

# Way of Discipleship Small Groups

Can praying for others really make a difference? 1: Prayer and God's will.



## Touching base (5 minutes)

Open in prayer as is helpful for your group.

If this is your first session take time to introduce yourselves and set any ground rules you want to for your time together.

If you met previously take the opportunity either as a group or in pairs to check in with each other about how your response from last time has gone.

Introduction: over these next four sessions we will look at some of the tricky questions we can face when praying for others.



## Opening question(s) (5 minutes)

Why do you think God wants us to pray for things?



## Understanding the information (20 minutes)

Share these thoughts in your own words or read them together:

Jesus taught his disciples to pray not just so they could enter into relationship – but so that they could see a genuine difference in the world. This kind of prayer is known as intercession (literally “standing between on behalf of others”) or petition. When we intercede, we join in with the Spirit in the battle in praying for others.

God repeatedly commands us to pray: “...if my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land.” (2 Chronicles 7:14) Karl Barth said, “To clasp the hands in prayer is the beginning of an uprising against the disorder of the world.”

The partnership God entrusts us with in being able to pray is an expression of the relationship He created us for. Part of the amazing dignity God gives us as His children is to enable us to join with Him in having a genuine impact on the way the world is.

God has set up the universe so that talking to him affects Him and affects what comes to pass. According to the story of the Bible, things genuinely hang on whether we pray. This is because if our relationship with God is to be real, actions and communication must genuinely impact both parties.



If they only affect one party, it is not a true relationship. Yet this raises many questions which can undermine our confidence in thinking prayer matters and turn it into a duty done by rote.

For example, if God wants to answer why do we need to be persistent? (Our children only have to ask for things once). How does prayer make any real difference when God already knows everything? If God always does the best thing because it's His nature, what difference can my praying really make? Isn't God going to do what He wants anyway?

In addition, we are used to seeing the world in terms of cause and effect, yet intercession rarely works so directly. We know too that often our prayers seem to go unanswered. The combination of these complex questions and mysterious experiences can undermine our confidence in prayer and make it hard for us to deal well with difficulties.

If a child is ill, and people pray, but the child dies, is this because it is God's will? Jesus never suggested that suffering was God's will, or even linked to people's sin (He rejected the idea in Luke 8). Instead, He displayed God's character by healing all who came to Him and insisted: "If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!" (Matthew 7:11) According to Christ, tragedy is not an expression of God's will, and His goodness can be relied upon.

Yet while God's complete victory over sin and death is sure, until heaven and earth are reunited, we remain in an "in-between" world in which, when we pray, there is more in play than just God's will. God is all-powerful, yet He has created a world in which several factors, most of which are unseen to us, can affect what happens when we pray. In a real way, these factors can restrict (at least temporarily) God's perfect will and have an impact on our intercessions.

The laws of nature. God's ability to answer intercessory prayer may be affected by the need for a stable and predictable natural world. God made us to learn how to love and make morally responsible decisions, but for that to be possible we need to live in a world which we can influence, but not control. The laws of nature need to be reliable enough to be predictable. If, through prayer, we could see God regularly change the laws of nature, responsible and loving decisions would be impossible.

Miracles are (by definition) therefore possible, but exceptional. God has the power to do anything, but He has created a universe which needs to work in certain ways for loving and moral relationships to exist.

Human freedom. Out of love, God has also chosen to limit Himself by respecting human freedom. For example, Luke makes the comment that it was possible for the Pharisees and the experts in the law to "reject God's purpose for themselves," (Luke 7:30) while through Isaiah God speaks of "those who carry out plans that are not mine." (Isaiah 30:1)

This means that the people we pray for do not lose their free will. We can interfere (at least temporarily) with what God wants. Theoretically, God could choose to override the freedom of human beings, but by taking it away it would mean we never had it in the first place. Thus, while God's love can influence us, He never controls us.

The spiritual battle we cannot see. The Bible lifts the veil on a spiritual landscape which both helps but also can hinder God's mission. Early Christians understood most of suffering to be the result of this hidden conflict. Just as Jesus taught us to pray, "Deliver us from evil", so Paul describes us as being in a struggle against "the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms....With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord's people." (Ephesians 6: 12,18)

The book of Daniel tells a story about how, even though his prayer had been heard by God straight away, an angel had been delayed for twenty-one days in answering because of resistance from opposing forces.(Daniel 10:4-14). However literally or not we might take this particular story, it is consistent with a view throughout the Bible that God's purposes can to a certain extent be interfered with in ways we cannot see.

Discuss: Which of these three "limits" to God's will - laws of nature, human freedom, or spiritual battle, strike you as the most significant? Why?

## Reading the Bible (15 minutes)

Read Ephesians 6: 10-20 in which Paul describes the reality of spiritual battle.

Discuss the Discovery Bible Study questions:  
What does this passage teach me about God?  
What does this passage teach me about people?  
How does this passage call me to obey God?  
What might I do in response to this this week?



## Seeing how it looks in real lives (10 minutes)

There is no video, but you are invited to discuss your experience of praying for others. How do you do it? What do you find helpful?



## Responding to God's leading (5 minutes)

Give people an opportunity to think about, "What might God be showing me and how might I respond?" They may like to write this down and/or share it with the group and/or share it with one other person. A friendly question is to ask each other, "Is there anything that would be helpful to ask you next time?"



## Group prayer (5 minutes)

How long, Lord? Will you forget me for ever?  
How long will you hide your face from me?  
How long must I wrestle with my thoughts  
and day after day have sorrow in my heart?  
How long will my enemy triumph over me?  
Look on me and answer, Lord my God.  
Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in death,  
and my enemy will say, 'I have overcome him,'  
and my foes will rejoice when I fall.  
But I trust in your unfailing love;  
my heart rejoices in your salvation.  
I will sing the Lord's praise,  
for he has been good to me.

Amen.

(Psalm 13)





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