

The Prayer Seminar

This seminar is a teambuilding Bible study for a group that already has a long-term prayer target. One of the challenges for long-term prayer teams is to stay fresh and engaged, and this seminar was designed to sharpen and refresh the fundamental skills of individual prayer warriors while building teamwork. By the close of the seminar we anticipate that God will give us a body of answers toward our team prayer target. The individual team members will have grown in their faith, understanding and skill in intercessory prayer. The team itself will be growing deeper in unity of vision and purpose as the members pray together week by week for their shared requests.

During the seminar the team will take six months to pray toward the same target every time for an hour each week. Typically the team takes ten minutes to reconnect with one another and share recent answers to prayer, 15 minutes to learn from a biblical example or teaching on prayer and then 35 minutes to pray together toward the target using the pattern or doctrine they have just learned. We never want to spend more time talking about the requests than we spend in actual prayer, so the leader has to keep an eye on the clock or else the team needs to budget more time for the prayer meeting. The conclusion regarding the “one thing” prayer may need to be spread over two weeks and should include a time of thanksgiving and celebration for the ways God has answered us.

The seminar schedule has been thought out and tested with several groups, but it is not inflexible. Some weeks the team may be unable to meet. Sometimes it may make sense to take a particular week out of order. For instance the pattern of prayer with fasting may be moved to coincide with a public fast day for the wider fellowship. If the whole church is fasting on a particular day, and if the church leadership is willing to accept our prayer team’s target, it is spiritual wisdom to align our day of prayer and fasting with the church-wide fast.

1. Jesus: The Model Prayer (Matthew 6 Forgiveness; Luke 11 Provision)

Jesus taught us to pray as His disciples, and the model that He gave us is probably the best place to start. The Lord's Prayer is not a formula for praying by rote but a pattern to help us, especially when we are just starting out as a prayer team. When a cook is preparing a particular meal for the first time, she will follow the recipe very closely, but as she gains confidence and experience she will feel free to make substitutions and to personalize the dish. In the same way we learn to follow Jesus' model by praying the Lord's Prayer. We learn to address God as our Father; we learn the areas of our greatest need where the Father is most interested in responding to us, but as we mature we will personalize the recipe and emphasize different aspects depending on our present situation.

I like to start by reading aloud the Lord's Prayer from Matthew 6, pointing out the meaning of each sentence. Then if I am leading the seminar I will start with the prayer, "Father in heaven, hallowed be Your Name." I will pray a sentence prayer reflecting that desire, for example, "Father, I worship You above all things; I pray for Your Name to be known and honored today in our church and our city today." When each prayer team member has had an opportunity to pray the hallowing prayer, then I can move on to pray, "May Your Kingdom come and Your will be done on earth as in heaven."

Often it is good to start by praying around the circle, so the leader can tell when everyone has had a chance. But sometimes there will be new members who are shy and don't want to have to pray aloud. In those cases it is best to ask members to pray as they are moved by the Spirit being sensitive to others who also want to pray. You may want to remind the team of the ABCs of team praying: make your prayer Audible, Brief, and Clear.

When praying, "May Your Kingdom come and Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven," we should all visualize how fully God's will is being done at the present moment in heaven. This will aid us in developing a clear concept of what we are asking when we say, "Your will be done on earth." One team I prayed with for several years concentrated on praying, "may Your kingdom come" in the United States where we were living at the time. This led to a study of previous revivals in America and an expectation that the Lord would bring a fresh revival in answer to our prayers.

Most teams find it easiest to pray for provision. Give people plenty of time to pray, "Give us today our daily bread," but remind everyone that this is a prayer regarding immediate needs not wishes far into the future. Jesus Himself emphasized asking the Father for provision in Luke 11:3-8, but forgiveness when He presented the model in Matthew 6:12-15. What will we hear our prayer team emphasizing when we pray the Model Prayer? As we use this pattern in our team prayers today, let's notice how our team prayer target corresponds to the needs Jesus points out in His prayer, and let's take our example direct from Him.

At the close of the prayer time, the leader should follow Jesus' pattern with the benediction, "Yours is the Kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen."

2. Zechariah: People's Advocate Prayer Pattern (Zech 3:1-5; Hebrews 7:23-25)
No matter what our prayer target, God will bring about the answer through people, people whom we know and perhaps can name in our prayers. Sometimes the people involved will make disappointing decisions, and sometimes they will fail. One clear example of a disappointing leader was Joshua the High Priest during Zechariah's prayer ministry. Joshua had been commissioned by God to return to Jerusalem and re-build the Temple that had been destroyed. He obeyed and went to Jerusalem, but because of hardships, lack of funds, and political opposition, he never really got started on the construction. He somehow managed to build his own nice house, but after fourteen years he had done nothing about the house of God!

When Zechariah is allowed to see into the heavenly courtroom, it is no surprise that we see Joshua dressed in filthy clothes and suffering interrogation and defamation from the prosecuting attorney, Satan the Accuser. But we want our prayer team to enter the heavenly courtroom on the side of the defense, where Jesus is the Angel of the Lord and the People's Advocate. He is the One who stands up to defend Joshua and He is the One who defends us from Satan's accusations when we fail and when we disappoint (Heb. 7:25). Today, as we pray our team request, let us be aware of the heavenly courtroom where we have taken our place, and let us stand up with Jesus on the side of His people, especially in areas where they are spiritually weak or areas where they have disappointed us.

This is the only vision in the Bible that I know of where the prophet is allowed to participate and affect the course of the vision. Notice that Zechariah pipes up from the back bench and tells the angels how to improve their cleanup operation—and they follow his directions! Pretty cool answer to prayer, isn't it? Once when I was leading a team to pray the People's Advocate pattern, the Lord showed me that there was one person I could not effectively advocate for. I would start out praying for his ministry to be established and two sentences later I would be criticizing him in my heart. It helped me a lot to follow Zechariah's example and ask the Lord to "put a clean turban on his head."

We can start following this example by praying for our leaders. Then we can pray for our family members. Then we can pray for those who have been charged with elements of the team's prayer target. It is not necessary to mention any of the ways these brothers and sisters have failed (in the vision only Satan did that) but we can simply pray for the Lord to cleanse them, strengthen them, and establish their leadership.

Let's decide together not to bring any accusation against any of Jesus' people before the Lord, but to say what Jesus says, "This one is Mine, snatched out of the fire."

3. Elijah: Watch & Pray Pattern (1 Kings 18:41-45; Col 4:2)

There is a lot in this short passage, but for the purposes of our team we want to notice what it meant for Elijah to pray with “vigilance” (Col 4:2). First of all, he committed himself to the prayer request, going on record with King Ahab that rain was on its way in answer to his prayers. Secondly, he was not just sending up general prayer, but was asking for a particular blessing with definite time constraints. Thirdly, because he was so thoroughly committed to seeing the answer, he kept asking for updates until he saw the tiny beginning of God’s answer. Finally, as soon as he started to see God moving, he himself went into high gear, putting into effect his plan to get down the mountain and away from Jezebel’s counterattack.

