

God's Purposes in Prayer

Leaders Guide



13 online adult Sunday school lessons

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About Acacia Resources

The biblical witness singles out acacia wood for its uniqueness. The only wood mentioned in the building of the ark of the covenant, the tabernacle and the altar is acacia. Acacia wood is listed with other precious objects—gold, silver, fragrant incense, onyx stones—given to honor God.

Today's acacia tree is known for its value, diversity and durability. Some acacia trees have fragrant flowers used in making perfume. The seeds are edible. The bark is rich in tannin, a substance used in tanning, dyes, inks and pharmaceuticals. Furniture, oars, tools and gunstocks are made of the hard lumber from the acacia tree.

Some 1,200 species of acacia trees and shrubs exist throughout much of the world, including Africa, Australia and North America. The acacia species is tough enough to survive the semiarid regions of Africa where its roots sink deep to capture the rare water which runs quickly into the soil.

The name *acacia* symbolically ties BCE's publishing initiative to our biblical heritage. The acacia tree represents the wise value attached to educational resources, the diversity of needs within churches and the durability demanded for growing healthy Christians, whether they are singles, couples with children or senior adults.

Acacia Resources will guide Christians and draw them godward, as the ark of acacia wood guided the people of Israel in their journey and represented the presence of God in their midst.

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A *God's Purposes in Prayer* Students Guide is also available from Acacia Resources (www.acaciaresources.com).

Preface

“Dear Lord, I know there must be a reason. But what is it? I answered the call to do your work. I’ve devoted my life to it! And now how am I supposed to do it? What good am I now? What good is a deaf priest? I prayed for you to help me, and every day I get worse. Are you deaf, too?”

After years of serving as confidante and spiritual advisor to the medical staff and patients in the fictional 4077th Mobile Army Surgical Hospital, Father Francis John Patrick Mulcahy, the beloved priest on the long-running television series *M*A*S*H**, faced his own crisis of faith in the series’ final episode. He was losing his hearing.

As he tried to gain faith’s perspective on what was happening to him, Father Mulcahy gave honest voice to questions we’ve all probably asked. Why doesn’t God answer our prayers according to our specifications? Isn’t God listening?

The problem, God would say, lies not with divine hearing but with human praying. In spite of scriptural accounts of praying people, a responsive God and the example of Jesus, prayer remains a confounding concept for most people. Perhaps that’s because often as not popular psycho-religion and self-serving theology, rather than the voice of God through the pages of scripture, inform our thinking as well as our practice.

The mind-boggling sales of a small book called *The Prayer of Jabez: Breaking Through to the Blessed Life* (Multnomah, 2000), seem to support this theory. It is a prayer, author Bruce Wilkinson claimed, that “contains the key to a life of extraordinary favor with God,” one he says that “God always answers.”

It goes like this: “Oh, that you would bless me indeed, and enlarge my border, and that your hand might be with me, and that you would keep me from hurt and harm!” (1 Chron 4:10). According to scripture, God granted Jabez his request, though his prayer was an unusual one for an observant Jew.

Christians and non-Christians alike have purchased the book and attest to its claims, yet critics have charged that it encourages prayer for selfish reasons and material gains. Christian author Phyllis Tickle feared that people would perceive the prayer as “some divine insurance policy so they can get everything they want. There is a self-centeredness in the prayer that is alarming. It smacks of something close to magic,” she said.

Judith Shulevitz, book critic for the *New York Times*, wrote that the author “seems snake-oil salesmanish—he promises that if you take these steps, results will be yours within days.”

Fast solutions and easy answers, private gain and personal success, safety and security are hardly God’s chief purposes in prayer. The most important thing about prayer has not to do with us, but with God. If, as the Westminster Shorter Catechism says, our chief purpose is to glorify God and enjoy God forever, then prayer must be a means to that end.

Discovering God’s ultimate purposes in prayer requires a careful and thorough walk through the history of God’s people. While we do so informed by the life and teachings of Jesus and inspired by New Testament writings, our conclusions about prayer are incomplete apart from the fuller understanding this perspective provides. It was within this tradition, after all, that Jesus prayed.

Even the origin of the Hebrew word for prayer, *tefilah*, offers a surprising and instructive insight. *Tefilah* is derived from a word meaning “to judge” or “to differentiate.” Rather than serving as a platform from which to list our wants and needs and make our requests to God, prayer, then, is the process of discovering who and what we are in relation to God, who and what we ought to be and how to begin or continue that transformation.

“Know before Whom you are standing,” the Talmud instructs those who would pray. Prayer requires that we realize we are in God’s presence. It is, indeed, holy ground. And it is why Jesus prayed, “Hallowed be your name” (Matt 6:9).

In Hebrew thought, prayer is concerned with what truly matters, not with trivialities. It is our opportunity to gain a clearer perception of life rather than an occasion to tell God anything. Jesus prayed with this full understanding and taught us to do the same. And what truly matters? “Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” (Matt 6:10).

Unlike many of the earliest prayers of the Hebrew people, which emphasized community over individuality and “us” instead of “me,” our prayers often resemble the obscure prayer of Jabez: God, this is what I want. Give it to me, and keep me safe.

“*Our Father*,” Jesus began his prayer. “Give *us* this day *our* daily bread” (Matt 6:11). Jesus recognized that we live and express our faith not in isolation but within community. The prayers of one can affect the lives of all.

Is it wrong to ask God for specific things? No. People throughout scripture did just that. But prayer does not exist primarily for us to tell God what we want or think we need.

God needs no reminders. We do. We need to be reminded of our dependence upon God and our responsibility for each other. Prayer does this in ways nothing else can.

Archbishop William Temple wrote, “The essential act of prayer is not the bending of God’s will to ours, but bending of our will to His. The proper outline of a Christian’s prayer is not ‘Please do for me what I want,’ but ‘Please do in me, with me, and through me what You want.’”

When God answers our prayer precisely according to our specifications, it is not because our prayer “worked.” It is because doing so is consistent with God’s divine plan not only for us but also for God’s kingdom. God responds to our prayers always from the perspective of eternity and with the knowledge of how our lives intersect with the lives and prayers of others and fit into the broader plan.

This fact in no way prevents God from answering us personally and specifically when we pray, as both scripture and our own lives reveal. God is great and powerful enough to respond to each of us as if we are the only one. At the same time, God can respond to the prayers of others, carefully weaving lives and events together to achieve global divine purposes that span time.

Nowhere is this clearer than in scriptural accounts of people like Hannah, David, Solomon, Elisha, Nehemiah, Daniel and others—people who faced deeply troubling personal and communal situations and turned to God for forgiveness, direction, hope, protection, purpose, wisdom, healing, mercy, justice and deliverance.

Sometimes they were short-sighted and self-focused, with no hint of how their prayers and God’s answers might affect the larger community. At other times they prayed on behalf

of the larger community, fully aware that God wanted to bless them as a people and a nation. Their prayers of worship, confession, petition, thanksgiving and intercession reflect our own in remarkable ways. Like us, sometimes only their hearts could pray, their voices paralyzed by grief, fear, doubt and confusion. Hanging onto perhaps a single thread of faith, they prayed, as we do, trusting God to understand what words could not express.

In a touching story from Chasidic Judaism that resonates across the ages, an uneducated Jew wanted to pray but did not speak Hebrew. Traditional Judaism stresses the importance of praying in Hebrew, although the Talmud states that one can pray in any language he or she understands. This devout man began reciting the only Hebrew he knew: the alphabet.

He continued repeating the alphabet over and over until a rabbi asked him what he was doing. “The Holy One, Blessed is He, knows what is in my heart. I will give Him the letters, and He can put the words together.”

Allow the following examples from some of the oldest biblical texts to guide not only your words but more importantly, your heart, as you gain new insights into God’s purposes in prayer.

Written by Jan Turrentine, managing editor for Acacia Resources, Baptist Center for Ethics, Nashville, Tenn.

Forgiveness and Restoration

Leaders Guide

Psalm 51

¹Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. ²Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. ³For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. ⁴Against you, you alone, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are justified in your sentence and blameless when you pass judgment. ⁵Indeed, I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me. ⁶You desire truth in the inward being; therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart. ⁷Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. ⁸Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that you have crushed rejoice. ⁹Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities. ¹⁰Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. ¹¹Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me. ¹²Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit. ¹³Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will return to you. ¹⁴Deliver me from bloodshed, O God, O God of my salvation, and my tongue will sing aloud of your deliverance. ¹⁵O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise. ¹⁶For you have no delight in sacrifice; if I were to give a burnt offering, you would not be pleased. ¹⁷The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise. ¹⁸Do good to Zion in your good pleasure;

rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, ¹⁹then you will delight in right sacrifices, in burnt offerings and whole burnt offerings; then bulls will be offered on your altar.

Theme: Prayers of personal confession and repentance allow God to restore us and equip us for service.

Before You Teach

- ▶ To understand more fully the context of Psalm 51, read 2 Samuel 11-12. Make a list of key events from this passage that led to David's feelings of remorse and guilt. Be prepared to summarize the story of Uriah, David and Bathsheba when you lead this Bible study.
- ▶ Read Psalm 51, the lesson from the Students Guide and the following teaching suggestions.
- ▶ As you plan for and lead this series of Bible studies, keep in mind the overall theme: God's Purposes in Prayer. Look for ways to suggest and reinforce these purposes represented by the lesson titles. Also be open to other purposes you discover as you study and dialogue with your class. If you think it may be helpful, plan to display the purposes visually and add to the list each time you meet.
- ▶ The following article includes thoughts suggested for helping adults apply this scripture. You may wish to read it in its entirety:

"Whatever Happened to Repentance?"
(www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2002/002/6.56.html).

As You Teach

Introduce the Lesson

► Guide adults to begin thinking about the concept of guilt by drawing from an underlying theme in the Oscar-winning film “Million Dollar Baby.” Encourage those who have seen the film to contribute their thoughts and help make application.

In the film, Clint Eastwood plays a boxing trainer named Frankie Dunn who, though deeply religious, is also troubled and guilt-ridden. He has been estranged from his daughter for many years, although viewers never learn why. He has faithfully written letters to her every week for 23 years, and each letter has been returned to him unopened.

During this time, Frankie has also faithfully attended Mass at his Catholic church in search of forgiveness, but he never finds it. His priest, Father Horvak, whom Frankie seeks out for advice, proves to be incompetent in terms of pastoral care and counseling. Instead of guiding Frankie to get to the bottom of his inner turmoil and struggle, he brushes him off as an annoyance.

► Lead adults to discuss the role of guilt in our lives by asking such questions as these:

- *Are some people more prone to feelings of guilt than others?*
- *Is guilt a good thing? Why or why not?*
- *What are some consequences of guilt?*

- *Do you think that some people no longer feel guilt about anything? If so, what does this indicate about them spiritually?*
- *What is the connection between guilt and repentance?*
- *Can we acknowledge guilt without repenting?*

► To illustrate one possible answer to the last question, call attention to the story about Pete Rose from the Introduction in the Students Guide. Summarize the story and read aloud the quote from Rose’s book.

Stress that in order to find forgiveness and restoration, we must first believe that we need it. Our tendency instead is often to minimize our shortcomings and use others as scapegoats for our sins or blame them for our actions.

Explore the Bible

► Summarize the events from David’s life as recorded in 2 Samuel 11-12. Identify Uriah and Bathsheba and their relationship and explain how David became involved with Bathsheba. Encourage adults to add to the discussion to piece together the sequence of events that led to David’s personal failure.

If time permits, read aloud some of the verses describing Nathan’s confrontation with David that led David to face his sin, including the story Nathan told David about the two men and the lamb.

“The raging prophet of God from the desert and the sin-stained king in his palace create one of the great scenes in all literature,” wrote Verna J. Dozier in *Sojourners Maga-*

zine. “Controlling his righteous rage, Nathan comes to the king with a seemingly simple plea for justice for one of David’s people who has suffered a great wrong” (www.sojo.net/index.cfm?action=magazine.article&issue=soj9407&article=940749).

“David falls into the trap. The wilderness sense of justice boils up in him, and he declares that the man who did this deserves to die. ‘You are the man!’ Nathan thunders. He spells out all the Lord has done for David, the viciousness of his act, and the judgment God will work against him. . . . David puts up no defense. He acknowledges simply, ‘I have sinned against the Lord.’”

The words of this psalm, Dozier wrote, “are the utter agony of one who faces the reality of the distance between God and God’s creature. It is metaphor. It is hyperbole. It is the beginning of a return.”

► Ask someone to read aloud Psalm 51:1-6. Point out the honesty and realism with which David saw himself, especially in light of who and what God is. Note that David began his prayer in a state of complete weakness and asked for God’s mercy. He knew that he was in no position to do in his life what needed to be done. Only God could do that.

Note the imagery David used in his confession and request for forgiveness: “blot out” (v 1); “wash” and “cleanse” (v 2).

Then ask:

- *How do you understand or explain David’s assertion in verse 4 that he has sinned only against God? What about the consequences of his actions on Uriah and Bathsheba?*

- *Is there a difference between crime and sin? If so, what?*
- *How do you interpret David’s statement that he “was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me” (v 5)?*
- *What insights does this psalm offer into the meaning of “sin”?*
- *What insights does it give us about God’s character?*

Call attention to verse 6 and note that while few people were aware of David’s sin, it caused a serious breach in his relationship with God. In spite of his sin, he was spiritually aware and alive enough to know that God was concerned with his “inward being” and wanted his outward actions to reflect a right and pure heart.

► Read aloud Psalm 51:7-12 and explain the role of hyssop in Passover celebration. Point out David’s continued emphasis on being cleansed in these verses.

Note David’s sequence of requests to God in verses 7-12. Then ask:

- *What significant spiritual truths do these requests recognize?*
- *What did David mean in verse 8 by his reference to the bones that God had crushed?*

Emphasize that David was fully aware of the consequences of his actions upon his relationship with God. He knew that his sin kept him from experiencing God’s presence like he

otherwise could. He was also aware that while confession and repentance were his responsibility, forgiveness and restoration were possible only because of God's mercy.

► Note that verse 13 marks a shift in David's prayer. While David's earlier words were concerned specifically with his sin and need for God's forgiveness and cleansing, he didn't stop there. He realized that while confession and repentance for personal sin are necessary, the good news of God's grace and forgiveness are more than a private and personal matter.

Read aloud Psalm 51:13-17 and lead adults to identify specific things David said he would do in response to God's graciousness toward him. Note that David recognized the emptiness of sacrifices and burnt offerings apart from "a broken spirit" and "a broken and contrite heart" (v 16).

Suggest that as David prayed, he became aware not only that God could forgive him, but that God had forgiven him. Refer again to the example of the Frankie Dunn character who, though he repeatedly sought forgiveness, never experienced it. Then ask:

- *Do you think Frankie's experience is fairly common? Are there times that in spite of confession, repentance and seeking God's forgiveness, individuals still carry guilt?*
- *How can we get rid of the lingering guilt we sometimes feel when we know that God graciously offers forgiveness when we confess and repent?*
- *What effects does lingering guilt have upon us? How can it be harmful?*

► Call attention to Psalm 51:18-19 and acknowledge that these verses seem to point to a time in Israel's history after the exile, because at the time David wrote the initial words, Jerusalem's walls would not have needed rebuilding. Some scholars believe these verses were added to the psalm at a later time. Suggest, however, that the language here could also be a symbolic description of God renewing divine protection on the city following King David's confession and repentance.

Ask:

- *What lessons about prayer can we learn from this prayer of David?*
- *Are forgiveness and restoration our ultimate goals when we confess our sins in prayer? If not, what is?*
- *What are God's purposes for us when we pray for and experience forgiveness and restoration?*

Apply Biblical Truth

► Call attention to some of the thoughts and conclusions about repentance from columnist Frederica Mathewes-Green, who wrote about the difficulty we have even in discussing it.

"We are the wealthiest, healthiest, most comfortable generation in history," she said. "With less to struggle for, we become increasingly oriented toward pleasure. This all-too-natural inclination is what most unites us" ("Whatever Happened to Repentance?" www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2002/002/6.56.html).

A "ceaseless stream of advertising messages ... tell us who we are: special, precious people with no faults, who

deserve to feel better than we do. ... Advertising invites us to be big babies—an invitation that fallen human nature has always found hard to resist.”

Telling a disciple of modern advertising that he or she is a sinner would leave them shocked and baffled, she said. “How could he be a sinner? All he knows is that he’s unhappy because he does not have his fair share of stuff, and he isn’t appreciated enough by those around him.” The idea of personal sin and estrangement from holy God is so foreign to many people today that some are likely to respond, “So who’s this God who thinks he’s better than us?” Mathewes-Green wrote.

The language of repentance seems bizarre today, she said. “We look around our neighborhood and our congregation and everyone seems so *nice*. We know what really wicked people are like—we see them in the papers every day—and we’re not like that. God must find us, in comparison, quite endearing. And of course he knows the hurts we bear deep inside, and anyone who’s been hurt can’t be bad (I call this the “victims are sinless” fallacy). With these and a thousand other sweet murmurs we shield ourselves from our real condition and remain Christian babies all our lives: pampered, ineffective, whiney, and numb.”

Mathewes-Green challenges us to “stop thinking of God as infinitely indulgent.” Repentance is part of the gospel message. It, too, is good news, although we act like it is not. Repentance is insight into our true condition and allows us to see ourselves the way God sees us. “The more we see the depth of our sin, the more we realize the height of God’s love. The constant companion of repentance is gratitude. Like the woman who washed Jesus’ feet with her tears, we are forgiven much and discover endless love. Seeing our sin becomes, paradoxically, an opportunity for joy.”

► Remind adults that repentance refers both to a change of direction and a change of mind. Encourage them to view repentance in a positive light, an opportunity to begin again. As it did for David, it marks for us the beginning of our return to right relationship with God and points us toward our next opportunities for serving God.

