

'Hear Our Prayer'
Lent Course 2025 Session 1
Hannah – Personal Prayer

TEXT

Hello and welcome the first of five sessions of this year's Lent Course, Hear our Prayer.

I want you to imagine that your prayer life is a school and the 'Prayer Ofsted Inspectors' have just made a visit. What grade are they going to give you? Perhaps you think you might get an Outstanding. Perhaps you are someone whose prayer life is sorted, intimate, easy and life-giving. If so, whilst you're welcome to stay, this course is probably not for you. These five sessions are aimed above all at those whose prayer life would get perhaps a Requires Improvement from the inspection team. It's for those who find prayer a struggle, who don't quite know to begin, who feel guilty about prayer or who find themselves wondering what on earth they are doing when they pray.

There are five sessions to this course, each one related to the life of an Old Testament figure who prayed. Some of you may be using the Lent Devotional which is available on our Fruitful App which gives daily bible studies into the same five figures. My interest is in their prayer life.

Our first session will focus on Hannah and will be about personal prayer and then, in session two, in company with Elijah we will think about how we can pray with greater ambition. Session three will be a bit different as, inspired by Ezekiel, we reflect on what we are actually doing when we pray and the cosmic dimension of our prayer lives. In session four, Esther will help us to reflect on how we pray communally and as part of the Church before in our final session Daniel inspires us to be constant in prayer and set for ourselves a rhythm of prayer.

We will also relate the prayer of these five characters to the praying life of Jesus and by so doing, think about our own prayer lives. How can we grow in our understanding of what we do when we pray? How can we grow as praying people? How can we change the world through the power of prayer?

If you are following this course as part of a group there will be a chance for conversation and discussion. And most importantly, in each session, we will do some praying. You may find that stretching. I might challenge you to try out new ways of praying or think about the old ways differently. But stick with it. Because when you pray anything can happen.

When I was a very small boy I used to visit my grandparents in their large old house in south London. In the entrance hall there was a button. I was always told not to press it, which meant of course I was desperate to do just that. What would happen if I pressed that forbidden button? Would it sound an alarm? Would it launch a missile? Would it summon the Police? Would it blow up the house? I had no idea.

That's like prayer. You press the button and see what happens. If we had any idea of the staggering power of a simple prayer: how it shakes the heavens, moves the tectonic plates, summons the angels, terrifies the demons, mobilises the church, changes hearts and unleashes the saving power of Christ, then we would probably be too terrified to do it.

So like reckless fools, let's press the button. And let's start with Hannah. And in looking at Hannah the subject we are going to explore is personal prayer.

Hannah is one of the most immediately likeable characters in the Bible. It is so easy to relate to her vulnerability and her fragility. She was married to Elkanah and was his first and probably his most important wife, certainly the one Elkanah really loved. But she could not conceive. That's probably why

Elkanah took a second wife, Peninnah, so that he could be a father. And whilst Elkanah goes on loving and caring for Hannah, she feels like a failure. She feels she has let her husband down and, worst of all, has to cope with mockery from the fruitful Peninnah.

So Hannah goes to the Temple and she pours out all her pain. At a time when most prayer was corporate and ceremonial, this is intense, heartfelt, deep personal prayer. Hannah just bares her soul before God. She prays with all her heart for what she wants – a little boy. And promises that, should her wish be granted, she will make of the boy an offering to the Lord.

Her prayer is so profound and intense that Eli, the priest, notices and presumes that she is drunk. He assures her that the Lord will bless her in her request, and so it comes to pass. Hannah gives birth to Samuel, a name that means 'Heard by God.' She offers the child to the Lord in fulfilment of her promise and then turns to him again in prayer, singing one of the most wonderful and joyful songs in the Old Testament, 'My heart exults in the Lord, my strength is exalted in my God.'

What is striking about Hannah is the profound intensity of her personal prayer. She does not allow her pain to stop her praying, rather it becomes the vehicle for her prayer. Her relationship with the Lord is honest and unguarded. She tells him everything.

Which carries us to the praying life of Jesus. That kind of passionate, honest, personal prayer was the very heart of Jesus's life. Think how his public ministry began. In the wilderness of Judea. Forty days alone and isolated, hungry and thirsty, laying everything before his Father, tempted again and again by the devil. A man naked before the Lord. And then as that public ministry came to its conclusion, the intensity of personal prayer is again where the work is done. In the Garden of Gethsemane, as the drunken disciples slept, in desperate prayer, Jesus resisted Satan once more and resolved to do the Father's will, the decision that carried him to the terrible agony of the cross.

Hannah and Jesus both show that it is in personal prayer, when we are alone with the Lord, that he can go to work in us. Think what this kind of personal praying does.

First, personal prayer is the school in which we are formed by Jesus. It is in personal prayer that his Spirit goes to work on us, dealing with our sin, building up our gifts, helping us to understand the mystery of our salvation through the cross, moulding us into the person he wants us to be. And ultimately it is personal prayer that prepares us for death and for the life of heaven, that place where all is prayer.