I like to point out to veteran prayer warriors that as Elijah grew in his prayer ministry, it actually took more time for his requests to be answered. When Elijah prayed at the beginning of the drought (1 Kings 17:1), he only had to pray once. Then when he prayed for the healing of the widow’s son (1 Kings 17:21), he had to pray three times. But now at the end of the drought (1 Kings 18:44), Elijah had to pray seven times before he saw his prayer begin to be answered. We should be encouraged as we notice that our perseverance in prayer is growing; it means that the Lord trusts us to keep on praying no matter how long it takes.

The Watch & Pray pattern really resonated with one of our prayer teams in Africa, and the team began incorporating a sort of “weather lookout” during every prayer meeting. One day the team realized that we had been praying for weeks to have 20 people reading the Bible with us, but we had never gone out and bought the Bibles. If the Lord had immediately answered our prayer as He did for Elijah, we would not have had enough Bibles to go around. So part of Watch & Pray for that team was to purchase 20 Bibles and dedicate them before the Lord while continuing to ask for Him to send the readers.

Today we want to see the Holy Spirit stir this kind of expectancy in our hearts and we want to pray with vigilance. Have the team “get up and look toward the sea” by sharing some of the ways they are beginning to see progress toward the team prayer target. Ask, “What if God started to send our answer this week? Would we be ready to move into high gear? What preparations should we be making now in case we see the tiny cloud the size of a man’s hand?”

4. Praying in the Name of Jesus (John 16:23-24; James 4:2-3; Phil 4:6)

Jesus promises to give us whatever we ask in His name. This does not mean that we should use His name as part of a prayer formula as though He had given us the magic words. Instead it means that His promise relates to those requests we bring on His behalf for the sake of His people and His kingdom. The opposite of praying in Jesus' name is to pray for our own personal benefit and ease of life. We often ask to be spared problems and to have a smooth road through life. It is not wrong to pray for safety and smooth transitions, and in fact Philippians 4 tells us that our Father in heaven wants to hear our hearts about whatever is currently making us anxious or causing us pain. Of course He does—any Father would—but these are not the prayers Jesus has in mind when He tells us to pray in His name. These prayers are purely for our own ease and our own kingdom. The Lord does want to hear us talk with Him about whatever concerns us; but the promise is not that our lives will be made easy, but that whenever we ask something for Jesus' sake, He will do it for our sake.

We can illustrate what it means to pray in Jesus name with the picture of a company expense account. Let's say you have been entrusted with a credit account to print advertising for your company, and you can go into the print shop at any time and get brochures and posters printed on the company credit account. You are placing requests and orders in the name of the company and for the good of the company. But if you need to print invitations to your son's birthday party, you are expected to make those orders on your own account and not on the company account. Jesus' promise is that you have an unlimited credit line to ask whatever you need to carry out the ministry of His kingdom. He will make sure you get it. But if what you really want is just an easy life, He never promised us easy.

As a team, let's take a step forward into spiritual maturity, and pray our team request, not for our benefit and comfort but for the glory of Jesus and His kingdom.

PS. Praying in Jesus' name is a good example of how to pray according to a promise made in the Scripture. But there are dozens of promises in the Scripture that can guide and confirm our prayers, and next week we will be practicing with some of them. At the close of your meeting today, tell the team that they should do some research and come prepared next week with a promise or two from the Scripture that means a lot to them.

5. Daniel: Standing on the Promises Pattern (Daniel 9; Jer 25:8-11)

Have you noticed how full of promises the Old Testament is? God gives His people a promise and then just a few pages later we can see Him deliver on it. But just like today, there were some promises in the Old Testament that God took a long time to fulfill. Jeremiah 25:11 is one of those. God had told Jeremiah that He was about to punish Israel by forcing them to leave their homes for seventy years of exile. Daniel was just a teenager when this exile occurred, but at some point (perhaps on his birthday!) when Daniel added the years up (Dan 9:2) he felt that the 70-year time period was up and the answer was due! What was happening? Was God delaying to honor His promises?

This is an important prayer pattern for us to learn and follow. Daniel did the hard work to study and determine exactly what the Lord had promised. Sometimes we are lazy Bible students and just latch on to any sentence in the Scriptures that sounds comforting to our situation. But Daniel shows us how to be diligent in discerning the Scriptural promises that apply most directly to our prayer target. Then Daniel stood firmly on the promise of God and refused to accept any further delay. His diligence in applying the Scripture by faith gave him boldness in prayer.

This is a more challenging prayer pattern than the earlier ones because it requires some independent Bible study and willingness to do our homework. Some team members may have a number of promises by memory and some may be at a loss to recall any. Invite someone to lead out in prayer and then the rest of the team can come along behind and support that prayer with the promises. Here is a list of a few Bible promises we can stand on, but also encourage the team to add to this list. Let us find the promises of God for our situation and let us pray God's mercy and urge His action (Dan 9:19) regarding our team prayer target today.

Promises We Can Stand Upon

Psalm 23:1 "The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not lack anything."

Psalm 34:17-18 "They cry out, and the Lord hears and delivers them out of all their troubles. The Lord is near to the broken-hearted and saves those who have a contrite heart."

John 10:28 Jesus promised, "I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish, neither shall anyone snatch them out of my hand."

John 14:13-14 Jesus promised, "If you ask anything in My name, I will do it."

Romans 8:28 "All things work together for good to those who love God, those who are called according to His purpose."

Philippians 4:6-7 If you pray instead of worrying, "the peace of God which surpasses all understanding will guard your heart and mind through Christ Jesus."

Mark 13:10-11 Jesus promised, "The gospel must first be preached to all nations. When they arrest you, do not worry beforehand what you will speak. But whatever is given you in that hour, speak it; for it is not you who speak but the Holy Spirit."

I Corinthians 15:58b "Your labor is not in vain in the Lord."

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

Matthew 11:28-29 Jesus promised, "Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest."

6. Praying According to the Will of God (I John 5:13-15; Rom 8:26-28)

Jesus made a going-away promise and repeated it three times (John 15:7; 15:16; 16:23-24) so that we could always know for sure that whatever we pray for we will receive. The conditions are not onerous: we are to pray in Jesus' name; we are to pray according to His will, and we are to abide in Him. But sometimes our experience of prayer does not seem to bear this out. We think we are fulfilling the conditions, so why don't we get what we are asking for?

Paul explains in Romans 8 that when we pray, both Christ and the Holy Spirit intercede for us in perfect accord with the will of God, something we could never do for ourselves. In this way our true spiritual desires are always granted by the Father who can't say no to His children or to His Spirit or to His Son. But this explains why sometimes our prayers are not answered according to the exact words we prayed when we asked, because in our weakness we don't know how to pray as we ought. The words of our prayers are interpreted and translated by the Lord Jesus and by His Spirit so that our prayers always reach the Father in accordance with His will.

During the years 2003-2011 I led a church missions team that was asking God for ten families to send out by 2010. During this period the Lord tested our faith in many ways and allowed us to send many families overseas, but at the end of 2010 we had only sent out half of the families we had asked for. We had to admit that we did not get the precise answer to our literal prayer request, but we also were able to see that by the end of 2010 many more than ten families had been sent out to make disciples around the US and overseas. They went out in Jesus' name and they went out to fulfill His commission; they just didn't go out as financially supported overseas missionaries. Then in the four years that followed the Lord allowed us to continue sending our supported missionaries. He did not give us exactly what we asked, and He did not respond according to our timing; but He did give us over and above what we originally imagined.