Stress that one of God’s purposes in prayer is forgiveness and restoration. We show our gratitude to God for these gifts by giving our lives in service.

Direction and Confidence

Leaders Guide

Judges 13:1-25

¹The Israelites again did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, and the LORD gave them into the hand of the Philistines forty years. ²There was a certain man of Zorah, of the tribe of the Danites, whose name was Manoah. His wife was barren, having borne no children. ³And the angel of the LORD appeared to the woman and said to her, "Although you are barren, having borne no children, you shall conceive and bear a son. ⁴Now be careful not to drink wine or strong drink, or to eat anything unclean, ⁵for you shall conceive and bear a son. No razor is to come on his head, for the boy shall be a nazirite to God from birth. It is he who shall begin to deliver Israel from the hand of the Philistines." ⁶Then the woman came and told her husband, "A man of God came to me, and his appearance was like that of an angel of God, most awe-inspiring; I did not ask him where he came from, and he did not tell me his name; ⁷but he said to me, 'You shall conceive and bear a son. So then drink no wine or strong drink, and eat nothing unclean, for the boy shall be a nazirite to God from birth to the day of his death.'" ⁸Then Manoah entreated the LORD, and said, "O LORD, I pray, let the man of God whom you sent come to us again and teach us what we are to do concerning the boy who will be born." ⁹God listened to Manoah, and the angel of God came again to the woman as she sat in the field; but her husband Manoah was not with her. ¹⁰So the woman ran quickly and told her husband, "The man who

came to me the other day has appeared to me." ¹¹Manoah got up and followed his wife, and came to the man and said to him, "Are you the man who spoke to this woman?" And he said, "I am." ¹²Then Manoah said, "Now when your words come true, what is to be the boy's rule of life; what is he to do?" ¹³The angel of the LORD said to Manoah, "Let the woman give heed to all that I said to her. ¹⁴She may not eat of anything that comes from the vine. She is not to drink wine or strong drink, or eat any unclean thing. She is to observe everything that I commanded her. ¹⁵Manoah said to the angel of the LORD, "Allow us to detain you, and prepare a kid for you." ¹⁶The angel of the LORD said to Manoah, "If you detain me, I will not eat your food; but if you want to prepare a burnt offering, then offer it to the LORD." (For Manoah did not know that he was the angel of the LORD.) ¹⁷Then Manoah said to the angel of the LORD, "What is your name, so that we may honor you when your words come true?" ¹⁸But the angel of the LORD said to him, "Why do you ask my name? It is too wonderful." ¹⁹So Manoah took the kid with the grain offering, and offered it on the rock to the LORD, to him who works wonders. ²⁰When the flame went up toward heaven from the altar, the angel of the LORD ascended in the flame of the altar while Manoah and his wife looked on; and they fell on their faces to the ground. ²¹The angel of the LORD did not appear again to Manoah and his wife. Then Manoah realized that it was the angel of the LORD. ²²And Manoah said to his wife, "We shall surely die, for we have seen God." ²³But his wife said to him, "If the LORD had meant to kill us, he would not have accepted a burnt offering and a grain offering at our hands, or shown us all these things, or now announced to us such things as

*these.”²⁴The woman bore a son, and named him Samson. The boy grew, and the LORD blessed him.
²⁵The spirit of the LORD began to stir him in Mahaneh-dan, between Zorah and Eshtaol.*

Theme: Prayer invokes God’s guidance and assurance as we live our everyday lives.

Before You Teach

- ▶ Read the focal passage, the lesson from the Students Guide and the following teaching suggestions.
- ▶ If you are displaying lesson titles week by week in order to reinforce visually the overall theme of God’s Purposes in Prayer, plan to add the words *Direction and Confidence*.
- ▶ Obtain markers and several poster-sized pieces of paper, or ensure that your meeting area is equipped with adequate board space. You will need space to make several columns and room to list a number of items in each column.
- ▶ Gather pens and pieces of note paper, enough for each person to have one.
- ▶ EthicsDaily.com regularly features columns and news related to family issues. Visit www.ethicsdaily.com and click on the Family Matters tab for links to columns that can be helpful as you prepare for and lead this Bible study. Consider the ages and life stages of those in your group as you

search the archives for helpful columns. Consider making photocopies of selected articles available to those in your group, and refer them to the Web site for additional resources and information.

As You Teach

Introduce the Lesson

- ▶ Before adults arrive, print the following or similar age/stage column headings on poster-sized pieces of paper or on boards: *20s-30s; 40s-50s; 60s-70s; 80s+*. Place several markers beneath each column.
- ▶ As adults arrive, call attention to the column headings. Ask them to think of everyday life issues and situations common for each age/life stage and list these under the appropriate headings. Encourage them to consider every possibility common to most people at each age/stage of life. Note that some issues may overlap or be common to several stages of life. Allow each person adequate time to contribute to the lists.

If necessary, prompt adults’ thinking by suggesting things like completing education; managing finances; establishing career; getting married or remaining single; deciding whether to have children; nurturing marriage and other relationships; dealing with divorce, remarriage and blended families; purchasing a home; starting a business; dealing with chronic illness; dealing with aging parents; raising children; saving for college educations and retirements; dealing with empty-nest; downsizing; retiring; facing deaths of parents, siblings, spouse, other relatives and friends, etc.

► After everyone has had an opportunity to contribute to the lists, review them and add to them. Randomly pick an issue from one of the columns, and ask adults to suggest how a person might pray in that situation. Repeat this for several other issues spanning the spectrum of life ages/stages. Encourage adults to consider how a person might need direction and confidence to face that situation and how that might affect their prayers.

Point out that in all of life's everyday situations, regardless of our age or life stage, we encounter situations and issues that call for sound decision-making. The opportunities we face and the choices we make can be confusing and sometimes frightening, with far-reaching results that affect others.

Stress that scripture affirms that God wants to be involved in the everyday details of our lives and give us direction and confidence as we face issues and make decisions. When we pray, we not only acknowledge that we need God's help; we also place ourselves in the position for God to guide and direct us.

Acknowledge that when we think of people whose life events are recorded in scripture and the ways God intervened in their lives, we usually first recall the most prominent, people like Abraham, Moses, Daniel, Esther, Jesus' disciples and first-century church leaders and apostles. But scripture also records God's intervention in the lives of common and almost obscure people, including an ordinary couple God chose to become Samson's parents.

Explore the Bible

► Using information in the Students Guide, introduce the period in Israel's history that surrounds the account of Samson's birth. Point out that it was at this time that Israel

was struggling to move from leadership by judges to leadership by kings.

Explain the role of judges in that culture, noting their primarily military function. Point out that the passage you will consider finds the people of Israel under Philistine rule, where they had been for 40 years. Note that this experience was a familiar one, as they fell regularly into a cycle that began with their disobedience to the covenant. That would be followed by punishment and oppression, their repentance and God's deliverance and blessing, with this cycle often repeating.

► Because the passage is rather lengthy, suggest that your group divide itself into listening teams to consider parts or all of it. Note that the passage refers to three key players: Manoah, his wife and the "angel of the LORD" or "man of God." If your group is coed, an interesting approach involves assigning the men in the group to listen specifically for Manoah's role in these events, and the women to listen specifically for Manoah's wife's role. Or, you might want to reverse the order and assign Manoah to the women and Manoah's wife to the men. Either approach should generate some interesting observations.

► Read aloud the questions below before you read the scripture so that adults have an idea of what they should observe. Then, read aloud Judges 13:1-7, and lead adults to reconstruct the sequence of events. Refer them to the information in the Students Guide as you ask and they answer leading questions such as these:

- *Who was Manoah?*
- *What was significant about where Manoah and his wife lived in relationship to the Philistines?*

- *What implications did this couple's childlessness hold for them?*
 - *Why do you think Manoah's wife so easily trusted what the angel of the Lord told her?*
 - *What specific instructions did the angel of the Lord give Manoah's wife? Why do you think he instructed her to follow the same guidelines during her pregnancy that her child would be expected to follow throughout his life?*
 - *What does the special dedication of this child as a nazirite from the womb suggest? What did the angel of the Lord say that this child would eventually do?*
 - *What did the woman add to her report to her husband that the angel of the Lord had not specifically said? What fact did she leave out of her report?*
- Note that upon hearing his wife's news, Manoah immediately "entreated the LORD" (v 8). Read aloud Judges 13:8-14; then ask:
- *How did Manoah's response to his wife's news differ from her response to the angel of the Lord?*
 - *Why do you think Manoah was not satisfied with his wife's report? Why did he need assurance from someone other than her?*
 - *What specifically did Manoah ask of God? How do you interpret what he asked in verse 8? in verse 12?*
- *In addition to the concerns that all prospective first-time parents have, what would be cause for additional concern for Manoah and his wife? Why would they especially feel the need for God's guidance and direction regarding their child?*
 - *What answers did Manoah and his wife receive? Why do you think they weren't given any more information or answers at this point?*
- Call attention to Judges 13:15-18, and note Manoah's response to the angel of the Lord. Note that Manoah still did not know the angel's identity at this point, according to verse 16. The angel refused to eat the meal Manoah offered to prepare, but suggested that Manoah provide a burnt offering for the Lord.
- Ask a volunteer to read aloud Judges 13:19-25 and summarize the events. Point out that it was at this point that Manoah realized who the angel was. Ask:
- *Why was Manoah afraid he and his wife would die?*
 - *What was his wife's response when he voiced his fear?*

Note that in the course of time, the woman gave birth to Samson, whom God had chosen "to begin to deliver Israel from the hand of the Philistines" (v 5). An obscure couple who had apparently been childless for a number of years suddenly found themselves on the verge of parenthood. They weren't sure what to do, so they prayed.

Apply Biblical Truth

- Lead adults to suggest some truths about prayer they can conclude from the experiences of Manoah and his wife.

Point out those listed at the conclusion of the lesson in the Students Guide, and read these aloud. Encourage adults to elaborate on these and offer personal examples.

Remind adults that Judges 14-16 reveal that Samson possessed both admirable strengths and glaring weaknesses. He broke his nazirite vows, made poor moral decisions and was not the effective leader he could have been. In many ways, his life reflected the life of the nation of Israel. God was faithful to Samson, just as God was faithful to Israel. When Samson called to God for help, God responded.

Acknowledge that our lives, like Samson's, present us with countless opportunities every day to prove our faithfulness to God. And like Samson, we are sometimes unfaithful. Still, God is and always will be faithful to us when we confess, repent and pray for guidance.

► To close, call attention to the lists your group compiled as you began this Bible study. Ask adults to find something from the lists with which they can personally identify. Remind adults that whatever the situation, however common or everyday it might seem, God wants to be involved in our lives and help us make wise decisions.

Encourage adults to focus on one thing they are presently facing and about which they need guidance and assurance. Distribute pens and note paper, and ask each person to write a prayer asking God to show them the direction to take as they make decisions. Encourage them to pray for the confidence to take the steps necessary to please God and live within God's plans for them.

Petition and Hope

Leaders Guide

1 Samuel 1:1-20

¹There was a certain man of Ramathaim, a Zuphite from the hill country of Ephraim, whose name was Elkanah son of Jeroham son of Elihu son of Tohu son of Zuph, an Ephraimite. ²He had two wives; the name of the one was Hannah, and the name of the other Peninnah. Peninnah had children, but Hannah had no children. ³Now this man used to go up year by year from his town to worship and to sacrifice to the LORD of hosts at Shiloh, where the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were priests of the LORD. ⁴On the day when Elkanah sacrificed, he would give portions to his wife Peninnah and to all her sons and daughters; ⁵but to Hannah he gave a double portion, because he loved her, though the LORD had closed her womb. ⁶Her rival used to provoke her severely, to irritate her, because the LORD had closed her womb. ⁷So it went on year by year; as often as she went up to the house of the LORD, she used to provoke her. Therefore Hannah wept and would not eat. ⁸Her husband Elkanah said to her, "Hannah, why do you weep? Why do you not eat? Why is your heart sad? Am I not more to you than ten sons?" ⁹After they had eaten and drunk at Shiloh, Hannah rose and presented herself before the LORD. Now Eli the priest was sitting on the seat beside the doorpost of the temple of the LORD. ¹⁰She was deeply distressed and prayed to the LORD, and wept bitterly. ¹¹She made this vow: "O LORD of hosts, if only you will look on the misery of your servant, and remember me,

and not forget your servant, but will give to your servant a male child, then I will set him before you as a nazirite until the day of his death. He shall drink neither wine nor intoxicants, and no razor shall touch his head.”¹²As she continued praying before the LORD, Eli observed her mouth. ¹³Hannah was praying silently; only her lips moved, but her voice was not heard; therefore Eli thought she was drunk. ¹⁴So Eli said to her, “How long will you make a drunken spectacle of yourself? Put away your wine.” ¹⁵But Hannah answered, “No, my lord, I am a woman deeply troubled; I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink, but I have been pouring out my soul before the LORD. ¹⁶Do not regard your servant as a worthless woman, for I have been speaking out of my great anxiety and vexation all this time.” ¹⁷Then Eli answered, “Go in peace; the God of Israel grant the petition you have made to him.” ¹⁸And she said, “Let your servant find favor in your sight.” Then the woman went to her quarters, ate and drank with her husband, and her countenance was sad no longer. ¹⁹They rose early in the morning and worshiped before the LORD; then they went back to their house at Ramah. Elkanah knew his wife Hannah, and the LORD remembered her. ²⁰In due time Hannah conceived and bore a son. She named him Samuel, for she said, “I have asked him of the LORD.”

Theme: Prayer recognizes that God gives us what is right and best for our lives.

Before You Teach

- ▶ Read the focal passage, the lesson from the Students Guide and the following teaching suggestions.
- ▶ If you are displaying lesson titles week by week in order to reinforce visually the overall theme of God’s Purposes in Prayer, plan to add the words *Petition and Hope*.
- ▶ The following article includes thoughts suggested for helping adults apply this scripture. It also includes a powerful story about Nelson Mandela and his role in the struggle to develop a new South Africa that is infused with hope. You may want to read the article in its entirety and include the story about Mandela speaking at New York City’s Riverside Church if time permits:

“The Power of Hope,” (www.sojo.net/index.cfm?action=magazine.article&issue=soj9409&article=940910).

As You Teach

Introduce the Lesson

- ▶ Use a primary theme from the 1994 film “The Shawshank Redemption” to lead adults to think about the various aspects of hope. After offering the following illustration from the film, encourage adults to discuss the concept of hope.

“The Shawshank Redemption” tells the story of Andy Dufresne (played by Tim Robbins), a successful young banker convicted of murdering his wife and her lover and ordered to serve two consecutive life sentences in the Shawshank prison. Andy, however, is innocent of the crime.

Shawshank is a desperate place that fuels misery and hopelessness. It is run by a Bible-verse-spouting warden who allows his prisoners to be horribly mistreated, beaten and even murdered. The long-term effects of such an environment prove insurmountable for one of the inmates, Brooks (James Whitmore). When he is finally released after serving 50 years, Brooks is so incapable of creating relationships and finding meaning in his life outside the prison walls that he gives up and commits suicide.

Andy, on the other hand, is driven by his dreams for the future. In spite of the demeaning treatment he and the other prisoners receive and the seeming futility of their existence, Andy has an inner hope, the source of which viewers at first do not know. Though he initially is lonely and isolated at Shawshank, he somehow holds onto his hope and dreams. He eventually gains the respect of other inmates and becomes quite influential among them. When someone tells him that “hope is a dangerous thing,” Andy replies, “Hope is a good thing, maybe the best of things, and no good thing ever dies.”

Andy’s hope comes in part from the escape plan he has been carefully devising for twenty years. When he finally realizes his dream of freedom, he begins working to make things right inside Shawshank.

► Guide adults to explore the idea of hope by asking such questions as these:

- *How do you define hope?*
- *Have there ever been times in your life when you were completely hopeless? What were the circumstances? What happened to restore hope within you?*

► Steer the discussion more specifically toward prayer by asking:

- *How are hope and prayer related? How are they different?*
- *Have you ever prayed earnestly and specifically for something for an extended period of time and not received the answer you hoped for? What did this experience lead you to conclude about prayer?*
- *Is it possible to pray so exclusively for something that the thing for which we pray becomes an idol?*

► Call attention to and read aloud the C.S. Lewis quote from the Introduction in the Students Guide: “We are not necessarily doubting that God will do the best for us; we are wondering how painful the best will turn out to be.”

Ask adults to indicate whether they agree or disagree with the following statements, and why:

- God always answers our prayers.
- God always gives us what we want when we pray.
- God always gives us what is right and best for our lives.
- God always gives us what we need.

Explore the Bible

► Introduce the very personal and intimate story of Hannah by placing it within the context of the evolving nation

of Israel. Point out that at the time of Hannah's prayer, Israel was on the verge of both social and political change. Plagued by leadership weaknesses and corruption, the people of Israel were in no way prepared to deal with internal threats, let alone those from external forces such as the Philistines, who were positioned to overtake them. Israel needed a leadership overhaul, and Hannah wanted a son. In answering Hannah's prayer, God also answered Israel's deep need in the person of Samuel.

► Divide adults into three groups and assign each group one of these three characters: Elkanah, Hannah or Peninnah. Ask each group to read 1 Samuel 1:1-8 and work together to create a personality profile for their assigned character. Provide each group with paper and pens or pencils and suggest that they record descriptions and qualities group members suggest to aid in developing a character sketch.

After several minutes, read aloud 1 Samuel 1:1-8 and call for groups to offer their characterizations of Elkanah, Hannah and Peninnah. As adults help paint verbal portraits of the key characters in this passage, use the information in the Students Guide to insert additional comments as necessary to set up and advance the story, including:

- the common practice of polygamy at this time;
- the fact that women were valued primarily for their child-bearing ability;
- the significance of the Shiloh pilgrimage;
- the identities of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas and the abuse of office by the latter two.

