SESSION 1

THERE IS A WAY THINGS WORK

We just want [prayer] to be simple and easy. . . . The problem is, sometimes [God] comes through, often he doesn’t, and we have no idea for the rhyme or reason why. We lose heart and abandon prayer. (And we feel hurt and justified in doing so.) We abandon the very treasure God has given us for not losing heart, for moving the “mountains” in front of us, bringing about the changes we so desperately want to see in our world. The uncomfortable truth is this: that is a very naive view of prayer, on a level with believing that all a marriage needs is love, or that we should base our foreign policy on belief in our fellow man.

That simple view of prayer has crushed many a dear soul, because it ignores crucial facts. There is a way things work.

JOHN ELDREDGE
**Personal Preparation**

This week, read chapters 1 and 2 in *Moving Mountains*: “Prayer That Works” and “Third Graders at Normandy.” Let’s begin simply and honestly with your reaction to these first two chapters. Our first reaction is often a telling one, revealing places and assumptions in us that God wants to speak to. So, without any pressure to get the “answer right,” what did this stir in you?

**Prayer That Works**

» Right up front, I confess that we all have a mixed story with prayer—prayers answered, prayers unanswered, and silence we can’t quite make sense of. What is your story with prayer? To begin with, do you pray much? Why or why not?

» Can you recall a few stories of answered prayer? If so, what were they?

» And what about unanswered prayer—what have you been praying about that seems to as of yet have no answers?
» What have you done with unanswered prayer? (Gotten mad, given up, lost heart, stopped praying, kept at it like the persistent widow?)

» In chapter 1, I said that most people approach prayer like this:

We just want it to be simple and easy; we want it to go like this: God is loving and powerful. We need his help. So we ask for help, as best we know how. The rest is up to him. After all—he’s God. He can do anything (Moving Mountains, page 5).

Does that pretty much sum up the way you’d like prayer to work? Why or why not?

» One of the big ideas in chapter 1 is that there is a way things work—even in prayer. In what ways has that been part of your understanding of prayer?

» After recounting the story of Elijah praying to end the three-year drought, I said this:

I love this narrative; it is so practical, and immensely helpful when it comes to understanding prayer and how it works. God is going to come through alright, but he insists
on involving Elijah’s prayers. It reminds me of Augustine’s line, “Without God, we cannot, and without us, he will not.” We find ourselves in the sort of universe where prayer plays a crucial role, sometimes, the deciding role. Our choices matter (page 9).

The story of the way Elijah prayed to end the drought—how would that compare to the way you have traditionally approached prayer?

The brother of Jesus is giving his readers a tutorial on the subject of prayer. (He had seen some serious demonstrations of prayer, we might recall, growing up around the man who turned a boy’s lunch into an all-you-can-eat buffet for five thousand.) James points to the famous drought story I just cited, then makes a staggering connection—you are no different than Elijah. That was his purpose in using the phrase, “Elijah was a man just like us.” James was trying to disarm that religious posture that so often poisons the value of biblical stories: Well, sure, that was so-and-so [in this case Elijah] and they were different than us. Nope. Not the case. Actually, James makes it very clear: Elijah was a human being just like you. In other words, you can do it too (page 11).

» What do you make of the idea that James says, “You can do it too”? 
Third Graders in Normandy

- There are two big ideas in chapter 2. The first is simply this: *God is growing us all up.*

  . . . until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature . . . (Ephesians 4:13).

  . . . wrestling in prayer for you, that you may stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured (Colossians 4:12).

  Brothers, stop thinking like children (1 Corinthians 14:20).

Therefore let us leave the elementary teachings about Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again the foundation of repentance from acts that lead to death, and of faith in God, instruction about baptisms, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment (Hebrews 6:1–2).

The call to grow up is very clear. “And how does God provide for growing us up? What are his *means*? Situations that stretch us, strain us, push us beyond what we thought we could endure—those very same circumstances that cause us to pray” (page 16). How has “growing up” been central to your understanding of what God is up to in your life?