When the prayer team gathers today, we want to incorporate some skills we practiced for praying in Jesus' name and praying out the promises of God. But we also want to relax in this truth: the Spirit knows what we want and Jesus knows what we need and they are both interpreting our prayers before the throne of grace. There is no chance that our praying will fail.

You can build teamwork into your prayer time by using a drill that volleyball teams often practice. A common volleyball drill requires one team member to set (to pop the ball clear above the net) and a second team member to hit (to spike the ball powerfully on target). With your prayer team, try to have one team member pray out his request from the heart, and then other team members can follow him praying out the promises and praying the request in Jesus' name and for His kingdom. This allows the "setter" to just think about what he is asking for, knowing that his teammates will come along behind him and hit that request will all the power of the promises of God. When several have prayed out the first prayer according to the promises and in the name of Jesus, then a second person can set for the team by mentioning another prayer.

7. Moses: Reasons and Grounds Pattern (Exodus 32:7-14)

In Moses' intercession we see a pattern of prayer that employs logic and reasoning. I'm glad to see that prayer is not just a way to express to God our feelings, but that He also wants to hear our reasons, and He can be moved by a reasonable argument. Moses was starting from a very difficult position, because he was praying on behalf of people who had just rejected God's provision and wanted to worship a golden calf-idol instead. God pointed out to him the judgment that should follow from the people's rejection of Him in favor of the gold idol that they had made. God's plan for judgment was entirely reasonable and just.

Moses answered with a logic of his own: "What will the heathen nations think about You if you destroy Your own people? Won't all Your hard work of deliverance be lost? Won't this rash action tarnish Your reputation and glory? Plus, You made a solemn promise to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and You can't go back on that!" Do you notice how Moses' logic includes both praying in God's name (for the sake of His kingdom and glory) and standing on the promises of God? Can you think of examples from the parent-child relationships that you know, where children have the confidence to state not only their requests but also good reasons why their parents should respond? The Reasons and Grounds pattern seems to come to most young children quite naturally.

For several years I led a team that was asking God for ten families to send out to the mission field. Over the years we developed a series of reasons and grounds to express to God why we felt our prayer was important for His kingdom. For instance, we pointed out to Him that many of our current missionaries were approaching retirement, and we needed new reinforcements just to stay even. We reminded Him that Jesus told us to pray for more workers to go into the harvest and that Jesus Himself had recognized that the harvest was ready. We stood upon the promise of Jesus in Mark 13:10, "The gospel must first be preached to all nations." Once we started to develop our praying toward a reasonable request, we gained a lot of confidence to pray our prayer for ten families by faith.

This is another prayer pattern that requires teamwork. Some members of your prayer team are more emotional and some are more logical. This is another good opportunity for the team members to help one another. Perhaps one person can lead out with a clear prayer toward the team's target. Then others can come behind that prayer and mention reasons why the prayer is important for the kingdom of God and for His reputation.

Before we go to prayer today, let's think logically about the reasons why it would be good for God to answer our central prayer requests. Let's list those out and in our praying, let's follow Moses' example and show the Lord all the ways that our prayer request redounds to His glory and fulfills His revealed purposes and increases His kingdom. No one should leave the prayer meeting today with any doubt about what we are requesting and why we feel God should be pleased to grant our request.

8. Abraham: Grounding Prayer in the Character of God (Gen 18:23-26)

There are certain similarities in the prayer pattern we learned from Moses and the pattern we will study today in the example of Abraham, but instead of relying on logic or God's stated promises, Abraham relied on his relationship as the friend of God. This model prayer comes at the end of a big day, after Sarah and Abraham had put on a banquet for the Lord and a couple of angels, and after the Lord confirmed His promise of a son by telling the couple that the son would be born within twelve months. Then the Lord took Abraham aside, dismissed His angels and lowered His voice to let Abraham in on some confidential information: He was about to destroy Sodom and everyone living in the area.

Abraham's beloved nephew Lot lived in Sodom with his family, and Abraham relied on his relationship with the Lord and all that they had been through to negotiate a protection clause for his nephew. As you read the account of Abraham's prayer, notice how careful Abraham is to honor the Lord and humble himself. But even though he worships and reveres the Lord God, he is willing to boldly make his requests to Him. Today we especially want to notice Genesis 18:25 where Abraham is able to say, "It would be out of character for You not to save a righteous man."

What do we know from personal experience about God's character that would make Him want to answer our team prayer? Recently I was leading a team in prayer for their ministry to children. They were seeking the Lord for more volunteers to work with the children, and they were also trying to put wise policies in place to protect the safety of the kids. We recalled a number of truths about God's character that helped us to pray for these requests: God is a Father who cares about His children; Jesus loves the children and welcomes them; the guardian angels of these children have special 24-hour access to the presence of God; God's wrath burns against anyone who would harm a child; children are the ones who characterize and comprise God's kingdom; the Lord Jesus grew up as a child under the protection of parents. The team prayed together for half an hour and just kept coming up with more and more truths about God that we knew would cause Him to answer our prayer for the nurture and protection of the children.

Today, we rely on our personal friendship with God and all He has shown us of His character to plead our case. We are not just mentioning the reasons why we think it would be good for Him to answer our prayer, but we are also taking the opportunity to praise Him for His righteous character. It is on the basis of His character that we will be praying. And we have every confidence that He will be faithful to answer us, because He cannot deny Himself (2 Timothy 2:13).

9. Ezekiel: The Man in the Gap Pattern (Ezek 22:28-31; James 5:14-20)

Throughout the course of this seminar we discover something precious about the character of God—when He acts upon the earth, He loves to act in response to the prayers of His children. In the first half of the book of Ezekiel, He makes His case against the sins of the people, using visions to show Ezekiel the wickedness that His people did in secret. At many times He seems to defy Ezekiel to intercede for people who lived so wickedly. He says to Ezekiel, “Son of man, do you see the wicked things they do? Turn around and you will see even greater abominations that they do” (for example, Ezekiel 8:5-14).

The “Man in the Gap” pattern brings out a strange but important prayer principle: the men and women of faith who are called upon to intercede for sinners often have the clearest appreciation of how much those sinners deserve condemnation. The false prophets did not build up a concrete wall of intercession, they just plastered over the sin problem with mud and clay. God was looking for a Moses, a man who could see the sin and still pray for the sinner. The first half of Ezekiel might lead us to believe that God just wanted to make a legal case so that He would be justified in destroying the people; but that was not His purpose at all. He told Ezekiel that He was looking for a man to stand in the gap for His people and was disappointed not to find one. God wanted Ezekiel to realize the extent of his people’s sin, but what He really wanted was for Ezekiel to intercede for the people like Moses had done. Ezekiel 22:30 is a great verse to challenge our prayer team, but it was a hard word for Ezekiel himself to hear, because Ezekiel had not been able to continue interceding for the people after seeing all their wickedness; he could not keep standing in the gap, protecting his people from the wrath of God.