Then ask:

- *What factors caused Hannah to become more distressed at the annual trek to Shiloh?*

- *What do you think Elkanah meant by his series of questions to Hannah in verse 8?*

► Lead adults to examine Hannah's prayer and the components of the vow she made to God. Ask a volunteer to read aloud 1 Samuel 1:9-18; then ask:

- *How would you describe Hannah's emotional state?*
- *Was Hannah's appearance alone at the temple unusual? Why or why not?*
- *What assumptions did Hannah make about God? Was this unusual?*
- *What specific things did Hannah ask of God?*
- *What did Hannah promise God if God granted her request for a male child?*
- *Do you think Hannah's response to Eli in verses 15-16 was unusual? Why or why not?*

► Reinforce the fact that Hannah promised to give back to God the very thing she requested God give her. Note that in making her vow to God, Hannah not only assumed that she would become pregnant but also that her child would be a male. In addition, she dedicated her son to God as a nazirite for life before the child was even born. Most men who took the nazirite vow did so for a particular period of time, not for life, and the men themselves made the vow.

Then ask:

- *Do you think Hannah was bargaining with God? Why or why not?*

- *How do you think Eli could affirm that God would grant Hannah her petition when he didn't know what she had asked of God?*

► Read aloud 1 Samuel 1:19-20 and lead adults to understand the parallels between Hannah's story and that of the nation of Israel. Note specifically that:

- Hannah had been enslaved in a life devalued by infertility.
- The people of Israel had been slaves in Egypt.
- Both Hannah and the people of Israel faced extreme limitations and were powerless to meet their own needs.
- Hannah cried out to God with her need, and God heard and answered her, giving her a son, Samuel.
- The people of Israel cried out to God for deliverance, and God heard and answered them, leading them out of Egypt and into a new life.
- The answer to Hannah's prayer, Samuel, represented new life and a new future both for Hannah and for Israel.
- God would use Samuel to lead Israel to move from its period of judges to monarchy, and Samuel would later anoint both Saul and David as kings of Israel.

Apply Biblical Truth

► Suggest that one of the results of prayer is renewed hope. Through prayer, God assures us that even when we cannot see results or do not understand, God is doing everything that we need.

Reinforce the idea of hope by conveying some of the following thoughts from Jim Wallis (*The Soul of Politics: A Practical and Prophetic Vision for Social Change*):

Wallis characterized the amazing events that occurred in South Africa in the late 1980s and Nelson Mandela's subsequent role as that nation's "best hope to bring both blacks and whites together" as "salvation events. . . . happenings filled with the pregnant promise of freedom, justice, liberation, peace, and reconciliation. They break the yoke of oppression while offering a healing balm to deep wounds. They testify to God's purposes and will for the Earth" ("The Power of Hope," www.sojo.net/index.cfm?action=magazine.article&issue=soj9409&article=940910).

"Such events turn the tables of history; they shake the world upside-down. They are beyond predictability and control, especially by those who rule," he wrote. Events like these open up a whole new world of possibilities, a new future beyond imagination.

"What salvation events bring to the world, most of all, is hope, and the world's oppressed peoples are always the ones who have the most at stake in them. When salvation events occur, we are all surprised. We don't expect they could or will ever happen. Most of us, to one extent or another, accept the dominant thinking of the world and view real change as quite hopeless. When it happens, we are taken aback."

The more he considers the idea of hope, Wallis wrote, "the more I am convinced that we must see hope in a different, and indeed a more biblical way. From the perspective of the Bible, hope is not simply a feeling or a mood or a rhetorical flourish. Hope is the very dynamic of history. Hope is the engine of change. Hope is the energy of transformation. Hope is the door from one reality to another.

"Hope unbelieved is always considered nonsense," Wallis wrote. "But hope believed is history in the process of being changed."

► Affirm that when we express our limitations and needs to God and ask God to intervene, God responds. Often God answers in ways we do not anticipate, and our prayers are answered in ways other than those we specify. But God's responses renew our hope and remind us that God is at work to give us all that we need.

Remind adults that one of God's purposes in prayer is to lead us to want for our lives what God wants for us. Often God's design for our lives is quite different from ours. Our prayers generally come from a very limited understanding of God's plans; consequentially, they are often short-sighted and sometimes selfish.

Stress that God answers our prayers with both our personal desires and the divine plan in full view. Stress also that the divine plan extends beyond us and encompasses the whole world and the past, present and future. God answers our prayers in light of all of these factors.

► Close by reading aloud the quotation from C.S. Lewis at the conclusion of the Students Guide: "The next moment is as much beyond our grasp, and as much in God's care, as that a hundred years away. Care for the next minute is as foolish as care for a day in the next thousand years. In neither can we do anything, in both God is doing everything."

Loyalty and Trust Leaders Guide

1 Samuel 7:2-14

²From the day that the ark was lodged at Kiriath-jearim, a long time passed, some twenty years, and all the house of Israel lamented after the LORD. ³Then Samuel said to all the house of Israel, "If you are returning to the LORD with all your heart, then put away the foreign gods and the Astartes from among you. Direct your heart to the LORD and serve him only, and he will deliver you out of the hand of the Philistines." ⁴So Israel put away the Baals and the Astartes, and they served the LORD only. ⁵Then Samuel said, "Gather all Israel at Mizpah, and I will pray to the LORD for you." ⁶So they gathered at Mizpah, and drew water and poured it out before the LORD. They fasted that day, and said, "We have sinned against the LORD." And Samuel judged the people of Israel at Mizpah. ⁷When the Philistines heard that the people of Israel had gathered at Mizpah, the lords of the Philistines went up against Israel. And when the people of Israel heard of it they were afraid of the Philistines. ⁸The people of Israel said to Samuel, "Do not cease to cry out to the LORD our God for us, and pray that he may save us from the hand of the Philistines." ⁹So Samuel took a sucking lamb and offered it as a whole burnt offering to the LORD; Samuel cried out to the LORD for Israel, and the LORD answered him. ¹⁰As Samuel was offering up the burnt offering, the Philistines drew near to attack Israel; but the LORD thundered with a mighty voice that day against the Philistines and

threw them into confusion; and they were routed before Israel. ¹¹And the men of Israel went out of Mizpah and pursued the Philistines, and struck them down as far as beyond Beth-car. ¹²Then Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Jeshanah, and named it Ebenezer; for he said, "Thus far the LORD has helped us." ¹³So the Philistines were subdued and did not again enter the territory of Israel; the hand of the LORD was against the Philistines all the days of Samuel. ¹⁴The towns that the Philistines had taken from Israel were restored to Israel, from Ekron to Gath; and Israel recovered their territory from the hand of the Philistines. There was peace also between Israel and the Amorites.

Theme: Prayer releases God's deliverance and protection.

Before You Teach

- ▶ Read the focal passage, the lesson from the Students Guide and the following teaching suggestions.
- ▶ If you are displaying lesson titles week by week in order to reinforce visually the overall theme of God's Purposes in Prayer, plan to add the words *Petition and Hope*.

As You Teach

Introduce the Lesson

- ▶ Begin with an illustration from the experiences of Barbara Cawthorne Crafton, an Episcopal priest, spiritual director and author. She has also served as rector of St.

Clement's Church in Manhattan's Theater district and as a chaplain at Ground Zero during the recovery efforts following the 9/11 tragedies. She appears regularly on television both as a preacher and a commentator on Hallmark's "New Morning" and "America at Worship."

On one occasion, Crafton wrote poignantly about that "mixed moment" in weddings when the officiating minister states, "Therefore what God has joined together, let no one put asunder."

When she officiates at weddings, Crafton says that she follows the old custom of binding the couple's joined hands with her clerical stole. "I never bind a pair of joined hands together and say those words without a powerful repentance for my own failures," she wrote. "Do better than I did, I think, sending that thought as a prayer and a warning. Please be better than I was" ("Room for Repentance," www.geraniumfarm.org/dailyemo.cfm?Emo=73).

She can recall a time when divorced people could not remarry in her church, and if they remarried in a secular ceremony, they could not receive communion. Over the years, however, grace has triumphed over the letter of the law. "The community has not put us out," she wrote. "It has, instead, given us room for repentance. And a chance to make a new life. A better one, this time."

Crafton's gratitude that things are different now runs deep. "The Church is more able to see failure as the seedbed of resurrection. ... Sometimes people don't cooperate, and they suffer for it, and inflict suffering. But grace abounds. ... I have been the beneficiary of the Church's decision to allow the spirit of the law to triumph over the letter. It has been life-giving. I cheerfully acknowledge my failures: cheerfully, because Christ has worked within them to help

me grow in wisdom, has never closed the door of the future to me, has never turned away and told me it was too late. In Christ, it is never too late” (“An Anniversary Waltz,” www.geraniumfarm.org/dailyemo.cfm?Emo=113).

► Using Crafton’s example, encourage adults to recall times in their lives when personal failures left them feeling cut off from a positive or hopeful future. Recall Crafton’s gratitude for her church’s ability to “see failure as the seedbed of resurrection.” Then ask:

- *Have you ever experienced a personal failure that became “the seedbed of resurrection”? What were the circumstances, and how did this experience open the door to a new future for you?*
- *What did you have to do in order to allow God to redeem a perceived failure and bring about a new beginning in your life?*

► Suggest that one of God’s purposes in prayer is to bring us from a point of failure and distress to a point of repentance and recommitment. God’s faithfulness in redeeming God’s people and their pasts deserves our trust that God will work to redeem us and restore us to a hopeful future.

Explore the Bible

► Read aloud 1 Samuel 7:2 and acknowledge the questions this verse automatically raises about why the ark of the covenant was not with God’s people at this time and why the people “lamented after the Lord.”

Using the information from scripture and the Students Guide, fill in details between Hannah’s prayer for a son in 1

Samuel 1 and the events 1 Samuel 7 records. Include such key elements as these:

- God answered Hannah’s prayer for a son, and Samuel was born. Hannah fulfilled the vow she made to God and returned Samuel to God, taking him to the priest Eli.
- Eli’s sons, Hophni and Phinehas “were scoundrels” (1 Sam 2:12) who abused their priestly offices and engaged in sexual misconduct.
- God’s messenger warned Eli that his sons’ evil would be punished. God spoke to Samuel and told him that calamity would come to the house of Eli because Eli had not dealt with his sons’ misconduct appropriately.
- The Philistines attacked the Israelites at Ebenezer and defeated them, killing 4,000.
- In an effort to turn the tide of the battle in the Israelite’s favor, Hophni and Phinehas took the ark of the covenant, the symbol of God’s presence, into the Israelite camp. But the Philistines engaged in further battle with the Israelite army, killing 30,000 foot soldiers. Hophni and Phinehas also died. The Philistines took the ark of the covenant, and when Eli heard this news, he fell over backwards, broke his neck and died.
- The ark of the covenant was anything but good news for the Philistines, who experienced one distressing situation after another as they moved it from place to place. They finally returned it to Israelite territory, to Kiriath-jearim, where it stayed for 20 years.

- During this time, the people of Israel had introduced the Canaanite fertility gods in their lives, clearly breaking their covenant with Yahweh.
- Samuel, by this time a mature young man, called on the people to repent, put away their false gods and turn their hearts only toward the Lord God. The people responded positively to Samuel's challenge.

► Ask a volunteer to read aloud 1 Samuel 7:3-4. Note that during this 20-year period of spiritual drought, the people of Israel tried to fill the spiritual void in their lives with foreign gods of the Canaanites, including the fertility gods Baals and Astartes. Ask:

- *To what do people today often turn to fill the spiritual voids in their lives?*
- *What factors today can lead to spiritual drought? How does this compare to that faced by the Israelites?*
- *What is the remedy for spiritual drought?*

► Read aloud 1 Samuel 7:5-12. Point out that Mizpah was significant to the Hebrew people because they had faced earlier judgment there and renewed their covenant to God. Lead adults to discuss the events by asking such questions as these:

- *What do you think the pouring of water signifies? What about the fasting?*
- *What else did the people do at Mizpah?*
- *What effect did this gathering have on the Philistines? What did they plan to do?*

- *What did Samuel do on behalf of the people?*
- *What did God do as a result of Samuel's prayer?*
- *What is the significance of "Ebenezer"?*

► Ask someone to read aloud 1 Samuel 7:13-14 and note the results of the events at Mizpah. Because the people confessed their unfaithfulness, repented and renewed their loyalty to and trust in God, God acted on their behalf.

Stress that this occasion of Samuel's leadership of the people at Mizpah follows an all-too-familiar pattern of the Israelites, and of us: sin resulting in confusion, distress and judgment; calling to God for help; repentance and recommitment; God's deliverance and peace. Then ask:

- *How aware are you of such cycles in your faith?*
- *How do your prayers change as you move through various stages in this cycle?*
- *What role does confession play in restoring vitality to our spiritual lives?*
- *What things distract us and cause us not to take our spiritual condition seriously?*

Apply Biblical Truth

► Suggest that we move dangerously closer to spiritual drought each time we rely on and trust in ourselves instead of God. We often quite easily believe that our successes, abilities, possessions, jobs, families and other blessings come as the result of our own goodness, intelligence and

ingenuity. And we sometimes offer our highest allegiance and worship to these things, instead of God. But none of them can fill the spiritual void in our lives. God alone can do that.

Barbara Cawthorne Crafton encourages “a lively trust in God and a lively suspicion of the self.”

“We can afford to examine our inner frailties with ruthless clarity, because we are not left to deal with their tawdriness alone. We don’t have to be afraid to name them. Only when they are exposed to the light can God help us set about dealing with them. It is when they are not named that they grow fangs. Few people are more dangerous than those with an unshakable belief in their own virtue” (“Trust in God. Suspect Yourself,” www.geraniumfarm.org/dailyemo.cfm?Emo=66).

► Affirm that one of God’s purposes in prayer is to offer us opportunities for confession, repentance and renewal of our loyalty to and trust in God. When we do, God can turn our failures into “seedbeds of resurrection,” delivering us from the past and pointing us to a positive and hopeful future.

Identity and Purpose Leaders Guide

2 Samuel 7:18-29

¹⁸Then King David went in and sat before the LORD, and said, “Who am I, O Lord GOD, and what is my house, that you have brought me thus far? ¹⁹And yet this was a small thing in your eyes, O Lord GOD; you have spoken also of your servant’s house for a great while to come. May this be instruction for the people, O Lord GOD! ²⁰And what more can David say to you? For you know your servant, O Lord GOD! ²¹Because of your promise, and according to your own heart, you have wrought all this greatness, so that your servant may know it. ²²Therefore you are great, O LORD God; for there is no one like you, and there is no God besides you, according to all that we have heard with our ears. ²³Who is like your people, like Israel? Is there another nation on earth whose God went to redeem it as a people, and to make a name for himself, doing great and awesome things for them by driving out before his people nations and their gods? ²⁴And you established your people Israel for yourself to be your people forever; and you, O LORD, became their God. ²⁵And now, O LORD God, as for the word that you have spoken concerning your servant and concerning his house, confirm it forever; do as you have promised. ²⁶Thus your name will be magnified forever in the saying, ‘The LORD of hosts is God over Israel’; and the house of your servant David will be established before you. ²⁷For you, O LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, have made this revelation to your servant, saying, ‘I will build you a

house'; therefore your servant has found courage to pray this prayer to you. ²⁸And now, O Lord GOD, you are God, and your words are true, and you have promised this good thing to your servant; ²⁹now therefore may it please you to bless the house of your servant, so that it may continue forever before you; for you, O Lord GOD, have spoken, and with your blessing shall the house of your servant be blessed forever."

Theme: Prayer reminds us that God alone is God and we find our purpose in relation to God.

Before You Teach

- ▶ Read the focal passage, the lesson from the Students Guide and the following teaching suggestions.
- ▶ If you are displaying lesson titles week by week in order to reinforce visually the overall theme of God's Purposes in Prayer, plan to add the words *Identity and Purpose*.
- ▶ Identify and secure a recording of a song that deals with an individual's struggle or determination to find out who they are. One possibility is "Who I Am," recorded by Faith Hill and written by Tom Hemby and Amy Grant. Take appropriate equipment to play the song when you introduce this Bible study.
- ▶ If possible, also secure an album by Carrie Newcomer and plan to play a song from it as you conclude this Bible study. See "Apply Biblical Truth" for some suggestions.

Listen to the songs ahead of time and select one that you believe will best communicate to your group.

As You Teach

Introduce the Lesson

- ▶ Ask adults to indicate whether they agree or disagree with the following statements and why:

Settling the issue of personal identity—who I am—is of utmost importance. We will never find purpose in life until we do.

After adults have reacted and responded to the statements, suggest that discovering personal identity is an issue for every generation and every age. Since the beginning of time, individuals have struggled with determining who they are and finding their place in the world. Relationships, education, jobs, fame, beauty, possessions, money, pleasure, success, alcohol, drugs—people look everywhere in an effort to find out who they are and why they exist.

One of the ways we both reflect and try to deal with this struggle is through music. The "Who am I?" question of life pervades music of every generation and genre. From country to rock to rap, singers give voice to the search for the identity and purpose in life that each of us seeks.

Elvis Presley asked, "Do you know who I am?"

John Denver sang, "On the road of experience I'm trying to find my own way. Sometimes I wish that I could fly away. ... And I'm looking for space and to find out who I am and I'm looking to know and understand."

In the musical “Fame,” Irene Cara begged, “Baby look at me and tell me what you see. You ain’t seen the best of me yet. . . . Remember my name. Fame. I’m gonna live forever. I’m gonna learn how to fly. High. . . . Baby, remember my name.”

► Challenge adults to help you further prove your point by recalling song lyrics that explore the question of personal identity and purpose.

After several suggestions, play the recording of Faith Hill’s “Who I Am” or another song you have chosen as an illustration of the universal search for identity and purpose.

