundreds or thousands of times that the disciples saw Jesus praying during their three years together. It was part of His life and defined Him as much as His miracles or teaching. What was it that they noticed about Jesus when He came back from prayer? Did they observe that prayer calmed Him or that he had a stronger sense of ministry? Something was happening when He went off to be with the Father in prayer, and they wanted what Jesus was receiving in prayer. Significantly, they didn't ask Jesus to teach them how to preach or do miracles. They wanted a connection that was the source of His power and His confidence. They wanted Him to teach them to pray. It was a gift that only Jesus could give.

What have you noticed about people who pray regularly? Do they seem calmer and less worried? Do they have a heart or values that you would like to emulate? Do they seem more confident about the future? I believe those can happen, but it is not a simple thing to be that kind of prayer. For me, prayer is a learned activity. You can learn a little from books, but you have to learn it from a master and practice it in your life. Life has taught me that the more that you pray, the better that you will be at prayer. It is kind of like playing music. Most people know that they can't just sit down and play the keyboard or the guitar. You will have to work at it. You have to commit to it. Maybe most of all, you have to see the blessing of it. Prayer is not for wimps. It is to be from the heart, and you want the outcome and believe that the Lord can give that outcome. For most, the question is whether you are willing to do the hard work that it takes to learn how to pray like Jesus.

Why would you want to work that hard? Why would you waste four years of your life going to college? Why would you spend the time to learn a language or a musical instrument? You do all of those because you see the benefits. Prayer is access to God with all the blessings that He can provide and all the love that He can give. God wants to provide you with gifts, just like any parent or grandparent does. You just have to learn how to ask. Think of what life would be like if you had less stress and worry. Think about how it would be to live without guilt from past sins because you had God's forgiveness daily. Prayer is the place where God touches your life. It is an opportunity to ask for spiritual things that will change the course of your life and not just a better job or a new car. Those who practice their prayer and are bold will have blessings in life that others can only dream about. They will see miracles and dream great dreams. Prayer is their chance to be at the throne of God.

1. When has someone asked you for advice or help with a tough situation? Why do you think that they asked you?

Read Luke 11:1-13

2. Verse 1 What does this verse tell you about the importance of prayer?

3. Why do we need to learn to pray? What can be so hard about prayer?

- 4. Verse 2. What is the attitude needed for prayer?**
- 5. Verse 3. What are the essential requests in prayer listed here by Jesus?**
- 6. Verse 8. What is the point of the parable? What does it tell you about our need to pray?**
- 7. Verse 8. Does God need convincing, or is there a different reason that we should be persistent in our prayers?**
- 8. What truth is expressed in these verses 9-10? What does it teach you about why to pray each day?**
- 9. Verse 11. Why can we depend on God to answer our prayers? Why do we know that He will always give us what is best, not just the easiest?**
- 10. Verse 11. How is prayer an act of dependence on God and learning to trust Him in every situation?**
- 11. Verse 13. What is the gift promised here when you pray? How do you think God feels when you pray regularly to Him?**
- 12. Verse 13. What do you think God wants you to ask from Him? What will constant prayer teach you about the character of God and His willingness to help?**
- 13. What benefits would a stronger prayer life bring to you?**

For now or later - taking the next step

Deep 1 Who can you ask to pray with you so that you can learn from them about prayer? Is there someone at your church or in your family whose prayer life you admire?

Deep 2 Why is God dependable? How will confidence in the Lord change the frequency and requests of your prayers?

Deep 3 What steps could you take to develop your prayer life? What is your greatest weakness? Is it frequency, faith, desiring God's will, or something else?

3. Warfare praying Ephesians 6:10-20

Big idea: The battle for your mind is won or lost by prayer.

This is war. It is a knockdown, drag-out fight for your mind, which Paul knew well. Demas who had served with Paul on his journeys was tempted away by Satan. Judas, one of the twelve disciples, was tempted by Satan. Even men like Moses, Elijah, and Peter had times where Satan played mind games. Satan is a schemer. He has come to wage war on Christians so that he can keep as many people from heaven as possible. He wants to give the Lord pain when he sees people falling away from the faith. Paul wants us to know that all the resources needed by a believer to fight this battle have been given to them by Christ. He pictures these weapons like the Roman armor of a soldier. The most prominent part of this armor is prayer. If we are to stand firm against Satan, we will do so with prayer. In one sense, prayer is what makes all the other pieces of armor useful. We are only righteous, faithful, and able to use God's word if we are dependent on God in prayer.