In James 5 we find out how much God wants to heal and rescue sinners, but He wants to do this in response to prayer. Apparently even today He is looking for someone to stand in the gap for His people and to intercede for them. As the prayer leader, you are responsible to protect the integrity of the team from gossip. You need to ensure that your team members understand how to intercede for individuals without betraying their confidences and how to pray for the failings of the church as a whole without creating divisions. But there are probably some sin patterns that your prayer group has noticed that you can confess together and together plead for God’s mercy and healing. For example if your church is going through a time when marriages are being tested, you can certainly confess the fractures and divorces in a general way without exposing individual sins. Recall that our purpose is to build a wall of defense, and that we might put ourselves into harm’s way to protect the sinner, cover the sin (James 5:20) and bring him home.

Could our prayer team bless the Father’s heart today by standing in the gap and interceding on behalf of His children? Let’s explore the ways in which our prayer target is really not about our selfish needs, but instead we are praying on behalf of the people of God or on behalf of the nations who deserve God’s wrath. Let’s build up a wall by prayer and stand in the gap between God and His wrath to instead beg Him for the gift of mercy. How can He refuse?

10. Jacob & Hezekiah: The Will-Not-Be-Denied Pattern (Gen 32:24-29; Isaiah 38)
At this point in the seminar our team has hopefully developed a solid foundation for expecting God's answers to prayer, and we have begun to see some ways in which God is beginning to move. During the next month we want to encourage greater boldness in prayer on the part of all the team members, and today we will be following the pattern of Jacob and of King Hezekiah, men who refused to be denied.

At a crisis point in Jacob's life, when he was on the brink of losing everything, the Lord met him and wrestled with him all night. The Bible account indicates that the Lord was unable to defeat Jacob, so He dislocated Jacob's leg at the hip joint. At dawn the Lord said to him, "Let me go," but Jacob in agony from his dislocation, refused to let go until he first received a blessing (Gen 32:26). It cost Jacob the very last ounce of strength and it cost him a permanent injury, but he got his answer to prayer. The account of Jacob's wrestling match is surprising to me on many levels, but the profound point is that no matter how exhausted he was or how painful his injury, he simply would not be denied. Can we pray our team prayer with such boldness and such energy?

Many times Christians will say something like, "I don't like asking God for specific gifts or results, because it seems presumptuous. I just say, "Thy will be done, Lord." This sounds pious on the surface, but it certainly doesn't follow the pattern of any of the great prayers of the Bible. Even when Jesus prayed, "Thy will be done," it was after He had wrestled with God for an extended period to the point of sweating blood! It is not wrong to pray, "Thy will be done," but it is a shame for the soldiers of the cross to give up without a struggle.

King Hezekiah turned his face to the wall and prayed against the prophetic word from the mouth of Isaiah (Isaiah 38:1-3)—now that is great boldness! Most of us who love the word of God and recognize that His word is forever sealed in heaven, would never consider praying against the revealed will of God. In fact, I do not recommend to my prayer partners that they pray against the word of God, but we can certainly follow Hezekiah's example of refusing to be denied.

The prayers and the tears of Hezekiah who refused to take no for an answer, moved the Lord to grant his request. Have we owned our team prayer request to the point that we will not be denied? The team may want to spend some time talking this through. The team leader must not use guilt to manipulate the climate of the prayer team, but he should certainly present the pattern of Jacob and of Hezekiah as a model for the team to pursue. Spiritual leaders need to call for energetic and heartfelt prayers that lay hold of God and do not easily let go. If we cannot pray energetically for the team prayer request, perhaps we need to modify it until we have a prayer that we can absolutely commit to. Then having identified our prayer request, let's take hold of God by faith and say, "I will not let you go until you bless me."

11. Jeremiah: The Nowhere-Else-to-Turn Pattern (Jeremiah 33:1-3)

Jeremiah was a man of prayer who faced more discouragements and setbacks than anyone on our team will face during our lifetimes, but he never gave up interceding for his people. The message God gave Jeremiah to preach was a message of judgment: the city of Jerusalem would fall to the Chaldeans, and the people would be taken captive. Jeremiah had the fewest converts of any prophet in the Bible, but he did not lose hope. He believed God's promise that after seventy years of captivity, He would bring the people back to their land.

Jeremiah 33:3 is the well-known promise "Call to Me and I will answer you and show you great and mighty things which you do not know." But today it is important to help our team see the context of this promise: God gave this encouragement of mighty answers to prayer when Jeremiah was hopelessly sidelined and confined in prison! Jeremiah was in a position of zero influence over the course of human events, but during the depth of his captivity, God promised him influence in the court of heaven.

Today we will be praying the "Nowhere Else to Turn" pattern that God taught Jeremiah. Once they begin to think along these lines, most of your team members will also have stories of answers to prayer when they had nowhere else to turn—this is a good opportunity for the team to share their experiences. Come prepared to mention one of your own personal experiences of being sidelined with nowhere to turn except prayer to God and your testimony of how He came through for you. You can also remind them of other Bible examples like Moses at the Red Sea or Paul's prayers from prison.

When you feel that the group has caught the essence of "nowhere else to turn," it is time to apply this realization to their current prayer requests and the team's central breakthrough request. Take time to confess your team's inability to control the outcome and your recognition that God is the only one who can rescue the situation. My pastor used to go back to Jeremiah 33:3 and ask God for a sign of encouragement, reminding God of His promise, "I will show you great and mighty things which you do not know." Today our prayer team can stand upon this promise and ask God for a sign of encouragement, something He will show us that we could recognize as one of His great and mighty works.

At our next meeting we will be considering the importance of fasting together for our breakthrough prayer request. Let's come hungry to our next meeting and learn from the Old Testament saints who prayed with fasting. We will also be learning how a public fast can be used to temporarily widen the network of prayer partners. During the next week we would like each member of the prayer team to invite at least two other people to fast on the appointed day and join our team in our breakthrough prayer. The team leader should decide whether to invite the wider prayer network to attend our team prayer meeting or whether we should simply invite them to fast and pray in partnership with us from wherever they happen to be.

12. Esther & Ezra: Fasting Together Pattern (Ezra 8:21-23; Esther 4:16)

Hopefully our team is able to come to the meeting fasting today so that we get the full benefit from the study and practice of this prayer pattern. Prayer and fasting was one very important way in the Old Testament for a large group of believers to unite behind a single prayer target. We see prayer with fasting again in the New Testament in Acts 13 when the leaders of the Antioch Church met together for direction from the Holy Spirit, and when those leaders sent Paul and Barnabas out as their first missionaries. (If your prayer team is missionary in nature, you may want to use Acts 13 as your pattern for today's meeting.)

We are studying Ezra and Esther because of their choice to rely on God rather than the human interventions that were available to them. Ezra was carrying a great deal of gold, silver and other valuables through some very dangerous country full of bandits. He could have relied on the king for a military escort, but instead he wanted to clearly demonstrate that Israel depended solely upon God. His prayer in Ezra 8:21 was for direction ("the right way") and protection on their long journey that would last several weeks. He felt that it would dishonor God if he asked for a protective escort, because he had already testified before the king that God was their Protector. He did not want to give anyone the impression that God's protection was not sufficient. He called for prayer unified by fasting from all of those who would be traveling with him.