► Introduce contemporary singer/songwriter Carrie Newcomer, who is known for lyrics that combine, rather than separate, all the parts of her life—her teaching, her family, her activism and her spirituality. “Sometimes I think you don’t choose your art form,” she said. “It chooses you and it doesn’t let you go because that’s who you are. I really believe we are most effective in this world when we’re doing something that is by nature what we love and who we are. That’s when we give our best. Life is short and I want to give the best of what I am” (“Carrie Newcomer,” www.rounder.com/publicity).

“I write about that thing that happens to human beings when they realize there is something greater than themselves. That moment could be when you’re holding a baby in your arms or walking in the woods or during some kind of formal prayer. There are different ways people access that, and that’s what I write about.

“Activism is an integral part of my work and life and I take the old Quaker adage of ‘let your life speak’ completely to heart. It means that who I am and what I believe should be

evident in the manner I choose to walk this life. This is easy to say, but very challenging to do. My activism is a natural outgrowth of how I view the world and live in it. The extent of the sorrows of this world can be overwhelming. There is so much to do, and we are only individuals. But we are all born with gifts and talents and our own small share of the burden to carry. One life can make a difference. I believe that.”

► Suggest that one of God’s purposes in prayer is to lead us to discover our identity and purpose in relation to God and God’s plan. When we do, we will, like David, discover how great God is, that God is God and we are not. We are, however, God’s people, who are called to reflect God’s compassion, grace, mercy and redemption in a very broken world.

Explore the Bible

► Set the stage for an exploration of David’s prayer from 2 Samuel 7:18-29 by noting that it was shaped by David’s concerns as a king. While David had specific circumstances in mind when he prayed this prayer, his words can help us broaden our understanding of prayer and realize that the key to our prayers lies with being God’s people and desiring what God desires. When we pray in this way, we can pray boldly, specifically and emphatically for ourselves, our families, our nation and our world and know that God will respond.

► Using information from the Students Guide, remind adults of what had happened before David prayed this prayer.

“David,” wrote Verna J. Dozier, “assumes that God wants what David wants. He feels uncomfortable living in a house of cedar while God still lives in a tent. Nathan the prophet

agrees with David's wish to change the situation, but that night the Lord sends Nathan a different message. 'I've lived in a tent all these years,' God said. 'Have I ever given anybody the idea I was dissatisfied with the arrangement?'" ("Where Will God Dwell?," www.sojo.net/index.cfm?action=magazine.article&issue=soj9407&article=940749).

David's job, Dozier concluded, was "to solidify God's work to give God's people a safe and secure place. When that is accomplished, then God will see about God's house, which will be the work of David's son."

Through Nathan's oracle, David learned that:

- He would not build a permanent house (the temple) for God. God would instead build a house (dynasty) for David.
- God would work through David's lineage to shape history and God's people.

Nathan's revelations resulted in David's prayer as recorded in 2 Samuel 7:18-29.

► Read aloud 2 Samuel 7:18-21 and lead adults to explore David's reaction to what Nathan had said by asking such questions as these:

- *How would you describe David's emotional state?*
- *How did David view himself as he talked to God about what lay in store for him?*
- *How do you think David viewed God?*

Point out that David addressed God as "Lord God" four times in these verses, and note that this very formal title was used nowhere else in 1 or 2 Samuel. Then ask:

- *Why do you think David addressed God in this way? What did this reflect?*

► Ask adults to define *doxology*. Note that Webster defines it as a "liturgical expression of praise to God." If your church regularly sings the traditional doxology during worship, ask adults to suggest why. If you do not, ask them to suggest reasons why. Then ask them to recall the words to the traditional doxology.

Note that the writer of the Students Guide referred to 2 Samuel 7:22-24 as David's "doxology to God." Ask someone to read aloud these verses. Then ask:

- *How would you describe David's emotional state at this point in his prayer?*
- *What did David say about God?*
- *How did David view Israel as a result of his view of God?*

Note the comments in the Students Guide that explain more about Hebrew prayer. While we sometimes carefully guard our words and fail to express honestly our thoughts and feelings when we pray, Hebrew prayer encompasses the spectrum of human emotions. The Psalms offer a number of examples.

To reinforce this idea, ask adults to spend a few minutes scanning the Psalms in their Bibles and identifying the various emotions they find. Note the honesty of expression

we can find in these prayers of ancient Hebrew people, who did not feel the need to “clean up” their prayers or use certain words and phrases when they talked to God. Then ask:

- *Are there any feelings or emotions that you think God does not want us to express in prayer? If so, what are they? If not, why not?*

► Call attention to the shift in David’s language beginning in verse 25 of this prayer. Read verses 25-29 aloud and ask adults to identify the imperatives David puts before God (confirm it forever; do as you have promised). Then ask:

- *On what basis did David make these bold demands of God?*
- *Why did David expect these results?*
- *What reaction do you have to David’s tone toward God? Do you think David was being disrespectful? Brash? Too demanding?*
- *Do you think David was trying to bully or intimidate God? Why or why not?*

Apply Biblical Truth

► Display the following statement and ask adults to respond to it in light of insights from David’s prayer in 2 Samuel 7:18-29:

Committing yourself is a way of finding out who you are. A person finds his or her identity by identifying.

► If possible, locate singer/songwriter Carrie Newcomer’s 1998 release “My True Name.” The title song includes lyrics that speak to our search for identity and purpose and the necessity of walking away from old names and false self-identities in order to be open to God’s Spirit.

To close this Bible study, play this song for your group. Before doing so, ask adults to listen for key themes and lines, including “But you saw to my center past every impostor and you whispered My True Name.”

Or, if you prefer, select another song from this or another artist that encourages us to find our purpose and identity in relationship to God.

► Close with prayer, asking God to guide you as you seek your identity and purpose in relation to God and God’s purposes.

Discernment and Wisdom

Leaders Guide

1 Kings 3:3-15

³Solomon loved the LORD, walking in the statutes of his father David; only, he sacrificed and offered incense at the high places. ⁴The king went to Gibeon to sacrifice there, for that was the principal high place; Solomon used to offer a thousand burnt offerings on that altar. ⁵At Gibeon the LORD appeared to Solomon in a dream by night; and God said, "Ask what I should give you." ⁶And Solomon said, "You have shown great and steadfast love to your servant my father David, because he walked before you in faithfulness, in righteousness, and in uprightness of heart toward you; and you have kept for him this great and steadfast love, and have given him a son to sit on his throne today. ⁷And now, O LORD my God, you have made your servant king in place of my father David, although I am only a little child; I do not know how to go out or come in. ⁸And your servant is in the midst of the people whom you have chosen, a great people, so numerous they cannot be numbered or counted. ⁹Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil; for who can govern this your great people?" ¹⁰It pleased the Lord that Solomon had asked this. ¹¹God said to him, "Because you have asked this, and have not asked for yourself long life or riches, or for the life of your enemies, but have asked for yourself understanding to discern what is right, ¹²I now do according to your word. Indeed I give you a wise and

discerning mind; no one like you has been before you and no one like you shall arise after you. ¹³I give you also what you have not asked, both riches and honor all your life; no other king shall compare with you. ¹⁴If you will walk in my ways, keeping my statutes and my commandments, as your father David walked, then I will lengthen your life." ¹⁵Then Solomon awoke; it had been a dream. He came to Jerusalem where he stood before the ark of the covenant of the LORD. He offered up burnt offerings and offerings of well-being, and provided a feast for all his servants.

Theme: Prayer stemming from proper motives produces godly wisdom.

Before You Teach

- ▶ Read the focal passage, the lesson from the Students Guide and the following teaching suggestions.
- ▶ If you are displaying lesson titles week by week in order to reinforce visually the overall theme of God's Purposes in Prayer, plan to add the words *Discernment and Wisdom*.
- ▶ The following online article includes ideas suggested for introducing and applying this Bible study. You may wish to read it in its entirety:

"Beyond 'Prayer Requests,'" (www.christianitytoday.com/biblestudies/areas/biblestudies/articles/040701.html).

As You Teach

Introduce the Lesson

► Begin by relating an incident from the ministerial experiences of Wayne Jacobsen. He wrote about a woman who, at a meeting in someone's home, told the group about her daughter's plan to move in with her boyfriend. She asked the group to pray that God would not allow that to happen.

"I don't think I can pray that for you," Jacobsen replied, to the shock and dismay of those gathered around the table.

"You'd have thought I'd just cussed by the way the mouths around the table soundlessly fell open," he recalled ("Beyond 'Prayer Requests,'" www.christianitytoday.com/biblestudies/areas/biblestudies/articles/040701.html).

Jacobsen went on to clarify his position, assuring the woman and the others in the group that he understood why she would want God to stop her daughter from taking that step. However, he said, he wondered "whether asking God to override someone's ability to make moral choices isn't akin to witchcraft."

He quickly continued by suggesting that the group instead pray that the daughter would become aware of God's presence and would understand with clarity the choice she was about to make. He also suggested that they pray that the woman would understand better how to trust God and love her daughter, "even if she makes the stupidest mistake of her young life."

The woman gratefully acknowledged, "That's exactly what I need."

► Suggest that a significant lesson in learning more about God's purposes in prayer is realizing that we some-

times spout prayer requests rather thoughtlessly, revealing what we want to happen rather than asking God to do what is in keeping with God's plan and purposes.

Jacobsen identified six types of prayer requests that reflect more of our selfish desires than the desires of God:

- *The trivial.* For example, our prayer that rain does not spoil our outdoor plans might run counter to those of a nearby farmer whose crops depend on getting rain at that particular time. We should pray with the larger picture in view and not "trivialize the awesome gift of prayer," Jacobsen said.
- *The self-motivated.* Praying that our son or daughter who volunteered for military service not be called up for duty in wartime is selfish, Jacobsen said. We should not ask God to trump God's purposes for our convenience.
- *The controlling.* This kind of selfish prayer asks God to make other people act like we want them to act. God does not force people to adhere to the divine will, so why should we expect God to make them act according to our will?
- *The manipulative.* People can sometimes fall to the temptation of this kind of selfish prayer when praying publicly in groups. For example, in a church prayer meeting, the chair of a prominent committee who advocated the approval of a particular project prayed that all church members would see the wisdom of voting in favor of the project.
- *The blaming.* Jacobsen recalled a group in his former church praying for an infertile woman. They

prayed that God would change the woman's husband, because they believed he was not godly enough to become a father, and that was the reason the woman had not become pregnant. Such prayers usually miss the point completely.

- *The mass-produced.* Just about anyone with email these days receives prayer requests to pray for people they do not know and situations they are not involved in. The strong implication in such requests often is, the more people we can get to pray, the higher the likelihood that God will answer our prayers like we want God to. Scripture does not support this theory. "God's answers to prayers are not based on a tally sheet," Jacobsen asserted.

► Call attention to the quotation in the Students Guide from Richard Foster: "To pray is to change. Prayer is the central avenue God uses to transform us. If we are unwilling to change, we will abandon prayer as a noticeable characteristic of our lives."

Remind adults that prayer is an avenue God uses to change us and equip us to become and do those things for which God has created us. This was true in the life of Solomon.

Explore the Bible

► Ask adults to respond to this question:

- *If you could ask God for anything and have God's assurance that you would receive it, what would you ask for?*

Note that this was the opportunity God presented to Solomon. His response offers us more insight into God's purposes in prayer.

► Establish a foundation for examining Solomon's prayer by noting he had ascended to the throne following his father, David. His encounter with God that resulted in this prayer came very early in his reign.

Ask someone to read aloud 1 Kings 3:3-5. Point out that while this account begins by stressing Solomon's love for God, it also includes more than a hint of reservation. Solomon had established an alliance with Egypt, and to seal the agreement, Solomon took as his wife the Egyptian Pharaoh's daughter. Though Solomon "loved the Lord," he nonetheless disobeyed God and married a foreign woman.

Another note of reservation comes with the reference to "high places." Gibeon was considered the major high place during the reigns of David and Solomon and had been the site of the tabernacle for a period of time. While Israelites sometimes worshipped at high places such as Gibeon, these sites were most often associated with the Canaanites, whose high places included elements for ritual worship of their gods Baal, Ashtoreth, Asherah and Anath. We learn later in 1 Kings 11 that Solomon built high places dedicated to the gods Chemosh and Molech, and perhaps the gods of other foreign women he had married through alliances with neighboring countries.

Though God had forbidden Israel to take on the religious customs of those in other nations with whom they interacted and had also forbidden marriages outside their people, Solomon was guilty of doing both.

► Ask:

- *Can we still love God while behaving inconsistently, compromising our convictions and acting hypocritically?*
- *Must we be completely void of hypocrisy and sinful thoughts before we can pray?*

Stress that though our actions do not always reflect the beliefs we profess and our choices do not reflect the love for God that we feel, God nonetheless still loves us and responds to our love. If we waited for our lives to be free from inconsistencies and problems before we prayed, we would never pray. In spite of his disobedience, poor choices and hypocrisy, God loved Solomon and responded to Solomon's deeply-felt but tainted love. God initiated conversation with Solomon in a dream and in effect offered Solomon a blank check. Solomon's response provides us with wise instruction for our own prayers.

► Ask someone to read aloud 1 Kings 3:6-9. Then lead adults to discuss Solomon's prayer and what it teaches us by asking such questions as these:

- *How did Solomon begin his prayer?*
- *For what did he express gratitude?*
- *What did Solomon acknowledge about himself?*
- *How would you characterize Solomon's tone?*
- *What did Solomon ask of God? Why did he feel this need so deeply?*
- *How do you define discernment, or wisdom?*

- *What do you think Solomon meant when he asked this of God?*

► Read aloud 1 Kings 3:10-15 and note God's reaction to Solomon's request. God was "pleased." Then ask:

- *In addition to agreeing to give Solomon what he had asked, what else did God promise to do for him?*
- *Under what conditions did God grant Solomon these things?*

Apply Biblical Truth

► Affirm that prayer enables us first to discover what God is doing and then determine God's expectations for us. "Through the vital communication of prayer," Wayne Jacobsen wrote, God "transforms us in the process. Prayer, therefore, is not so much a means of manipulating the master plan, but of being shaped by the master's hand."

Jacobsen offered some guidelines that can help direct our prayers "to foster a transformational, ongoing walk with God."

- Focus prayer on people involved instead of on telling God what actions we expect God to take. When our requests of God are so specific and narrow, we remove the opportunity to discern God's desires in the matter.
- Seek God's perspective. We are sometimes guilty of using prayer to give voice to what we think is best and asking God to bless that and take those actions, rather than waiting in silence to allow God to

speak to us and show us more of God's plan for a particular person or situation.

- Let trust, not fear, fuel your prayers. Solomon had experienced God's faithfulness to his father, David, and knew God could be trusted. Long before Solomon made any request of God, he acknowledged God's steadfast love and realized that like his father, he too could depend upon it.

Jacobsen observed that we sometimes fail to follow up with our prayers "because we have so little hope that our prayers will affect much." But if our purpose in prayer is to discover God's purposes, then our initial prayer is but a beginning point. "If nothing has happened since," Jacobsen advised, "we can ask God for wisdom."

► Close by reading aloud the following prayer, which was given as a blessing given to Henri Nouwen, prolific author, Catholic priest and theologian who spent the last decade of his life as a member of L'Arche Daybreak, a community for the disabled, in Toronto Canada.

"May all your expectations be frustrated; may all your plans be thwarted; may all your desires be withered into nothingness, that you might experience the powerlessness and poverty of a child and sing and dance in the love of God the Father, the Son and the Spirit" (www.lifestream.org/awords01.html).

Vision and Deliverance Leaders Guide

2 Kings 6:8-23

⁸Once when the king of Aram was at war with Israel, he took counsel with his officers. He said, "At such and such a place shall be my camp." ⁹But the man of God sent word to the king of Israel, "Take care not to pass this place, because the Arameans are going down there." ¹⁰The king of Israel sent word to the place of which the man of God spoke. More than once or twice he warned such a place so that it was on the alert. ¹¹The mind of the king of Aram was greatly perturbed because of this; he called his officers and said to them, "Now tell me who among us sides with the king of Israel?" ¹²Then one of his officers said, "No one, my lord king. It is Elisha, the prophet in Israel, who tells the king of Israel the words that you speak in your bedchamber." ¹³He said, "Go and find where he is; I will send and seize him." He was told, "He is in Dothan." ¹⁴So he sent horses and chariots there and a great army; they came by night, and surrounded the city. ¹⁵When an attendant of the man of God rose early in the morning and went out, an army with horses and chariots was all around the city. His servant said, "Alas, master! What shall we do?" ¹⁶He replied, "Do not be afraid, for there are more with us than there are with them." ¹⁷Then Elisha prayed: "O LORD, please open his eyes that he may see." So the LORD opened the eyes of the servant, and he saw; the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha. ¹⁸When the Arameans came down

against him, Elisha prayed to the LORD, and said, "Strike this people, please, with blindness." So he struck them with blindness as Elisha had asked.
¹⁹Elisha said to them, "This is not the way, and this is not the city; follow me, and I will bring you to the man whom you seek." And he led them to Samaria. ²⁰As soon as they entered Samaria, Elisha said, "O LORD, open the eyes of these men so that they may see." The LORD opened their eyes, and they saw that they were inside Samaria. ²¹When the king of Israel saw them he said to Elisha, "Father, shall I kill them? Shall I kill them?" ²²He answered, "No! Did you capture with your sword and your bow those whom you want to kill? Set food and water before them so that they may eat and drink; and let them go to their master." ²³So he prepared for them a great feast; after they ate and drank, he sent them on their way, and they went to their master. And the Arameans no longer came raiding into the land of Israel.

Theme: Prayer invites God to intervene for us as we face life's challenges.

