



BACK TO THE BIBLE SERIES: 5 Prayers That Rocked the World

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Do you believe prayer moves the hand of a sovereign God? I'm not asking you what you think the right answer would be on a quiz. I'm asking you, deep in your heart of hearts, do you still believe that prayer moves the hand of a sovereign God? I believe many Christians, if they were to be honest in their heart of hearts, would say that, "Somewhere along the way I think I stopped believing that." We always arrive at that conclusion in the midst of our pain. Think of it like this: Most of us know, as good Christians, we should pray. Probably many of us have a prayer list and we go through the prayer list: Bless the missionaries; pray for Aunt Sally or Uncle Joe; pray for this; pray for that. We are very sincere in doing that, but the truth of the matter is, if God doesn't answer that prayer, it really isn't going to rock my world. I don't have a lot of skin in the game with those prayers. But in my hour of need, in my hour of pain, in my hour of disappointment, when my life is coming unraveled and I cry out to God, and it's day after day, it's week after week, it's month after month, and God seems nowhere to be found, I reach the conclusion that prayer just doesn't really work. Now maybe I've come to believe that God just doesn't listen; He just doesn't care. But more likely what I've come to believe is God is sovereign and God is going to do His thing and there's nothing I can do to change that. Both of those conclusions are false—and we arrived at those conclusions in the midst of our pain.

If you have a Bible, turn with us to 1 Samuel, Chapter 1. Just a little bit of background: Immediately preceding what happens in this chapter is a period of time called the period of The Judges. The period of The Judges may very well have been the darkest, most sinful, rebellious time in the history of the Hebrew people. Several years ago, when we were preaching through the Book of Judges, when we got to these last few chapters of Judges, it was actually very difficult to know how to handle the material with children in the room. It's at least PG-13. It is horrific material, trying to capture how absolutely horrible the period of the Judges really was. So now as we open 1 Samuel, technically we are still in the period of The Judges. This is the overlap into the period of The Kings. So, the nation is dark; it's far from God. It's rebellious and this story then appears.

Now there was a certain man from Ramathaim-zophim in the hill country of Ephraim, and his name was Elkanah the son of Jeroham, the son of Elihu, the son of Tohu, the son of Zuph, an Ephraimite. He had two wives: the name of one was Hannah and the name of the other Peninnah; and Peninnah had children, but Hannah had no children. (*NASB, 1 Samuel 1:1-2)

Elkanah had two wives. We see this often times in the Old Testament. God never embraces this; He never endorses this, but it was fairly common in the culture. There was tremendous pressure for a Hebrew wife to have children, specifically to have sons. It was believed that if a woman had children, she was blessed by God. Conversely, if she had no children, she was believed to be

cursed by God. So, it was very important that she have children and, specifically, that she has sons, in order that her husband might carry on the family name. If, after a period of years, it became obvious she's not going to have children, it was not at all uncommon that the husband would take a second wife—not because he loved her, but in order that she might have children for him. So that is clearly the situation here. Elkanah marries Hannah. He loves Hannah, but Hannah has no children for him; so, he takes on a second wife, not because he loves her, but simply in order that she might have children for him.

Now this man would go up from his city yearly to worship and to sacrifice to the LORD of hosts in Shiloh. And the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were priests to the LORD there. When the day came that Elkanah sacrificed, he would give portions to Peninnah his wife and to all her sons and her daughters; but to Hannah he would give a double portion, for he loved Hannah, but the LORD had closed her womb. (Vs. 3-5)

Probably several times a year—three or four times a year—Elkanah and family would go to Shiloh in order to celebrate the national feasts or celebrations. It says that he went up in order to sacrifice to the LORD of hosts—L-O-R-D in all caps. Now this is a common name for God in the Old Testament. It's used over three hundred times, but it's worth noting this is the very first time in the Old Testament that this name is ever used for God—and it's used several times in this text. LORD of hosts means God of the armies, God of the armies of Heaven. It carries the idea that this is the God that ultimately always wins, because He controls the armies of Heaven.