We think we are in control. We never plan to get angry at other Christians over the way they treat us. We never expect to have doubts when God doesn't give us what we want. Yet it happens to people in churches all the time. Satan wants to use our minds as his playground. He will fill the minds of Christians with all kinds of fears, doubts, and anger. He sows worry and guilt so that people think that there is no value in being a Christian. Why? He wants them to leave the church and hurt themselves and their families. Everybody says it won't happen to them. Yet, how is your armor? The average Christian spends less than five minutes a day in prayer. Many Christians haven't opened their Bibles in weeks or months. Satan has easy pickings because people are unprepared. Paul gives a call for every Christian to be prepared like a soldier amid battle. God has made available the tools. It is time to put them on. It is time to pray as if your life depends on it for, in truth, it does.

If you want to win the battle with Satan, you have to make prayer a habit. Prayer is the power that enables every Christian to wear the armor of God and keep it secure. We pray for the Holy Spirit that he might use his power to fight for the control of your mind and your life. Realize the hardest victory to win might be the victory of your mind. Satan will tempt you daily with sins like lust, greed, and anger. Every day, he will fill your soul with doubts and fears. Such emotions seem to pop out of nowhere. Prayer each day will keep you connected to the Lord and make it harder for Satan to defeat you. Prayer partnered with the study of God's word will not only protect you but also slay Satan when he or his minions try to enter your life. Prayer is a powerful weapon and worth our time and effort if we don't want Satan to rule our lives.

1. What was your favorite Halloween costume as you or your children were growing up?

Read Ephesians 6:10-20

2. Verse 12. What is the situation that the Ephesians face?

3. Verse 12. How do we face the same struggles with Satan that the Ephesians faced?

4. In what way have you found the Christian life a battlefield against Satan? How does Satan wage war against us, and how good are we at fighting Satan?

5. Verse 13. Why is it so important to stand firm? Why can't we compromise on the battlefield?
6. Verse 14. What defenses has the Lord provided for us in this battle?
7. Verse 14. Why do you think that Paul used the detailed description of a Roman soldier's armor to describe our defenses from God for this battle?
8. Verse 17. What is the one offensive weapon that we have in our fight against Satan?
9. Verse 18. What is the last piece of armor mentioned in the text? Why is it given such a place of importance?
10. How could you combine Bible study and prayer in your battle against Satan and why would that be a powerful weapon?
11. Verse 19. What is Paul's one request as he wages this battle with Satan in his life?
12. Verse 19. How does Paul's request reflect the importance of praying for others in this battle against Satan?
13. What difference does daily prayer make in your battle with Satan?

For now or later - taking the next step

Deep 1 How would you describe the pieces of God's armor in your own words? What benefit would each piece bring to your life right now?

Deep 2 Where do you feel that you are losing the battle with sin and with evil? How is that impacting the quality of your life?

Deep 3 What blessings do you think you would experience if prayer and Bible study became daily parts of your life? What is holding you back from making a commitment to regular time with the Lord?

4. Praying for others

Col. 1:3-14

Big idea: The greatest help for a friend is a prayer for spiritual blessings

Paul is in prison in Rome when he hears from Epaphras about the church in Colosse. The church is under pressure from arguments and false teachings that threaten to undermine the faith that has been planted. Paul can't go to see this church that Epaphras planted, but he can pray that they have the knowledge and understanding to see through the false teachings. Prayer is at the heart of the early church's ministry and their success. If you look through the pages of the book of Acts, you will see a church on fire with prayer because they know that they can't do the ministry God has given them or overcome Satan's trials without the Lord's help. Paul prays in this text for the people because he is convinced of its power. He has seen firsthand what prayer can do in complex situations. Paul knows that the most significant help you can give to a friend is often prayer.

Why does the church today seem to struggle more than they did in Paul's day? I think part of the answer is that we don't pray as they did. We define ministry by the things we can do with our hands. We have potlucks, gather canned goods for the poor, and pick up trash on the street. All that is good, but it often misses God's power. Sadly we often don't include God in ministry. Try to get people to pray for those in need or to have a prayer service before church to lift their inadequacies to God, and no one comes. Somehow we have come to believe that prayer is passive as if it is something you can do when there is little else to do. Paul knows that unleashing the power of God through our prayers can help people battle the forces of evil and the troubles of life better than anything we can do with our hands.

