

Prayer: a cry from the heart

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[0 : 00] Well, good morning everyone. And a happy new year to you all from the Ropers.!

I have to confess I'm not particularly good at it, particularly when I'm praying on my own. You know, I can sit down, I can read a bit of the Bible perhaps, perhaps a devotional by some wise Christian leader, and start praying with the best intentions.

But then after 30 seconds of praying, trying to follow the pattern of the Lord's Prayer perhaps, I suddenly remember that email that I haven't sent, or the 10 things that I've got to do before lunch. Or worse still, the DBD man, delivery man, a hammer's on the door, and instead of letting him just leave the parcel at the front door, I have to race downstairs and wave at him, just as he's disappearing in his van.

And of course the moment has gone. Why didn't I just stay in that room and carry on praying, and let the delivery man leave his parcel? So this morning I'm not going to give you a lecture, on how to improve your prayer life.

[1 : 32] I'm just not the person for that. But there are plenty of good books on the subject, and I can recommend this very good book to you. You Can Pray by Tim Chester. Some very good helpful tips in there on how to pray, and why we pray.

And you can pray. And perhaps you've never prayed before, and this will be the great time to start. But what, with the Spirit's help, I'd love to focus on this morning, is the one who is the object of our praying.

Our wonderful, loving, all-powerful, divine Father, who is able to do immeasurably more than we could ever ask or imagine, according to his power that's at work in us.

I hope that will stimulate us to want to pray more. Individually, and as a fellowship of people, we've all got our different needs, and there's some tremendous needs among the fellowship here.

And we need to pray. We need to uphold each other in prayer. We're a needy people. But I take great comfort from the fact that praying from God's perspective, it's not a kind of performance test.

[2 : 51] I think sometimes we think it is. You know, we've got to perform well, and God will only hear if we pray well. We pray to say the right things. And I can remember when I first became a Christian, sometimes it seems to be, praying seems to be a way of people parading how much they know of Scripture and letting everybody know about their sort of knowledge of doctrine and things like that.

But it's not that at all, is it? It's essentially the first and the ongoing evidence of spiritual life. We start our spiritual lives by praying.

There's some really good examples in Scripture. For example, when Paul was on the way to Damascus to sort out the Christians in Damascus and persecute them and arrest them, Ananias, and he met Jesus on that road, didn't he?

And Ananias, the believer in Damascus, had a vision at the same time and said, you're going to hear, you know, before long of this man, Saul, who's going to come up to Damascus.

And I think he, Ananias, had already heard about him. And so he had this vision from the Lord, and the Lord said, do listen to this man.

[4 : 13] Take him in. You'll find, told him exactly where to find him. And this is what he said. And in one of the old versions it said, behold, he is praying. And that was the amazing thing.

Now I imagine Paul had said all sorts of prayers in his earlier life. As a Pharisee, he probably stood on the street corners praying so everybody could hear him praying. But here he was, praying for the first time a real spiritual prayer with faith to God who'd been revealed to him.

Anyway, enough of that. The story of Hannah, which Sue read for us very beautifully. It's a true story in the Old Testament, and it's a very vivid, very human one, which kind of tugs at our

heartstrings, doesn't it?

Here's a woman who lived in a good home, a highly respected husband in the community, who loved and cared, obviously cared for her deeply, we're told that. But beneath the surface, all was not well with Hannah.

She longed to have a child. But couldn't. And we have to say, in those days, in Israel, it was a kind of deep shame not to be, to have children, to be childless.

[5 : 28] But what really upset her was this other woman in the family, Penina, who seemed to be able to produce babies like there was no tomorrow, one after the other, had maybe ten sons or whatever.

she just seemed to be able to do it without thinking. But she kept on needling and provoking Hannah, really getting at her, taking the mickey out of her, because she couldn't have a child. And this went on and on for years and years, until one year, it all got too much for Hannah. And when they all went up to the temple, as they did on this annual occasion, to gather in worship and feast, Penina had yet another go at her.

And that was the straw that broke the camel's back. And poor Hannah just broke down in tears. She went bitterly. She was absolutely inconsolable.

And you can imagine it, can't you? Her husband didn't exactly help, I have to say. Nor did his rather pathetic attempt at consolation. Cheer up, dear.