The story seems to be interrupted by this introduction of Eli and his two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, who were priests in the nation. I would call that a teaser—it interrupts the story. We are introduced to these guys and then the story continues.

There's clearly more to the story to be told. We can tell by the details of the story that this is the Feast of Tabernacles. This was in the fall after the harvest was in. This was a time of a tremendous celebration. This is a very happy feast—the harvest was in! Everybody would head to Shiloh and there they would worship God, but they also would celebrate just being together. The harvest was in; there was a period of time before the work would begin again. It was a wonderful time of the year. So, in the midst of a celebration that typically was all about joy, you have a story of tremendous pain.

Elkanah would give out the portions. You'd bring the sacrifice; part of it would be burnt as the offering and part of it was to be consumed. So, he would give out the portions to Peninnah and notice the plural: to her sons and her daughters. We don't know how many children she had, but clearly, she had multiple sons and multiple daughters. But he would give a double portion to Hannah. Why? The text tells us: Because he loves her...but the LORD had closed her womb. Now the idea of the LORD closing her womb is going to come up several times in this story.

The best way to understand this story is to realize this is about two stories running concurrently—and that's always the way it is. There's the personal story that we all live, and then there's the God story, and both of those stories are running together. The God story is the story of the nation—the period of The Judges. It's dark; it's rebellious. The people are far from God. Eli and Hophni and Phinehas represent part of the God story—the national story. But in the midst of that there is the personal story—the Hannah story. And God, in order to address the God story, is doing something in Hannah that she doesn't understand and it's causing her significant pain, year after year after year. Imagine the dynamics in this family. First of all, you have a wife that is dearly loved but she cannot have children. She's believed to be cursed by

God and her heart is broken. There's significant pain there. Then you have another wife who's not loved, and she lives with the pain of not being loved. She's lonely; she's left out; she's unloved—but she has children. The intensity of the story picks up.

Verse 6:

Her rival (very strong term), however, would provoke her bitterly to irritate her, because the LORD had closed her womb. It happened year after year, as often as she went up to the house of the LORD, she would provoke her, so she wept and would not eat. Then Elkanah her husband said to her, “Hannah, why do you weep and why do you not eat and why is your heart sad? Am I not better to you than ten sons?” (Vs. 6-8)

If it isn't bad enough, Peninnah, probably out of her pain—her pain of not being loved, of being the wife that was forgotten and neglected—she takes out her pain on Hannah. She provokes her. They become rivals; the word means adversaries. She's doing it on purpose, in order to irritate her, to rub her nose in it, that “You don't have children; I have children!” out of her own pain. So, you have Hannah in pain; you have Peninnah in pain; and clearly you have Elkanah in pain, and like a typical husband, he's trying to fix it. It'd be interesting to take a little poll among the men and the women in terms of Elkanah's response. The men would probably say, “Yeah, those are logical questions. ‘Hey, what's the deal, Honey? Why are you so sad? Cheer up! I mean, come on, check it out, aren't I better than ten sons?’” And the guys are saying, “Well, that makes some sense.” But the women are appalled, saying, “This man is a clod! (laughter) What she needs is someone to feel her pain, someone to enter into what she's feeling and try to somehow meet her in her place of pain.” But, clearly, everybody in the story is feeling it. This is a very gut-wrenching story.

Then Hannah rose after eating and drinking in Shiloh. Now Eli the priest was sitting on the seat by the doorpost of the temple of the LORD. She, greatly distressed, prayed to the LORD and wept bitterly. She made a vow and said, “O LORD of hosts (God of the armies, there it is again), if You will indeed look on the affliction of Your maidservant and remember me, and not forget Your maidservant, but will give Your maidservant a son, then I will give him to the LORD all the days of his life, and a razor shall never come on his head.” (Vs. 9-11)

So, as she does every year, Hannah goes to the temple to pray and she pours out her heart before God. One of the things to notice in this story is the emphasis on prayer. It comes up over and over and over again. She says, “God, if You give me a son, I'll give him back to You for all of his life.” When it refers to the razor and the head, it's a reference to what was called the Nazarite vow. Typically, the Nazarite vow was for a period of time. In this case, she was saying it would be a vow that would define the entirety of his life. “If You just give me a son, I promise I will give him back.”

