

Study on Prayer, Week 1  
An adult lesson  
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Eleanor

I'd like to start out by introducing Eleanor Daniels to the folks who have joined us after she left.

Every Sunday, I am reminded of what I like most about our class. I think a lot of people who are trying to plug in to a church, and putting their toes in the water believe that what church is – is the sermon and the main service. I think they come and sit there passively, listening, trying to see what it is that the people around them feel while they aren't sure they feel the same. Maybe the sermon connects with them, maybe it doesn't. Maybe the music that we have that day is music they like, or maybe it isn't. But they come to church and sit there and go back out the door and what I think is that they've actually missed the best part.

I think we're supposed to listen and we're supposed to praise, but God gave all of us different experiences, intentionally made us all different, so we could fill in each other's gaps. When we listen to a sermon, each of us interprets what we hear from our own perspective and even though we come together in this same place every week – our perspectives are as diverse as if we never met.

When you're listening to the sermon, everything comes from one direction – and the simple truth is that no preacher can give you the life lessons of a room full of people. I think those individual experiences are one thing that makes OUR Sunday school class fun. Out there we all sit in self-reflection. How many times have you been in a sermon and wanted to ask a question, or share a point with the person beside you? Out there you can't do that. In here, you can.

I think that's what I like best about our class and that's why I feel a little sad for the people who never got to see Eleanor lead our class. We'd listen to everything Eleanor said and look for something unique we might bring up to share with the class. If Eleanor said, "I think you made a good point" or "that's an interesting observation" we felt like a kid showing off a rock that we'd found. I won't say

that we competed openly and compared notes on the way home, but it was pretty close to that.

I like our church, I'm not someone who looks for things that we're doing wrong at church. But when I talk to someone in the community, and I get a chance to invite them to church, I start out by telling them how great the experience in Sunday school is. For me, that's my favorite part.

I think that learning and sharing atmosphere in this class is the reason the class was a place we felt comfortable pulling Zachary and Ian into. It's a great experience to begin relating to your children as peers and the interaction of this class made that perfect.

So over the next few weeks, I will be trying to just copy the way Eleanor did it. So when you hear something that gives you an idea, or an observation, I encourage you to share it and be involved with the teaching yourself. That's what makes our class great and one of the things that sets our religion apart is that our God WANTS us to try to understand Him.

That's why he gave us all of these instructions (BIBLE) and made them challenging enough to understand that we'd never get tired of trying.

### Getting started

If I'm investing time to create a lesson, I usually like to pick something that I don't understand myself so I can learn too. That gives me a lot to choose from.

I don't really understand prayer.

Have you ever thought about what it would be like if everywhere you went, you could see floating above the people's head, what they are praying for? So you'd see that this person prayed for their family to be reunited, that person prayed for a stable job, another person prayed for healing for someone they love, or for themselves. You'd see it right there above them, and you could see for yourself, decide for yourself, whether their prayers were being answered.

What would we see, if we're really being honest? LET THEM ANSWER.

I think that if we just judge what we can see, we'd decide that a lot of those people were asking for things that didn't come to them.

Let's take a few minutes at your table. Take one minute to think without talking, so you aren't trying to think of what you want to say and can listen to the others at your table. Take one minute and think about something you've prayed for, or are praying for right now, that wasn't answered the way you asked.

At this point, we're not looking for cases where you believe you can see what God did that was better.

Right now we're just looking for "I prayed for this and it was important to me, and I prayed hard for it and it didn't happen". I'll let you know when the minute is up, and then I'll let you share yours with the people at your table. Later, we'll talk about a time when you prayed for something and your prayer WAS answered, but for now, let's just talk about the ones that don't seem to have come through like you wanted.

ASK THEM TO SHARE EXAMPLES, WRITE THEM ON THE BOARD UNDER HEADINGS THAT YOU HAVEN'T YET LABELLED.

#### Categories

1. Times are bad (Help me!)
2. We've been bad (Sorry!)
3. Times are good, thanksgiving (YAY!)
4. Peaceful communication with God

So just looking on the face of it, which is all we CAN do without understanding all the curves in the road God has created, is it safe to say that we don't always get exactly what we pray for? LET THEM RESPOND.

Why not? LET THEM RESPOND.

I'd like for us to think about these different kinds of prayer over the next several weeks, starting with the one that I think is probably the most common prayer, the "Times are bad (Help me!)" prayers.

Are there examples in the Bible of prayers that aren't answered?

2 Corinthians 12:7-10 (READ THROUGH)

Of the prayers that you mentioned earlier, can anyone see how this might be the case for you, that by God not immediately removing the thorn from your side, it made you a more "perfect" tool in your weakness? Would anyone like to share it?

We're probably alike in this. When I'm in trouble, my prayers are a 10. When I'm scared about my job, or someone I love, or want something great to happen, I'm much more attentive to prayer. I'm asking, and really considering my position, and my power over the circumstance, I'm not really just asking, I'm **begging** for something that I want desperately.

When I am on the top of a wave, I spend less time with God. I ashamed to say it but that's true. How many parents have watched their kids making decisions that they didn't approve of, and asserting their independence – while we thought to ourselves, "well let's see what happens when things don't turn out". We know they'll come back to us for help if they don't right? For them, it's the worst thing in the world to come back and admit they need help. They'll do about anything. Like the prodigal son, they'll eat scraps with pigs rather than crawl back for help.

