

A Prayer for a Troubled Mind

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[0 : 00] This is the morning service on the 18th of October 1998. The preacher is Phil Muleman.

His sermon is entitled A Prayer for a Troubled Mind and is from 1 Samuel 1.1-18.

Well, we've been talking a lot about prayer this morning, haven't we? We're going to talk a bit more about it. You're going to ask us a question.

How do we view prayer? Is it something that we take seriously? Or do we think of it as an activity that is irrelevant? Is it viewed as something that you do when you go to church on Sunday and forget about for the rest of the week?

Is prayer something that we do only for ourselves, ignoring the needs of those around us? Perhaps prayer is something that we do on the run because we have no other time to pray due to other pressing commitments, whether they be church-related, work-related or family-related.

[1 : 23] And often, prayer is something that we do on the run. But do we really take time to pray? Do we really sit down and spend time in prayer to God, the Creator?

Or do we shirk the issue because there are just too many things going on in our lives? Or is prayer just an unnatural thing to do with?

If you think about it, prayer in our world is an unnatural activity because from birth, we have been learning the rules of self-reliance as we struggle and strain to achieve self-sufficiency.

Prayer flies in the face of those deep-seated values. It's an assault of the human autonomy, an indictment on independent living. To people in the fast lane determined to make it on their own, prayer is an embarrassing interruption.

Prayer is alien to our proud human nature. Prayer is alien to our planet. And yet, somewhere, sometime, probably all of us at some point reach the point of falling to our knees, bowing our heads, bowing our heads, fixing our attention on God and praying.

[2 : 55] We may look both ways around us to be sure that no one is looking. We may even blush a little. But in spite of the foreignness of the activity, at some stage, we will pray.

Well, why are we drawn to prayer? I think that one of the most common reasons people are drawn to prayer is when people have a troubled mind.

When people are burdened with something they don't know how to cope with, it may be a problem with work that they need to deal with. It may be a problem with a family matter that is ongoing, a wayward child or a sick parent.

But as human beings, we all have human needs. And not just from time to time, I think all of the time. The passage that has been read to us and so well acted out to us this morning from 1 Samuel, you may like to turn to it on page 213, is all about a woman, Hannah, who had a troubled mind over her inability to have children.

We've all heard she was barren. Even though she was well loved by her husband, as verses 5 and 8 suggest, she was still very troubled.

[4 : 22] Now it was common in that society that the husband kept more than one wife. And we read and we saw that Hannah's husband, Elkanah, is also married to Peninnah.

And the difference between Peninnah and Hannah? Peninnah had children and Hannah had none. Now I don't think there was any love lost between Peninnah and Hannah.

Verse 6 tells us that Peninnah used to provoke her severely, to irritate her, because the Lord had closed Hannah's womb. And no doubt, the mockery and jibes of Hannah's fertile rival, who surrounded in the household with her brood of offspring, would be a source of pain and bitterness for Hannah as well.

You see, to be barren in this society, in the society that Hannah grew up in, was to be considered a disgrace for a married woman.

It was to be considered, you were a failure. Hannah was loved by her husband. There's no doubt about that, but there was no joy for her.

[5 : 29] The reminder of her infertility was always at the doorstep. And nothing hurt her more than the annual feast that her husband Elkanah would attend every year at a place called Shiloh.

Now Elkanah was a good man and observed the practices of worship in his day. He offered his sacrifices to God, to Yahweh, according to the laws that had been passed on to them.

The consistent worship offered by Elkanah Elkanah and his family, year by year, set a positive example of faithful and godly living. The family feast, which followed the sacrifice that they had made, would be the culmination of this pilgrimage that they had made to Shiloh.

And it would be a wonderful meal that they would share together. And the meal that they shared together was in honour of the restored fellowship that they had all made with God following the sacrifices made to him at Shiloh.

But the provocations made by Peninnah to Hannah and the loud chatter made by Peninnah's children enjoying the portions of the meat that they had would be yet another reminder or a nail in the coffin, if you like, of Hannah's isolation, of Hannah's failure.

[6 : 56] Invariably, Hannah was reduced to tears and left her meal uneaten. In vain, Elkanah, her husband, her best friend, her lover, tried to comfort her.

Am I not more to you than ten sons? He would say. It seemed that no amount of assurances of love could remove the depression that punched Hannah.

For Hannah, life held no meaning so long as she remained barren. So who can she turn to?

What can she do? What can we do when life is tough? When not even our closest friend or the person that we love most is unable to relieve our troubled mind?

And do what Hannah did. She turned to God. God is there and He wants to hear our pain. He wants to know what our troubles are.

