

## **Should We Pray Like Hannah?**

1 Samuel 1:1-17

Dr. Michael Helms

Mother's Day, May 14, 2017

How many of you have ever been desperate for help, so you decided that praying was a good idea? We all petitioned God for help, especially when we get in trouble. As the saying goes, there are no atheists in fox holes. Even if we are not in a habit of praying, if our life is on the line, most people will say a prayer.

When there is a drought, we start praying for rain. When our bodies become sick, we start praying for healing. When we are out of work, we start praying for a job. The more desperate we are, the more we might try bargaining with God.

Prayers of petition are common in the Bible:

Abraham prayed that God would deal justly with Sodom and Gomorrah.

Moses asked God not to bring disaster on the Israelites for their disobedience.

David asked God to heal his son.

Elijah asked God to bring fire down from heaven to consume his offering so that all would know that Yahweh was the one true God.

Jesus asked not to have to drink from the cup of suffering and death.

Paul asked God to remove from him what he called a "thorn in the flesh."

In return we are looking for God's promises and God's assurances. We want some affirmation from God that he is going to take care of us. So we look for clues and signs that God has heard our plea for help.

In the book of 1 Samuel, a woman named Hannah is crying out to God for help.

What Hannah wanted more than anything in life was to have a child. Her barrenness had been used by others to provoke her, to belittle her, and to make her feel that she wasn't worth having around. Because of the suffering she endured, she began to bargain with God through her prayers.

In her day "vows were one of the few acceptable ways any person could approach God directly without the medium of a priest or public ceremony." (1 & 2 Samuel, Cartledge, p. 32)

The law of Moses had a lot of rules about how people could pray.

For example, Numbers 30:2 says, “When a man makes a vow to the LORD or takes an oath to obligate himself by a pledge, he must not break his word but must do everything he said.” The rest of Numbers 30 implies that one could be released from a vow if it was determined that the vow was a rash promise.

Here is our first word of caution as we answer the question, “Should we pray like Hannah?”

When a person is desperate, it’s easy to make rash promises.

Is anyone guilty of being like the man who was falling from a cliff and began praying to God to save him and he’s making all kinds of promises to God, only to stop and say, “Never mind, God, I just got caught up in some branches of this tree”?

None of us want to be like Esau, a man that was famished after returning from an unsuccessful hunt. He was so hungry that he promised his brother he would trade his birthright for a bowl of stew. His brother could have released him from such a rash promise, but he did not.

In our text for today, Hannah made a promise to God. If she became pregnant, she promised to give her child back to God if God allowed her to give birth to a child. Was such a promise a rash promise, like the one Esau made to his brother Jacob?

It appears that she made such a vow without even consulting her husband. She was overcome with emotion. Perhaps this was a prayer not thought out but made in the emotional moment of the temple experience. Perhaps it was providential.

Emotions are powerful. We must be careful about decisions that we make while emotion has us in its grips. Sometimes when emotions are running high, we can make decisions that we later come to regret.

But the opposite can be true, too. Sometimes major life decisions are made under intense pressure and the anxious moments are the catalyst that moves us closer to God.

Hannah prayed: “O LORD Almighty, if you will only look upon 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.” 1 Sam 1:11 (NIV)

Hannah was older now, but not passed child-bearing years. Yet she was far enough along in age that she felt it was necessary to bargain with God. In her praying, she believed God needed an incentive to act.

Is that how prayer works? “God, I’ll do this, if you’ll do this.”

We can pray a prayer like that, but is it necessary? Is God trying to cut a deal with us?

Hannah promised to give her child away to be raised within the confines of the temple so he could be taught how to become a priest to the people. The sign of this boy's separation from his family to connect with God would be that his hair would not be cut.

Hannah prayed a prayer of desperation which included a promise to God.

During one of the many Reformation battles, a young soldier found himself and his army being soundly defeated by the enemy. He and his comrades hastily retreated from the battlefield in defeat, running away in fear of their very lives.

The enemy gave chase. The young man ran hard and fast, full of fear and desperation, and soon found himself cut off from his comrades. The soldier eventually came upon a rocky ledge containing a cave.

Knowing the enemy was close behind, and that he was exhausted from the chase, he chose to hide there. After he crawled in, he fell to his face in the darkness, desperately crying to God to save him and protect him from his enemies. He made a bargain with God. He promised that if God saved him, he would serve Him for the remainder of his days.

