

REACHING OUT TO FEEL THE PEACE OF GOD

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Last Sunday we discovered that prayer is reaching out to touch the hand of God. Today let's take a look at how prayer helps us to experience the peace of God. In a world filled with so much violence we often hear these words, "Pray for peace." Places like Israel and Ukraine immediately come to mind. Praying for peace expresses our heartfelt desire for the cessation of armed conflict. But sometimes, praying for peace refers to situations a little closer to home. In fact, sometimes in our homes. Such was the case with Hannah, a woman who lived a long, long time ago in the land Israel. Her desire for peace had nothing to do with physical violence. It had everything to do with the kind of inner turmoil that can destroy a person's life. Let me share her story with you. It is found in the first two chapters of the Old Testament book of 1 Samuel.

Hannah was the wife of Elkanah, a kind and loving husband who was devoted to her. There was just one problem. He had another wife named Peninnah. Just to set the record straight, in those ancient days in the land of Israel having more than one wife was permitted, but not encouraged. It often created a tumultuous relationship between the two wives and that was certainly true with regards to Hannah and Peninnah. Peninnah was the mother of a whole brood of children. Hannah was the mother of none. That was the problem. Children were considered to be a blessing from the Lord. Not being able to bear a child meant that you had somehow missed out on God's blessings. No wife wanted to be labeled with that horrible word, "barren." To make matters worse, Peninnah never missed an opportunity to ridicule Hannah about her childlessness, especially when the family went to Shiloh for the annual religious festivities. On the last day there was always a feast, and portions of the celebratory meal were given to everyone. Peninnah always received a huge platter of food because she had many sons and daughters, a lot of mouths to feed. Looking over at Hannah's much smaller portion, she couldn't help but voice a few condescending remarks for everyone to hear.

Angry and humiliated, Hannah was reduced to tears. This taunting had been going on for years. It had to stop. She was being torn apart emotionally by the continuing denigration of that other wife. She had to find some peace, some way to deal with the hurt and pain that was tearing her apart. She did the only thing she could think of. She went to the Tabernacle to pray. This tented sanctuary was the holiest place in all of Israel. Perhaps God would help her. Kneeling in front of the tented shrine, she prayed with hysterical

fervor, pouring out her heart before the Lord. She was so animated in her prayers that she caught the attention of Eli, the elderly priest in charge of the Tabernacle. He walked over and scolded her, thinking she was drunk. She assured him that she was not that kind of woman. Explaining why she had come to pray, Eli sensed her deep distress and as God's representative, offered words of comfort. He said, "Go in peace, and may the God of Israel grant what you have asked of Him" (1 Samuel 1:17). Deeply appreciative and feeling a lot better, she returned to her family, and they all went back home the next day. She had entrusted all her anxious desires to be a mother into the hands of God, and Eli's blessing had granted her the assurance that God was at least going to listen to her prayers. Now He was in charge of whatever would come to pass and that brought her peace, a sense of well-being that could overlook the insults of Peninnah.

Now, let me ask you a question. Have you ever felt like Hannah? Have you ever faced a situation where you faced the same kind of stress and anxiety as she did? It may not have been childlessness. Perhaps it was the possibility of lost employment, persistent family strife, discord in the workplace, or unresolved personal issues dating all the way back to your childhood. There are a thousand reasons why our lives can be tormented by so much stress and inner turmoil that the possibility of inner peace and a feeling of being whole and genuinely hopeful seems like a million miles away. Perhaps Saint Paul was thinking about that very thing when he wrote his letter to the Christians in Philippi. They too had reason to be anxious and fearful. Being a Christian often meant facing persecution, ill will from a pagan society and worse. So he included these words of encouragement in his letter to them, "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, let your requests be known unto God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:6-7).

