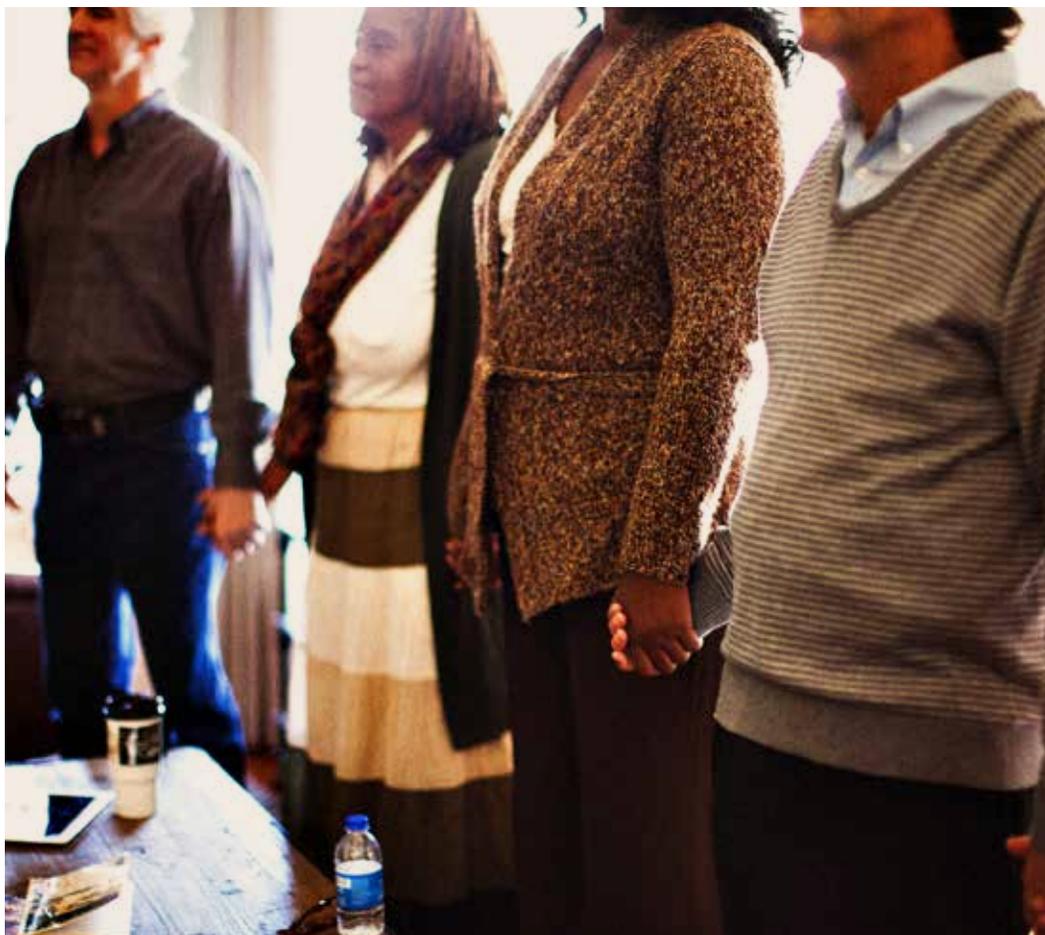


## SESSION 3

# Serve Through Prayer



### QUESTION 1:

*When have you seen a community really focused on prayer?*

## THE POINT

Serve those around you through consistent prayer.

## THE PASSAGE

1 Kings 17:17-24

## THE BIBLE MEETS LIFE

In 1984, 18-year-old Thomas Haynesworth was on an errand to buy sweet potatoes and bread for his mother. While running this errand, a victim of a recent sexual assault saw him and mistakenly identified him as her attacker. Thomas Haynesworth was wrongly convicted and spent the next 27 years of his life behind bars. Then, lawyers at The Innocence Project intervened, using newly discovered DNA testing to get his conviction overturned. On December 6, 2011, he was fully exonerated of all charges.<sup>1</sup>

Haynesworth is just one of many wrongly convicted prisoners now freed due to the work of The Innocence Project, started by lawyers Barry Scheck and Peter Neufeld in 1992. They believed if DNA technology could prove that people were guilty of crimes, it could exonerate the innocent as well. Their passionate desire to intercede for those who cannot help themselves has grown into an international movement that has freed hundreds of innocent men and women.<sup>2</sup>

But you don't have to be an attorney to plead someone's case. Elijah's intervention on behalf of the widow at Zarephath proves we can change others' lives simply by praying.