When he looked up from his despairing plea for help, he saw a spider beginning to weave its web at the entrance to the cave. As he watched the delicate threads being slowly drawn across. In the mouth of the cave, the young soldier pondered its irony. He thought, "I asked God for protection and deliverance, and He sent me a spider."

His heart was hardened, knowing the enemy would soon discover his hiding place and kill him. Soon he did hear the sound of his enemies, who were now scouring the area looking for those in hiding.

One soldier with a gun slowly walked up to the cave's entrance. As the young man crouched in the darkness, hoping to surprise the enemy in a last-minute desperate attempt to save his own life, he felt his heart pounding wildly out of control.

As the enemy cautiously moved forward to enter the cave, they came upon the spider's web, which by now was completely strung across the opening. One man backed away and called out to a comrade, "There can't be anyone in here. They would have had to break this spider's web to enter the cave. Let's move on."

In the years ahead the young man made good his promise and served God as a committed Christian.

Was there anything wrong with the man's prayer?

It's not unlike Hannah's because he was desperate. God hears our cries of desperation. Should we pray like this man? Should we pray like Hannah?

There are times when we are desperate and we need God's help. We may think that if we bargain with God, God might be moved to come to our rescue. Just because God rescues us in those situations, that doesn't mean it happened because we bargained with God, but it may seem to us that was the reason.

While it may not be wrong to pray like Hannah, we must be careful that we do not make rash promises that may not be necessary, that God may not have asked for in order that He come to our rescue.

Instead, let me suggest that there's a more noble way to pray and that is to pray like Jesus.

Can you think of a more desperate situation than the one Jesus was in when he was facing the cross as he prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane? It's likely that he had witnessed a crucifixion in his life. He could visualize the suffering and the death he was about to endure and that would have brought great anxiety to him. Luke says he was in such anguish that as he prayed his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground. (Luke 22:44)

The attitude of Jesus' prayer was not one of bargaining. He wasn't offering God anything in exchange for escaping the cross.

Instead, Jesus withdrew about a stone's throw beyond his disciples. He knelt and prayed, "Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done." Luke 22:41 (NIV)

Jesus knew that there are times in life when suffering must be endured. King David learned that. The Apostle Paul learned that. Is there any mother that hasn't learned that?

God understands desperate prayers and those who make them. But be careful about how you pray prayers of desperation.

I would think God expects us to keep promises we make to him, but not those that are not rash or foolish. As we see in the story of Hannah and in the story of this desperate soldier, God sometimes answers such prayers, but these kinds of prayers are not the best kind to pray.

It's better to pray like Jesus, who prayed often. He prayed about the desires of his heart, but He was more concerned about the will of God taking place in his life than he was about having the desires of his heart fulfilled.

Every mother has dreams and hopes for her children. Mothers have hopes and dreams that they want to see come true for their children whether they are five or fifty. You may be a woman that has hopes and dreams for nieces or nephews, or other children you've come to love. Some of those hopes and dreams will come true. But we don't write our own scripts. Things happen that we do not plan.

Life can be very difficult. You already know that. I can't think of a more important thing a woman can do for a child than to pray for that child. You don't have to bargain with God

because God loves that child more than you do. God wants good things for your family just as you do.

God does want to know your heart, so pour out your heart to God. Trust God with all your thoughts, hopes, dreams, and desires.

You don't have to bargain with God. Instead, pray like Jesus did. But if you do, that means that you are more interested in discovering the will of God for you and those you love than trying to get God to do your will. There is a big difference. It will make a difference in how we pray.

Prayer:

Lord God, we are like children when it comes to getting what we want. We will beg, plead, bargain, complain, get angry, all in an effort to persuade you to make something happen in our lives. We believe you have all power, Lord. We believe you can do all things. Forgive us when we try to convince you to fulfill our agenda, even when we don't know if our agenda is best.

Jesus knew he didn't want to go to the cross, but He was wise enough to pray for your will to be done. Help us to pray like that, to express to you what it is that we feel, but to be willing to do what you desire in each and every situation. Through prayer, help us to discern what path it is that you want us to take each time, so we can make the best choices.

Amen.

© Copyright 2017 by John Michael Helms