What is Paul saying to us? To begin with he's saying, "Don't be a worry wort. Don't allow yourself to dwell in a constant state of anxiety." Unfortunately that's where some people have chosen to live. Encouraged by a friend to entrust all her cares and worries into the care of Christ, one dear lady responded, "Oh, but I don't want to ever come to the place where I can't worry!" That woman had failed to realize that worrying is faithless. It reveals our lack of trust in God. It is also fruitless. It doesn't change anything. Finally, it's futile. It doesn't help us or anybody else. Just the opposite, like this little limerick reminds us, "The worried cow would have lived till now, if she has saved her breath; but she feared her hay wouldn't last all day, so she mooed herself to death."

Then like a doctor's prescription, Paul tells us what to do, "In everything, by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known unto God." Tell God about what you are facing instead of stewing and

brewing over the situation. Years ago, I had a push lawn mower that wouldn't start. I worked on it for hours, totally frustrated. Finally, I came to my senses. Instead of continuing to worry over something I could not fix, I picked it up and carried it to a repairman. We need to do the same thing. We need to pack up our worries and anxieties and take them to God through prayer. Furthermore, we need to be specific. We shouldn't beat around the bush. We need to tell God everything, just like a patient speaking with a doctor. Finally, we need to be thankful, because God is going to address our concerns and administer his healing balm. We must never forget what 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 tells us, "Be joyful always, pray at all times, be thankful in all circumstances."

Now here's the best part. When we entrust our worries and anxieties into the care of God, He bestows upon us a special gift, His peace. It's the kind of peace that transcends anything that this world has to offer. Jesus told His disciples, "Peace I leave with you. My peace I give unto you, not as the world giveth, give I unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid" (John 14:27). This is kind of peace that a child experiences when a little one crawls up into the lap of a loving father, pouring out all of his or her anxieties and hurts. Just being there provides a sense of security and well-being. Everything is going to be alright, no matter what happens, because a loving father protects and cares for his children. Paul also states that God's peace is like a soldier standing guard on the wall of our lives. When troubles come, the Spirit of Christ says, "Move on. You will gain no entrance here!"

Fortunately, when we offer this kind of prayer, things have a way of working themselves out. Upon returning home, Hannah became pregnant and gave birth to a son by the name of Samuel. Dedicated unto the Lord at an early age, Samuel became the last and the greatest of Israel's judges, guiding the nation as it transitioned from a tribal confederation into a unified nation under the leadership of King David. Not only that, God granted her a number of other children as well. How about you and me, living right here and now in this twenty-first century? Can God grant us the same kind of peace that Hannah experienced? Can He grant us the same kind of peace that Paul talked about in his letter to the Philippians?

You have already heard one example this morning. Walking alone on the beach, the Lord filled my wife's anxious heart with the reassurance of His love and watch care, even as she faced a time of uncertain employment. Let me share another example with you, one which many of us can relate to. It's from a story in Guideposts titled, "What Prayer Can Do: Blanket of Peace." Lying down on the hospital gurney, the nurse spread a thin blanket over Nancy King and told her, "You'll have a short wait before we can do the procedure. Just try to relax until then." Nancy had already been diagnosed with a cancerous tumor following a recent colonoscopy. Now the doctors

wanted to see if it had spread to other parts of her body. Since Covid restrictions were still in place, her husband had not been allowed to be there in the room with her. She was all alone with her fears. Crying out to the Lord, she prayed, "Help me get through this and whatever comes next." Worst case scenarios ran through her head. What if surgery couldn't help? What if there was nothing the doctors could do? Then, out of nowhere, a feeling of peace descended upon her. She said, "It settled over me like a blanket, covering me, smothering my fears." Looking down, she realized that her left hand was bunched up in the folds of the blanket that the nurse had spread over her. It reminded her of the woman who had touched the hem of Jesus' robe. "This must be what the hem of that robe felt like," she thought, rubbing the edge of the thin blanket. The sensation of the fabric calmed her nerves and made the Lord feel even closer. By the time the nurse returned to take me to the procedure, she was ready to face whatever came next.

Fortunately, the cancer had not spread, and the surgery was successful. She had reached out in prayer and experienced the peace of God. May the same be true for you and me when we face those times in our lives when in prayer we too need to reach out and grab hold of the peace of God.