We're all, every one of us, prodigal sons. We want, desperately, to show that we can stand on our own. We want everyone to see us as strong and capable and smart. We assert our independence and God just waits.

It's a strange thing to realize that what each of us fears so much, these failures in life, the hard times, the wrong decisions – while we're terribly afraid those will happen and return only reluctantly to beg God for help, while we dread coming

back, God's part of that is only joy to see us come back. He's the father of the prodigal son, who is celebrating and glad you came back to talk to Him about it.

He's probably glad we're looking for His advice and guidance now.

None of the things you did will matter. They will be forgiven when you come back. It's hard, or impossible, to see this, but everything we experience here, all the bad things, sickness, our own failures, the things we're so afraid of – they won't really matter one day either.

Right now, we're all prodigal sons wandering the Earth. We pick up the phone and call God, by praying, let Him know we're alright and that we're still thinking of Him, but we still are wandering around. One day, we'll go home for good and when that happens, all He will be is happy to see us. All our sins and troubles will be forgotten and small in the face of our homecoming.

That's how things work out, when you're a Christian and your prayers aren't always answered. Still pretty good ending. PAUSE (DEPENDING ON TIME, COULD END HERE)

What about those times when your prayers ARE answered?

Let's take a minute now to think of a time when you prayed for something, and God delivered a response that was so obvious and clear that you knew He'd answered you. After a minute has passed, I'll let you know and you can share your experience with the folks at your table.

TAKE RESPONSES FROM THE TABLES

When God answers one of our prayers in a clear and obvious way, it makes a mark on us doesn't it?

When I was in Pennsylvania doing that terrible job that was so stressful that I'd find the people I worked with hiding in empty offices crying, and all I wanted to do was come home and get away from it myself, I had an experience where God

directly answered my prayer. I was praying every day for help to get me through it, or to open up a job at Eastman, or make my book sales go so high I didn't have to work, but none of those things happened, so I just kept at it. I came home one weekend, and Tim's sermon was about succeeding through challenges, and viewing them as God's refining of us. I couldn't tell you the exact sermon now, but then, it really resonated with me.

I took back three copies of the sermon, intending to send one to Zachary, and keep one and I didn't have any plan at all for the 3<sup>rd</sup> one at the time. That Monday morning I didn't pray for God to help me, I prayed for Him to use me where I was and asked for Him to give me a job to do for Him there.

I got to work, and there were these two folks at the desk. They were just distraught already over the stress that the project manager was unloading on everyone. I told them about Tim's sermon and it resonated with them too. I went out to the car and brought the disk in and they listened to it that night and came back the next day and told me that they'd been praying for God to help them through this experience, and that I'd been God's answer to their prayers.

It's been several months and I still remember that feeling. I was as satisfied with that feeling as I've been with any compliments or kudos from my boss, or any compliment on anything else I've done. I felt great that day, even though nothing I'd prayed for, for myself, had changed at all. I was still standing in the same circumstance, but everything about the way I saw it was better.

I think God answers our prayers when we're praying for things that are part of His plan. That seems like an obvious thing to say. But getting our feet on His path is hard. Even when we're trying, our feet only rarely stay right on His path, and even then it's only for a few steps before we fall off and wander. Sometimes we're close to the path, sometimes we're far off. When we're close to it, we can experience the pleasure of praying for something and watching Him deliver it.

James 1:6-7

But he must ask in faith without any doubting, for the one who doubts is like the surf of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind. For that man ought not to expect that he will receive anything from the Lord,

Proverbs 28:9

He who turns away his ear from listening to the law, even his prayer is an abomination.

DID JESUS EVER HAVE AN UNANSWERED PRAYER?

Jesus was without sin. He prayed frequently. He had perfect faith in His father. Was there ever a time that He prayed for something that He didn't receive?

Matthew 26:36-39

"My father if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me."

Those words, just for that sentence, how different was Jesus' prayer from ours?  
ALLOW RESPONSES.

Do you think that if Jesus had stopped right there, that **His** prayer would have been answered? ALLOW RESPONSES.

Is there any part of the Bible where Jesus comes closer to us? Every one of us has made a prayer like that, sometimes we've done it day after day. Please make this go away. Paul prayed for his thorn to go away.

Reading that makes me think of Jesus standing beside us on a landing, with a flight of steps above us. We're all standing on the same step for just that moment, and then He takes the next step, the one that we hardly ever take and says...

"My father if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. **Yet not as I will, but as you will.**"

Jesus knew what was ahead was torture and pain. Just like we sometimes look ahead and dread what's coming for us, are afraid of waking up with the same problems tomorrow.

One moment, Jesus is like all of us and the next moment defines Him as the son of God.

God wants us all to take that second step. When we do, we step on the path He has for us and come as close to Him as we can before our last day. It feels so great when we do that, that we remember the feeling for long after and try to get back to it. We tell God that we don't want the bad things to come, but we are willing to let go and just follow His plan for us no matter what. When we do that we take another step up closer to Him.