

We are continuing our series today called *Teach Us to Pray*. Every Christian I know wants a better prayer life. They want to pray more consistently. Pray with greater fervor. Pray with greater power, greater intimacy with God. Pray with greater ability to hear God's voice. That desire to grow in prayer isn't unique to us. Jesus' disciples saw him praying constantly, and one time they came to him and said, "Lord, teach us to pray." That's what this series is all about: learning how to pray and growing in prayer, specifically by learning from some of the most impactful and inspiring prayers of the Bible. Last week we learned about prayer from a man named Nehemiah; today we learn about prayer from a woman named Hannah, and we learn how to come before the Lord in our places of desperate need and ask for God to provide. Every once in a while, around 3 a.m. at the Hamel house, one of our kids will have a bad dream. When they wake up and they are scared and they don't know what to do, they come running into our room and they say, "Daddy, I need you." They instinctively know to run to their father. I want you to imagine you are at your house and it's 3 a.m., but it's not a bad dream that awakens you; rather, it's someone violently trying to knock down your door. Someone is trying to break into your house. What would you do? Most of us would quickly grab our phone and dial 911. I need help! When you are in desperate need, you must know where to go and who you can call on. That's what we are going to see today as we open God's Word. Turn to 1 Samuel 1.

As you are turning there, let's set the context for what is going on with God's people. Historically speaking, it was roughly the year 1100 B.C. The key word that describes the situation is *barrenness*. Barrenness was two-fold, both general and specific. It begins with the barrenness of God's people. The Israelites were in a horrible place. Their land and farms were being constantly raided and pillaged by their neighboring enemies. They had no unifying political leader, and the moral fabric of nation had eroded greatly. Judges 21:11 describes the moment by saying, "In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit." It wasn't just the nation at large that had compromised its integrity and morals; it was the spiritual leaders of the people. 1 Samuel 2:12 says, "Hophni and Phineas (the priests) were scoundrels; they had no regard for the Lord." As priests, they used their positions of authority over the Lord's house to steal people's offerings and use them for their own indulgence, and also to sleep with women. It was a gross defilement. The people had back-slidden; the leaders had backslidden—the nation of Israel had become a spiritually barren place.

But it wasn't just with God's people in general, it was also with one specific woman named Hannah. This passage shows three areas in which Hannah had great difficulty and pain in her life.

- *No children.* In the ancient world, a woman's honor, self-worth, and value in society were tied to her ability to have children. Hannah had none, and because of her physical barrenness, she felt empty, incomplete, and brokenhearted.
- *A cruel, rival wife.* In the ancient world, polygamy was common. Hannah's husband married two women. The Bible not only says that his other wife, Peninnah, had children—numerous sons and daughters—but also that this other woman would intentionally provoke her and irritate her, specifically mocking her because of her inability to have children.
- *An insensitive husband.* Hannah's husband did love her, and joyfully provided for her, but he was too emotionally dense to listen to her, understand her, and relate to her in her pain. He literally said, "Why are you sad? Why are you crying? Why don't you eat? Don't I mean more to you than ten sons?" Men, imagine if you and your wife were trying to have kids, trying for years. Your wife thinks she may be pregnant. She takes a test, but it's negative. She's sitting on the bathroom floor crying, and you walk by all chipper and say, "Don't worry about it baby; you got me!" That denseness and emotional unawareness is off the charts.

Hannah feels empty. Attacked. Unseen. Uncared for. Alone. That's the context. Now let's read about how she went to God in prayer. Year after year, Hannah and her family went to the house of God. One year, she prayed.

In her deep anguish Hannah prayed to the Lord, weeping bitterly. 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." As she kept on praying to the Lord, Eli observed her mouth. Hannah was praying in her heart, and her lips were moving but her voice was not heard. Eli thought she was drunk and said to her, "How long are you going to stay drunk? Put away your wine."

"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. Do not take your servant for a wicked woman; I have been praying here out of my great anguish and grief."

Eli answered, "Go in peace, and may the God of Israel grant you what you have asked of him." She said, "May your servant find favor in your eyes." Then she went her way and ate something, and her face was no longer downcast.

Early the next morning they arose and worshiped before the Lord and then went back to their home at Ramah. Elkanah made love to his wife Hannah, and the Lord remembered her. So in the course of time Hannah became pregnant and gave birth to a son. She named him Samuel, saying, "Because I asked the Lord for him."

After he was weaned, she took the boy with her, young as he was...and brought the boy to Eli, and she said to him, "Pardon me, my lord. As surely as you live, I am the woman who stood here beside you praying to the Lord. I prayed for this child, and the Lord has granted me what I asked of him. So now I give him to the Lord. For his whole life he will be given over to the Lord." And he worshiped the Lord there. (1 Samuel 1:10-20, 24b-28).