[6 : 33] You've always got me. I'm better than ten sons, aren't I? Yeah, husbands take no. She refused to eat. And once the meal was over and people were leaving, she stood up and started pouring out her heart.

You can just see her standing there, can't you? At the table. Pouring out her heart to the Lord, weeping bitterly. But then dear old Eli the priest was sat by the door looking on.

And you can just picture it again, can't you? Here he was. He noticed her lips were moving. But she didn't seem to be saying anything. And this went on for several minutes. So he jumped to the conclusion that she'd been having too, or she'd had too many glasses of wine over lunch.

And ticks her off for being drunk. But Hannah protests respectfully. Not so, my Lord. I'm a woman who is deeply troubled.

Can you identify with that this morning? I've not been drinking wine or beer. I was pouring out my song to the Lord. Don't take your servant for a wicked woman. I've been praying here out of my great anguish and grief.

[7 : 41] And Eli duly trespassed, replies, we'll go in peace. And may the God of Israel grant you what you have asked of him. At this, Hannah rejoins her family.

She has something to eat. And obviously, it derived great benefit. We need to note that, don't we? It derived benefit from unburdening herself on her Lord. Her face was no longer downcast, we read. And the rest, as they say, is history. Nine months or so later, she had this son called Samuel. And because she'd been given this special gift, as she saw it, from the Lord, she dedicates him to the Lord for the rest of his life.

It was a remarkable answer to her prayers, something that she thought was impossible. But God had answered it for her. And of course, Samuel becomes one of the greatest prophets in Israel's history.

He was a great kingmaker, which we'll see a bit later on. So what can we learn today from this story of Hannah?

[8 : 46] It is our week of prayer, isn't it? And we can draw lessons from this account. There's three things. Preachers always have three things, don't they? So I'm not going to deviate from that.

Three things to draw out that might stimulate us to go on praying. And I hope they do. And the first is, God understands our heartaches.

Is there something in your life, perhaps, that you're really struggling with at the moment? You feel absolutely powerless to change. That's perhaps gone on for years and years.

As you start a new year, you can't see how things are going to improve, if they improve at all. And it's as if those closest to you don't really understand the depth of anguish you're going through in your heart.

Maybe like Hannah, someone is really upsetting you, perhaps provoking you, and they just won't stop. It's like a dripping tap, and it just gets at you. Maybe someone at work, or someone in the home, or somewhere around you.

[9 : 55] Or perhaps it's someone close to you, a son or a daughter, perhaps, has severe challenges, maybe physical challenges, some sort of disability, mental illness, developmental challenges, special educational needs, things like that, or emotional things that seem to go on and on and on, and you can't stop them, and you're struggling to cope.

Or perhaps it's something deeper within yourself, struggling with your own conscience that you don't know how to put right. So there's all kinds of things, really, that can get to us.

But Hannah knew who to turn to in her hour of desperate need. And it was the God of her people, Israel. The thing is, at that time, they knew God as the Lord Almighty, the great, all-powerful Jehovah.

Who could do the impossible for his people, like rescue them from Egypt and so on. And so he is. He is that all-powerful, almighty God who we've been singing about earlier.

But now, we as his people in the gospel age can know God as our loving, heavenly Father. He's closer to us than we often like to think or even believe.

[11 : 12] And there's something that's really struck me recently. Do I really know God as a father? The best father anybody could have. And of course, Jesus, the Emmanuel, God with us, which we just celebrated at Christmas.

He's opened the way for us to be adopted into this father's family, his father's family. And of course, Hannah would never have prayed to God as a father. It would have been this Jehovah God, the all-powerful God who she had a relationship with.

But as adopted children now, in God's family, we can know him as a father. And in fact, Jesus insists that we do. When you pray, he says, say, our Father in heaven.

And sometimes we may think of heaven as somewhere sort of out there, remote and distant. And one writer says, it's a bit like saying, well, it's up, heaven must be up there somewhere, a bit to the left of that far distant galaxy.

And that's where heaven is. It seems a bit like that, remote and distant. But Jesus taught that the kingdom of heaven is something we can experience here and now, in this room.

[12 : 25] It's very present with us. It's close to all of us. As Paul said to the Greeks in Athens, for in him we live, we move, and have our being. Everything we have, everything we see around us is a gift from God.