[8 : 09] He wants to know what our requests are just as He does here with Hannah. Hannah is in deep anguish. And in verse 9 we read that she presents herself before the Lord.

She enters the temple and walks past the temple priest to pray to God. And in verse 10 we see that she was deeply distressed and prayed to the Lord and wept bitterly.

Her prayer is a no-holds-barred one either. She prays openly and honestly and quite frankly to God. She tells God just how she feels.

She expresses to Him the pain that she is suffering. Perhaps the pain that she is expressing here is helping her to express her complete trust and dependence upon God.

She is rightly coming to God knowing that He is ultimately the only one who can help relieve her of this torment that she is enduring. And by taking it to God she is handling it and dealing with it appropriately.

[9 : 22] for each of us as Christians it is important too that we handle and deal with our pain and our troubles appropriately.

That is we come before God with our pain with our troubles and so on. Sure we need to talk to others about the problems and the troubles that are going on in our life but ultimately if we don't leave it with God then we are not dealing with our troubles and our anguish appropriately.

The effect is that we then allow ourselves if we don't take these things to God we then allow ourselves to bathe in our own self-pity and doubt and when one person can't help us we go to another person and so the cycle comes on we get people to feel sorry for us and we are not dealing with the problem it is only a problem.

Well in verse 11 Hannah's pain drives her to make a bow with God. She says O Lord of hosts if only you will look on the misery of your servant and remember me and not forget your servant but will give to your servant a male child then I will set him before you as a Nazarite until the day of his death.

He shall drink neither wine nor intoxicants and no razor shall touch his head. her vow here looks suspiciously like a bit of bargaining with God doesn't it?

[10 : 54] The vow being that if God gives her a child then she will give him to the Lord for the rest of his life. He will be a Nazarite and his hair will not be cut and he will be set apart for God and so on.

Well it begs another question doesn't it? Should we bargain with God? I mean should we say to God God if you give me X I will give you Y should we bargain with God?

Let me say that vows attached to prayers are rare in the Bible. Hannah's prayer is almost unique in this respect. If we were to look at the opening chapters of 1 Samuel chapters 1 to 3 in detail we would see that there can be little doubt that this vow that Hannah has made was divinely inspired. You see the eventual birth of her son Samuel is important for the history of Israel and it is all a part of God's unfolding plan for salvation history.

So I think it would be foolish to enter into prayer with the idea of bargaining with God. For a start we have nothing to bargain with. The real lesson that we need to learn here is that we acknowledge that whatever God gives us we owe to him alone.

[12:17] This is all that Hannah was really doing. Samuel belonged to God because God gave him to him. In the same way his answers to our prayers do not represent prayer achievements.

To pat oneself on the back or to boast about our prayer triumphs is offensive to God. Whatever he may give us in answer to our prayer he gives us by his sovereign grace.

The letter of James in the New Testament says every generous act of giving with every perfect gift is from above coming down from the father of lights.

Well Hannah's prayer is prayed. It is clear she knows where she stands before God. She stands before him as his servant.

Now her prayer is observed by the temple priest Eli and Eli stands up and he accuses her in verse 14 of being drunk to which Hannah responds in the following verses 15 and 16 No my Lord I am a woman deeply troubled.

[13:35] I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink but I have been pouring out my soul before the Lord. Do not regard your servant as a worthless woman for I have been speaking of my great anxiety and vexation all this time.

We don't know how long she has been talking to God for pain but she then stands for pain for quite some time. Eli seeing the genuineness of her need and the sincerity of her faith does his best to reassure her.

Go in peace he says in verse 17 and that affirms his acceptance of her explanation and he adds to this a kind of a blessing. He says the God of Israel grant the petition you have made to him.

Now Eli doesn't know the content of her prayer. All he could see was her lips moving and he didn't know what words she was saying. The content of Hannah's prayer is between Hannah and God.

But Eli is able to give her reassurance because of his position. Well here again is another stark reminder of who we need to go to in our trouble.

[14:56] Moaning to the people around us about our problems and pain as I said is only a band-aid to what can be accomplished by bringing our needs before God. And when we do come before God in prayer we exercise faith.

We believe that he is there so to speak. we also believe that he can hear us, that God can hear us. We can also believe as well that God hears our prayers. And if there is just one thing that we can take from this passage it is the knowledge that God hears our prayers.

Hannah prays to God asking him to remember her and to not forget her. Hannah is no more special than you or me. Yet God hears her and God uses her for his purposes.

Verses 19 and 20 tell us how the Lord remembers her as he had remembered Noah in Genesis chapter 8 and his covenant with Abraham Isaac and Jacob in Exodus.

[16:13] God remembers Hannah. God remembers Hannah. Not to suggest that his memory was faulty or anything but to indicate that he was about to work out his unfolding purposes.