## 1 Kings 17:17-18

**17** And it came to pass after these things, that the son of the woman, the mistress of the house, fell sick; and his sickness was so sore, that there was no breath left in him.

**18** And she said unto Elijah, What have I to do with thee, O thou man of God? art thou come unto me to call my sin to remembrance, and to slay my son?

You're surely familiar with Murphy's Law, that says anything that can go wrong will go wrong. The British variation is Sod's Law, which means essentially the same thing but also carries the notion of being mocked by fate. The poor, unlucky sod is an average person hounded by bad fortune. And then there's the addendum used with both laws: Finagles Law. This law says anything that can go wrong, will go wrong *and* at the worst possible time.<sup>3</sup>

Ever felt like Murphy and Finagle were stalking you, and you are the unfortunate sod? First the transmission goes out on your car. Then your home's air conditioner quits. And when you've almost finished paying for those two things, you get an expensive traffic ticket. Or in a more serious scenario, you lose your job. Then your marriage falls apart. And when you're finally getting back on your feet, you find out you have cancer.

In times like these, we can relate to the widow at Zarephath. First, she had lost her husband. Widows at that time had little means of income. So after the initial blow, a drought came, and resources started to dwindle for her and her son. She became poorer and poorer until she had only enough flour and oil for one final meal. She resigned herself to death by starvation. The unexpected appearance of Elijah on her doorstep brought relief in the form of renewed food resources. But just when it seemed things were returning to normal, life came crashing down again.

The widow's son became sick—extremely sick. And then she experienced that horrific moment when her son stopped breathing, and life left his body. I know the sheer terror of this feeling. In 2013, my husband and I received a phone call from the hospital. “Your son ... Code Blue ... found unresponsive ... come immediately.” We watched, helpless, as doctors and nurses worked on his lifeless body, assessing his vitals and searching for brain activity. Such moments raise myriad unanswerable questions. Why? Why me? Why my child? Why now?

In her shock and despair, the widow turned on Elijah. She asked similar questions: “O thou man of God? art thou come unto me to call my sin to remembrance, and to slay my son?”

She wondered if her son's death was the result of her own sin, and Elijah had been sent to bring her punishment. People in ancient times commonly viewed sickness as God's punishment for sin (John 9:1-2). Yet Elijah had already spared her son from death once by miraculously extending their food resources. The more pertinent question would have been: *Why did God bring my son through the last crisis only to let him die of another?*

Not even the wisest believers have an easy answer for much of the suffering we endure. It is not always given to us to know why. Even Elijah questioned God at this turn of events (1 Kings 17:20). The “why” of suffering is not always clear. C.S. Lewis wrote, “God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: It is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world.”<sup>4</sup> We may not know the reasons why, but suffering shouts for us to look to God.

Similarly, God had something to say to the widow at Zarephath. He wanted to show her something about Himself. She would soon learn to know God as her deliverer. Her deepest suffering was an opportunity to trust God and witness His power. When it seems all is lost, we are perfectly positioned to turn to God and discover He is the answer to the questions that have no other answer.

**QUESTION 2:**

***What do we learn about the widow from her question to Elijah?***

---

**1 Kings 17:19-21**

**19** And he said unto her, Give me thy son. And he took him out of her bosom, and carried him up into a loft, where he abode, and laid him upon his own bed.

**20** And he cried unto the LORD, and said, O LORD my God, hast thou also brought evil upon the widow with whom I sojourn, by slaying her son?

**21** And he stretched himself upon the child three times, and cried unto the LORD, and said, O LORD my God, I pray thee, let this child's soul come into him again.

We can always find reasons to stay out of other people's problems. Sometimes people take advantage of us. Sometimes we just don't have the resources to fix what's broken. Their problems may seem too big, or their troubles too deep. Quite often, we have enough problems of our own. Elijah certainly did. He had angered Ahab and Jezebel, and had surely troubled a lot of his neighbors, by bringing drought. In spite of all he was facing, Elijah stepped into the widow's suffering and joined her in her pain. While he could do nothing in his own power to restore her loss, Elijah knew the God who does the impossible (Luke 1:37), so the prophet took it up with Him.