When Israel was threatened with genocide, Esther could have hid behind her royal status and entrusted herself to the care of her husband the king; but instead she put her life in God's hand along with the lives of all her people. In order to demonstrate solidarity in prayer, she asked that the people fast together with her. The ones who fasted were the ones who would either live or die, entirely dependent upon God's answer to their prayer. Esther counted herself among those under the threat of death when she said, "If I perish, I perish" (Esther 4:16). You can see how the prayers of those people who shared the sentence of death were focused and unified through fasting.

In the same way that Ezra and Esther did, we can use the fasting prayer pattern to expand the base of our prayers by asking a wider network of partners to pray with us. The wider network may not be able to be present for our prayer meeting, but if they are fasting with us, we have a spiritual solidarity before the throne of grace. At various crisis points during my outreach ministry in East Africa, I have called my prayer partners to pray on a particular day with fasting, especially when our lives were threatened or when it appeared that the entire enterprise was in danger. Like Ezra and Esther, I can testify that the hand of the Lord was upon us for good, and that He answered our prayer for rescue. There is mystery here, but there are so many examples in the Bible and in our own lives, that we feel we are on solid ground when we encourage the team and the wider network to fast together with us as we pray our team prayer request.

13. The Together Pattern (Heb 13:18-19; Matthew 18:19; 2 Cor 1:11)

Many of the examples in this prayer seminar focus on the prayers of a single person, but last week we saw how a praying leader can bring a large group together behind a single request. Ezra demonstrated his total reliance upon God by calling together the people to fast and pray for safety on the road, and he is a good example of how prayer can unite the hearts of our people. On the other hand, Ezra could just as easily have prayed alone and received his requests. Some on our team may notice God's mighty answers to individual prayer and wonder why we have to rearrange our schedules to pray together. Are our together prayers more powerful than our individual prayers? What difference does it make that we are praying as a team?

I don't know of any one passage in the Bible that would teach us how the Together pattern increases the effectiveness of our prayers, but there are a few passages that tell us what we can expect from Together prayer. At the close of the letter to the Hebrews, the apostle requests the believers to pray together for him and his partners. He is confident that the Lord will answer his individual prayer for deliverance, but he also knows that if they pray for him together he will be delivered sooner than if he does not have their partnership (Hebrews 13:19). Paul also knew that the Lord would answer his individual prayer regarding his journey to Rome, but he still begged the Roman Christians to join him in the Together prayer (Romans 15:29-30). The answer to our prayers comes more effectively and more quickly when we agree in prayer together.

Jesus also gives a special promise regarding the Together pattern. He said, "Assuredly I say to you that if two of you agree on earth concerning anything that they ask, it will be done for them by My Father in heaven" (Matt. 18:19). It pleases the Lord to see us discussing our desires together and taking time to develop the details of our prayer request, lining it up with what we know of His will. He promises to act on these prayer decisions that we make in consultation together.

The other important reason why we pray together is so that we can give thanks together for the answers, and God will receive that much more glory. In 2 Cor 1:11 Paul again mentions his belief that when we pray together we add to the effectiveness of our individual prayers; and since this is true, we can all share in both the praying and the rejoicing in God's answer. We all have part together in the praying, so we all have part in the praising and thanksgiving. This is another reason why the Together pattern is so important, because it results in more people giving more praise to God.

By this point in the seminar our teammates will be able to share personal testimonies of how our prayer team has motivated them to stay persistent and targeted, and today we want to give opportunity for several of those testimonies. We also want to read the prayer request in Hebrews 13, where the apostle expresses his belief that the Lord will answer his individual prayer for deliverance, but that the unified prayer of his team will result in an earlier answer than individual prayer alone. Today we want to put this into effect by not only praying together toward our target, but also by thanking God together for all of the evidence He has shown us that He is moving in answer to our prayers.

14. Bartimaeus: Bold & Specific Pattern (Mark 10:46-52)

We are now well past the halfway point of our prayer seminar, and we need to guard against a common failing of prayer teams: vision drift. During the past three months there have probably been personal needs arising among the team members; and out of concern for our friends we have taken time to pray with them for those needs. Believers in Jesus are always ready to pause and pray for the urgent needs that surround us, but we also need to regularly bring back the focus. What is this prayer team about? What are we meeting together to ask God to do?

I think Jesus often has to ask us the same question He asked James and John (Mark 10:36) and Bartimaeus (10:51): "What do you want me to do for you?" Jesus asked this question as He was climbing the long road through Jericho up to Jerusalem where He would be put to death. When blind Bartimaeus heard that Jesus was passing by he called out to Him for mercy. People tried to quiet him down, but he called out all the more loudly, begging Jesus to hear his prayer. When he came face to face with Jesus, his blindness must have been obvious, but still Jesus asked him the crucial question, "What do you want Me to do?" How will our team answer that question? Can we be as bold and as specific as the blind man was?

Blind Bartimaeus could have waffled at the crucial moment. Realizing that his blindness was incurable he could have instead asked for money or for food. He could have asked Jesus' help in landing a job or getting some appropriate vocational training. You and I are often faced by the temptation to hold back from our boldest prayers and to ask for something a little less audacious. Bartimaeus received his sight because he was bold enough to ask the impossible, right out loud, right in public, and he trusted Jesus for the answer: "Rabbi, I want to receive my sight!"

About five years ago I was praying with a very small group that met for six months for prayer and discipleship. One project that we did together was to place before the Lord our "Blue Sky Assignment," our dream job in the Kingdom of God; what would be our assignment from God five years from now if He would give us the desire of our heart. I wish I could say that after the period of discipleship was complete, we all continued to pray regularly for our special assignment, but the truth is I just filed mine away. Four and a half years later, to my surprise I received a phone call offering me the very assignment I had asked for and the start date was almost exactly five years from the date of our team's "Blue Sky" prayers. I am so glad that I was completely honest with God and with my partners. Also, the fact that the assignment came in answer to bold and specific praying gives me great confidence that the Lord is going to give me everything I need in order to complete the assignment for His glory.

Today Jesus is asking our prayer team, "What do you want Me to do for you?" Let us try to be as specific about what we are asking as Bartimaeus was, and let's pray it boldly, out loud together.

15. Be careful what you ask for? (Mark 10:35-45; Luke 22:28-30)

Last week we answered Jesus' question to James, John and Bartimaeus, "What do you want me to do for you?" This week we will reinforce our answer to that question from the outrageous request of James and John: "We want to sit on Your right and left in Your glory."

Their timing was not the greatest. Jesus was going up to Jerusalem to die, and that was very much on His mind. He had just been telling His team about the agony ahead (Mark 10:33-34), and after a brief pause, James and John took Jesus aside to make their request.

We can't judge the heart motives of these two brothers, but their closest friends thought that part of their desire was to get preferential treatment, to get promoted above the other members of the team. What James and John did not realize was that Jesus' glory was in the cross and that the places on His right and left were already reserved for two murdering thieves! He tried to impress this on them by asking whether they were ready to drink His cup of suffering and be baptized into the terrible death that awaited Him, but they did not get it. They kept insisting that they wanted the places on Jesus' right and left.