Well the prayer of Hannah is a great one and it sets out the next part of Israel's history as I've alluded to this morning. But it is also a great reminder to each one of us that the Lord wants us to come to him in our pain and our distress.

It's a reminder to us that all good things come from God and that whatever we have we should be prepared to give back to him. So many of our prayers are shallow and self-seeking and we tend to blame God for prayer not being answered the way we want.

God hears our prayer and he wants us to honestly bring our greatest pains before him.

God doesn't want us to bring it before him in the rush between meetings but he wants us to come before him with a knowledge of who he is.

[17:34] that is he is our creator, he is our redeemer, he is our sustainer. Too often I neglect this in my own prayers and far too often I have ignored God's sovereignty and lordship in my life.

perhaps our pain, troubles and discomforts aren't eased because we are not willing to stop what we are doing to come before birth.

Perhaps it's because of embarrassment or a lack of knowledge about who it is that we actually pray to. But if we are willing to put all things aside and come to God with our troubled minds and our pains, he hears us.

Peace came to Hannah. Eli's words of comfort were God's way of telling her that he had heard.

Now time was to pass before Hannah became pregnant and peace was with her in that time.

You will notice that she was unable to eat because of the emotional pain that she was in. And now in verse 18 we read that she returns to her quarters.

[18:59] She ate unable to eat before. She drank with her husband in that meal that was probably a really joyous celebration and so on. And her countenance was sad no longer.

Hannah had taken her troubles to God. She was able to return to the family and her countenance was sad no longer. Why? Because God the God of Abraham Isaac and Jacob God had given her peace.

often people think of God as uncompassionate and one who knows no pain. How can God know how I feel?

If he loved me he would have made such and such happen. God can and God does cope with that sort of talk. Sadly I think it is to have a very limited view of God.

It's putting God in a box and not looking at the whole picture. Ultimately if we keep up with that line of thought you are in danger of severing your relationship with God.

[20:14] You see God does identify with us in our pain. He knows what it's like to be distressed. He knows how your heart aches over your greatest problem.

Whether it be infertility or whether it be guilt for things past or things that may be in the future. God knows. Look to the Garden of Gethsemane and there you see God's Son Jesus in pain and sorrow with a troubled mind.

So much sorrow at that time that he is sweating blood. He doesn't want to have to endure the suffering that is about to come his way. He knows what's going to come of him.

But in prayer to his Father he is made strong and able to carry out the job that he is called to do.

Look beyond Gethsemane and look to the cross and there you see Jesus God in the flesh enduring the physical pain of crucifixion as well as enduring the sins of the whole world placed upon him on the cross.

Let's look beyond the cross look to the resurrection and there what do you see? You see the risen Lord Jesus free of sorrow and is troubled no longer.

[21:48] He has endured the torment and humiliation of humans so that our sin can be dealt with. I'm not saying that by turning to Jesus that we are free of trouble pain free or free of trouble and anxieties but knowing that God has gone before us ought to give us courage to face the highs and lows of this world knowing that there is a better world to come.

Now I have to be real here and tell you that it is not easy to come before God with my troubles. I know what it's like to have a troubled mind.

It occurs to me all too often. And I also know that there have been great times of peace when I have poured out my troubles before God whether it's in tears whether it's on my knees in some ways coming before God with my troubles.

When we as a family had decided to move from Sydney to Melbourne there were many worries and pains and troubles associated with that.

I tried to take on far too much by myself and ignore God. I became quite sick. And eventually when God showed me that I need to look to him and tell him my troubles instead of just people then there was a great sense of peace a peace which was beyond my understanding which overwhelmed me.

[23:22] And when I left it all to God things fell into place correctly. Now it doesn't mean I didn't have to do things. Of course I had to do things but I left it with God and an overwhelming sense of peace came along with it.

Now I still have times when there is no sense of peace about issues. I have to remind myself during those times that God is bigger than even me.

And I have to humble myself before him trusting him and leaving those matters before him. Friends, God wants us to come to him with our troubled minds because he cares for us.

If you don't see that, if you don't see that he cares for us, then can I encourage you to look to the cross. All the care that you'll ever need to see is displayed below the cross.

Well, are you willing to hand over your troubles to God? Are you prepared to leave him your concerns and trust him? Let's pray. Amen.

[24 : 34] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Lord, we thank you that we can come to you in our troubles and our jewels.

Lord, I pray for this morning for people with troubles. Pray that in our trouble we would look to you. Father, we pray that as your people, we would put aside embarrassment and pride to turn to you. Amen. Amen. Amen. we thank you God that you hear our prayers in Jesus name