

Prayer: Week 3

“When prayer is hard ...”



- Welcome (5-10 minutes)

In your dreams, what would you do and where would you live?



- Worship (10-15 minutes)

Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Saviour. The Sovereign Lord is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, he enables me to go on the heights.

Habakkuk 3:17-19

- Word (50 minutes)

If only prayer were a guarantee of the delivery of exactly what we ask for and at the exact specified time that we ask for it! If only we could control God to give us what we want, as and when we choose! Except ... except that this would result in all manner of cruel and inappropriate prayers being answered. (God, I pray for it to be Christmas every day; I pray for my teacher not to be in school this week; I pray that my sister will be very ill so I can use her hair straighteners for that party; etc) However, this would give us God-like authority without God's wisdom, grace or mercy. This would not be a good idea!

Read the following passage:

*1 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 And because the Lord had closed her 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 Elkanah her husband 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?" 9 Once when they had finished eating and drinking in Shiloh, Hannah stood up. Now Eli the priest was sitting on a chair by the doorpost of the Lord's temple. 10 In bitterness of soul Hannah wept much and prayed to the Lord. 11 And she made a vow, saying, "O Lord Almighty, if you will only look upon 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." 12 As she kept on praying to the Lord, Eli observed her mouth. 13 Hannah was praying in her heart, and her lips were moving but her voice was not heard. Eli thought she was drunk 14 and said to her, "How long will you keep on getting drunk? Get rid of your wine." 15 "Not so, my lord," Hannah replied, "I am a woman who is deeply troubled. I have not been drinking wine or beer; I was pouring out my soul to the Lord. 16 Do not take your servant for a wicked woman; I have been praying here out of my great anguish and grief." 17 Eli answered, "Go in peace, and may the God of Israel grant you what you have asked of him." 18 She said, "May your servant find favour in your eyes." Then she went her way and ate something, and her face was no longer downcast. 19 Early the next morning they arose and worshipped before the Lord and then went back to their home at Ramah. Elkanah lay with Hannah his wife, and the Lord remembered her. 20 So in the course of time Hannah conceived and gave birth to a son. She named him Samuel, saying, "Because I asked the Lord for him." **1 Sam 1 1-20 (NIV)***



- Look at the passage above and underline where prayer begins, and talk about why she left it so long before turning to the Lord. Do you recognise anything of your own approach to prayer from this account?

Hannah's story is one of deeply felt pain due to her being unfulfilled and also being taunted and tormented by her rival, Peninnah from whom there was no respite. Prayer is hard when we don't see the answers we feel we need. This is particularly tough when our prayer concerns are for health and strength, for healing or for an unacceptable situation to change for the good of our stress levels. For Hannah, a child would mean affirmation of herself as a woman and as a wife. It would demonstrate that she was blessed and favoured by God. Without a child, she was lonely and vulnerable. Yet for many, many years, her prayers are met with silence from heaven.

- Talk about Coffey's pointers on prayer that he sees arising from Hannah's story. Discuss with your group how you have felt the need to pray in a similar manner and how you will use Hannah's example in future praying. What situations do you find yourself in where you can draw strength from Hannah's story?



Desperate prayers are not unusual

Heaven is used to 999 calls and we shouldn't be afraid to make them.

Prayer is often the last resort – when it should be the first

Hannah had nowhere else to go. The sooner we run out of options, the quicker we get down to serious praying.

Sharing a burden lessens the load

Eli became the listening ear that Hannah so desperately needed, but to find it, she needed to express her vulnerability.

We can find rest – even though there is no quick answer

The narrative records that this distressing incident brought Hannah to a place of peace even though her immediate problem was not solved.

God can do the impossible

Hannah's story has a happy ending – but not all our stories end with us getting what we ask for. Yet the circumstances surrounding Samuel's birth remind us that God can do impossible things when He chooses. However hard we find it to accept, we are left with the conclusion that when we don't get what we pray for, it has to do with God's will, not his weakness. P.46 Coffey

Prayer is hard when we take the cries of our heart to God and we see no change. This does not mean that God is deaf to our pleas nor that he is uncaring about us or our situation. We turn to St Paul for hope here! He suffered for many years, constantly asking God to take his suffering away, and yet, for even such a saint as he was, God chose to answer that prayer with a 'no, you'll be better for living with it ...'

- Read 2 Corinthians 12 7-10. Talk about the potential good in 'unanswered prayer'. Talk about times in your past in which it was good that your prayer went unanswered. How might it have helped in your journey of faith?



It is important that we keep on practising the discipline of prayer in every situation we find ourselves. Fear of 'getting it wrong' can be crippling, as we may wonder whether it is 'God's will' for something to happen. This is something of a red herring, as the purpose of prayer is to change ourselves to be more Godly. It is through the honing of our characters by 'not praying the best prayers', and living with 'silence in heaven' that we learn to discover what his will is. This can be painful, and we can experience personal resistance to change.



- Spend some time gathered round a focus for prayer. Each person should pray the prayer that they are currently feeling to be unanswered. Pray for one another with supporting prayers for each person from the rest of the group.

- **Witness (20 – 25 minutes)**

Learning how to pray responsibly for other people and events is a necessary part of our growth as disciples. Jerry Sittser describes the pitfalls in this way;

Christians on opposing sides have prayed for victory in conflicts that were – and are - ... serious and deadly. Some Christians in the United States are praying for Israel's victory over the Palestinians while Christians in Palestine are praying not for victory but for peace. Again, some Christians in Northern Ireland are praying for the defeat of "the enemy," whether Protestant or Catholic, while other Christians are praying not for vindication but for reconciliation. And some Christians in the United States are praying for economic recovery in [their] nation, while Christians in other parts of the world are praying for enough food to survive another day. P.71 Sittser

Look at a national newspaper for the day. Talk about how you might pray responsibly for the major headlines.

- Prayer the prayers that your group agreed in week 1.



- Time for refreshments, you've earned them.

Bibliography

Coffey, Ian; *What you always wanted to know about prayer ... but were afraid to ask*; CWR; 2007

Sittser, Jerry; *When God doesn't answer your prayer*; Zondervan; 2003

Further Reading

Wiesel, Elie; *Night*; Penguin Twentieth Century Classics; 2006

Tolstoy, Leo; *Prayer: Divine and Human*