**QUESTION 3:**

***When have you seen someone pray courageously during a time of need?***

I love Elijah's honesty and humility in this moment. Although the widow had just accused him of bringing this trouble, he didn't try to defend himself. He didn't pretend to know the answer to her questions. Elijah simply took the widow's problem and made it his own. He carried the lifeless boy to his room and laid him on his own bed. He got involved in the messiness of the widow's troubled life. And then Elijah did the only thing he knew to do under the circumstances. He prayed.

Elijah's prayer is a picture of real faith. Real faith doesn't presume to know why God does what He does or why He allows what He allows. Real faith asks the hard questions. It voices the doubts and anguish we feel. Yet, despite the questions, doubts, and hurt, real faith keeps coming back to God. It trusts that, whatever happens, He is all loving and all powerful; it trusts that God is the answer to our every need.

In crying out to God, Elijah spoke up for the widow. He raised the questions that plagued her. He pleaded for the help she needed. He demonstrated the only two things needed to be a great prayer warrior: compassion for someone in need and faith that God can help.

We call this intercessory prayer. An intercessor is a go-between, someone who mediates between two parties, and when we intercede for others in prayer, we are going to God on behalf of others. We should feel honored when someone goes before the throne of God on our behalf, presenting our need. At the same time, we have the privilege of going before God with the needs of others. Paul called us to this: "I exhort therefore, that . . . supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks, be made for all men" (1 Tim. 2:1).

Even more, we should consider it our responsibility. Elijah lived that principle. He didn't rationalize that this boy was not his child; therefore, praying for the boy was not his responsibility. He followed the example of Samuel, who in his last public address told the Israelites, "As for me, God forbid that I should sin against the LORD in ceasing to pray for you" (1 Sam. 12:23). The believer

is called to a life of service, and that service includes praying for others. For a believer to know others are suffering is to bear the responsibility and privilege of praying for them.

Elijah is an example of an effective pray-er.

**“The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much. Elias was a man subject to like passions as we are, and he prayed earnestly that it might not rain: and it rained not on the earth by the space of three years and six months. And he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth brought forth her fruit” (Jas. 5:16-18).**

Elijah was a human being as we are. He possessed no miraculous powers in himself. He had no greater authority with God than we do, but he believed God could do anything. And he dared to ask God for the impossible: “O LORD my God, I pray thee, let this child’s soul come into him again.”

---

## **1 Kings 17:22-24**

**22 And the LORD heard the voice of Elijah; and the soul of the child came into him again, and he revived.**

**23 And Elijah took the child, and brought him down out of the chamber into the house, and delivered him unto his mother: and Elijah said, See, thy son liveth.**

**24 And the woman said to Elijah, Now by this I know that thou art a man of God, and that the word of the LORD in thy mouth is truth.**

God is not a divine Santa Claus who grants our every wish. God is not beholden to do our bidding just because we ask, but He invites us to participate with Him in helping others. He encourages us to intercede on their behalf. And He moves to respond to the prayers of His people.

- ▶ God responded to Abraham’s pleas to spare his nephew Lot from the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 18:16-33; 19:12-22).
- ▶ God relented from destroying the children of Israel after Moses interceded on their behalf (Ex. 32:9-14).
- ▶ God resurrected Dorcas when Peter prayed over her corpse (Acts 9:36-43).
- ▶ In response to the fervent prayers of believers, God sent an angel to rescue Peter from jail on the night before he was to be tried (Acts 12:3-12).

God still acts in response to the prayers of His people. Well I remember those days in the hospital with my son when we did not know if he would survive. Friends and family surrounded us with love and prayed with us for our child. When my son walked out of that hospital days later, it was a testimony to God’s work and the power of prayer. Seven years after, he is healthy and strong. His very presence is a continual reminder of God’s mercy and the compassion of friends, brought together in prayer.

I do not imagine it was any goodness in my family or me that prompted God to act. Nor do I suppose our prayers were more persuasive than others. I don’t believe God spared my son just to end my suffering.

Often God’s “yes” is aimed at a higher purpose. Through His response to our prayer, He reveals something of His nature and fosters our faith. We see that when Elijah presented the widow with her revived child and declared, “See, thy son liveth.” Her first words were, “Now ... I know ...” At last she knew God is real, and Elijah was His spokesperson. It was not just her son who came to life. Faith also came to life in the widow through Elijah’s answered prayer. Yahweh alone is the true and faithful God!