You have to believe that the Lord still works in the lives of His people. Only then will you see the value of prayer and take time to pray specifically about the needs of others in your prayers. We need to begin with the promises that God has made and ask that God keep them with someone important to us. We also need to pray the promises of God so that we are asking for things that God gladly gives instead of something we just want. Finally, we need to pray for the spiritual needs of people and not only the physical requirements that they might have. Paul didn't ask for healing for a sick person. He prayed that the faith of the Colossians increase so that they would not be swept away with the false teaching. Pray for the Spirit first, and the rest of the person will find healing as well.

1. What one thing would you ask God to grant to your church?

Read Col. 1:3-14

2. Verse 3. What does Paul praise in a group that He has never met?

3. Verse 3. How are faith, love, and hope evident in your life?

4. What would attract you to the Colossian church?

5. Verse 5. What is the origin of the believer's faith and love?

- 6. Verse 5 What is the difference between God's hope and the hope of the world?**
- 7. Verse 7. Who taught the gospel to the Colossians, and how does Paul describe him?**
- 8. Verse 9 What does Paul pray for on behalf of the Colossians?**
- 9. Verse 9. What is the focus of your personal and congregational prayers on Sunday? What would we pray for if we followed Paul's example?**
- 10. Verse 10. What is the purpose of Paul's prayer?**
- 11. How would an intense faith walk change your life and the lives of those you love?**
- 12. Verse 13. How does God enable believers to share in His inheritance?**
- 13. What can you learn about praying for others from Paul's prayer here for the Colossians?**

For now or later - taking the next step

Deep 1 How does your prayer life compare to Paul's? Do you have his intensity or his desires for others?

Deep 2 How are spiritual requests for others a more significant benefit to them than just praying for their physical needs and hurts?

Deep 3 How would your life and the lives of those you love change if you had the spiritual blessings that Paul wishes for the Colossians?

5 Praying for the lost
Matt 9:35-38
Big idea: You share when you care

In a world full of troubles and broken people, we often wonder who cares about them. The answer is that Jesus cares. He prayed in the hills and then traveled through all the towns and villages, teaching the good news of the kingdom and healing their broken bodies. His miracles brought the people to Him, but it was the teaching and preaching that changed lives. At the heart of what He did was prayer. Regularly, Jesus would finish his time of preaching teaching and go to a remote area to pray. He prayed about the obstacles that the people were facing and their need for the spiritual food that He could give them. Our Lord also asked others to pray. He wanted people to pray so that they would care enough to help others and share what God alone could give.

The world is still filled with people who are broken and without spiritual hope. Fewer are in worship, and fewer know what God can do for their lives. We wonder if it will ever get better. To reach them, we try programs and build fancy buildings. It is what we humans do best. We multiply programs at federal, state, and local levels. We create organizations to do programs to help with needs in our community, from feeding children to helping those with drug addictions. None of these programs can do what prayer can do. Prayer harnesses the power of God. Prayer can change the lives of those praying and those we pray about in a way that no program can ever do. People around us have their lives and their eternities hanging in the balance. What Jesus still needs is people on His team who will pray so that He can open hearts and lives.

The early church was a revolution that overwhelmed the pagan Roman Empire, and this revolution all began with prayer (Acts 4:23-31). The people of God acknowledged that God was greater than all the kingdoms of the world. The people of God prayed that the Lord would give them boldness so that they continued to speak out during persecution. Finally, they prayed that the Lord would work miracles among the people. The church today accomplishes little because we do not pray for the lost and our mission. Imagine if the church would pray on Sundays so that even half of the members were sent out by the Lord to touch one person. It would change the world. People you love would no longer be harassed and helpless. People who you reach would witness to others about what the Lord had done in their life. The new revolution starts with prayer, for it is God who can change the world through us.