There is so much that we can glean from this prayer, but what I really want to focus on boils down to one word: *desperation*. Hannah was in a place of desperation, she was holding sadness, shame, disappointment, relational baggage, and unmet hopes and dreams, and she brought all of that into the presence of God, and with boldness and confidence and tears laid it all before him. When she was desperate, when she was at her lowest, when she was at the end of her rope and hopeless, she came to the Lord. Look at the descriptions given in this passage:

- Year after year she went to worship the Lord Almighty.
- In her deep anguish, she prayed to the Lord, weeping bitterly. "I have been praying out of my great anguish and grief."
- Hannah was praying in her heart; her lips were moving but her voice was not heard. "I was pouring out my soul to the Lord."

She went consistently (year after year). She brought all her raw and tangled up emotion (wept bitterly, great anguish and grief); she dumped the entire wheelbarrow out in God's presence (words couldn't even express what was happening in her heart as she was pouring out her soul to the Lord). She is pounding on the doors of heaven and she is begging with all she has for God to meet her and for God to provide for her. When we come to God and say, "Teach us to pray," God wants to teach us to pray like Hannah, to pray out of our desperation.

As I was studying this passage these last few days, I asked God, “How do you want me to preach about this?” I felt him nudge me to go to people in this church and ask them about areas where there has been a desperate need in their life, how they took it to God, and what God did. I was moved to tears and amazement time and time again listening to people’s testimonies.

- I heard from a person who has chronic pain, who has spent years visiting every doctor and every specialist she can find, and has no answers. Some days she can’t even leave the house. On those days, she just sits in her living room and cries out to the Lord and says, “Jesus, you are the great physician. You can do what no one else can do. Have mercy on me God and take away this pain.”
- I heard from a young woman whose parents are contemplating divorce. “At this point, the only thing left that I can do is pray. So I am praying all the time.”
- I talked to a man who told me about a season when his family was completely strapped financially, living paycheck to paycheck, already extremely stressed, and then they got an unexpected bill from the IRS for tens of thousands of dollars and had no idea what they were going to do, how he was going to feed his kids and not lose their home. He told me how he got down on his knees with his wife in the living room and wept.
- I talked to a mother whose teenage son was struggling. She couldn’t break through, and she spent the night lying down in the hallway outside of his room, praying over him through the hours of the night.
- I talked to a man who has an exceptional education and incredible vocational skills, but who went without a job for nearly two years, living with his wife and kids in his in-laws’ basement, taking a minimum wage job to provide for basic necessities. He kept calling out to God, “I know this is not what you have for us. I know you called me to more. Please, please, please open a door!”

Every story was so unique. And every person had a personal testimony of how God met them and ministered to them in their need. Some of them saw a miracle.

- That man who was underemployed for two years ended up with his dream job, and because it took so long to come, he said, “I will never, for a single day, take my career for granted.”
- In the family with financial burdens and an enormous bill from the IRS, the mom and dad were weeping in the living room, and they said, “This makes no sense at all, we can’t even pay our bills as it is, but we are going to trust God and give him the first 10% of our income.” It was a moment of surrender and abandon. He said the next day, literally the next day, they got a call from a distant relative they had not heard from in forever. This person had no idea what was going on in their life, and just randomly said, “I have an extra house. Would you like to stay there for free, no expenses at all, for the next four or five years?” Of course, they said yes, and it gave them space to pay off every penny of that debt, with even a little left over.
- One of the parents told me that their grown kid who was struggling to turn their life around is following God and is flourishing far beyond their parents hopes or dreams.

Some of them, like Hannah, got their miracle. To be perfectly honest with you, some of them have not. They are still waiting and trusting and wrestling with God. That’s when faith really comes into play. As inspired as I was by the stories of provision that some shared, I was just as inspired by the testimonies of those who haven’t seen a breakthrough yet.

- One woman said, “Having a wayward child has taught me more about God’s unconditional love than everything else that has happened in my life combined.” Desperation deepens our knowledge of God like nothing else.
- One man in our church said, “I pleaded for God to lead me out of the wilderness. God wanted to lead me deeper into the wilderness, so he could strip away every trace of pride and self-sufficiency from my life.” That season of barrenness is a time when God is working out righteousness at the deepest levels of your soul.

- One of the women I spoke to this week, who I have so much respect and admiration for, said, “I have come to God empty more times than I can count. I have never walked away empty handed.” She said, “Seldom has God given me exactly what I asked for, but he’s always given me exactly what I needed.”
- One man said, “Sometimes God works a miracle for us. Sometimes, God works a miracle in us. One way or the other, God is always working a miracle.”