- How might your assumptions about that affect your prayer life?
This assumption is important for one simple reason: it changes your expectations. When you show up at the gym, you are not surprised or irritated that the trainer pushes you into a drenching sweat; it’s what you came for. But you’d be furious if your housemate expected this of you when you flop home on the couch after a long day’s work. (Perhaps you might begin to see the connection in some of your feelings toward God) (page 16).

» Do you see the connection? Explain.

» The second big idea in chapter 2 is this: We are at war. We were born into a great battle.

The Scriptures are a sort of wake-up call to the human race, a trumpet blast, to use Francis Thompson’s phrase, “from this hid battlements of eternity.” One alarm they repeatedly sound is that we are all caught up in the midst of a collision of kingdoms—the kingdom of God advancing with force against the kingdom of darkness, which for the moment holds most of the world in its clutches. Is this your understanding of the world you find yourself in? Does this shape the way you pray—and the way you interpret “unanswered” prayer? (page 20).

Has this been true of your basic convictions of the world? If not, why not?
» How might it change your prayer life if you did hold as one of your deepest beliefs that you live in a world at war?

T H E  B I G  I D E A S

» There is a way things work—even in prayer.
» God is growing us all up—through situations that stretch us, strain us, and push us beyond what we thought we could endure.
» We are at war—a collision between the kingdom of God advancing with force against the kingdom of darkness.
GROUP DISCUSSION

Watch the video for session one. If you find it helpful, use the following space to take a few notes on anything that stands out to you.

Teaching Notes
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

After the teaching session has ended, discuss as a group any or all of the following questions.

1. Read Matthew 17:14–20. According to this passage, why is prayer the “greatest secret weapon God has given to his people”? What did Jesus say was required on the disciples’ part for this prayer to work?

2. Whether playing an instrument, reading a book, cooking, or riding a bicycle—there is a way things work. We know that to get good at something, it takes practice. Why do we tend to have a different attitude when it comes to prayer?

3. Read Luke 11:1–4. What are some aspects of Jesus’ prayer life that motivated his disciples to want the same? Why did Jesus give them this prayer as a model to follow?
4. Think about the story in the video of the wildfire, which burned 20,000 acres and consumed more than 340 homes in Colorado Springs. What does this story reveal about the power of prayer? What questions does it raise about how prayer works?

5. Read Ephesians 4:11–16. In what ways does Paul say that God is “growing us up”? How does God use prayer to help us mature in Christ?

6. Read 1 Kings 18:41–45. What does this story reveal about being persistent in prayer? What do you tend to do when you don’t see any results from your prayers?

7. In James 5:17, we read, “Elijah was a human being, even as we are.” What is James saying about the power we have been given in prayer? Do you believe you have access to this same power?
Okay—this may prove to be the best part of your work in this study guide. I want you to pick a “prayer project” that you can begin to “practice” on. Like anything else in life—music, driving, sports, love—we learn as we practice, and as we practice we get better. So, pick something that you want to see changed through the power of prayer, and begin to make it a daily practice to pray into it, applying the things you are learning in this book and video series.

Caution: DO NOT pick something massive for this “exercise.” What I mean is, some prayer projects are harder than others and very difficult projects would fall into the realm of things like, “my husband’s salvation,” or, “healing my friend of breast cancer,” or “ending global terrorism.” Those are all very worthy things to pray about; but things like this also fall into the category of “grad school prayer,” prayer that is probably going to take time and effort.

For this exercise, pick something small like that presentation you need to make at school or work next week, or the conversation you want to have with your friend on a touchy subject. Things that fall within the realm of, “I can pray about that every day, and if I do I will probably see some results in the near future.”

Write down one, two, or three prayer “projects” here. Also write out your prayer for each as well. We’ll check in next time to see how things are going.

Note