And every breath that we take is a gift from God. Our Father. And the moment we put our trust in Jesus as our saviour and Lord, God gives us his comforter.

That's what we read, don't we? He gives us his comforter, his Holy Spirit, to actually live in us. That very close relationship with God through the Holy Spirit to know him as our Father.

And in a sense, the Holy Spirit is the seal of adoption that we are, his sons and daughters. So what does that mean for us practically speaking? It means that wherever we are, whatever we're going through, we can reach out to him, our Father, offload all our anxieties onto him because he cares for us more than we like to believe sometimes, more than any natural father can or would.

He cares for us. And when we ask for bread, Jesus said, will he give us a stone to eat? Break our teeth on it?

[13 : 45] Of course he won't. He's gracious, he's compassionate, he's slow to anger and rich in love as we read twice yesterday at the prayer breakfast, Psalm 145.

So like Hannah, don't hold back. Just pour out your hearts to the Lord, to the one who can either do the impossible to put things right or give you the grace to cope with the things that you're going through.

As Paul said, when he pleaded with the Lord three times to take away his thorn in the flesh, we don't really know what that was, but it was something that really, really troubled him like this childlessness that Hannah had.

And the answer was no. It came with this amazing promise though, didn't it? It wasn't just no, you're not having that. He gave, the Lord gave him a great promise.

My grace is sufficient for you for my power is made perfect in weakness and we really need to grab hold of that and hold on to it if there's things happening in our lives that we just can't see a way through.

[14 : 51] And maybe God will do a miracle and change things for you, but he may not. But what he does do is give you the grace to cope. Sometimes it just teaches us humility, a bit of humility between this God, this great God who's also our Father.

And it also teaches us patience and long-suffering, those gifts of the Spirit. So we all have a great opportunity this week, don't we, to be like Hannah and go to the old chapel across the way there. It'll be open all week, I understand, for prayer. And you can go there without any interference from DPD deliveries or whatever at home or work distractions and just pour out your heart to the Lord. Why don't we do that? Your Father awaits you. Go and take to him the things that are in your life that trouble you most, perhaps a loved one or something more personal to you.

Perhaps you've never really prayed to him before. Go there and pray. Or you can do it wherever you are, but there's a special place there. Perhaps someone in your heart that you desperately want to come, to know him as their Father too.

[16:05] Take it to him in prayer. And one thing I can promise you, that Johan won't be sitting at the door, as far as I'm aware anyway, to watch your lips moving. So you'll be all right.

The second point that we can learn from this story of Hannah. God delights to hear our prayers. I love this picture from the book, *Having a Merry Heart in a Martha World*.

Any of you read it? By Joanna Weaver. It's all about spending regular time with God. And I'll just read you a little excerpt from this. A sort of summary, really.

A woman went into a living room and noticed a man sitting there in the living room. She asked why he was there and he said he wanted to take the time to talk with her. And she would come away every day and sit and talk and they would pull out the Bible.

And he would share insights about the stories in the Bible that she never realised were there. She would be able to tell him anything and find comfort in his reactions. And thoroughly enjoyed every minute that she spent with him.

[17:11] She looked forward to the times they had together alone in this room day by day. But then life got hectic and she soon would miss just one day then another and she just had a hard time getting back to the room for her time with the Lord.

Then one day she noticed the door was ajar and there was a light on and a fire roaring in the grate. And she looked in and saw the man was still sitting there waiting for her to join him.

He assured her that he'd been there sitting and waiting for her. She felt ashamed and asked for his forgiveness for neglecting him. And he forgave her and he asked her to come and sit so they could talk again.

He then told her that he wasn't there just for her. Of course he was happy to listen to all her problems and her cares and anxieties. But he was also there because he really wanted to enjoy her company too.

Isn't that wonderful? Yeah, there is some value in having a regular quiet time if that's possible. But there is a danger with that isn't there too?

[18:24] That if we master this discipline and it becomes something that we feel we have to do rather than what we really want and love to do. Where still we can kind of pat ourselves on the back.

Oh, I've done all my quiet times this week. And that's not really what praying is all about. It's far more important as David says in Psalm 37, delight in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart.

Just let that sink in for a minute. Delight in the Lord. Go to him. Delight in him. He delights in you. He'll give you the desires of your heart when we're in tune with him.