1. Who do you know who could use a little compassion? What do they need most right now?

Read Matt 9:35-38

2. Verse 35. How is Jesus' ministry described in this verse? What was He able to give the people that they were lacking?

3. What does verse 35 tell us about the mission of the church?

4. Verse 36a. How does Jesus feel when He sees all these broken people?

- 5. Verse 36a. How does compassion for those around us change the focus of our prayers?**
- 6. Verse 36b. How does the text describe the people who came to Jesus? What sort of troubles do you think that they were experiencing?**
- 7. Verse 36b. How would you describe the lives of the majority of the people in your community?**
- 8. Verse 37. What problem did Jesus see as He addressed the needs of the people?**
- 9. What opportunities does Jesus see in the world around us because people are so broken?**
- 10. Verse 38 What was Jesus' answer to the brokenness of the world?**
- 11. Verse 38. Why pray to the Lord about the problems of our community before beginning to do something about them?**
- 12. How does prayer change and prepare those who are praying for others?**
- 13. The early church was built on prayer (see Acts 4: 23-31). How would continued prayer change the ministry of your congregation or small group?**

For now or later - taking the next step

Deep 1 Who do you know who is broken or struggling whose problems break your heart and could cause you to pray for them?

Deep 2 What barriers often stand in the way of people that keep them from listening to the gospel?

Deep 3 What do you think would be the result if your whole church began to pray for the lost?

6. Breakthrough prayers

Gen. 15:1-7

Big idea: Miracles happen when people pray

Abram is a man in crisis. He has just defeated four kingdoms and their armies to rescue Lot and his property from their control. It was a daring move as Abram defeated four nations with only 318 servants. It seems that he is concerned that the armies will regroup and destroy him and his people. He turned to the Lord and prayed, and God heard him and promised to be Abram's protector and shield. Saving Lot had opened up another wound for Abram. Abram had no heir. God had promised Abram that his descendants would be a great nation (Gen. 12:2) and yet Abram didn't even have a son. He prayed about this fear, and God answered with new promises built upon the promises that He had made before. It was another breakthrough for Abram, whom God would later call Abraham when the promise was fulfilled (Gen. 17:5).

The church needs a breakthrough. Mainline churches across America are dying. Churches in our denomination are dying as they get too small to afford a pastor. Our seminaries are producing less than half the pastoral graduates that they did a generation ago. Local congregations are getting older, and the youth don't see as great a need to be with the Lord. We have forgotten what Abraham knew. If you want help in a crisis, you need to pray. We try to create programs that will solve our problems, but so often they don't work. Abraham could have built an army, but that would not have defended him as God could. He would try to claim God's promise through a son named Ishmael, but his solution to the problem of needing an heir would only cause him greater problems. We pray because only God can help. Breakthrough prayers get past barriers with the power and wisdom of God. They can accomplish more than the work of our hands for such prayers call upon the hands of God.

A man stood before the emperor and the representatives of the church alone. His writings were laid out on a table in front of him as evidence of his tyranny. He was called to renounce them and save himself. He instead asked for an evening to pray. He prayed that night wrestling with the decision. In the end, he decided to stand firm. The year was 1521, and the man was Martin Luther. His crisis with the church led to the reformation movement. Prayer can change everything. When God's people are willing to wrestle in prayer with their fears, worries, and desires; God can do amazing things. God laid out the impossible with Abraham, and he believed. God laid out the truth for Luther, and he changed all of Europe and the future of the church. Wrestle with your fears and crisis in prayer and watch for God's breakthrough that will change everything.

1. What is your greatest fear right now, and what would you earnestly like God to do about it.

Read Gen. 15:1-7

2. After having defeated the nations that kidnapped Lot (Gen14:15-17), what fear grips Abraham so that he prays to the Lord?

3. Verse 1. What fears drive people to their knees in your church or small group?

4. **What struggles are you having in your church that could use God's help and solutions?**

5. **Verse 1. What is the Lord's answer to Abram's first concern? Why is this a better answer than anything that Abram could do for himself?**

6. **Verse 1. As you think about the history of the church, why are prayers necessary before action if we are to overcome the crisis?**

7. **Verse 3. What is Abram's second concern after having saved Lot, his nephew, even though God has made promises about this issue before (Gen 12:3, 13:16)?**

8. **Verse 3. How does doubt in God's promises increase our fears and worries? Why is constant prayer the tool to overcome such unbelief?**

9. **Verse 5: What does God promise that only God can do? Looking back, did God keep His promise?**

10. **Why do breakthroughs in prayer have a higher chance of happening than advances in science or technology?**

11. **Verse 6. How does Abram respond to God's promises? Why is such a response critical if prayers are going to cause breakthroughs?**

12. **Why is faith still necessary if we want the breakthroughs that only God can give?**