We might take from this a warning to be careful what you ask for. I'm sure there are many times when I make requests without fully thinking through the consequences, but that is not the point that Jesus wanted us to take away. Instead we learn that Jesus knew how to interpret even the most outrageous prayer of faith and to give His friends what they wanted, even when their exact words missed the mark. If we turn to Luke 22:28-30, we see that Jesus preserved the brothers from the places on His right and left, but granted them everything they really wanted. In Luke 22 Jesus promised them a kingdom, a throne, nearness and fellowship with Him. Don't you think that promise fulfilled all of the holy ambitions in their audacious request? What more could they have wanted?

In Mark 10:41-45 Jesus dealt with the issue of jealousy and selfish ambition, divisive qualities that He simple will not tolerate. If in fact James and John selfishly desired promotion above the other disciples, that desire was rejected and filtered out, but everything else was fully granted. Now if Jesus will do that for the most outrageous prayer in the Bible, what will He do for us if we make our team request boldly and specifically? Give the team an opportunity to express any misgivings they have about the team prayer request. Let's go to Jesus for assurance that He will filter out any selfish ambitions and protect us from unforeseen consequences, and then let us answer His question: "What do you want Me to do for you?"

16. The requirements of faith and forgiveness (Mark 11:22-25)

A prayer team is like a squad that is training to use high explosives: we are handling the greatest power known to man, a very dangerous grace. We sometimes worry about whether we are asking for the wrong thing, as though through our ignorance the dynamite will cause damage. Last week's passage from Mark 10 showed us how that even a misplaced prayer like James' and John's request for the place on Jesus' right and left would be translated to protect them from the cross and to give them even more than they had dared to hope for. In Mark 11 Jesus placed a charge of dynamite against the trunk of a fig tree and gave His men a visible picture of the power of prayer, and He told them that they also had been entrusted with this dangerous grace.

In Jesus' mind the greatest danger is that we will pray and the explosive will not ignite—we will have relied fully upon God's answer and instead we will hear a tiny pop and no explosion. Jesus tells us in Mark 11:25-26 that this often comes about because we have a spirit of unforgiveness toward another person. God has no desire to act on our behalf to forgive our sins while we are harboring bitterness and unforgiveness towards other people, and our prayers fall to the ground as duds. Today let us take some quiet time to search our hearts and ensure no team member harbors bitterness against anyone.

The other reason our prayers can fail to ignite is for lack of faith in God's answer. Jesus says plainly in Mark 11:23-24 that God is ready to do anything we ask, and He is not held back by any inability on His part. But the key to receiving answers to our prayers is to have faith that God will do what we are asking. By this point in our seminar we should all be convinced that God wants to do what we are asking, but there needs to be freedom to discuss the specifics in case some of our teammates have doubts about the details. The team needs to be willing to adjust the prayer target if the Spirit is giving faith to ask for more or to move the target in some way.

I recall that one year our church was asking God for a breakthrough request, that He would give us 500 worshipers in our weekly service. The pastors and elders could see that there was a psychological barrier preventing our church from expanding, and we wanted God to break through that barrier. But many of our prayer partners in the congregation felt this prayer represented an unhealthy focus on numbers. We needed to discuss the prayer request together and find new ways of expressing it so that our heart desire was evident and all of us could agree with one voice.

Children of God find it very difficult and hypocritical to pray for things that they do not think God is really going to give them. For this reason all members of the team need to lay hold on the team requests by faith in order to pray them wholeheartedly. Let's take time to hear from the team and together to focus our praying on those elements that we know by faith God wants to do. No matter how impossible those things seem, if we know that we are praying God's desire, we can be sure that we will see His answer if we don't give up.

17. The Importance of Bothering God (Luke 11:1-8; 18:1-8)

After four months of praying has the Lord fully answered our prayer yet? If He has, this is a good time to decide to call for a thanksgiving service and close the seminar. Surely it is a sign that our seminar has accomplished its good work, when the Lord moves quickly to bring our answer.

If however, there are still elements of our prayer that remain unanswered, Jesus commands us to lay hold on Him and not give up too early. When the first disciples asked Jesus to teach them the prayer seminar, He gave them a model prayer and then emphasized the need for persistence. He told the parable of the Friend at Midnight to teach us that often God waits for us to see if we are willing to wait for Him. Read Luke 11:5-8 and see if you can identify each of the persons in the story. Clearly God is the One with the bread, and we are the ones who are pounding on heaven's door. But notice that there is a third person in the story: the one who arrived hungry after a long journey. For our prayer team, who is the one who is hungry at midnight? For whom are we interceding? Let's think clearly today about the ones who will benefit the most when the Lord answers our team prayer. Then let's pray our hearts out on behalf of those needy ones, having every confidence that God is listening and already has the biscuits in the oven, if only we will wait a little longer, standing and pounding on the door!

The Friend at Midnight teaches us that God actually wants us to bother Him at all hours and to keep on asking in the face of initial obstacles. One of our prayer partners felt that the Holy Spirit was tying this truth back to Elijah's Watch and Pray pattern. She felt that God was calling the team to the kind of persistence that Elijah showed when he sent his servant back seven times to check on the progress of his answer to prayer. As we meet for prayer today, let's keep our hearts open to hear what the Holy Spirit might be saying to our team through Jesus' words.

Again in Jesus' Parable of the Unjust Judge (Luke 18:1-8) we learn more about persistence, and in this case He teaches us about persistence in the face of injustice. It may take some prompting for our team to be able to think of our prayer target in terms of injustice, but this is an important discussion for us to have. In what ways is our prayer target a response to sin and evil in the world? Why is it intolerable that our prayer should go unanswered and people remain in the midst of such wrong? Does our prayer target seek the deliverance of people who are being held in bondage to sin and to the devil, people for whom Christ died? Does our prayer target seek the glory of God in dark places where His name is now not praised? In what way does our prayer target seek the good of young children who are the VIPs of God's kingdom, but who do not yet know Him? As the team discusses these issues, let's allow a sense of indignation and wrong to burn in our hearts to the point that we are able to pour out to God the injustice of the status quo, and why we need the righteous Judge to take action. Jesus' promise is that He will avenge His people and He won't be slow about it!

18. Irresistible: the prayer of a humble child (Psalm 131; Luke 18:9-17)

Today we get a chance to hear ourselves praying as God hears us. In Luke 18 Jesus lets us observe two prayers from heaven's perspective, so that we can imitate the prayer that pleases God and gets His answer and avoid the kind of prayer that gets ignored. This is a truly unique training opportunity for us. Jesus is the one who daily receives our prayers, and in this parable He invites us into heaven so that we can experience what it is like for Him to listen to us.

Jesus brings us behind the scenes to eavesdrop on two men who are praying. One man's prayer is characterized by pride and self-appreciation and self-justification. He is so self-sufficient that he doesn't really even ask for anything. His speech is so self-centered, that Jesus says he was really just "praying with himself," just play-acting. He wasn't asking for God's involvement, and he got no more than he asked for; he was just wasting his breath.

Then Jesus directs our attention to a sinful tax collector, a societal outcast and a traitor to his own people. He was not acting a part, in fact he seemed unaware of anyone else—he was totally consumed with standing in the presence of a holy God. He was too ashamed to lift his head but was unconsciously pounding himself with his fists and he confessed his failures and sins. Jesus tells us that this man who was not a very polished speaker and did not quote a lot of Scripture but was entirely absorbed by God and humbled by his own shortcomings, he was the one God delighted to receive. He got everything he asked for and went home justified before the Lord.

