

PRAYING WHEN YOU ARE DESPERATE

One of the reasons I am praying every day for our next pastor is because of what I went through when I came here 22 years ago. When I arrived, the great majority of the people were wonderful. I was excited to get to know my new flock. Unfortunately, there was a handful of people who didn't want me as their pastor. And they let it be known. That made my life miserable. I remember on one occasion while having a group of people with me who were seeking to encourage me, I literally put my head on the table and wept. I don't think I have had a time where I sought the Lord in prayer more diligently and more passionately than those first few months. I was praying out of desperation. That's one reason that I am praying for our next pastor every day, and praying for our search team. I want to do all I can to plead with God that he bring the right person here and that from the very beginning, our church will flourish in every way.

Have you ever noticed how much better you pray when you are desperate? It is not so much the content of your prayers; it is more the fervency and heart-felt passion.

This morning, we start a new series on prayers of the O.T. We are going to look at 6 people whose prayers made a difference. I want all of us to continue to learn how to pray more effectively. I also want to see God respond to our prayers so that more of us will pray more and see God work in greater ways.

We are beginning our series with Hannah, a godly woman who shows us not just how to pray, but especially how to pray when we are desperate.

Setting

The book of 1 Samuel begins at the end of the period of Judges. Joshua had led the Israelites into the Promised land, and while the next generation kept following God, the following generation after them rebelled against the ways of God and Israel sank into a dark time. Twice in the book of Judges, the summary statement is said: "In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes." There were moments of relief from the oppression of other nations as God graciously rescued them, but that was quickly followed by times in which the Israelites again turned their back on God and they paid the price of God sending another nation to oppress them.

By the end of Judges, God is going to help them move ahead in a different direction. This will be a transition time for Israel. God is going to bring a king to Israel. Part of the way God is going to do this is through an unlikely woman named Hannah.

Let's pick up the story in:

There was a certain man from Ramathaim, a Zuphite from the hill country of Ephraim, whose name was Elkanah son of Jeroham, the son of Elihu, the son of Tohu, the son of Zuph, an Ephraimite. ² He had two wives; one was called Hannah and the

other Peninnah. Peninnah had children, but Hannah had none.

³ Year after year this man went up from his town to worship and sacrifice to the LORD Almighty at Shiloh, where Hophni and Phinehas, the two sons of Eli, were priests of the LORD. ⁴ Whenever the day came for Elkanah to sacrifice, he would give portions of the meat to his wife Peninnah and to all her sons and daughters. ⁵ But to Hannah he gave a double portion because he loved her, and the LORD had closed her womb. ⁶ Because the LORD had closed Hannah's womb, her rival kept provoking her in order to irritate her. ⁷ This went on year after year. Whenever Hannah went up to the house of the LORD, her rival provoked her till she wept and would not eat. ⁸ Her husband Elkanah would say to her, "Hannah, why are you weeping? Why don't you eat? Why are you downhearted? Don't I mean more to you than ten sons?" I Samuel 1:1-8 ^{NIV}

We find in these opening verses Hannah's situation. Her husband had two wives. Hannah was the first wife, but she could not have children. As was the custom in that day, when a man's wife could not bear children, if he could afford it he would take a second wife to bear children and raise up an heir. That is what Hannah's husband, Elkannah did.

You can imagine how Hannah felt. First, she couldn't produce a child. In her day, that was a great disgrace. Then her husband marries a second wife who had no trouble bringing forth children. Just having the kids around would be a constant reminder to Hannah of her failure. And, if that wasn't bad enough, Peninnah, would constantly rub it in and provoke Hannah to tears. Sounds like a lovely home life for Hannah, doesn't it!

Every year, Elkannah and his two wives and children would go up to Shiloh, the place where the tabernacle was before Jerusalem would become the center of worship. This was supposed to be a time of joy and celebration to God. They would sacrifice a young bull, giving part of the sacrifice to the priests, and then eating the rest as a family, a feast celebrating God's goodness. But for Hannah, this was a time of great sadness, a time that Peninnah took advantage of to provoke Hannah even more. Elkannah would try to soften Hannah's hurt, but, like most men who don't know what to say in situations where a woman is hurting, he tried to get Hannah to feel better by telling her that at least she had him as a husband. Who needs kids? Wasn't he worth 10 kids?