Before You Teach

- ▶ Read the focal passage, the lesson from the Students Guide and the following teaching suggestions.
- ▶ If you are displaying lesson titles week by week in order to reinforce visually the overall theme of God's Purposes in Prayer, plan to add the words *Vision and Deliverance*.

▶ The following article from EthicsDaily.com includes an illustration suggested for introducing this Bible study. You may wish to read it in its entirety:

"Illiterate Ethicist," (www.ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=5557).

▶ Note that this scripture is at first glance primarily a story of battle between two kings. Important lessons for us, however, come not from the battle story, but from what happens essentially behind the scenes when Elisha prayed and God responded with spiritual resources only eyes of faith could see. Plan to devote extra time to exploring the truths about prayer that this story reveals and the conclusions we can draw and apply to our lives and circumstances.

As You Teach

Introduce the Lesson

▶ Call attention to a board or poster on which you have printed *Dios aprieta pero no ahogar*. Ask adults if anyone can translate or explain the phrase. Then explain that its meaning will become apparent as you relate the following true story.

▶ Use this example from the life of EthicDaily.com columnist and theology professor Miguel De La Torre. His mother, uneducated and illiterate, fled the political turmoil of Cuba with him when he was a baby in 1958. Upon arrival in the United States, she did whatever was necessary to get a job and feed her family.

"Do you know how to waitress tables?' she would be asked. 'But of course, I have a high school diploma from

the old country,' she confidently replied. In reality, she simply memorized some important phrases found on most menus. She did get the job, and I, her son, got fed" ("Illiterate Ethicist, www.ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=5557).

Just as God did not liberate Hagar from her oppression but empowered her "to survive and endure the institutionalized forces responsible for her marginalization" by providing a spring in the desert where none existed before, De La Torre believes God also enabled his mother, a poor Latina woman, "who could neither speak the language nor wait tables, to 'make a way out of no way' by waitressing.

"My mother's only hope was to rely on a God that always provided the means and resources to meet the harsh realities of life. She wrote no grand thesis on the subject, but taught me this concept via her oft-stated aphorism: *Dios aprieta pero no ahogar* (God squeezes but does not choke)."

► Then ask:

- *Do you ever feel as though life's circumstances are squeezing you to the point of choking?*
- *When in particular have you felt that way? What were the circumstances? What was your response?*
- *How do such circumstances affect your prayers?*
- *How do your prayers affect the circumstances?*

► Affirm that scripture encourages us repeatedly to take our concerns to God and ask for God's help and deliverance. Then ask:

- *Do you think that when we through faith ask God to intervene in the circumstances of our lives we can "manipulate" or "control" God?*
- *What is the appropriate way to ask God to intervene in our lives without approaching God as something of a heavenly Santa Claus who can give us what we want?*

Explore the Bible

► Introduce the events recorded in 2 Kings 6:8-23 by noting that this period marked a time of transition for the nation of Israel. The prophet Elijah, their spiritual leader, had served under the kings Ahab and Ahaziah and had fervently and consistently pushed the people toward an undivided loyalty to Yahweh. In the final scriptural account of Elijah's life, Elisha, his disciple and successor, witnessed him being carried away by a chariot of fire. Just before he left, Elijah asked Elisha what he wanted, and Elisha asked for a double portion of Elijah's spirit, which he received. Elisha was without a doubt an important and effective spiritual leader, yet many scholars believe his ministry lacked the surprising and amazing prophetic wonders of his predecessor. He was referred to as the "man of God" more often than as a prophet. These events in Elisha's ministry occurred when the Arameans threatened Israel.

► Read aloud 2 Kings 6:8-10 and note the reference to Elisha in verse 9. Also point out that it was more than coincidence that Elisha knew about the Arameans' planned attack, because verse 10 states that the king of Israel was able to warn the place they planned to attack "more than once or twice," indicating that Elisha had first warned him.

► Ask someone to read aloud 2 Kings 6:11-14 and lead adults to reconstruct the sequence of events by asking such questions as these:

- *When the king of Aram's plans to attack Israel continued to be thwarted, what did he assume?*
- *Why do you think the officer in the Aramean army did not immediately reveal to his king the identity of the Israeli king's informant? Why did he wait until the king asked?*
- *When the Aramean king found out that Elisha had somehow known of his plans and had warned Israel's king, what did he do?*
- *Why do you think Elisha did not warn the king of Israel about the Arameans' move to surround Dothan, as he had done on previous occasions?*

► Read aloud 2 Kings 6:15-19; then ask:

- *What was Elisha's response when he learned the city was under siege?*
- *What was his attendant's response?*
- *Why was Elisha so calm?*
- *What did Elisha ask God to do for his attendant?*

► Using information from the Students Guide, point out the significance of "fire" in both Hebrew and Christian scripture. Then ask:

- *Why would the "chariots of fire" (v 17) have been especially significant for Elisha?*
- *What did Elisha do when the Aramean army descended on the city?*
- *What did God do in response to Elisha's prayer?*
- *What happened next?*

Reinforce Elisha's partnership role in the process of protecting the city from destruction at the hands of the Aramean army. The presence of spiritual protection did not change the earthly circumstances immediately. Elisha had to act on the knowledge he had.

► Ask a volunteer to read aloud 2 Kings 6:20-23. Point out the nature of Elisha's prayers in verses 17-20. He asked God to open the eyes of his attendant (v 17) and strike the Arameans blind (v 18). He later prayed for God to open the eyes of the Arameans (v 20).

Note the response of Israel's king to the presence of the Aramean army. Explain that had he taken them prisoner, he would have been allowed to slaughter them, according to a ban that existed. However, Elisha reminded him that he (the king) had done nothing to capture the army and take them prisoner. That had come at the hand of God and because of Elisha's subsequent spiritual perception and leadership. Elisha advised the king to extend hospitality to the prisoners by preparing a meal for them and allowing them to return to their king.

Apply Biblical Truth

► Reinforce the fact that as for Elisha, deliverance for us comes when we have the perception and sensitivity to view life's circumstances through eyes of faith. Prayer is both a channel through which we gain new vision and through which we seek and find God's deliverance in the face of life's challenges.

► Call attention to the conclusions about prayer as found in the "Seeing Through Eyes of Faith" section of the Students Guide. Review each of these conclusions and allow adults adequate time to respond to and discuss them. You may want to ask volunteers to read these aloud, one at a time, and ask adults whether they agree or disagree and why.

► Lead adults to consider these conclusions more personally. Explain that to close this Bible study, you are going to read aloud a series of statements. Ask them to weigh each statement and decide the degree to which it is true in their lives.

- I believe that God wants to be involved in my everyday life and initiates that involvement.
- I believe that God often involves others in circumstances in order to help resolve them. Sometimes God wants to use me to help resolve difficult situations in the lives of others.
- I believe that God is closely and intimately concerned with the circumstances and challenges we face.
- I believe that God is always at work, and I can discern God at work when I see through eyes of faith.

- I believe that God's desire is to show mercy in and find redemptive solutions for the problems and circumstances we face.

► Close by voicing a prayer affirming the above statements of faith. Ask God to provide you with faith-growing opportunities and spiritual vision to see God at work in the everyday circumstances of your lives.

Faith and Possibility

Leaders Guide

2 Kings 20:1-11

¹In those days Hezekiah became sick and was at the point of death. The prophet Isaiah son of Amoz came to him, and said to him, "Thus says the LORD: Set your house in order, for you shall die; you shall not recover."²Then Hezekiah turned his face to the wall and prayed to the LORD: ³"Remember now, O LORD, I implore you, how I have walked before you in faithfulness with a whole heart, and have done what is good in your sight." Hezekiah wept bitterly. ⁴Before Isaiah had gone out of the middle court, the word of the LORD came to him: ⁵"Turn back, and say to Hezekiah prince of my people, Thus says the LORD, the God of your ancestor David: I have heard your prayer, I have seen your tears; indeed, I will heal you; on the third day you shall go up to the house of the LORD. ⁶I will add fifteen years to your life. I will deliver you and this city out of the hand of the king of Assyria; I will defend this city for my own sake and for my servant David's sake."⁷Then Isaiah said, "Bring a lump of figs. Let them take it and apply it to the boil, so that he may recover."⁸Hezekiah said to Isaiah, "What shall be the sign that the LORD will heal me, and that I shall go up to the house of the LORD on the third day?"⁹Isaiah said, "This is the sign to you from the LORD, that the LORD will do the thing that he has promised: the shadow has now advanced ten intervals; shall it retreat ten intervals?"¹⁰Hezekiah answered, "It is normal for the shadow to lengthen ten intervals; rather let the shadow retreat

ten intervals."¹¹The prophet Isaiah cried to the LORD; and he brought the shadow back the ten intervals, by which the sun had declined on the dial of Ahaz.

Theme: Prayer recognizes that restoration, healing and wholeness come from God.

Before You Teach

- ▶ Read the focal passage, the lesson from the Students Guide and the following teaching suggestions.
- ▶ If you are displaying lesson titles week by week in order to reinforce visually the overall theme of God's Purposes in Prayer, plan to add the words *Faith and Possibility*.
- ▶ This Bible study raises deeply felt questions about the connections among faith, prayer and healing. Most people have personal experiences with serious illness and its effects, their own or that of family members and/or close friends. Consider the personal experiences of those in your Bible study group as you plan to lead this discussion, realizing that it may be painful or difficult for some in your group. Consider also how this discussion and those in your group can become sources of strength and healing for those who may be currently struggling.

Be prepared for honest displays of emotion, including anger, doubt, cynicism and grief. Allow adequate time for those in your group to discuss their personal experiences

with prayer during times of serious illness, and encourage them to become for each other sources of spiritual and emotional strength as they struggle with the ways God answers our prayers for healing.

► The following online articles include illustrations and additional information suggested for introducing this Bible study and helping adults better understand God's responses to our prayers for healing. You may wish to read them in their entirety:

"Praying for Hope," (www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2000/008/4.46.html);

"To the Limits of Our Faith," (www.sojo.net/index.cfm?action=magazine.article&issue=soj9505&article=950523).

As You Teach

Introduce the Lesson

► Lead adults to begin thinking about the connections among faith, prayer and healing and to consider how they think about healing and wholeness by summarizing the experiences of Nancy Guthrie. Refer to the complete story online as necessary for additional details. Or, if you prefer, relate a story from your own personal experiences that will convey similar ideas.

When a geneticist told Nancy Guthrie and her husband that their newborn daughter, Hope, had a rare metabolic disorder called Zellweger syndrome, her initial reaction was, "This is my fault. I didn't pray enough for a healthy baby" ("Praying for Hope," www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2000/008/4.46.html). Because Hope was born without a particular subcellular particle, her body's systems would become

toxic, shut down and eventually cause her death. The geneticist explained that most children born with this condition live less than six months.

The Guthries grew to understand that Hope's condition was pervasive, with every cell of her body marked by Zellweger. Unlike a disease that had invaded an otherwise healthy body, the syndrome had been present even as Hope was forming prenatally.

As Guthrie and her husband prayed in the weeks following Hope's diagnosis, she wrote that they were "profoundly aware of our utter dependence upon God. We were powerless to change our situation and desperate to see God work." They also wondered, "How do you pray for a child who is going to die?"

When they learned that church members had been asked to pray that God would miraculously heal their daughter, Guthrie told someone, "That is not how we feel led to pray." She acknowledged, "We did not ask God for that. Maybe we were afraid to pray that, or to expect it, when the diagnosis seemed so sure and grim."

A few weeks after Hope's birth, Guthrie's Bible study group focused on the story of Hagar, the slave who had run away from Abraham and Sarah because of Sarah's harsh treatment of her. While Hagar wanted to escape her difficult situation, God told her instead to return to it and submit to it. Guthrie felt the same call from God: "I knew God was calling me to submit to the journey we faced with Hope," instead of asking God to change the situation.

Like the Guthries, those close to them struggled with how to pray for Hope. Shortly after her birth and diagnosis, their then nine-year-old son asked, "Is there any chance that

Hope might live?” He, too, was struggling with whether to expect God to heal his sister. “I told him God can do anything,” but God “might choose to heal her by making her perfect in heaven. And whether she was here with us or in heaven ... she was in God’s hands.”

Hope lived 199 days. “From God’s perspective,” Guthrie said, “it was not a tragedy for her to die. It *feels* like a tragedy to me, but I find God’s perspective reflected in Isaiah 57:1-2: ‘The righteous pass away; the godly often die before their time. And no one seems to care or wonder why. No one seems to understand that God is protecting them from the evil to come. For the godly who die will rest in peace.’”

Guthrie affirmed that we can ask God for healing. Through her daughter’s condition and subsequent death, however, she learned also to pray, “‘God, give us your perspective on sickness, on loss, on death, on healing.’ I don’t want to change God’s mind,” she wrote, because God’s thoughts are perfect. Neither does she want to change God’s timing or God’s plan, she said, because those, too, are perfect. Instead, she wants to think God’s thoughts, accept God’s timing and embrace God’s plan.

► Reinforce the truth that while God can and does heal and can make the impossible possible, not all prayers for physical healing are answered. Suggest that through the experiences of an ancient king, Hezekiah, we can struggle honestly with questions about faith, prayer and healing and come to a fuller understanding of God’s perspective and purposes. Ask adults to consider silently these questions:

- *What possibilities for restoration, healing and wholeness exist beyond the physical realm?*

- *How are people of faith to live when the possibility of physical death resulting from illness seems certain?*

► Note that though Hezekiah’s faith later faltered, the primary purpose of scripture is not to tell the stories of faithful people but to point to the faithfulness of God. God is faithful to bring restoration, healing and wholeness, sometimes in ways we do not fully understand or expect.

Explore the Bible

► Introduce King Hezekiah by asking volunteers to read aloud 2 Kings 18:1-7 and 2 Chronicles 31:20b-21. Remind adults that Hezekiah’s father, King Ahaz, was a weak leader and had left to his son a nation that was spiritually and morally compromised. King Hezekiah, under the prophet Isaiah’s influence, had begun to institute spiritual reforms. He cleansed the Temple, reorganized worship and made efforts to stamp out idolatry and superstition. He also worked to fortify Jerusalem’s defenses.

► Read aloud 2 Kings 20:1-3 and note that Hezekiah at this point was 39 years old, 14 years into his reign. His nation faced an imminent threat, as Sennacherib had conquered 46 walled Judean towns and had deported over 200,000 residents. The city of Jerusalem was now under siege, and Sennacherib had demanded that the Judeans transfer their complete loyalty from Yahweh to him. In the face of this crisis, Hezekiah became ill to the point of death.

Point out that the prophet Isaiah advised Hezekiah to put his affairs in order, telling him that he would die. This was more than speculation. Isaiah said, “Thus says the LORD” (v 1). Many in that culture believed that declaratory words

like these held such power that once they were spoken, they could not be retracted.

Ask:

- *What was Hezekiah's response to Isaiah's declaration?*
- *Have you or someone you know faced a similar outlook? What was your/their immediate reaction?*

► Ask someone to read aloud 2 Kings 20:4-7. Review the sequence of events it records, and note the highly unusual reversal of prophetic judgment. Lead adults to discuss what happened by asking such questions as these:

- *How was Israel's fate bound up with Hezekiah's fate?*
- *How do you understand God's promise to "add fifteen years" to Hezekiah's life? Do you think we are to understand this literally?*

Point out God's promise to Hezekiah to deliver him "and this city" (v 6), and note that it was for God's own sake and for David's sake. Hezekiah, by contrast, had appealed to God based on his own character and personal merits and achievements (v 3).

Reinforce the connection between Hezekiah's healing and the deliverance of Jerusalem. Sennacherib had tried to get the people to transfer their loyalty from Yahweh to God. God responded to this challenge by striking down his army. Further, God had earlier promised to preserve David's lineage. Manasseh, Hezekiah's heir, was born three years after Hezekiah was healed. And considering the terribly

corrupt practices the people had begun during the reign of Hezekiah's father, Ahaz, Hezekiah no doubt had much work yet to do in leading the people to return to life as God intended.

Affirm that while numbers were regularly used symbolically in Hebrew culture, it is difficult to determine in this case whether the 15 years God promised Hezekiah were symbolic or literal. If Hezekiah indeed lived an additional 15 years, those years would have essentially doubled his reign and certainly lengthened the time during which he could have led effectively and further enacted his reforms.

► Read aloud 2 Kings 20:8-11 and acknowledge that "the sign" Hezekiah requested (v 8) is a source of debate among biblical scholars. As the Students Guide notes, "The word translated here as 'dial' can be translated as 'steps' or 'degrees'; most recent scholarship interprets this as a series of steps on which the sun marked the progression of time by casting a shadow."

Suggest that the point is that, while a shadow normally lengthens, it does not normally recede. Hezekiah asked that something quite unnatural happen. Isaiah prayed to God, and the very unnatural thing Hezekiah had requested did indeed happen.

Apply Biblical Truth

► Lead adults to consider and discuss their understandings of God's purposes in prayer when we pray for restoration, healing and wholeness. Relate some of the ideas from the online article "To the Limits of Our Faith" to generate discussion. Elaine V. Emeth, the writer, distinguished between cautious and courageous prayer this way: "In cautious prayer, we define the healing and put God to the

test. In bold, courageous prayer of faith, we allow God to define the healing and ourselves to be changed by our encounter with God.”

It is natural, she wrote, to pray, “Loving God, prove that you are with us, that you are our God, that you hear our cry and you care. Prove this by meeting our heart’s desire. Answer our prayer, meet our demands, fulfill our hopes, and we will be reassured that you are a powerful God and you are with us.”

This prayer, though honest and heart-felt, “is centered in our need to understand, to be in control, and to find relief—rather than being centered in God’s will.”

Emeth encouraged an alternative way of praying that pushes “the limits of personal faith with courageous prayer characterized by expecting the unexpected: healing through being ‘broad-sided by grace.’ We have to risk letting God be in charge and our being changed by our encounter with God.”