13. **How does crisis play into breakthroughs in our ministry? Why does it often take a disaster for us to pray enough for breakthroughs to happen?**

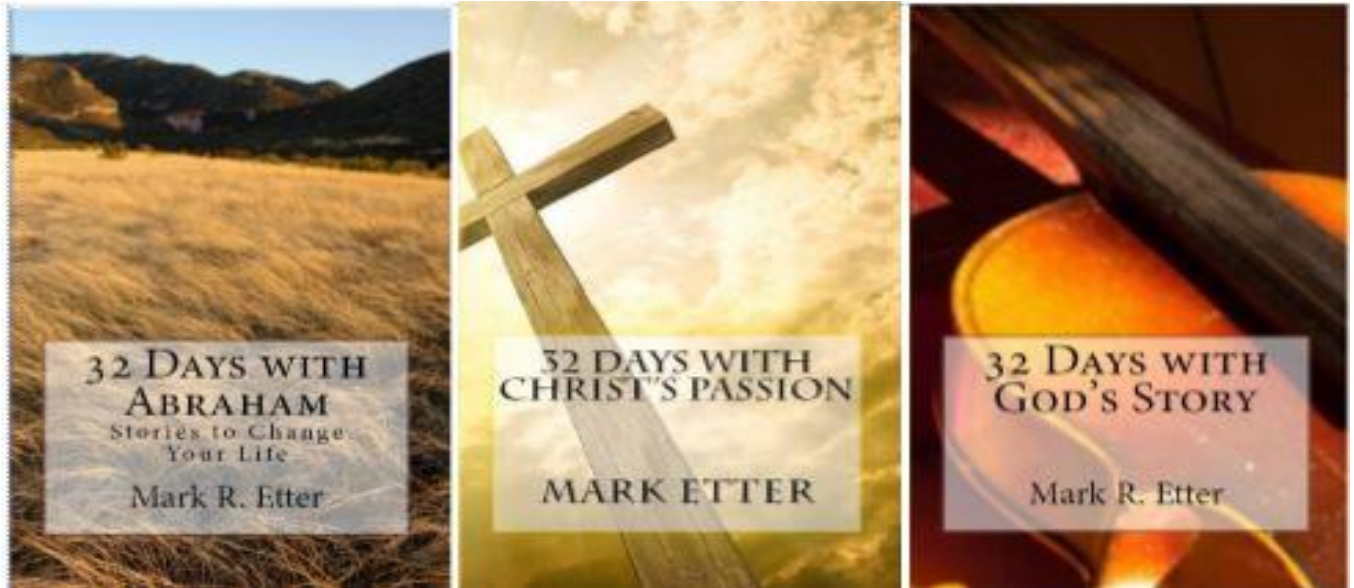
For now or later - taking the next step

Deep 1 Where in your life do you need God to tell you not to be afraid?

Deep 2 What are your prayer conversations like when you talk to the Lord? Are they filled with angst or hope?

Deep 3 What breakthrough would you like to see God bring to the church today? Do you have the stamina to pray for it with confidence until God brings His solution?

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About the author

Rev. Mark Etter has been a pastor for over thirty-five years and is currently the pastor of Bethany Lutheran Church in Erlanger, KY. Rev. Etter has published several books of Adult Bible studies and numerous devotions and youth studies with Concordia Publishing House in St. Louis. He has been active in the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod as an LWML counselor, evangelism chairman, coach for pastors, and circuit counselor. He and his wife, Joan, have three grown children and two grandchildren.

Did you know?

Here are seven questions that are answered in this study. The page and question number in this study are given after each question.

1. What is Elijah's prayer before the miracle on Mt. Carmel? Why is it necessary for us to draw attention to God if we want miracles to happen? (Page 7, Question 9)
2. The disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray. Why do we need to learn to pray? What can be so hard about prayer? (Page 10, Question 3)
3. How is prayer an act of dependence on God and learning to trust Him in every situation? (Page 11, Question 10)
4. Where does prayer fit in the armor of God mentioned in Ephesians 6? How important is prayer to make the rest of the armor work well? (Page 15, Question 9)
5. How would personal and worship prayers change if we followed Paul's example? (Page 19, Question 9)
6. How does compassion for others change the focus of our prayers? (Page 22, Question 5)
7. Why is faith necessary if we want breakthroughs to come to us in prayer? (Page 28, Question 12)

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