On one particular occasion during a feast, Hannah could take it no longer. She needed to get away and pray.

Once when they had finished eating and drinking in Shiloh, Hannah stood up. Now Eli the priest was sitting on his chair by the doorpost of the LORD'S house. ¹⁰ In her deep anguish Hannah prayed to the LORD, weeping bitterly. ¹¹ And she made a vow, saying, "LORD Almighty, if you will only look on your servant's misery and remember me, and not forget your servant but give her a son, then I will give him to the LORD for all the days of his life, and no razor will ever be used on his head."

1 Samuel 1:9-11

Hannah prayed a prayer out of deep anguish of her heart. And she told God that if he would give her a son, then she would dedicate him in service to God for his whole life as a Nazarite, a person dedicated to serve God.

God heard her prayer. In the next year, she got pregnant and bore a son, whom she named Samuel. When the boy was weaned, which was 3-4 years old, when the family again went to Shiloh for a sacrifice, Hannah took young Samuel and gave him to Eli, the head priest to raise up.

Now, let's draw some lessons from Hannah on prayer.

I. GOD ARRANGES SOME SITUATIONS THAT INVITE US, EVEN FORCE US TO PRAY AND SEEK HIM BECAUSE HE HAS A HIGHER PURPOSE FOR US.

Notice that it says:

But to Hannah he gave a double portion because he loved her, and the LORD had closed her womb.⁶ Because the LORD had closed Hannah's womb, her rival kept provoking her in order to irritate her. 1 Samuel 1:5-6

Not just once, but twice, it says that the Lord had closed her womb. This was to make it very clear that the Lord was behind her situation.

There are some situations that God causes, not because we have sinned, not because he hates us, but because he wants to do something great.

There is a time in Jesus' ministry when he and his disciples come across a blind person:

As he went along, he saw a man blind from birth.² His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"

³ *"Neither this man nor his parents sinned," said Jesus, "but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him. John 9:1-3*

Hannah didn't blame God for her situation, but unbeknownst to her, God was planning on doing a great work in her life. But it was only after Hannah prayed that God responded.

What is important here is that when you face a difficult situation, and maybe even when it seems like God has put you in that situation, to not turn away from God. Don't ever feel that God hates you or has it in for you. We are so limited in our ability to understand God's ways or to see the future.

How do you know if God has caused a situation that has put you in a desperate time? You don't. But in times like this, here are two things to remember:

God may want to bring something good or even great through it.

No matter what the cause of the situation is, God can bring something good out of it. This is the truth of:

Romans 8:28 And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who

love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

In either case, don't turn away from God. Turn to him.

A second lesson from Hannah is:

II. GOD WELCOMES OUR TEARS AND ANGUISH

I'm sure that Hannah had prayed before to God for a child. What woman wouldn't have? I'm also sure that she prayed in great sincerity. But she had reached a point of deep agony:

In her deep anguish Hannah prayed to the LORD, weeping bitterly. 1 Samuel 1:10

The phrase, *deep anguish*, is used elsewhere in the Bible to characterize the psychological pain experienced by one who has lost a child through death, or for someone who is experiencing great personal, physical suffering. One commentator stated, "Relief from this sort of pain is never pictured in the Hebrew Bible as coming from a human being; in each case divine intervention was the only remedy. Wisely, Hannah also went to the Lord for help." NAC

God welcomes our tears because God welcomes us. Hannah was just an obscure woman, but she knew that God welcomed her, even and especially with her tears.

King David experienced the same emotions when wrote:

I am weary with my moaning;

every night I flood my bed with tears;

I drench my couch with my weeping. Psalms 6:6 ^{NLT}

Maybe God is waiting until we get so desperate that our prayers come from deep within our heart. Maybe God doesn't answer some of our prayers until we really mean them. How desperate do we want some of the things we are praying for?