She offered several guidelines for this kind of prayer for healing:

- **Trust your heart to lead you to the heart of God.**

“Those who really let God hear about their pain, grief, outrage, or fatigue often feel or hear a response in the quiet of their emptied hearts. This is not complaining *at* God, but pouring out our hearts fully, without editing our prayer so that it’s ‘nice.’”

- **Trust God to meet you in the unexpected person, the unacceptable situation, the rejected feeling, the prayer you are afraid to pray.**

“What situations are unacceptable by our rules for God? When children die? When a young mother or father has cancer? Accidents, disability, disease? When someone is a victim of crime? The infinite, true God cannot be our God unless we give up the job. Of course we abhor loss and senseless suffering, but we have to remember who is God, that God has created the world and allowed humankind free will. ... When I protest, ‘It’s not supposed to be this way,’ sometimes God might agree, but it is human limitation, not God’s limitation, that is at issue. If I expect God to act according to my rules, then I am trying to reverse the right order. Right relationship is foundational to authentic spirituality.”

- **Trust that God’s will for us is good, far beyond our comprehension, or even our imagination.**

“When we pray for healing, rather than focusing on relief or a cure” Emeth wrote, “we have to let God define the healing, trusting that God cares about the whole person. ... When God defines the healing, it may or may not include a cure for disease or a remission, but there will always be healing. This greater wholeness will be recognizable. ... The healing that comes first may be physical, emotional, or spiritual, but it will require participation and a faithful response on our part.”

- **Trust that God is with us.**

“God is with us,” Emeth concluded, “but God’s living water respects the spiritual dams that we build. When we thirst for healing, are we willing to open the floodgates through direct and honest prayer, not

knowing God’s definition of healing in a particular situation and what it will require of us?”

► Conclude by posing again the questions you introduced earlier:

- *What possibilities for restoration, healing and wholeness exist beyond the physical realm?*
- *How are people of faith to live when the possibility of physical death resulting from illness seems certain?*

Dependence and Intervention Leaders Guide

2 Chronicles 20:1-19

¹After this the Moabites and Ammonites, and with them some of the Meunites, came against Jehoshaphat for battle. ²Messengers came and told Jehoshaphat, “A great multitude is coming against you from Edom, from beyond the sea; already they are at Hazazon-tamar.” (that is, En-gedi). ³Jehoshaphat was afraid; he set himself to seek the LORD, and proclaimed a fast throughout all Judah. ⁴Judah assembled to seek help from the LORD; from all the towns of Judah they came to seek the LORD. ⁵Jehoshaphat stood in the assembly of Judah and Jerusalem, in the house of the LORD, before the new court, ⁶and said, “O LORD, God of our ancestors, are you not God in heaven? Do you not rule over all the kingdoms of the nations? In your hand are power and might, so that no one is able to withstand you. ⁷Did you not, O our God, drive out the inhabitants of this land before your people Israel, and give it forever to the descendants of your friend Abraham? ⁸They have lived in it, and in it have built you a sanctuary for your name, saying, ⁹“If disaster comes upon us, the sword, judgment, or pestilence, or famine, we will stand before this house, and before you, for your name is in this house, and cry to you in our distress, and you will hear and save.” ¹⁰See now, the people of Ammon, Moab, and Mount Seir, whom you would not let Israel invade when they came from the land of Egypt, and whom they avoided and did not destroy—

¹¹they reward us by coming to drive us out of your possession that you have given us to inherit. ¹²O our God, will you not execute judgment upon them? For we are powerless against this great multitude that is coming against us. We do not know what to do, but our eyes are on you.” ¹³Meanwhile all Judah stood before the LORD, with their little ones, their wives, and their children. ¹⁴Then the spirit of the LORD came upon Jahaziel son of Zechariah, son of Benaiah, son of Jeiel, son of Mattaniah, a Levite of the sons of Asaph, in the middle of the assembly. ¹⁵He said, “Listen, all Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem, and King Jehoshaphat: Thus says the LORD to you: ‘Do not fear or be dismayed at this great multitude; for the battle is not yours but God’s. ¹⁶Tomorrow go down against them; they will come up by the ascent of Ziz; you will find them at the end of the valley, before the wilderness of Jeruel. ¹⁷This battle is not for you to fight; take your position, stand still, and see the victory of the LORD on your behalf, O Judah and Jerusalem.’ Do not fear or be dismayed; tomorrow go out against them, and the LORD will be with you.” ¹⁸Then Jehoshaphat bowed down with his face to the ground, and all Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem fell down before the LORD, worshiping the LORD. ¹⁹And the Levites, of the Kohathites and the Korahites, stood up to praise the LORD, the God of Israel, with a very loud voice.

Theme: Prayer recognizes our dependence upon God and God’s ability to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves.

Before You Teach

- ▶ Read the focal passage, the lesson from the Students Guide and the following teaching suggestions.
- ▶ If you are displaying lesson titles week by week in order to reinforce visually the overall theme of God’s Purposes in Prayer, plan to add the words *Dependence and Intervention*.
- ▶ The following article from EthicsDaily.com includes an illustration suggested for closing this Bible study. You may wish to read the article in its entirety:

“Grieve, But Grow!” (www.ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=3180).

As You Teach

Introduce the Lesson

- ▶ Guide adults to begin thinking about the concepts of dependence and intervention by recalling the film “Forrest Gump.” Both the title character and Forrest’s childhood friend, Jenny, provide us with moving illustrations of how a person’s life can turn around when someone else intervenes and does for them things they cannot do for themselves.

For Forrest, intervention came at the hands of his mother. It happened early and often, and it made all the difference. For Jenny, intervention came, albeit late and not before she had suffered senselessly.

Raised in an alcoholic’s home and sexually abused by her father, Jenny’s life has been anything but happy. Because

she never learned basic life skills as a child, she knew only to run from her pain and subsequently made a series of poor choices as she grew up.

Years later, as a scarred and angry young woman, Jenny returns to her run-down childhood home and stands outside. In one of the film's most moving scenes, she picks up some rocks from the road and begins hurling them at the house where she endured so much pain and unhappiness. She continues to pick up rocks and throw them as hard as she can at the house, until finally she is completely exhausted. Falling to the ground, she begins to cry.

Forrest, who has been standing by watching, goes to her and says, "For some things, there just aren't enough stones."

With those words, the slightly mentally challenged man with an IQ of 75 wisely articulates what we all eventually learn: sooner or later, we face situations and circumstances that are beyond our ability to overcome. We lack the resources within ourselves to deal with them.

With Forrest's help, Jenny is finally able to face her pain and learn to love Forrest as he loves her. But Jenny first has to admit that she needs and wants someone's help. All she knows to do is throw stones, and that only leaves her physically exhausted.

Forrest knows the power of intervention because of the tenacity of his mother, who, in spite of his handicaps, instilled in him the tools he needs not only to overcome the adversities he faces but also whatever else life hands him.

► Suggest that much about our culture discourages us from admitting our dependence or need for intervention by or help from others, including God.

Encourage adults to continue to think about this by relating the experiences of theology professor Margaret Kim Peterson, who faced the terminal illness and subsequent death of her husband.

Peterson knew her future husband was HIV-positive. Though many people discouraged them, the couple married and began life together surrounded by the facts of his illness and near certainty of his death. As a result, their ideas about and expectations for life were constantly challenged. "We also found that the Christian faith unmasked and illuminated some of our assumptions about life and death in ways that were surprising and transforming," she wrote. ("A Good Death," www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2000/006/6.64.html)

She gratefully recognizes the role others played in their lives as they lived with his illness and faced his death. One of the ministers at their church deliberately placed the couple in a small-group Bible study whose members could minister to them and love and care for them. "In that group," Peterson wrote, "my husband got to care for others, as well as to be cared for by them; to share their lives, to play with their children, to be part of the family of the church."

He spent the last two weeks of his life in intensive care in the hospital, receiving treatment for AIDS-related pneumonia, on a ventilator and heavily medicated. When it became clear that he was going to die, it was Peterson's job to tell him. "I said I knew he wanted to live but that it looked like this was his time to die, and my time to go on without him, for a little while at least."

Because of the ventilator, he couldn't speak, but he was able to write on a pad of paper these words: focusing on God's sovereignty. "He died the next day," Peterson wrote,

“an obedient death. He wanted to live, but he knew that it was his time, and he bowed to God’s sovereign will. Can there be a greater act of faith?”

“It is very easy for many of us, living in a culture which glorifies independence, to imagine that self-sufficiency is a normal human state. Dependent people are somehow defective and not fully adult,” she noted.

But Peterson and her husband learned to view health not as the absence of sickness but instead in terms of wholeness. “Health, for a Christian, is fitness for life in communion with God and with God’s people. People are healed as they are brought into closer relationship with God and neighbor, and enabled to embody God’s purposes in the world. This can happen even when a person suffers from physical illness.”

Peterson concluded that in “a strange and paradoxical way, my husband was more whole on his deathbed than he had been at any other time in his life; and I was more whole as his death approached and as his widow than I had been at any earlier time in my life.”

► Note that physical illness is but one time in our lives when we become dependent and need to rely on intervention both from others and from God. Then ask:

- *What are some other life circumstances that have caused you to realize more completely your dependence upon God and God’s faithfulness to respond to your situation?*
- *What role did prayer play in these circumstances?*
- *Why do you think we tend to depend upon God more completely during crises?*

- *How has God’s deliverance and faithfulness during a crisis resulted in a deepening of your faith and your willingness to trust God at other times?*

► Affirm that one of God’s purposes in prayer is to help us realize our dependence upon God and God’s faithfulness and ability to intervene in our lives, doing for us what we cannot do for ourselves.

Explore the Bible

► Introduce Jehoshaphat and the crisis he faced by reading aloud 2 Chronicles 20:1-5. Remind adults that Jehoshaphat had followed his father Asa as king of Judah and reigned for 25 years (1 Kings 22:41-42). Like his father, he worked for religious reforms, and his reign was characterized by military strength, peace and prosperity, circulation of the law and institution of judicial reforms. He was known as a pious man and displayed complete confidence in God.

Lead adults to discover the seriousness of the crisis Jehoshaphat faced by pointing out that the enemies who were poised to attack him were a “great multitude” (v 2). Then ask:

- *What was Jehoshaphat’s initial response to the news of the impending attack?*
- *What did he do next?*
- *What was the purpose of the fast? What did Jehoshaphat hope it would achieve?*

Note that Jehoshaphat's fear was the impetus for spiritual awakening among the people. He acknowledged his fear; then he proclaimed a fast and called the entire community together to pray and worship.

► Guide adults to examine closely Jehoshaphat's prayer. Ask a volunteer to read aloud 2 Chronicles 20:6-12. Then ask:

- *What was the purpose of the series of rhetorical questions Jehoshaphat directed to God in his prayer?*
- *How did Jehoshaphat view God? How did he view himself and his people?*
- *What did Jehoshaphat expect God to do? Why?*
- *What effect did his prayer have on his people?*

Reinforce the notes of human despair and dependence upon God in Jehoshaphat's prayer, and also point out the reasons he gave for the people to have confidence in God. Call attention to verses 7-9 and note what is at stake for the people: God's gift of the Promised Land and the Temple as the place where God answers prayer.

Point out the shift in tone in the prayer at verse 10, as Jehoshaphat acknowledged the crisis at hand, and stress his statement in verse 12: "We do not know what to do, but our eyes are on you."

► Read aloud 2 Chronicles 20:13-17 and note the role Jahaziel played in revealing the answer to the people's prayers. Point out the following facts:

- Everyone was assembled for prayer—"little ones" (v 13) and wives and children.
- "The spirit of the Lord came upon Jahaziel," although he was apparently not one of Israel's designated prophets. Still, God spoke through Jahaziel to provide the people with an answer to their prayers. Jehoshaphat showed great wisdom as king in realizing that God works and speaks through whom-ever God chooses.
- Jahaziel gave the people simple and clear instructions. He told them not to be afraid or dismayed, and reminded them that the battle was God's, not theirs. Their movement onto the battlefield into position would demonstrate their faith in God, but once there, they were to "stand still, and see the victory of the LORD" (v 17).

► Ask a volunteer to read aloud 2 Chronicles 20:18-19; then ask:

- *How did Jehoshaphat and the people respond to Jahaziel's instructions?*

Stress that the under the leadership of Jehoshaphat and Jahaziel, the people worshiped God, though their circumstances had not changed. They had not yet stood in the battlefield and witnessed God's deliverance, but their worship expressed their dependence upon God and their faith that God would intervene on their behalf in answer to their prayers.

Suggest that Jehoshaphat's call to fasting helped prepare the people to be receptive to what God through Jahaziel called them to do.

Apply Biblical Truth

► Close with the following example from the ministerial experiences of pastor and EthicsDaily.com columnist Michael Helms, who acknowledges that while he is always aware of his limitations when counseling grieving people, he is “also aware of God’s presence more than any other occasion that I have to minister to others” (“Grieve, But Grow!” www.ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=3180).

Andrea Tew, whose husband had recently died of cancer, allowed Helms to record some of her faith journey and struggles in one of his columns. “It is hard for me to imagine the future now, because I cannot imagine it without Eric,” Tew said. “But at the same time, there is a certain anticipation to see just how God is going to provide for us spiritually, physically, and mentally. I want my children to be able to look back when they are much older and be able to see how God carried us through a difficult time in our lives. Without the promises that God gives us, that desire could never be fulfilled. But, because we know He holds our future in His hands, we can trust Him to see us through.”

► Suggest that times of crisis allow us to realize our dependence upon God and discover how God will intervene and meet our needs, affirming the faith to which we verbally commit when things are going well in our lives. Our quick-fix and independence-driven culture advises us to take matters into our own hands, but sooner or later, like Jehoshaphat, we face situations that render us powerless, not knowing what to do. While we must still confront the “enemy”—whatever difficult circumstances we face, we can trust God to intervene.

Memory and Mercy Leaders Guide

Nehemiah 1:1-11

¹The words of Nehemiah son of Hacaliah. In the month of Chislew, in the twentieth year, while I was in Susa the capital, ²one of my brothers, Hanani, came with certain men from Judah; and I asked them about the Jews that survived, those who had escaped the captivity, and about Jerusalem. ³They replied, “The survivors there in the province who escaped captivity are in great trouble and shame; the wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been destroyed by fire.” ⁴When I heard these words I sat down and wept, and mourned for days, fasting and praying before the God of heaven. ⁵I said, “O LORD God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments; ⁶let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer of your servant that I now pray before you day and night for your servants, the people of Israel, confessing the sins of the people of Israel, which we have sinned against you. Both I and my family have sinned. ⁷We have offended you deeply, failing to keep the commandments, the statutes, and the ordinances that you commanded your servant Moses. ⁸Remember the word that you commanded your servant Moses, ‘If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the peoples; ⁹but if you return to me and keep my commandments and do them, though your outcasts are under the farthest skies, I will gather

them from there and bring them to the place at which I have chosen to establish my name.’¹⁰ They are your servants and your people, whom you redeemed by your great power and your strong hand. ¹¹O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servant, and to the prayer of your servants who delight in revering your name. Give success to your servant today, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man!” At the time, I was cupbearer to the king.

Theme: Prayer gratefully acknowledges God’s unchanging faithfulness to us even when we are unfaithful to God.

Before You Teach

- ▶ Read the focal passage, the lesson from the Students Guide and the following teaching suggestions.
- ▶ If you are displaying lesson titles week by week in order to reinforce visually the overall theme of God’s Purposes in Prayer, plan to add the words *Memory and Mercy*.
- ▶ The following online articles include profiles of Christian recording artist Sandi Patty, whose story of restoration you can use to illustrate God’s faithfulness. You may wish to read these articles in their entirety:

“The Long Road Home,” (www.christianitytoday.com/tc/2003/005/5.60.html);

“The Road Home,” (www.christianitytoday.com/music/interviews/2004/sandipatty-0904.html).

To further enhance the points of this illustration, you may want to obtain one of Sandi Patty’s recordings and play it either at the beginning or at the end of your Bible study.

As You Teach

Introduce the Lesson

- ▶ Begin by rhetorically asking:
 - *What must happen in order for restoration to occur in our lives?*

Then use the following example from the life of Christian recording artist Sandi Patty to guide adults to consider answers to this question.

Sandi Patty burst onto the scene of contemporary Christian music in a big way in 1979. Since then, she has earned five Grammy Awards, 39 Dove Awards and four Billboard Music Awards. She has sold over 11 million albums and has been inducted into the Gospel Music Hall of Fame.

Songs like “I’ve Just Seen Jesus,” which she performed and recorded as a duet with Larnelle Harris, “We Shall Behold Him,” “More Than Wonderful” and “In the Name of the Lord” became some of her trademarks and made her much-sought-after for concerts and other performances. She traveled with Bill and Gloria Gaither, sang “The Star-Spangled Banner” at the rededication of the Statue of Liberty and appeared on “The Tonight Show.” Aspiring singers in churches across the country imitated her style and sang her songs to canned-music accompaniment throughout the 1980s and early 1990s.

She appeared to have it all, but her world came crashing in around her when she admitted in 1993 to having had an adulterous relationship that led to the end of her marriage. Her second marriage to Don Pelsis quickly followed, as did an intense and intentional process of restoration through her church. Part of that process involved the couple essentially becoming the subject of one of their pastor's sermons about sin. This event became their public confession and request for forgiveness and began their road to restoration.

Today Patty is again recording and performing publicly. Together she and Pelsis have eight children—four of hers, three of his and a son they adopted together. Years after her very public scandal and confession, however, some Christian radio stations refuse to play her music, and some former fans will not forgive her.

