

For whole families to return to God

God loves to bring whole families to know Him. As you pray for people who are not yet following Christ, why not pray for that person's entire family? Scripture is packed with stories and promises of God redeeming entire peoples. He loves to do family-size miracles. One such promise, found in Jeremiah 24, will help you pray with boldness and hope.

1. For God to put in motion His plans for good (vs 6)

- **Praise God for His steady goodness** throughout the story of a particular family. Count some of the blessings. Thank God for loving each person of the family despite wrongdoings and failures
- **Imagine God gazing upon the entire family.** Ask God to look upon them with favor, according to the depths of His love for each one of them.

Jeremiah 24:6

For I will set My eyes on them for good, and I will bring them again to this land; and I will build them up and not overthrow them, and I will plant them and not pluck them up.

2. For God to give them a new beginning (vs 6)

One of the "good" things God does is to give people another chance. Verse six describes God bringing a people to a place for the second time. At that time, He sets His heart to build them and grow them to become all that He meant them to be.

- **Bring them to a opportune place.** Ask God to "bring them again" to a time and place where they begin again. Ask Him to free them from the things that hold them in brokenness, self-serving foolishness, or outright alliances with evil powers.
- **Build them.** Ask God to build again what has been demolished. Yes. You can ask God to rebuild trust, and hope, and kindness.
- **Grow them.** Ask God to sink their roots down deep and become alive with new life that lasts.

Jeremiah 24:7

I will give them a heart to know Me, for I am the LORD; and they will be My people, and I will be their God, for they will return to Me with their whole heart.

3. For God to give a heart to return and to know Him (vs 7)

With the family in your mind's eye, read verse seven out loud. Read it as if you were hearing God speak of His plans for these particular people. After you have read it once out loud, read it again. Then then do it a third time. And then read it twice more, with different emphasis. (Are you counting? That's five.) Read the entire verse out loud again, this time inserting the family name in the first line, "I will give _____ a heart to know Me." You may find the repeated readings will stretch your faith to pray with family-sized, God-focused hope.

- **Give them a heart to know God.** No one returns to God unless He awakens a heart-desire to know Him.
- **Draw them to return with all their heart.** Pray that God instills in them a full-hearted zeal to belong to God.

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Help people pray for more than one person at a time. Because God always deals with people as someone who is part of a people and a family, as well as dealing with them as an individual. By praying on the larger scale of whole families or communities of people, you'll help keep from shrinking prayer to a problem-solving, request-getting, procurement procedure. You'll help people pray their way into the story of an entire people. If the Bible is any indication, God delights in revealing Himself in the multi-generational story of families. Most of God's promises in scripture are given to families and entire peoples. That means that our prayers can often find their best size and shape when we pray for whole families in a long range way.

1. Begin with a reminder of God's dealings with whole families.

Begin your prayer with an introductory comment, or lead a brief discussion of God's ways with whole families.

- **Simple: God gives second chances to families.** Background on the scripture: God was allowing the Hebrew people to enter into a very difficult time. He was allowing a foreign power to carry them away from their home and all that they knew. But God was promising that He would give them a new beginning. How did God know how each of the individuals would respond? We're not really sure. But we can be sure that He acted this way in that day, and He's still the same God with the same love. Let's ask Him to do similar things with families or groups of people that we know.
- **More detail: How does God choose us so that we choose Him?** Contrast the phrase "I will set My eyes on them for good" with the phrase "they will return to Me with their whole heart." Doing something with all your heart means that you are doing it without coercion or force. But consider how God pre-meditates His goodness to come upon people. God seems to start the process by releasing a plan to give a second chance. How many chances do we get? Well. As you can see, the topic is endless. Stop the discussion before trying to solve great mysteries. It's enough to recognize the ways of God as He deals with people. Trying to figure out how everything works can be distracting. Focusing on what God wants to do is fruitful and helps us pray boldly.
- **Tricky and time-consuming: God gives second chances to families.** Look at the whole chapter. At first glance, Jeremiah 24 seems to suggest that some families are fated to doom and others are pre-determined to have a nice life. In fact, the image of two bowls of figs says more about how those who seem to be entering a great disaster (the exile) will be watched by God with purposive, saving power, ultimately restoring them. But the ones who seemed lucky actually have already set their hearts so firmly against God that they will have proved themselves to be rotten to the core. To effectively lead such a discussion may require a bit of homework in other parts of Jeremiah and other books of the Bible to pull all of this together.

2. Focus on a family and pray in three "rounds" of prayer

The guidelines for prayer are pretty straightforward as found in the participant's guide. The most practical way to focus prayer is to group everyone in twos or threes and have them agree to focus prayer on one family together.

- **Story-setter: Praise God for goodness past.** Begin by giving God honor for dealing in their lives with faithfulness and purpose for many years and generations. Praying this way focuses attention on God, helps everyone envision the long, unfolding story of salvation that is taking place, and will direct prayers toward the promises of God being fulfilled.
- **Faith-stretcher: Reading God's promise aloud repeatedly.** Perhaps the most memorable thing you'll do in this session is reading verse seven out loud seven times. There are many ways to do this, of course. Some may offer a silly objection that such repetition violates Matthew 6:7. But that is not the case. This is not meaningless repetition. No one is suggesting that we will be heard by God by saying this out loud even once. The point is to be sure that we have heard what God is promising. Exercises like this can give the Holy Spirit room to impress us with His heart and His hope.