Everyone on our team has an individual style: some use a wider vocabulary and spiritual words, and some speak quite conversationally—all of us use favorite phrases almost every time we pray. The object here is not to make anyone self-conscious. Instead we can all learn to pray more honestly, telling the truth about our inability and our complete reliance upon God. Right after telling the Parable of the Two Prayers, Jesus blessed the children, demonstrating their VIP status and teaching us that we all must become like children in order to enter the kingdom.

Psalm 131 is brief, just three verses that emphasize childlike faith when we come before God. In the first verse we turn away from the attitude of the self-absorbed Pharisee; we acknowledge to God that we are not able to understand all of the cosmic forces arrayed around us and our own relative importance. In the second verse we take a deep breath and calm ourselves in the presence of God our Father, like a two-year-old calms down in his mother's arms after a stormy fit of raging when he doesn't get his way. Okay, now that we have calmed down, we remind each other to hope in the Lord. That's a child-like prayer Jesus loves to hear.

As we pray our team requests today, let us first consciously and openly confess to God our inability to bring about the changes we most desire to see. Use the three steps of Psalm 131 to breathe out, breathe in, and settle our hope and confidence where it belongs, entirely in the Lord Jesus. We will still bring our prayers before God, and we will still use the prayer style we have grown up with, but our attitude will be like little children. We can visualize ourselves in a puddle of tears because we can't manage by ourselves, and then we can see ourselves carried in the Father's arms and calming ourselves with full trust in Him.

19. What about unanswered prayers? (Heb 5:7-9; 2 Cor 12:7-10; Phil 1:29)

Our emphasis in this seminar is the same as Jesus' emphasis—God will give us what we ask for on Christ's behalf. The Father and the Son give us every encouragement to pray in faith, knowing that our requests are heard; but our teammates can't help recalling that there was one time when Jesus prayed in the garden that the cup would pass from Him, and His Father said no. We also recall that Paul in 2 Cor 12 prayed for healing from some illness or affliction and God said no. Today we need to deal with the spiritual facts of life. In some rare cases there will be a prayer request that our Father in heaven decides to deny. Now that we have been praying together for several months, we have seen a lot of answered prayers; but there are probably a few prayers that remain unanswered as far as we can tell. Could these be requests that God has decided to deny?

The three passages in today's reading should help us to see that even when our specific prayers are denied, the Father is giving us something better. Hebrews 5 says not that Jesus' request was denied but that His prayer was heard and He was given grace to endure suffering and death so that He could inherit the joy set before Him. He knew and prophesied on three separate occasions that He was going to die on the cross, but He still poured out His heart to God, asking the impossible (that He could be spared the cross and we could still be saved). Instead of providing Jesus a way out, His Father provided Him a way through the suffering.

Paul certainly felt he got a better deal because of the increased grace and power that were given to help him through the suffering. Paul experienced an intimate conversation with God in which God gave him His own divine power, but it could only be given to Paul on the condition that he remain in his physical weakness and pain (2 Corinthian 12:9). Paul said that once he understood this condition, he was very glad to accept and own his personal weaknesses.

Philippians 1:29 teaches us that the things we suffer for Jesus are a great privilege. Many people believe in Jesus and receive His grace—who wouldn't want the great blessing of forgiveness and new life? Moreover, every human being suffers hardship, illness, weakness and death. But only the privileged few are permitted to suffer in fellowship with Jesus and to suffer for His sake. Perhaps some of our prayer requests that seem to be delayed are really opportunities to be strengthened to go through suffering on the behalf of Christ. Perhaps Jesus is inviting us into a deeper fellowship with Him that is truly a tremendous privilege.

Our goal today is to allow the Holy Spirit to purify the motives in our team prayer request. If we are in any way desiring our own convenience or comfort, let us agree together that we are willing to endure suffering for Jesus' sake, if only He will glorify Himself through us by answering our prayer. Sure, we can ask God for smooth sailing and relief from affliction if that is our desire, but as we mature in Christ we will begin to follow the example of Jesus and of Paul to submit those desires to God, begging Him to answer our prayer for His glory.

20. Spiritual equipment for warfare prayer (Neh 4:10-20; Eph 6:10-20)

During the next three weeks we will be preparing for and engaging in spiritual warfare. This means that we will not only be praying for our team prayer request, but we will also be conscious that there are other spirit powers opposed to the prayers we are praying. We will not be doing anything weird, and we will certainly not be talking to the demons, but we do expect the Holy Spirit to give us an awareness of the battle we are engaged in on Christ's behalf.

Nehemiah gives us a practical example of how spiritual men and women armed themselves for ministry. Nehemiah 4:7-9 tells us that their adversaries tried to discourage them, and failing that they were ready to make military attacks on them. In Nehemiah's case, it was obvious that a spiritual battle was going on behind the warlike actions of the enemies on the ground. Nehemiah's solution was to pray and to set a watch (4:9). In our situation the spiritual battle may not be so obvious, but we can see that the very fact Nehemiah's people were aware of the schemes of their enemy and armed themselves prevented attacks and defeats. While half of them were working on the project, the other half were armed and on guard (4:16).

We need to read and apply the spiritual armor passage in Ephesians with this principle in mind. We should realize that if we are aware of our enemy's schemes and if we have properly armed ourselves, he will usually be afraid to attack. The most important thing in spiritual warfare is that we must arm ourselves with God's armor and stand our ground. As we put on the armor by prayer we are putting on Christ Jesus, His truth, His righteousness, His gospel. We also want to remind ourselves of Eph 6:18-19, that the reason we put on the armor is so that we can pray and proclaim the good news. Nobody puts on armor just to have a feeling of security; soldiers and policemen put on armor because they are about to perform a dangerous service.

I like to have the team visualize the suiting up process, so that they learn how to do this for themselves whenever they are about to enter upon a dangerous mission. We visualize putting on Christ Jesus as a belt of truth, because Jesus is the Truth. We picture ourselves putting on Jesus as our righteousness, because He took our sins on Himself in exchange and He put upon us His righteousness like a breastplate to protect our hearts. We put on the shoes of the gospel, reviewing the most important points we want to communicate to all, "Jesus Christ died for our sins and arose." We picture the faith of Jesus as a shield that we raise against any shots the enemy might fire at us. The team can say this aloud, "All my trust is in Jesus alone; I reject Satan and all his schemes." We visualize strapping on the helmet, because Jesus is saving our lives from any attack of the wicked one and Jesus is our Head. Then we pick up the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. There is no need to visualize this, we can all literally pick up a Bible or Scripture portion as a physical act.

Once the team is suited up in the spiritual armor that God has provided, let's get down to the task of praying our team request, especially the aspects that cause the gospel of peace to advance. You may also feel this is a good time to take a field trip and pray in the very areas where you are asking for the advances to be made.

21. A peek behind the scenes of warfare prayer (Daniel 10:10-14)

An ongoing challenge for warfare prayer is that we often miss seeing the drama involved in our prayer ministry, because much of the struggle and victory is taking place invisibly in the spirit world. Daniel faced this same challenge and was beginning to be discouraged. He had been fasting for three weeks, eating only enough food to sustain life, while he prayed for the promised deliverance of his people. To him the three weeks felt like a long time with no progress (if you have ever fasted more than 24 hours you would probably agree with him!), but when the angel came to him, Daniel found out the rest of the story.