Patty admits that her adultery “was nobody’s fault but my own” (“The Road Home,” www.christianitytoday.com/music/interviews/2004/sandipatty-0904.html). She acknowledges that she discovered things about herself that she’s not proud of. And, she says, “I’ve learned that I’m always a choice away from going down the wrong path. Every day, there’s a choice to be all that God wants me to be. I’ve learned that God is faithful in the midst of it. I’ve learned that God’s people are loving, caring and supportive.”

Patty is certain of God’s forgiveness, saying, “A person can absolutely be fully restored. I have to believe that God forgives us of our sins and doesn’t remember them. . . . God’s grace is not cheap grace—it’s wonderful grace that frees me.”

► Affirm that in spite of our unfaithfulness, God is always faithful to us. Through prayer, we have access to God’s mercy and forgiveness and can enjoy restoration of our relationship to God.

Suggest that we are sometimes guilty of rushing headlong into prayer, asking God for help and giving God a list of things we want and think we need. Through the example of the prophet Nehemiah, we are reminded that confession is an essential part of prayer. Our petitions to God must be preceded by our confessions and repentance. In light of a tragic situation, Nehemiah called out to God for help in a prayer that began with a very specific confession.

Explore the Bible

► Read aloud Nehemiah 1:1-4 and explain the circumstances it records. Following the Babylonian captivity, many of the people of Judah had returned to Jerusalem. Others, like Nehemiah, had stayed in Babylon. These verses recall a time when Nehemiah lived in Susa and served the King of Persia as cupbearer. Hanani and “certain men from Judah” (v 2) returned to Susa to deliver distressing news to Nehemiah: Those who had returned to Jerusalem were in serious trouble. They had not rebuilt the protective wall around the city, so they were susceptible to outside invaders. In addition, they felt “shame” (v 3), which probably meant that morale was very low.

Call attention to Nehemiah’s initial reaction to the news: “When I heard these words I sat down and wept, and mourned for days, fasting and praying before the God of heaven” (v 4). Then ask:

- *Why did Hanani and the other men go to Nehemiah for help?*
- *Why do you think Nehemiah fasted and prayed?*

Point out that Nehemiah’s name means “God has comforted” and suggest that he might already have had the reputation of bringing God’s comfort to people during

desperate times. The meaning of his name stood in clear contrast to the physical state of Jerusalem and the emotional state of the people at this time. Certainly in this case, God would use Nehemiah's leadership to bring comfort to the people.

► Note that Nehemiah 1:5-11 records Nehemiah's prayer. Ask someone to read it aloud, and lead adults to discuss how it serves as a model of prayer for us by asking such questions as these:

- *How did Nehemiah begin his prayer? What did this approach do?*
- *How did Nehemiah understand himself in relation to God?*
- *How did Nehemiah see his role between God and the people of Israel?*
- *How do you understand verse 7? How did the people's failure to keep even one part of the covenant affect their relationship to God?*

Point out Nehemiah's confession of personal sin and the sin of his family, as well as the confession for all the people of Israel. Suggest that Nehemiah recognized the affects of sin not only on individuals but on the entire community.

► Call attention to the transition that occurs in verse 8 of Nehemiah's prayer, and note that here Nehemiah begins to remind God of the promises God made to Israel. Then ask:

- *What does "remember" mean in verse 8? Did Nehemiah think that God had forgotten God's promises?*

- *What did Nehemiah ask God to do?*
- *On what basis did Nehemiah make his request?*
- *Was God obligated to answer Nehemiah's prayer? Why or why not?*
- *Does God need to be reminded of God's promises?*
- *What was Nehemiah going to do for which he would need mercy in the sight of the king?*
- *What does Nehemiah's prayer teach us about God's character?*
- *What does Nehemiah's prayer teach us about prayer?*

Remind adults that although some of the exiled Israelites had returned to Jerusalem, Nehemiah believed that Israel had not yet been fully restored due to the conditions there. He knew that following his prayer of confession, he would need to take some actions to lead the people to repent and worship God above all others. He would also need to go to Jerusalem to provide comfort to the people, for which he would need the king's permission.

Apply Biblical Truth

► Recall the example of Sandi Patty as she sought forgiveness and restoration. "The first step to freedom," she says, "is saying 'Look, I messed up. I'm not proud of it, but I'm not going to ignore it. Here's how I messed up'" ("The Road Home," www.christianitytoday.com/music/interviews/2004/sandipatty-0904.html).

“I disappointed a lot of people. Some churches may never have me come to sing. But that is part of the consequences of sin.” Patty says that she blames herself for the fact that some radio stations won’t play her songs and some bookstores refuse to carry her CDs. “They feel like I let them down. Those feelings are very justified and valid. I don’t blame them—I caused a lot of hurt and disappointment. A lot of healing has taken place, though, and hopefully, we are building some bridges.”

► Close by relating the following comments from theology professor David S. Cunningham:

“Our culture discourages us from acknowledging how thoroughly the lives of others are interwoven with our own. Consequently, we consider our sins a private affair, not recognizing how seriously we injure one another by keeping them a secret. Today, no one admits fault for anything: politicians, criminals, and family members are all eager to assign blame elsewhere. Even our insurance agents tell us never to admit fault—even if we know we caused the accident! Without someone to lead us to be honest with ourselves about our own mistakes, we probably won’t be” (www.sojo.net/index.cfm?action=magazine.article&issue=soj9601&article=960132f).

Without confession and sincere repentance, Cunningham points out, we cannot receive forgiveness and we will not find restoration. On the contrary, when we do confess and repent, we find a faithful and merciful God ready to forgive us and restore us to right relationship.

Confession and Insight Leaders Guide

Daniel 9:1-19

¹In the first year of Darius son of Ahasuerus, by birth a Mede, who became king over the realm of the Chaldeans—²in the first year of his reign, I, Daniel, perceived in the books the number of years that, according to the word of the LORD to the prophet Jeremiah, must be fulfilled for the devastation of Jerusalem, namely, seventy years. ³Then I turned to the Lord God, to seek an answer by prayer and supplication with fasting and sackcloth and ashes. ⁴I prayed to the LORD my God and made confession, saying, “Ah, Lord, great and awesome God, keeping covenant and steadfast love with those who love you and keep your commandments, ⁵we have sinned and done wrong, acted wickedly and rebelled, turning aside from your commandments and ordinances. ⁶We have not listened to your servants the prophets, who spoke in your name to our kings, our princes, and our ancestors, and to all the people of the land. ⁷Righteousness is on your side, O Lord, but open shame, as at this day, falls on us, the people of Judah, the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and all Israel, those who are near and those who are far away, in all the lands to which you have driven them, because of the treachery that they have committed against you. ⁸Open shame, O LORD, falls on us, our kings, our officials, and our ancestors, because we have sinned against you. ⁹To the Lord our God belong mercy and forgiveness, for we have rebelled

against him, ¹⁰and have not obeyed the voice of the LORD our God by following his laws, which he set before us by his servants the prophets. ¹¹All Israel has transgressed your law and turned aside, refusing to obey your voice. So the curse and the oath written in the law of Moses, the servant of God, have been poured out upon us, because we have sinned against you. ¹²He has confirmed his words, which he spoke against us and against our rulers, by bringing upon us a calamity so great that what has been done against Jerusalem has never before been done under the whole heaven. ¹³Just as it is written in the law of Moses, all this calamity has come upon us. We did not entreat the favor of the LORD our God, turning from our iniquities and reflecting on his fidelity. ¹⁴So the LORD kept watch over this calamity until he brought it upon us. Indeed, the LORD our God is right in all that he has done; for we have disobeyed his voice. ¹⁵And now, O lord our God, who brought your people out of the land of Egypt with a mighty hand and made your name renowned even to this day—we have sinned, we have done wickedly. ¹⁶O Lord, in view of all your righteous acts, let your anger and wrath, we pray, turn away from your city Jerusalem, your holy mountain; because of our sins and the iniquities of our ancestors, Jerusalem and your people have become a disgrace among all our neighbors. ¹⁷Now therefore, O our God, listen to the prayer of your servant and to his supplication, and for your own sake, Lord, let your face shine upon your desolated sanctuary. ¹⁸Incline your ear, O my God, and hear. Open your eyes and look at our desolation and the city that bears your name. We do not present our supplication before you on the ground of our

righteousness, but on the ground of your great mercies. ¹⁹O Lord, hear; O Lord, forgive; O Lord, listen and act and do not delay! For your own sake, O my God, because your city and your people bear your name!”

Theme: Prayer recognizes God’s great and undeserved mercy toward us even when we are rebellious and disobedient.

Before You Teach

- ▶ Read the focal passage, the lesson from the Students Guide and the following teaching suggestions.
- ▶ If you are displaying lesson titles week by week in order to reinforce visually the overall theme of God’s Purposes in Prayer, plan to add the words *Confession and Insight*.

As You Teach

Introduce the Lesson

- ▶ Begin by relating the following experience columnist Frederica Mathewes-Green had the day following September 11, 2001, as she drove through Washington, D.C. She had gone there to meet with Father George Calciu, a spiritual mentor, but quite naturally, the events of the day before were on everyone’s minds and lips.

“Why do you think that happened yesterday?” he asked her (“Judgment Day,” www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2001/139/23.0.html).

Mathewes-Green responded that she didn't know. Father Calciu, on the other hand, declared, "It was the punishment of God."

She hadn't considered that, but wrote that she had often wondered "what might return our sick culture to health. ... I've often wondered what might turn us around. Everything moves in cycles, and some sick cultures do return to health; it can happen in a generation. But I have never heard of a historical example that wasn't inaugurated by catastrophe. Healing is the fruit of repentance, and repentance comes in the wake of suffering. There aren't many examples of spontaneous remission from this sort of illness."

► Ask:

- *How would you have answered Father Calciu's question?*
- *Do you agree with his assessment? Why or why not?*

Allow adults opportunities to discuss his statement, as well as Mathewes-Green's ideas. Then relate the additional account that follows.

Father Calciu further explained his conclusion to Mathewes-Green by saying that "the concepts of repentance and humility are mostly absent in America, and it doesn't seem likely that we'll understand the lesson." Americans, he said, "are very proud, and are used to being powerful, and the concepts of repentance and humility are not commonly expressed even among conservative Christians."

Mathewes-Green added that we "tend to skip over them in our rush to reassure ourselves that God loves us. He does,

of course, but you don't really know how much he loves you until you dare to repent. Until you see how much God had to forgive in you, you can't really see the height of his love. Not many churches where that is preached today, conservative or liberal."

So, she continued, "it won't do much good for us to spray on some superficial piety, while not taking it to deep, self-challenging levels. Fr. George said that he was very moved when he saw the Congressmen singing 'God Bless America.' Then he began to think, in how many of their votes and actions do these same men and women work to cast away the blessing of God?"

What the song might really mean, Mathewes-Green concluded, is "God, bless the things we already do; bless the things we have decided to do."

Though she had thought for years that America needed to express humility and repent, and this tragedy seemed to be something that might kindle that kind of response, she feared instead that "we'll focus on how much we have been wronged, and smite our adversaries by our own considerable earthly power, and feel satisfied at videotape of young Arab men frying to death in Jeeps. If Fr. George is right, if 'repent' is indeed God's message, I'm afraid we'll need more than one lesson to get it."

► Call attention to the closing paragraphs in the Students Guide lesson, which ask us to consider: "What would have happened in the days and months following that tragic day if American Christians had joined Daniel in a time of fasting with sackcloth and ashes? What would have been different if we had joined Daniel in an honest prayer of confession? Would God have been able to do a different work in our world?"

Ask:

- *Instead of exhibiting raw power and engaging in warfare, what if we had worked harder to alleviate the conditions that fuel terrorism's fire? What if we had chosen our words more carefully, spoken more thoughtfully and respectfully?*

► Suggest that when we confess, our pride and pretense disappear, allowing room for God's grace to work in and through us. We realize our shortsightedness and incomplete knowledge and discover our dependence upon God's insight and wisdom. We also recognize God's great and undeserved mercy toward us even when we are rebellious and disobedient. Prayers of confession can lead us to new possibilities and perspectives.

Explore the Bible

► Introduce the scripture by noting that Daniel 9 records a confession by Daniel for both personal and community sin. Remind adults that much of the book of Daniel deals with Judah's captivity in Babylon and includes accounts of visions and their interpretations. We cannot be certain exactly when it was written or by whom. The writings reflect on the way God deals with people God has judged and punished but does so in an effort to give God's people hope.

Note that Daniel 9:1-19 is a variation from much of the rest of the book, as it records a reflection on a dilemma and a prayer for God's mercy.

► Further introduce Daniel by noting the following:

- Daniel was one of the Jewish exiles in Babylon. He became one of the professional wise men in Babylonian court.
- Even at the risk of falling into displeasure with the king, Daniel and his friends insisted on eating only foods that allowed them to keep the dietary requirements of their religious tradition.
- Through revelation of God, Daniel was able to interpret the king's dream and was rewarded by being made ruler over the province of Babylonia.
- His additional abilities at interpreting dreams resulted in his being promoted to third in command.
- Because he insisted on praying to his God, Daniel was punished by being thrown into the lion's den, but he emerged unharmed.
- Beginning with Daniel 7, the book records Daniel's mysterious visions and revelations that refer to a future crisis that will be followed by God's judgment.

► Read aloud Daniel 9:1-2, and note that it is difficult to determine how long the Hebrew people had been in Babylonian captivity when this narrative occurred. Most biblical scholars date it at least 70 years into the exile.

Explain that Daniel had been reading the writings of the prophet Jeremiah, which had resulted in his confusion and distress over when the exiles would be able to leave Babylonian captivity.

► Call attention to Daniel 9:3, and note Daniel's immediate reaction to the confusion he felt. Then ask:

- *How did Daniel prepare “to seek an answer by prayer and supplication”? Why was this significant?*

► Ask a volunteer to read aloud Daniel’s prayer of confession in Daniel 9:4-6. Then ask:

- *Why might Daniel’s prayer be somewhat surprising, in light of what initially led him to pray?*
- *How did Daniel’s confession begin?*
- *To what did Daniel specifically confess?*

► Read aloud Daniel 9:7-10 and point out the ways Daniel contrasted God’s faithfulness with Israel’s unfaithfulness. Then ask:

- *How do we normally understand the concept of righteousness? How does God view it? How do you think Daniel understood it?*

Continue reading Daniel 9:11-14 and note the connection between faithlessness to the covenant and the onslaught of calamity. Point out also Daniel’s observation that confession is more than just recognition of unfaithfulness. It is also an acknowledgment that God is the final judge in one’s relationship to God.

Ask:

- *Why did Daniel say that God was correct in doing what God had done?*
- *Why did Jerusalem deserve what had happened to it, according to Daniel?*

► Note the transition beginning in Daniel 9:15 with the phrase “And now.” Ask adults to read verses 15-19; then ask:

- *What did Daniel ask God to do? Why?*
- *On what basis did Daniel make his requests to God?*
- *Why did Daniel think that God would want to preserve this people?*

Call attention to the following phrases that frame Daniel’s requests:

- “let your anger and wrath ... turn away” (v 16)
- “listen ... let your face shine” (v 17)
- “incline your ear ... and hear” (v 18)
- “open your eyes ... and look” (v 18)
- “forgive ... listen and act and do not delay” (v 19)

Stress that Daniel made his requests on the grounds of God’s mercies, not the righteousness of the Hebrew people. Daniel knew God was merciful, even when he and the people of Israel had been rebellious and disobedient.

Apply Biblical Truth

► Suggest that confession opens the way for us to new insights into our relationships with God and with others. Like Daniel and the Hebrew people, when we confess, we

realize what we are incapable of doing, but we also are able to see new possibilities as we follow the leadership of God's spirit in us. The new insights we gain through confession also motivate us to take new and different actions.

► Close by relating one or both of the following thoughts:

- Columnist Frederica Mathewes-Green notes that humility "is not the same as resisting the urge to show off (which is modesty) or denying that you have gifts and talents (which is lying). Humility is remembering that you have a beam in your eye. In every situation remember what God knows about you, and how much you have been forgiven. You might think you can fool people, but no matter how charming you appear, spiritually you have spinach in your teeth. ... Be swift to admit when you're wrong. Ask others to forgive you, and forgive them without asking if you want God to forgive you" ("A Daily Repentance Workout," www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2002/002/45.59.html).
- Author and Episcopal priest Barbara Cawthorne Crafton writes, "Such a relief it is, to acknowledge our failings. It's not the current American way—that way is to minimize them, to psychologize them away, litigate them away, find someone else to blame for them. After such a tap dance, it's refreshing to be able to say, 'You know, I did that. It was wrong and I wish with all my heart that I hadn't done it. I'd give a lot to undo it. But I did it and I am sorry.' That's a clean thing to say. Something an adult says. An honest adult" ("Second Chances," www.geraniumfarm.org/dailyemo.cfm?Emo=74).

Perspective and Justice Leaders Guide

Habakkuk 3:1-19

¹A prayer of the prophet Habakkuk according to Shigionoth. ²O LORD, I have heard of your renown, and I stand in awe, O LORD, of your work. In our own time revive it; in our own time make it known; in wrath may you remember mercy. ³God came from Teman, the Holy One from Mount Paran. His glory covered the heavens, and the earth was full of his praise. ⁴The brightness was like the sun; rays came forth from his hand, where his power lay hidden. ⁵Before him went pestilence, and plague followed close behind. ⁶He stopped and shook the earth; he looked and made the nations tremble. The eternal mountains were shattered; along his ancient pathways the everlasting hills sank low. ⁷I saw the tents of Cushan under affliction; the tent-curtains of the land of Midian trembled. ⁸Was your wrath against the rivers, O LORD: Or your anger against the rivers, or your rage against the sea, when you drove your horses, your chariots to victory? ⁹You brandished your naked bow, sated were the arrows at your command. You split the earth with rivers. ¹⁰The mountains saw you, and writhed; a torrent of water swept by; the deep gave forth its voice. The sun raised high its hands; ¹¹the moon stood still in its exalted place, at the light of your arrows speeding by, at the gleam of your flashing spear. ¹²In fury you trod the earth, in anger you trampled nations. ¹³You came forth to save your people, to save your anointed. You crushed the head of the wicked

house, laying it bare from foundation to roof. ¹⁴You pierced with their own arrows the head of his warriors, who came like a whirlwind to scatter us, gloating as if ready to devour the poor who were in hiding. ¹⁵You trampled the sea with your horses, churning the mighty waters. ¹⁶I hear, and I tremble within; my lips quiver at the sound. Rottenness enters into my bones, and my steps tremble beneath me. I wait quietly for the day of calamity to come upon the people who attack us. ¹⁷Though the fig tree does not blossom, and no fruit is on the vines; though the produce of the olive fails and the fields yield no food; though the flock is cut off from the fold and there is no herd in the stalls, ¹⁸yet I will rejoice in the LORD; I will exult in the God of my salvation. ¹⁹GOD, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, and makes me tread upon the heights. To the leader: with stringed instruments.