#### **QUESTION 4:**

***What are the challenges and benefits of praying boldly for others?***

Perhaps more people around us would come to faith if we, like Elijah, dared to ask God for the impossible. “Bold prayers honor God, and God honors bold prayers. God isn’t offended by your biggest dreams or boldest prayers. He is offended by anything less. If your prayers aren’t impossible to you, they are insulting to God.”<sup>5</sup>

When we pray, God responds, and when God responds, it points to Him. When Jesus’ disciples asked him whether a man had been born blind due to his own sins or those of his parents, Jesus answered, “Neither ... but that the works of God should be made manifest in him” (John 9:2-3). May others see God as we pray.

#### QUESTION 5:

***How have our group’s prayers helped you in your walk with Christ?***

### ENGAGE

***Develop a prayer plan. Fill in the blanks and consider these important matters this week.***

I would like to pray more consistently about \_\_\_\_\_ .

\_\_\_\_\_ is a person I can pray more regularly for.

\_\_\_\_\_ is a time/place where I can take time to focus and pray.

The top three things I’d like to pray about this week are:

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

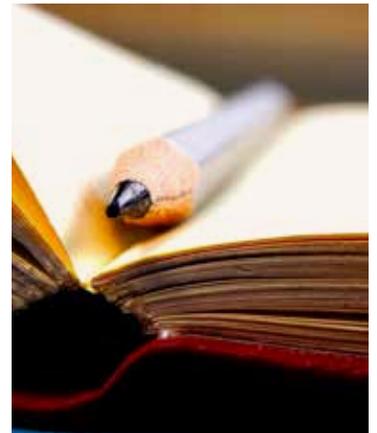
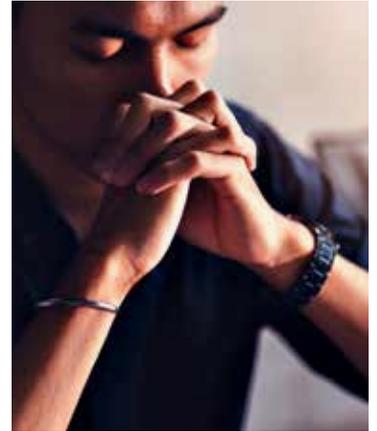
***Write out and tape this list in a place where you will see it daily.***

---

## LIVE IT OUT

The Innocence Project has interceded for innocent prisoners who served a combined total of over *five thousand* years in prison. Lives have been restored and families have been reunited. When we intercede for others in prayer, we can likewise join with God in restoring lives and leading people to Christ. How will you step into the lives of others by praying for them?

- ▶ **Pray.** Pray right now for someone you know who is in need physically or spiritually. Trust God to answer.
- ▶ **Journal.** Begin a prayer journal to list the needs of others. Use it in your daily quiet time and update it with answers God provides.
- ▶ **Pray with others.** Start a prayer group at your church, work, or with your neighbors. Invite others to pray with you for needs in your community and around the world.



### END NOTES

1. "Thomas Haynesworth," *Innocence Project*, [innocenceproject.org/cases/thomas-haynesworth/](http://innocenceproject.org/cases/thomas-haynesworth/)
2. [25years.innocenceproject.org/start/](http://25years.innocenceproject.org/start/).
3. "Murphy's Law, Sod's Law, and Finagle's Law," *Grammarist*, [grammarist.com/phrase/murphys-law-sods-law-and-finagles-law](http://grammarist.com/phrase/murphys-law-sods-law-and-finagles-law).
4. C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1962), 93.
5. Mark Batterson, *The Circle Maker: Praying Circles Around Your Biggest Dreams and Greatest Fears* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016).



## REMEMBER

By Janelle Alberts

These are trying times in the life of our church body.

Belief trends continue to reflect discouraging numbers across the country. Cynicism persists despite how we collectively try to shake it. To all those who may be growing weary in well-doing, may we interrupt this otherwise stressful time with the following reminder: It's all true. God's Word is reliable. His church is alive. He is everything He promises to be.

Just ask acclaimed singer/songwriters Brad + Rebekah, who recently renewed their minds on this matter courtesy of the most jarring diagnosis of their lives. The diagnosis included words like *inoperable*. And *cancer*.

The cancer came to light after Rebekah gave birth to the couple's second child and Rebekah began to notice that her own health wasn't bouncing back like it should. After more than a year of doctor visits in which Rebekah received repeated assurances that all was well, the face of one follow-up nurse looked ... different.

"Her demeanor changed ever so slightly," says Rebekah, who had been working on a new song, "Rejoice," with her husband against the backdrop of Philippians 4, which features phrases like, "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your graciousness be known to everyone. The Lord is near" (vv. 4-5).