A third lesson we need to learn in desperate times is:

III. NO SITUATION IS EVER HOPELESS WITH GOD

One person put it this way: "God's tendency is to make our total inability his starting point. Our hopelessness and our helplessness are no barrier to his work." Davis

A hopeless situation is not a problem with God. But if we look at the situation first and just keep looking at it, then it is easy to lose hope.

Hannah shows her deep understanding and devotion to God when she begins her prayer by addressing God saying:

"LORD Almighty, if you will only look on your servant's misery and remember me,

This is the first time that this name for God is used by anyone in Scripture up to this point in the Bible, to address the Lord. This name of God is literally "Lord of hosts" or "Lord of the armies."

The title refers to all the armies that belong to God: all the angels, all the stars in heaven, all people. It's a way of saying that God is the Lord of infinite resources and

power which are at his disposal as he works on behalf of his people. God is the ruler and sovereign of every and all power.

Hannah knew God, and knew that God commanded all the resources of heaven and earth. When she prayed, she knew her situation was hopeless from a human perspective. But she also knew that God is the Lord of all resources and all power. If God wanted to do it, he could.

This reminds us that prayer really needs to start with our view of God. If our God is small in our eyes or limited in what we think he can do, then any situation that is too challenging and great is going to persuade us that God cannot possibly answer our prayer. And we either will not pray at all, or pray without any faith.

Hannah followed many other women who were barren for many years before they had children. Think of Sarah, the wife of Abraham; Rachel, the wife of Jacob. Yes, there were others like her, but God had performed miracles to bring forth a child. He could do the same for her.

One last lesson from Hannah is that:

IV. OUR PRAYERS SHOULD COME OUT OF A DEEP SENSE OF DEPENDENCE AND SUBMISSION TO GOD

Let me read v. 11 in the ESV and note how Hannah refers to herself:

And she vowed a vow and said, "O LORD of hosts, if you will indeed look on the affliction of your servant and remember me and not forget your servant, but will give to your servant a son, then I will give him to the LORD all the days of his life, and no razor shall touch his head." 1 Samuel 1:11^{ESV}

Three times, she uses the term "servant."

Not only did Hannah have a high view of God, she had a right view of herself before God. She was God's servant. She did not come to God with any sense of judgement on God because she was barren; she didn't come demanding that God answer her prayer. She came submissively, acknowledging that she was God's servant. Her heart was in the right place.

One of the most important heart attitudes we can have before God is to realize that we are nothing before God. We bring to him nothing; we have no claim to anything from God.

However, let me balance this with the incredible status that we have before him as his children. As his children, we can boldly come to our merciful and gracious God. I love the exhortation in:

Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need. Hebrews 4:16

It is in our posture of dependence and submission, that our heart is in the right place, and, at the same time, we come to our great and mighty God whose throne overflows with mercy and grace to us.

God wants us to come to him and pray, and when we do with an expression of our deep dependence and submission to him, God delights to respond to our need.

Hannah appealed to God, and God answered her prayer. God enabled her to bear a son, a child who would grow up to become a mighty prophet of God and be instrumental in ushering Israel into a new period of the monarchy. Hannah's story in the Bible ends this way:

Each year his mother made him a little robe and took it to him when she went up with her husband to offer the annual sacrifice. ²⁰ Eli would bless Elkanah and his wife, saying, "May the LORD give you children by this woman to take the place of the one she prayed for and gave to the LORD." Then they would go home. ²¹ And the LORD was gracious to Hannah; she gave birth to three sons and two daughters. Meanwhile, the boy Samuel grew up in the presence of the LORD.

1 Samuel 2:19-21

Out of her desperation, God gave her a son who would change the course of Israel's history. Then he gave her five additional children.

Next Steps:

1. Have you stopped praying for something because the situation seems hopeless? Maybe that is exactly where God wants you. Maybe he wants to do something great in your life or through your prayers if you will trust him. Keep praying.
2. Have you been praying half-heartedly for something? Maybe God is waiting for you to get desperate before he answers your prayer. Keep praying.
3. Are you facing such a desperate situation that you have lost sight of God and haven't been praying? Maybe God has you in that situation to make you more desperate in seeking God. Keep praying, but get your eyes more focused on God than your situation.