Now it came about, as she continued praying before the LORD, that Eli was watching her mouth. As for Hannah, she was speaking in her heart, only her lips were moving, but her voice was not heard. So, Eli thought she was drunk. Then Eli said to her, “How long will you make yourself drunk? Put away your wine from you.” But Hannah replied, “No, my lord, I am a woman oppressed in spirit (bitter in spirit); I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink, but I have poured out my soul before the LORD. Do not consider your maidservant as a worthless woman; for I have spoken until now out of my great concern and provocation.” Then Eli answered and said, “Go in peace; and may the God of Israel grant your petition that you have asked of Him.” She said, “Let your maidservant find favor in

your sight.” So, the woman went her way and ate, and her face was no longer sad. (Vs. 12-18)

So, Hannah goes to the temple. She’s praying. Eli thinks she’s drunk, probably a commentary on what was happening a lot at the temple those days, and probably also some insight as to Eli’s spiritual discernment. So, he confronts her, and she says, “I’m not drunk. Man, I am in pain; I’m pouring out my heart. I’m bitter of soul; I’m pouring out my soul before God that He might give me a son.” And Eli responds by saying that God is going to give the asking you to have asked of Him. That’s literally what the Hebrew says—a tremendous emphasis on the fact that she asked, and God is going to give the asking that she has asked of Him. Clearly that’s what she understands because suddenly she cheers up. She eats; she smiles and she’s ready to move on.

Verse 19:

Then they arose early in the morning and worshiped before the LORD and returned again to their house in Ramah. And Elkanah had relations with Hannah his wife, and the LORD remembered her. It came about in due time, after Hannah had conceived, that she gave birth to a son; and she named him Samuel, saying, “Because I have asked him of the LORD.” (Vs. 19-20)

It’s always interesting in these Hebrew narratives when the technique is kind of this rapid-fire through the details. She has been praying for years—probably well over a decade for a son. She’s in unimaginable pain and then the text just goes, “Boom! Boom! Boom!” There’s a son! But the point is: this is no problem for God. There’s a God story going on and there’s a personal story going on. There’s no way Hannah could understand what the God story is, but both of the stories are going on and, when it was time for God’s hand to move, God responds to her prayer—gives her a son. That’s no problem for God.

The text says God responded to the prayer of a woman in pain.

Arnie: So, Bryan, Hannah was a humble woman with humble faith, and she wasn't at all worried about approaching God with a huge request, to the point that she even made a deal with God. Now I know most of you say it's not right to make a deal with God. So how come this is the exception?

Bryan: Well, first of all, I don't think the intent of the story is necessarily promoting that, but I think what God saw was Hannah's heart. It's a painful story. I mean, she's a faithful woman that trusts God. And she is in absolute agony year after year after year. I don't think it's meant to be a formula. It's God hearing the prayer of a faithful woman who's in pain. So, it's the heart that I think we should emulate.

Arnie: Well, and I'm sure a lot of ladies have prayed to have children that can't, and the prayer is not answered.

Bryan: Sure. For everyone that the deal works, there's a lot where it didn't.

Cara: I know my kids make deals with me all the time I know nothing about. They'll be like, well, you said I could have that if I did it. No, I didn't. [That's actually a tactic] Where was I? [That's a good illustration.] I'm impressed by Hannah's willingness to give the child God gave

her back to Him as a woman and a mom. I think that's beautiful, yet a very challenging spiritual principle to consider.

Bryan: Very unusual in a very different time, very different circumstances. But I do think it's helpful to remember all of our children belong to God; they don't belong to us. We either acknowledge it or we don't, but at the end of the day, they're His, and we're managers, and that's just the way it is.