We can do that anywhere, of course. When I worked in London a few years ago now, used to travel up from Kent where we used to live, I had a friend who sometimes caught the same train going up to Charing Cross.

And because it was the unspoken commuter rule that on no account you speak to anybody on the train before 9am, that people just sat there and looked at each other or read a paper which is probably what I did.

[19:36] But this guy would always get his Bible out and sit in the corner of the train and pray quietly in the corner. That was his special time with the Lord. I personally find the best time for me to talk to the Lord is when I'm out walking in Farnham Park here.

It's a great place just to meditate and think on him. And rejoice in him and pray to him and pour out my heart when I've got something to worry about. Find a place that's convenient for you so that you can it just comes naturally.

Something part of your natural daily routine if you like to meet with God in that special place perhaps. And can I say too that it's a great thing if you've got someone close to you that you can pray pray with.

and that's something that Alice and I try and do every day and it's a real help. We can just lay everything before the Lord that we think we're going to have to cope with that day.

Hannah knew who to turn to in her hour of desperate need and we can do the same. Just one other point here. Yes, we need to respect and honour God as Jesus also taught us.

[20 : 49] Hallowed be your name. Worship him in your spirit. But we can also talk to him intimately as a father. I always remember a few years ago I used to go and pray with a guy called Jim Sanderson who worked for Sazra and was the local scripture reader up in Aldershot at the garrison here.

We used to get together to pray now and again for his work. And there was a guy there that really impressed me. And he'd always open up his prayer by the words that God used to appoint David. He was God's kingmaker if you like.

Appointing this David the shepherd boy as king of Israel. The forerunner of our saviour Jesus. So that the answer to Anna's prayer not only brought her fulfilment in joy in her own life but it also paved the way for God's greater plan of salvation to be fulfilled that we all benefit from now.

And if she'd not been so desperate and been so provoked by this Peninnah she may not have prayed so fervently or vowed to give her son back to the Lord if only if he would give her this son. God had great purposes to work through all this through Samuel. And sometimes in our lives God uses distressing circumstances which we can't underestimate to prompt us to pray more earnestly more fervently more passionately for changes to be brought about.

[22 : 14] And when those prayers are answered we later realise they were all part of God's master plan for the blessing of ourselves and perhaps others as well despite the suffering that we ourselves have gone through and perhaps still are.

So as God's children there's always a purpose let's get hold of that there's always a purpose in the challenging times the suffering that we have to go through.

We may not appreciate it at the time and I can look back at times when we just did wonder what on earth was going on. But when we look back we can see God's hand at work through it.

Do you remember that picture of the tapestry? If you look at the back of a tapestry it just there's all these colours and it just looks a mess. It's all sort of jumbled up and mixed up and you can't understand what on earth it's about.

Very confusing but you turn it over and you get this beautiful picture this creative picture and that's very often what God is doing in our lives. To us it seems a complete mess difficult to understand what's going on.

[23 : 23] As a church we can experience that sometimes but God is working his purposes out as we pray to him and we serve him and he's producing something beautiful that will become evident to us either later in this life or in glory.

So may Hannah's example be a spur for us as a church family to pray together pray individually for God's will to be done in our lives and in the life and the work of the church and the extension of his kingdom here at Bethel reaching out to the lost in our community that they too may discover this loving father that we all know so precious to us and be adopted into his family.

And let me say this prayer is not all about us yes it is about taking all our needs and our wants and our desires to the Lord and it is actually really about recognising our need that we do need a father we do need someone we can go to and to be submissive to his will and his greater purposes that Hannah in her case was just not aware of at the time but God had his master plan behind the scenes and there may be personal cost to us as we go through those experiences but it's so often true isn't it that when our backs are against the wall as Christians and it can be a hostile world out there when we all come together to pray more fervently more urgently more passionately it's then that God through his spirit does abundantly more than we could ever ask or think so let's really pray on this week shall we just to finish with then

Andy started off with getting a bit of participation from the congregation so I'm not going to do anything differently so I'd like us all you don't need to stand at this point but why don't we all say this together as a kind of watch word for our week of prayer Ephesians 3.20 now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine according to his power at work to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations forever and ever Amen Thank you