Seeing the angel helped Daniel to realize the reality of the battle surrounding his prayer target. Even though the angel was a holy angel sent to encourage Daniel, his size and his appearance were terrifying and even the prayer team members who did not see the angel were filled with terror. We should probably be glad that the angels remain invisible to us for the most part, but it might help us to visualize our prayer room filled with mighty angels who have been sent to minister on our behalf (Hebrews 1:13-14).

Far from being abandoned, Daniel was beloved by God who began to answer his prayer immediately, sending the angel to him on the very first day of his fast. But the angel had to fight through enemy lines and even needed assistance to break through to Daniel. If we have been praying together for five or six months and still don't see the answer to our prayer target, it is probably because "we are not wrestling against flesh and blood but against principalities and against powers" (Eph 6:12). We cannot know how crucial our prayer target is and what spiritual battles are involved in God's answering of our prayer, but we can know that we are greatly loved like Daniel was and that the answer to our prayer is already on the way.

Daniel did not ask to see an angel, but he did ask for a sign of encouragement that God was in the process of fulfilling His promise, and he asked for strength to be able to receive God's answer (Daniel 10:19). You can lead your team in following Daniel's warfare prayer pattern. Call the team members to fast through a meal or longer if they are willing and able. Then when you gather for your prayer time, confess to God that you are mourning because the answer to your prayer seems to be a long time in coming. Then in a humble spirit (not in a demanding way or rude) ask the Lord for a sign of encouragement to show that He is still at work to bring the answer to your prayer. Does the act of fasting make you feel weak? Ask Him to strengthen you in the inward man to be able to receive the sign of encouragement that you are asking Him for.

22. Strategic targets in warfare prayer (1 Timothy 2:1-8; 2 Corinthians 10:4-5)

When we are praying in situations of spiritual warfare, how can we know what targets we should aim at? Some people make it sound as though we humans should be engaging the various levels of supernatural powers, things we can know nothing about. One time I even heard a preacher tell people they needed to pray for a spiritual canopy to be built over the building where they were meeting so that the demon spirits would not be able to listen in on their plans. I don't know whether there is such a thing as a spiritual soundproof canopy and neither did that preacher; he was just making stuff up.

In contrast to these Christian spiritualists who make confident assertions about things they know nothing about, Paul instructs us to pray on target for men and women who are in authority, people we can know something about. Let us apply these scriptural instructions to our team prayer request today. What human authority figures seem to be hindering us? What people in authority could help us if they wanted to? Let us pray for as many of these people as we can think of, recognizing that their authority is legitimate and that all of their power comes because God gave it to them. Let us pray that they will favor our initiatives for the glory of God. Let us pray that they themselves will be able to hear the gospel and to respond in faith. This is true spiritual warfare that does not bring destruction but brings people to faith and opens doors for the gospel.

Paul also says that he uses the mighty weapons of spiritual warfare to pull down demonic strongholds, including arguments or philosophies or high-sounding ideas that are being raised against God, and bringing every thought captive to the obedience of Christ. You can lead your prayer team into spiritual warfare by simply identifying the cultural lies and false arguments that our own society is raising up against God and opposing them by stating the truth of Scripture. Don't allow your prayer time to turn into a gripe session against the prevailing cultural currents, but instead pray out the word of God to Him boldly. An instance of this kind of warfare prayer in 2015 would be: "Father, our Supreme Court has made a law recognizing homosexual marriage. These leaders have been blinded by our enemy to craft this lie against your good creation. By prayer we oppose and tear down that false argument and assert the truth that You from the beginning made us to be male and female. We say along with our Lord Jesus, that what God has joined together no man can separate." This is just an example, but I'm sure that the culture in your local area also resists the progress of the gospel.

How is the worldly culture in your local area raising up arguments against God, and how do those lies stand in the way of the team's prayer focus? Today is a great opportunity for you to identify those false arguments and speak the truth before God in prayer. Remember also to pray for your human leaders by name and to seek the Lord for His mercy in their lives so that they can come to faith in Him. For those leaders who have a testimony of faith in Christ, it is always appropriate to pray for their spiritual protection, that they may respond to the challenges by faith and not shrink back.

23. Conclusion: Praying for your “one thing” (Psalm 27:4; 2 Chron 1:7-12)

Our prayer relationship with God is that of a child with the Father: we talk to Him about whatever is happening in our lives and depend on Him for daily provision. But we also see an example throughout the Bible: that the people closest to God have concentrated on asking Him for one particular thing. When God’s children have asked Him for their one thing, God has always been well pleased to give it to them. David’s one thing was to make a house of worship where he could spend time with God. Even though God told him that the house would be built not by him but by his son Solomon, David felt that he had received the deeper promise of daily, intimate conversation with Him—that confidence really comes through in his Psalm 23. Solomon’s one thing was wisdom to rule (1 Kings 3:9), and God made him wiser than all of the kings of the ancient world. Jacob was hungry for a Father’s blessing, hungry enough to wrestle all night with the Angel (Genesis 32:24-26). Hannah just wanted a baby, and so did Sarah, and so did Rebecca, and so did Rachel, and so did Elisabeth. These holy women of faith received the ability to conceive even when they had tried everything else and all human hope was gone. They prayed, “Please Lord, just one thing!”

The “one thing” prayer is so important in God’s kingdom that even His Son was told to ask for it: “Ask of Me, and I will give You the nations for Your inheritance, and the ends of the earth for Your possession” (Ps 2:8). Just as God told Solomon in 1 Kings 3:5, and just as His prophets asked on His behalf (2 Kings 2:9), so God is saying to us and to our prayer teams, “Ask Me, what shall I do for you?” This is the question that sets apart the men and women of faith from the fainthearted boys. What is your one thing that you can boldly ask from God?

The heroes of the faith are those who asked for the impossible. Blind Bartimaeus boldly asked Jesus to make him see again (Mark 10:51). Hezekiah asked for the prophecy of Isaiah to be overturned and the changeless word of God to be changed (Isaiah 38:1-8). Elisha asked for twice as much spiritual power as Elijah (the greatest prophet of the OT) had demonstrated (2Kings 2:9-11). These are audacious prayers, outrageous prayers, but what we notice about those who asked God for their one thing is that they all got what they asked for, even those who asked for the impossible.

The only people whom we have studied in this seminar who asked in good faith for their one thing and were denied are the disciples James and John in Mark 10:35-40. Remember how they asked for the best seats in Jesus’ glorious kingdom, sitting on His right and left? What they did not know is that Jesus’ glory would be shown in the cross and that the places on His right and left were reserved for two criminals who would be crucified with Him. But even as Jesus gently re-directed their bold prayer, He also purposed to give them all that they asked. Just a few weeks later, Jesus answered their prayer by promising them that they would “eat and drink at My table in My kingdom and sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel” (Luke 22:30). We see that all who ask God for their one thing, receive their request.

As we close the prayer seminar, what will we say to Jesus’ penetrating question, “What do you want me to do for you?” Today let each person on the team ask his one thing in the sure confidence that we cannot be denied.