"It was like a bucket of cold water," recalls Rebekah of the bombshell news that she had cancer. After her nurse's changed demeanor, her doctor met with her later in the middle of a noisy hallway and, speaking resolutely, explained that she had an inoperable, cancerous tumor wrapped around her kidney.

"I processed it in chunks. Cancer. Inoperable. He asked if I had any questions. I wasn't even capable," she says. What she honestly was hoping in that moment was that someone would tell her it was a nightmare and that her husband would wake her up any minute.

### **GOD PROVIDES PEACE**

Their experience began to look like a story out of Scripture, with this family trying to find their way, hold on to God, and understand what to do next—minus the final page outlining for them here's how this ends. A grueling period of awaiting an outcome can unmove anyone emotionally. "It was a roller coaster of peace and anxiety," says Rebekah. "I had to reign in my fear. I was thinking, *I don't want to leave my family. I don't want to leave my children.*"

Despite the tension, both Rebekah and Brad experienced God's peace and sovereignty along the way with significant and personal signposts that helped to keep them going. "There were little things along the way that held me steady,"

marvels Brad. “Some of it was totally unrelated to the diagnosis. God took care of some financial stuff that was on our hearts, for instance. All those little things spoke to me.” The two felt compelled to hold on to the fact that if God was caring for them in small ways, they could also trust Him with the big diagnosis they had received. “We tried to walk it out the best we could each day,” says Brad.

### **GOD GIVES US OTHERS**

Brad and Rebekah’s song, “Rejoice,” spoke to the trying experience they were facing personally right then. They knew they were called to rejoice, for indeed the Lord is near. Pain and anxiety were working to overpower them from rejoicing in God’s closeness, as would be the case for any one of us. Yet, we’re assured that the Christian faith battles fear in sometimes inarticulate, yet palpable ways. One way that happened for Brad and Rebekah was seeing it lived out in the church body.

During this period of time, the couple did two release concerts. Their concerts redirected them

right back into the presence of fellow believers—churches they had known well—who surrounded them personally and ensured them that in this time, the church was covering them.

The concerts turned out to be a blessing to the couple in a way they hadn’t necessarily registered until they were in the middle of the gift itself.

“I looked out at that community during our concert, and there they stood. Rejoicing,” remembers Rebekah. “We look back at all we’d been through and how foolish in the middle of the trial we would think, *Now it’s time to give up?*”

No, it was not.

“We just constantly reminded ourselves of that,” she says.

### **GOD IS ALWAYS WITH US**

In the middle of their trying times, the couple found out that the tumor was in fact operable. Not long after that, Rebekah went in for a surgery that was scheduled to take eight hours, but was successfully completed in two.

Consistently throughout the entire ordeal, Rebekah had prayed using these specific words, language that was personal to her. “I don’t know why in my prayers I kept using the phrase, ‘Lord, cause it to fall out,’” Rebekah confesses. But after surgery, when her doctor was debriefing her on her subsequent prognosis, he used an interesting phrase. He said, verbatim, “It’s like it fell out.”

That led Rebekah to experience extraordinary intimacy in her relationship with the Lord. “My thoughts are nothing compared to His goodness,” she says. “I will worship. I have to be stubborn about my decision to do that. It’s a choice.”

That choice is something all Christians can relate to. One can worship, even while walking out the complexity of a life in faith, and likewise maintaining and facing the practicalities of life on earth, which still, regularly ... hurt. “To be honest with you, we have more than a few people we know who were diagnosed and then a short while later were gone,” Rebekah reflects.

“What I do know is that when the end comes for us, we’ll be overwhelmed by His glory and that it was a fight in which we could know, grateful, that He is full of love.”

What continued to fuel that strong faith Brad and Rebekah had while in the trenches of their personal ordeal?

That it is all true. His Word is reliable. His church is an alive and willing community of edifying believers. And, “He is a good and loving father, we belong to Him,” declares Rebekah. “No matter what that looks like here. No matter what happens, He is still worthy of our worship.”

Today, in remission and feeling healthy and well, Rebekah can reflect on who God is and what we are to Him. In that we can rejoice.

**Janelle Alberts** is a freelance writer and has written for *Christianity Today* and *RELEVANT* online publications. Her first book, *Honest Answers: Exploring God Questions With Your Tween*, preps parents on how to tackle hard questions with their tweens using pithy Q&A's. It can be found on Amazon.com.