These are the moments where faith is tested the most. Your faith isn’t tempted when your bank account is full, your marriage is thriving, all your kids are flourishing, and your doctor says you are as healthy as ever. No, the crucible of faith is when life isn’t working out the way we hoped, and God doesn’t answer right away, can we keep on praying, can we keep on trusting, even when life doesn’t seem fair? Can we, in those moments of barrenness, trust God’s goodness and God’s sovereign knowledge? Isaiah 55:8-9 says, “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the Lord. “As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.” God is sovereign. God is all-knowing. We must have the humility and trust to believe that if he allows barrenness in our lives, he may very well be up to something!

One thing that the Bible tells us on this side of Hannah’s story, that Hannah did not know at the time, is that, “The Lord closed Hannah’s womb” (1 Samuel 1:5-6). We read this not once, but twice! Hannah was praying in her desperation, “God, give me a child; God, give me a child.” Not only did he not answer her prayer, but it was God who had kept her from having a child. She didn’t know it, but in that season of waiting, of struggle, of desperation, God was preparing to do something in her and through her that would not just bless her and bring fulfillment to her life, but that would also change the course of human history. God did something in this woman’s barrenness that would heal the barrenness of the entire nation of Israel. God did something in this woman’s barrenness that would help prepare the way for Jesus, who would heal the barrenness of the entire world. At the time, all Hannah saw was years of disappointment. All she saw were her dreams going unfulfilled and her prayers going unanswered. But God was working. She was in the valley. God was on the mountain. And he said, “Keep coming to me. Keep calling on me. Keep trusting me. I have a plan. I am going to work all things together for the good of those who love me!”

I want to speak personally and pastorally right now to anyone who is in desperate need like Hannah was. God sees you. God knows everything about you and what you are going through. God cares for you. God is good. God wants you come to him with your burden, with your pain, with your confusion, with your disappointments, with your questions, and lean into him more than ever. Pour out your soul to him! The Book of Psalms is a collection of 150 prayers, many of which were just like Hannah’s. Listen to some of them.

- “Out of the depths I cry to you, Lord; Lord, hear my voice. Let your ears be attentive to my cry for mercy” Psalm 130:1-2.
- “I waited patiently for the Lord; he turned to me and heard my cry. He lifted me out of the slimy pit, out of the mud and mire; he set my feet on a rock and gave me a firm place to stand. He put a new song in my mouth, a hymn of praise to our God” (Psalm 40:1-3).
- “I sought the Lord, and he answered me; he delivered me from all my fears. Those who look to him are radiant; their faces are never covered with shame. This poor man called, and the Lord heard him; he saved him out of all his troubles. The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear him, and he delivers them. Taste and see that the Lord is good; blessed is the one who takes refuge in him. Fear the Lord, you his holy people, for those who fear him lack nothing. The lions may grow weak and hungry, but those who seek the Lord lack no good thing: (Psalm 34:4-9).

Listen to Hannah. Look at the testimony of God's people throughout the ages. Come to God with your greatest needs, because those who seek him lack no good thing. He may give you what you ask for, he may tell you he is working in the waiting, he may have something different and better than you could have imagined. But he will meet you there and give you what you need!

I told you the focus of this message was on the word "desperation," but the message wouldn't be complete without an additional word: *consecration*. Because Hannah didn't just come and ask God to provide; she promised that if God gave her what she asked for, she would give it back to him. She said, "If you give me a son, I will give him to the Lord for all the days of his life" (1 Samuel 1:11). Not just desperation, but consecration. Hannah wasn't asking only for her dreams to be fulfilled; she was also asking for God's kingdom to advance. Her prayers weren't for her enjoyment or vindication; they were for God's glory.

I want to lay this question before you. This is one of the most important questions you could possibly ask yourself. Have I consecrated my future to the Lord? When you think about the next year, the next five years, the next ten years, your marriage, your family, your career, your health, your wealth, whatever it is you hope to have and are asking God for, can you say with Hannah, "Every good thing you give me, I will use for your glory. Your blessings won't just be for me; I will turn them back to praise your name." If you want to learn how to pray, hold on to these two words: desperation and consecration.

- Desperation: God, meet me in my deepest needs.
- Consecration: God, I will live my entire life for you.

We are going to have a time of communion and prayer. Some of you will want to receive communion right now, others, before you receive communion, may want to come to God in desperation. You can do that right where you are, or we also invite you to come forward to pray. Bring your deepest needs before God, for your singleness, for your marriage, for desire for a child, for your addiction, for your loneliness, for your diagnosis, for your child. Wherever there may be desperation right now, come and pour out your soul to the Lord like Hannah did. He wants to meet you here. He wants to provide.