Theme: Prayer provides us with perspective and assurance of God's intervention that will ultimately lead to justice.

Before You Teach

- ▶ Read the focal passage, the lesson from the Students Guide and the following teaching suggestions.
- ▶ If you are displaying lesson titles week by week in order to reinforce visually the overall theme of God's Purposes in Prayer, plan to add the words *Perspective and Justice*.

▶ Obtain a number of hymnals and distribute these around your meeting area before adults arrive.

▶ The following article includes illustration and comments suggested for you to use as you introduce this Bible study. You may choose to read it in its entirety:

"Building Global Justice: We Are the Ones We Have Been Waiting For," www.sojo.net/index.cfm?action=news.display_archives&mode=current_opinion&article=CO_040616_wallis.

▶ EthicsDaily.com regularly features columns and news related to justice issues. The following are representative:

"Illiterate Ethicist," (www.ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=5557);

"Which God is Dead?" (www.ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=5654);

"Teaching Outside the Ivory Tower," (www.ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=3990).

As You Teach

Introduce the Lesson

▶ Begin by relating the following story Sojourners executive director Jim Wallis told when he gave the Baccalaureate address at Stanford University in June 2004:

Wallis recalled that he was invited by some inmates at the infamous Sing Sing Prison in upstate New York to come and speak to them. "I will never forget what one of those young prisoners said to me that night," Wallis told the graduates ("Building Global Justice: We Are the Ones We

Have Been Waiting For,” www.sojo.net/index.cfm?action=news.display_archives&mode=current_opinion&article=CO_040616_wallis).

“Jim,” the inmate said, “all of us at Sing Sing are from only about five neighborhoods in New York City. It’s like a train. You get on the train when you are about 9 or 10 years old. And the train ends up here at Sing Sing.”

A number of the prisoners were students in a unique program through New York Theological Seminary, studying to earn their Master of Divinity degree. “They graduated when their sentences were up,” Wallis told the Stanford graduates. “Here’s what that young man at Sing Sing told me he would do upon his graduation: ‘When I get out, I’m going to go back and stop that train.’ Now that is exactly the kind of faith and hope we desperately need today,” Wallis challenged.

The fundamental choice between cynicism and hope marks the biggest struggle of our times, he said. “The choice between cynicism and hope is ultimately a spiritual choice; and one which has enormous political consequences.

“More than just a moral issue, hope is a spiritual and even religious choice. Hope is not a feeling; it is a decision. And the decision for hope is based upon what you believe at the deepest levels—what your most basic convictions are about the world and what the future holds—all based upon your faith. You choose hope, not as a naïve wish, but as a choice, with your eyes wide open to the reality of the world—just like the cynics who have not made the decision for hope.”

► Lead adults to consider the degree to which they live with hope by asking such questions as these:

- *What realities in our world tend to squash your hope?*
- *About what are you typically cynical?*
- *What gives you hope?*
- *How are hope and justice connected?*

► Acknowledge that much injustice exists in our world. The cry for justice is as old as time and as fresh as today’s headlines. The call for justice is also prevalent throughout the pages of scripture, especially in the Psalms and the words of the Hebrew prophets. Regardless of the situation, the scriptural plea for justice was lifted to the God who both hears and acts.

Habakkuk was a Hebrew prophet about whom we know very little. Yet his prayer for justice is founded on his faith that God will ultimately intervene. Instead of cynicism, Habakkuk lived with the hope and assurance that if he waited in faith, God would deal with injustice in God’s way and time and would establish justice.

Explore the Bible

► Preface your exploration of Habakkuk 3 by noting that it is a poetic prayer or hymn calling God to action. Its language is unfamiliar and somewhat difficult, and its images of God are incomplete for those of us who understand God’s character through the life and teachings of Jesus. Those who are white, middle-class Americans have little frame of reference for the pain, helplessness and hopeless-

ness that comes from generation after generation of injustice.

Affirm, however, that Habakkuk's ancient prayer is instructive for everyone, because all of us at times face crises of faith, feel the sting of unfairness and deal with suffering.

► Read aloud Habakkuk 3:1-2. Point out the explanation of *Shigionoth* in the Students Guide, and note that this probably gives some kind of musical direction and suggests that these words were used as both prayer and hymn in worship. Then ask:

- *On what basis did Habakkuk make his appeal to God?*

Point out that while Habakkuk appealed to God based upon God's help in the past and God's covenant with the people, his reference to reviving God's works or deeds of the past acknowledged the fact that Israel had strayed from its part of the covenant with God.

► Note that Habakkuk 3:3-15 is difficult to translate from the original Hebrew. It records a theophany—an appearance of God. In his description of God's appearance, Habakkuk used a number of images to refer to God's power throughout history: pestilence and plague (v 5); "shook the earth ... made the nations tremble" (v 6); "eternal mountains ... shattered" (v 6). He also used some rather difficult images of God as warrior: horses and chariots (v 8); bows and arrows (v 9); flashing spear (v 11). He used images of thunderstorm and a battle between storm and sea as well.

As a volunteer reads aloud these verses, remind adults to keep these images in mind. Then ask:

- *What do these images of God reveal about God's power and control over earthly affairs?*
- *What do they teach us about God's pursuit of justice?*
- *What do these images teach us about God and the way God acts on our behalf?*

► Stress the two primary themes of verses 3-15, as noted in the Students Guide: God is sovereign, and God acts. Note the confidence with which Habakkuk portrayed God as active and involved in human affairs, not a passive bystander. Habakkuk's God saves, rescues and redeems, protects the powerless and oppressed and executes justice.

Remind adults that while these war-like images of God are ancient and incomplete in light of the understanding of God we have through Christ, they reinforce the idea that God is a God of justice. God relentlessly pursues justice on behalf of the poor, the powerless, the oppressed and the disenfranchised. Habakkuk believed that God would intervene, although God would do so within God's timetable. In the meantime, Habakkuk lived with hope and faith.

► Ask a volunteer to read aloud Habakkuk 3:16-19. Note that this records Habakkuk's response to the vision he had. In a word, all Habakkuk could do was tremble and "wait quietly" (v 16) for God's rescue and God's judgment of Israel's enemies. Habakkuk lived in an "in between" time and with an "even though" faith.

Suggest that these are realities with which we and people of all times must live. Ask:

- *What experiences have you had that caused you to declare an "even though" faith?*

- *What did these experiences teach you about God? about prayer?*
- *When your faith faltered during these times, what restored your hope?*

Apply Biblical Truth

► Call attention to Habakkuk 3:19b and remind adults that these words were intended to be sung during worship. Distribute hymnals among adults and ask them to locate hymns of hope, faith and assurance. Allow several minutes; then ask them to identify those hymns that have particular significance or meaning for them. Ask volunteers to read aloud lines or verses from these hymns that help restore confidence that God will intervene on our behalf.

Reinforce the fact that God's faithfulness to intervene throughout history can provide us with the confidence we need to live through unjust and difficult times.

► Close by referring again to the Baccalaureate address Jim Wallis gave to Stanford graduates. In it, he referred to a number of global crises and injustices, all of which might lead to feelings of hopelessness and despair. Instead of succumbing to these feelings, however, Wallis challenged the students to become actively involved in pursuing justice. To illustrate his point, he recalled a speech given by Bono, the leader of the Irish band U2 who is actively involved in raising awareness about and funds to fight the HIV/AIDS crisis in Africa.

"Bono is a spiritual man, though not a churchy person," Wallis said. And then he quoted Bono, who said:

"So you've been doing God's work, but what's God working on now? What's God working on this year? Two and a half million Africans are going to die of AIDS. What's God working on now? I meet the people who tell me it's going to take an act of God to stop this plague. Well, I don't believe that. I think God is waiting for us to act. ... waiting for us to recognize that distance can no longer decide who is our neighbor. We can't choose our neighbors anymore. We can't choose the benefits of globalization without some of the responsibilities, and we should remind ourselves that 'love thy neighbor' is not advice: it is a command."

Wallis went on to say, "The antidote to cynicism is not optimism but action. And action is finally born out of hope."

Presence and Security

Leaders Guide

Psalm 46

¹God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. ²Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea; ³though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble with its tumult. ⁴There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High. ⁵God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved; God will help it when the morning dawns. ⁶The nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter; he utters his voice, the earth melts. ⁷The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge. ⁸Come, behold the works of the LORD; see what desolations he has brought on the earth. ⁹He makes wars cease to the end of the earth; he breaks the bow, and shatters the spear; he burns the shields with fire. ¹⁰“Be still, and know that I am God! I am exalted among the nations, I am exalted in the earth.” ¹¹The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.

Theme: Prayer reminds us of God’s unchanging power and presence in our lives.

Before You Teach

► Read the focal passage, the lesson from the Students Guide and the following teaching suggestions.

► If you are displaying lesson titles week by week in order to reinforce visually the overall theme of God’s Purposes in Prayer, plan to add the words *Presence and Security*.

► Obtain the words to all the verses of the hymn “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God.” Prepare enough copies for each person to have one.

► EthicsDaily.com regularly posts sermons by numerous pastors. The first of the following sermons includes an illustration suggested for use as you introduce this Bible study, and the second may serve as an additional resource for you as you conclude. You may wish to read these and other sermons in their entirety:

“The Power of Hope,” by Dr. Robert F. Browning, pastor, Smoke Rise Baptist Church, Stone Mountain, Ga. (www.ethicsdaily.com/doclib/upload/Hope.doc);

“Making Sense of the Senseless, Again” by Dr. Robert F. Browning, pastor, Smoke Rise Baptist Church, Stone Mountain, Ga. (www.ethicsdaily.com/doclib/upload/Making_Sense_of_the_Senseless-2001.doc).

As You Teach

Introduce the Lesson

► Lead adults to begin thinking about the concept of security by stating the following facts:

- Americans spend an estimated \$20 billion annually on professionally installed electronic security products and services, including monthly monitoring

fees. The figure grows at a rate of approximately 8.7 percent per year.

- Approximately one-fifth of all US households are protected by professionally installed and monitored electronic burglar alarm systems.
- Police officers heartily encourage and endorse the use of home alarm systems, with 90 percent believing the systems serve as a deterrent to burglary attempts.
- In surveys of parents, protecting children and helping them feel safe is consistently a top priority.
- Schools, workplaces, stores and other public buildings are increasingly installing protection and monitoring devices.

Then ask:

- *Where do you feel most secure?*
 - *Is your feeling of security dependent upon being in a certain place? Why or why not?*
 - *What most threatens your sense of security? Why?*
 - *What is the worst possible thing you can imagine happening? Have you thought about what you might do if it did happen?*
- Ask adults to broaden their thinking about safety and security beyond the physical/personal level and identify other areas of our lives we try to secure (jobs, relationships, finances, futures, etc.). Ask:

- *Where do most people place their trust? Why?*
- *What steps do people take to secure themselves, their families and their futures?*
- *Where do you turn for help when you feel threatened? Hopeless?*

► Refer to the sermon by Dr. Robert F. Browning titled “The Power of Hope.” In it, Browning recalls knowing people who interchanged the words *help* and *hope* but did not know why. “Now I know,” he said. “Hope and help are derived from the same English root. Thus some people say, ‘Can you hope me out?’ when they are asking for assistance.

“I think hope and help are interchangeable in scripture, too. There is hope because there is help and there always will be hope because God is willing to help us at all times. Maybe this is why the Jews believe that despair is the one unforgivable sin. It denies God” (“The Power of Hope,” www.ethicsdaily.com/doclib/upload/Hope.doc).

Browning’s sermon continued with a reference to an incident from the ministerial experiences of John Claypool. While pastoring the Crescent Hill Baptist Church in Louisville in the 1960s, Claypool and a Jewish rabbi some 40 years his senior became friends while working together in the civil rights movement. Following a particularly tense and unproductive meeting, Claypool confessed to his Jewish friend, “I think it is hopeless. This problem is so deep, so many-faceted, there is simply no way out of it.”

The rabbi’s response to Claypool reflects an unshakable faith in God: “Humanly speaking, despair is presumptuous. It is saying something about the future we have no right to

say because we have not been there yet and do not know enough. Think of the times you have been surprised in the past as you looked at a certain situation and deemed it hopeless. Then, lo and behold, forces that you did not even realize existed broke in and changed everything. We do not know enough to embrace the absolutism of despair. If God can create the things that are from the things that are not and even make dead things come back to life, who are we to set limits on what that kind of potency may yet do?”

Explore the Bible

► Before you lead adults to examine Psalm 46, remind them of the following related to the psalms:

- Psalms are among scripture’s most widely read texts.
- The New Testament quotes from Psalms more than any other Old Testament book except Isaiah.
- The Psalms were originally used in the public worship of the Hebrew people as both hymnal and prayer book.
- Different types of psalms exist: laments, which begin with a description of a plight, followed by a petition for deliverance and a promise to pay the vows; thanksgiving; confession; praise; wisdom; hymns. Psalms were used for a variety of purposes as well.
- The Psalms richly express the faith of the Hebrew people, with themes including God as creator; God as supreme; the unique relationship between God

and God’s people; God’s holiness and righteousness; God’s grace and mercy; God’s ability to save.

► Introduce Psalm 46 by noting that it was the inspiration for Martin Luther’s most beloved hymn, “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God.”

Read the psalm in its entirety. Then distribute copies of the words to Luther’s hymn. Divide adults into four groups and assign each group one of the stanzas of the hymn. Challenge them to study Psalm 46 again and find support from it for their assigned hymn verse. Suggest that they make a list of words, phrases and themes from the scripture that support their assigned verse.

If those in your group prefer, they may wish to work individually on these assignments and later compare their findings.

► After several minutes, ask volunteers to read aloud the verses to the hymn, pausing between each for others to suggest supporting words, phrases and themes from Psalm 46.

► Reinforce the following concepts from Psalm 46:

- The word “refuge” (v 1) is an important one throughout the psalms, occurring 23 times. Underlying its use is the belief that in spite of how things may appear, God—not evil forces—rules over the world.
- Verses 2-3 reflect the worst someone with a pre-scientific worldview could imagine. At the time this psalm was written and sung, people viewed the mountains as both the foundations that anchored the dry land and the pillars that held up the sky. Without

the mountains, they believed that the water would rise to consume them, and the sky would fall on top of them. In spite of forces beyond human control, the psalmist renounced fear and displayed confidence that God is in control and can be trusted. God is present and our source of help even when what seems to be permanent and unchangeable does change.

- Verse 4 marks a shift in the psalm to focus on God's activity on behalf of the city of Jerusalem. Regardless of the impending threats to the city, God was present with the people. In contrast to the chaotic waters of verses 2-3, God's presence is like a flowing stream (v 4).
 - Verse 8 marks another shift in the psalm and invites everyone to "behold the works of the LORD." When necessary, the psalmist said, God could bring desolation. But God is also the author of peace, making wars to cease, shattering spears and burning shields.
 - Verses 7 and 11 repeat this refrain: "The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge."
- Suggest that this psalm encourages us to imagine the worst possible thing that could happen. Then it affirms that we have no reason to fear, because God is present with us and can be trusted to help us.

Reinforce the fact that our security depends not upon us, our possessions, our technology or our weaponry. Our security lies in God alone. Even when everything around us is moving, shaking and changing, God can and will deliver us. Prayer acknowledges God's presence in our lives and

our confidence in God to give us what we need at precisely the right time.

Apply Biblical Truth

► Ask:

- *How do you answer someone who asks you where God is when there is so much violence, suffering and evil in the world?*
- *How do you respond when someone questions how God could allow a certain catastrophe or tragic event to happen?*

Suggest that now more than ever, people tend to ask such questions, particularly of people of faith. Even before the days of the headline-grabbing tragedies at schools in Colorado, Arkansas, Kentucky, Mississippi and Oregon; the Oklahoma City bombing and the events of September 11, 2001, people have wanted to know that God is present and can help.

In probably every service of worship on the Sunday following the September 11 tragedies, ministers tried to offer words of hope and assurance to people still numb with grief. In his sermon that Sunday, Dr. Robert Browning said, "I know that true security is found only in a relationship with God. We are vulnerable and life is fragile. What man builds can be destroyed along with those who use it. Buildings topple but the Kingdom of God does not. It is eternal. It is also healthy, wholesome, good and strong. It provides the best that life has to offer and comfort when life has not offered us the best" ("Making Sense of the Senseless, Again," (www.ethicsdaily.com/doclib/upload/Making_Sense_of_the_Senseless-2001.doc).

► Close by reading the following from *Meditations on the Psalms* by Barbara Cawthorne Crafton: “History contains us, but God contains history. More to the point in this connection, God contains possibility and hope. From war and cruelty, there could be healing. Perhaps there will not be—and human decision is the largest factor here, not divine chess—but there *could* be. God contains that could,’ that vision of righteousness and mercy, which can be glimpsed by human beings and lived by them if they choose to live it.”

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