Cara: That's actually the thought that I use to talk myself off the ledge when I'm worrying, because you know, your fear is that you're not going to be there for them, but God has them. I just have to remind myself that, [Yeah.] almost daily, really.

Bryan: The other thing that's worth pondering is, when we hesitate, there must be something in our view of God that's messed up, because I think if we had an accurate view of God, we wouldn't hesitate. So, we're all struggling to come to an accurate view of God, and it takes a lifetime and we still don't arrive.

Cara: Well. I think the biggest thing for me is if something were to happen to me, I trust that it's part of the plan. What I don't want to happen, Bryan, is for my kids to blame God. [Yeah.] That, so, [That's tough] you know, when we talked, you talked about in your life, when you went in for your heart surgery, no matter what happens, God is still good. [Right.] I tell my kids that. [Yeah.] That's my worry. That's it.

Bryan: And it's sobering. They'll take their cue from us. [Right.] So, if they've seen us trust Him, that's where they'll get it.

Cara: Also, I said, how do I tell my kids I serve a big God, but I'm too afraid to do this, [Yeah.] and then I just do it.

Bryan: Yeah. We all wrestle with it. Yeah.

Arnie: So, Bryan, you give us a picture of the God of the Armies that was talked about in the story. You know, we don't hear that very much in the Bible. Can you explain a little bit better on that?

Bryan: Yeah, so a phrase that's used quite a bit through the Old Testament, Lord of Hosts, is the idea that He is the general, in essence of the armies of Heaven, of the Angel Army. So, a couple of the key pieces is: He's a king, and in the ancient world, the kings led the armies, [Oh.] and His army is an angelic army. They're not cute little cuddly angels with wings and a halo. They're warriors. And so, you put those concepts together, and it's a pretty awesome army God has at His disposal.

Arnie: So how important is prayer when it comes to spiritual warfare?

Bryan: Very important. It's a key weapon. And it's like, well, why wouldn't we go to war without one of our most powerful weapons? And in Ephesians Six, where it talks about the armor, put on the different pieces, it actually says if someone, for example, isn't spiritually mature enough to put on the armor, you can intercede for them. In a sense, you intercede for them because they're not ready to fight yet. And the way we do that is through prayer. That's a pretty serious responsibility.

Cara: You talked about two stories going on here. There's the story of how God was going to deal with the priests of the nation of Israel. And then there's this personal story of Hannah going on. If you put everything in the Bible on a timeline, you can say that they're all stories about the Kingdom and personal stories.

Bryan: Yeah. So that's one of my favorite things about this part of First Samuel is, how could Hannah have possibly understood what God was doing, but what He was doing would change a nation. So, there's always something else going on. There's always more to the story. I often don't see it, don't understand it, but it's not just me and my life. God's up to something and there's a bigger plan here. And just because I don't know what God's doing doesn't mean there isn't a plan.

Cara: That tells me then that I'm part of the overall story. And that widens my perspective a lot. [Right.] You know, my kids when we talk and they have questions at night, my kids to open them up, that there's a piece of the Bible that hasn't even happened yet. So, we're living in that now. It just gives us a whole new perspective. [Yeah.] Yeah.

Arnie: And when you see things happening in our nation, in our culture, that make us really upset as Christ followers, that really, you're saying that's part of the bigger story?

Bryan: Well, there's certainly more going on. I'd say it's part of sin in the world and that there's a cosmic war going on. You know, I think we all understand we need to be careful about speculating that when certain things happen, like natural disasters, we don't know why that happens. I've heard preachers speculate that was God's discipline or punishment, and it's like, yeah, I don't think we'd know that, but for sure there's a bigger story going on and God's up to something, and we have to trust Him with that.

Cara: Would you say all the things then in this world that are going on that seem like such big deals are just a backdrop to what God is doing?

Bryan: It's all part of the story. I'm not sure I'd say it's a backdrop. It's more reflective of the battle. We see glimpses, but there's a whole lot more going on. He's up to something. We know that.

Arnie: You're saying it's complicated.

BRYAN: I am saying it's complicated. Thank you.