Second, personal prayer is the place in which we discover God's call on our lives. I remember once interviewing someone who felt called to be a priest. What happens when you pray about it? I asked. He hadn't. He's now a brilliant Christian headteacher.

Third, personal prayer is the place where we find close and intimate friendship with the Lord. What Jesus offers is a profound and all-absorbing relationship of love in which we find our true dignity and beauty as his child. Prayer is the place where that friendship is located and celebrated.

Fourth, personal prayer is the place where we ask. Ask you and shall receive Jesus says. It is the place to lay our needs and the needs of the world before the Lord, knowing he will hear and answer.

So if it does so much, why do we find personal prayer so hard? We know it matters, we know it does stuff, but we don't ever quite get round to doing it. Think – what is that stops you praying alone?

It may be that we can't find the words, or think we can't. It's easy to assume that prayer has to be elegantly worded and polite in order to work and that if we aren't one of those praying experts who get the words right, we had better not try.

Or it may be self-consciousness that stops us praying. I remember thinking along those lines when I first became a Christian. What am I doing, speaking these words to a God I cannot see? Am I any different from a child with an imaginary friend?

Some people think they don't have time to pray, even though it turns out they have plenty of time for all sorts of other stuff.

Sometimes sin and guilt stop us praying because we think we have offended God so deeply that he won't listen to us.

And often what stops us praying is our pain. We dare hardly name our fears, our dark experiences, our bitter memories before God because they make us feel ashamed or weak or unworthy of God's company.

So two simple tips to get your personal prayer life up and running. The first is one we learn from Hannah and Jesus. Quite simply, it's honesty.

You don't need posh words or elegant phrases to pray. Remember, Jesus knows you. That is why he has been born and come to share your life. That's why he promises that every hair on your head is numbered. He knows you a zillion times better than you know yourself, and what he knows he understands and what he understands he loves. So there is no need and no point in holding anything back from Jesus. Just dump it on him.

In your personal prayer tell him anything and everything in any words you want to use. Like Hannah, voice your pain, express your needs and desires, lay before him your uncertainty and grief. Tell him your sin and seek forgiveness. Share your sense of inadequacy your weakness, your fears. Just say it! Just get it all out, anyhow, as messily as you like.

Remember the pharisee and the sinner who go up to pray in Luke 18. The pharisee lays before the Lord his pride and his successes and how amazing he is. The sinner prays, 'Have mercy on me a sinner.' And it is the sinner's prayer that is heard, because he is honest before God.

The second tip for developing a personal life of prayer is a contrasting one, in fact it may even sound contradictory. It's structure. Because structure creates the spaces where you can be honest. Some people say, 'I pray when I garden' or 'I pray when I drive.' Well I once tried praying whilst driving and very nearly put a minibus of students into a ditch. Hannah was not gardening or driving when she spoke to the Lord. She was just praying. And whilst I am not saying there is anything wrong with multitasking prayer, there is something very special about time given simply and solely to the Lord.

So my challenge to you is to bring some structure to your personal prayer. Find a time, a space, a place when you are doing nothing else. How that works will be very different for the parents with four small children compared to the single person or someone who is retired. But the principle is the same. Dedicated time, carved out for God, when all you are going to do is pray.

And within that time, have some routine or pattern. Here are some ideas.

Idea 1. You could have a simple threefold shape. First give thanks. Name before the Lord all that is good and is giving you joy. Second confess. Lay before your Lord your sin and your dependence on him. Third, intercede. Like Hannah, ask. Bring to him your needs, the needs of the world and those places where you need his help. And do all those three with honesty.

Idea 2. You could pray with the scriptures. That may mean working your way through a book of the Bible, reading slowly, listening to God and praying what he puts on your heart. Or it may mean using a resource such as the Fruitful app, Pray as you Go, Lectio 365 or the many other discipleship resources that are now so easily available.

Idea 3. You could pray the Office of the Church. This is expected of all who have a recognised ministry within the church such as our clergy and licensed lay ministers. In the Office, which is easily available online, the church sets out a pattern for prayer at the start and end of the day with psalms and Bible readings. That structure provides plenty of opportunities for personal prayer as you reflect on the scriptures or intercede.

Idea 4. You can use imagination. Some people pray with a Christian work of art or a poem. Some might use the words of a hymn. Some might use a rosary or prayer beads. Some might stop on a walk and pray in the open air. The important thing is dedicated time, given over to God, in which you can be honest in opening your heart before him.

Of course the Christian faith is not a private matter and we will come onto that later in the course. We need our brother and sister Christians and would suffocate without companionship in prayer. In fact chatting to a fellow Christian or a spiritual director and drawing on the wisdom of others is a great way of growing in your own prayer life.

But Jesus says to us in Matthew 6, 'Whenever you pray go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.' What the Lord offers us is a personal relationship, a genuine friendship. And that is fed above all by deep, heartfelt and honest prayer – just you and God and no one else. So I dare you, this week, press the button, get praying.