

God's Purposes in Prayer

Students Guide



13 online adult Sunday school lessons

Acacia Resources, a division of Baptist Center for Ethics
4219 Hillsboro Road, Suite 210
Nashville, Tennessee 37215
(615) 383-3192 phone
(615) 383-0915 fax
www.ethicsdaily.com

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About Acacia Resources

The biblical witness singles out acacia wood for its uniqueness. The only wood mentioned in the building of the ark of the covenant, the tabernacle and the altar is acacia. Acacia wood is listed with other precious objects—gold, silver, fragrant incense, onyx stones—given to honor God.

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The name *acacia* symbolically ties BCE's publishing initiative to our biblical heritage. The acacia tree represents the wise value attached to educational resources, the diversity of needs within churches and the durability demanded for growing healthy Christians, whether they are singles, couples with children or senior adults.

Acacia Resources will guide Christians and draw them godward, as the ark of acacia wood guided the people of Israel in their journey and represented the presence of God in their midst.

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A *God's Purposes in Prayer* Leaders Guide is also available from Acacia Resources (www.acaciaresources.com).

Preface

“Dear Lord, I know there must be a reason. But what is it? I answered the call to do your work. I’ve devoted my life to it! And now how am I supposed to do it? What good am I now? What good is a deaf priest? I prayed for you to help me, and every day I get worse. Are you deaf, too?”

After years of serving as confidante and spiritual advisor to the medical staff and patients in the fictional 4077th Mobile Army Surgical Hospital, Father Francis John Patrick Mulcahy, the beloved priest on the long-running television series *M*A*S*H**, faced his own crisis of faith in the series’ final episode. He was losing his hearing.

As he tried to gain faith’s perspective on what was happening to him, Father Mulcahy gave honest voice to questions we’ve all probably asked. Why doesn’t God answer our prayers according to our specifications? Isn’t God listening?

The problem, God would say, lies not with divine hearing but with human praying. In spite of scriptural accounts of praying people, a responsive God and the example of Jesus, prayer remains a confounding concept for most people. Perhaps that’s because often as not popular psycho-religion and self-serving theology, rather than the voice of God through the pages of scripture, inform our thinking as well as our practice.

The mind-boggling sales of a small book called *The Prayer of Jabez: Breaking Through to the Blessed Life* (Multnomah, 2000), seem to support this theory. It is a prayer, author Bruce Wilkinson claimed, that “contains the key to a life of extraordinary favor with God,” one he says that “God always answers.”

It goes like this: “Oh, that you would bless me indeed, and enlarge my border, and that your hand might be with me, and that you would keep me from hurt and harm!” (1 Chron 4:10). According to scripture, God granted Jabez his request, though his prayer was an unusual one for an observant Jew.

Christians and non-Christians alike have purchased the book and attest to its claims, yet critics have charged that it encourages prayer for selfish reasons and material gains. Christian author Phyllis Tickle feared that people would perceive the prayer as “some divine insurance policy so they can get everything they want. There is a self-centeredness in the prayer that is alarming. It smacks of something close to magic,” she said.

Judith Shulevitz, book critic for the *New York Times*, wrote that the author “seems snake-oil salesmanish—he promises that if you take these steps, results will be yours within days.”

Fast solutions and easy answers, private gain and personal success, safety and security are hardly God’s chief purposes in prayer. The most important thing about prayer has not to do with us, but with God. If, as the Westminster Shorter Catechism says, our chief purpose is to glorify God and enjoy God forever, then prayer must be a means to that end.

Discovering God’s ultimate purposes in prayer requires a careful and thorough walk through the history of God’s people. While we do so informed by the life and teachings of Jesus and inspired by New Testament writings, our conclusions about prayer are incomplete apart from the fuller understanding this perspective provides. It was within this tradition, after all, that Jesus prayed.

Even the origin of the Hebrew word for prayer, *tefilah*, offers a surprising and instructive insight. *Tefilah* is derived from a word meaning “to judge” or “to differentiate.” Rather than serving as a platform from which to list our wants and needs and make our requests to God, prayer, then, is the process of discovering who and what we are in relation to God, who and what we ought to be and how to begin or continue that transformation.

“Know before Whom you are standing,” the Talmud instructs those who would pray. Prayer requires that we realize we are in God’s presence. It is, indeed, holy ground. And it is why Jesus prayed, “Hallowed be your name” (Matt 6:9).

In Hebrew thought, prayer is concerned with what truly matters, not with trivialities. It is our opportunity to gain a clearer perception of life rather than an occasion to tell God anything. Jesus prayed with this full understanding and taught us to do the same. And what truly matters? “Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” (Matt 6:10).

Unlike many of the earliest prayers of the Hebrew people, which emphasized community over individuality and “us” instead of “me,” our prayers often resemble the obscure prayer of Jabez: God, this is what I want. Give it to me, and keep me safe.

“*Our Father*,” Jesus began his prayer. “Give *us* this day *our* daily bread” (Matt 6:11). Jesus recognized that we live and express our faith not in isolation but within community. The prayers of one can affect the lives of all.

Is it wrong to ask God for specific things? No. People throughout scripture did just that. But prayer does not exist primarily for us to tell God what we want or think we need.

God needs no reminders. We do. We need to be reminded of our dependence upon God and our responsibility for each other. Prayer does this in ways nothing else can.

Archbishop William Temple wrote, “The essential act of prayer is not the bending of God’s will to ours, but bending of our will to His. The proper outline of a Christian’s prayer is not ‘Please do for me what I want,’ but ‘Please do in me, with me, and through me what You want.’”

When God answers our prayer precisely according to our specifications, it is not because our prayer “worked.” It is because doing so is consistent with God’s divine plan not only for us but also for God’s kingdom. God responds to our prayers always from the perspective of eternity and with the knowledge of how our lives intersect with the lives and prayers of others and fit into the broader plan.

This fact in no way prevents God from answering us personally and specifically when we pray, as both scripture and our own lives reveal. God is great and powerful enough to respond to each of us as if we are the only one. At the same time, God can respond to the prayers of others, carefully weaving lives and events together to achieve global divine purposes that span time.

Nowhere is this clearer than in scriptural accounts of people like Hannah, David, Solomon, Elisha, Nehemiah, Daniel and others—people who faced deeply troubling personal and communal situations and turned to God for forgiveness, direction, hope, protection, purpose, wisdom, healing, mercy, justice and deliverance.

Sometimes they were short-sighted and self-focused, with no hint of how their prayers and God’s answers might affect the larger community. At other times they prayed on behalf

of the larger community, fully aware that God wanted to bless them as a people and a nation. Their prayers of worship, confession, petition, thanksgiving and intercession reflect our own in remarkable ways. Like us, sometimes only their hearts could pray, their voices paralyzed by grief, fear, doubt and confusion. Hanging onto perhaps a single thread of faith, they prayed, as we do, trusting God to understand what words could not express.

In a touching story from Chasidic Judaism that resonates across the ages, an uneducated Jew wanted to pray but did not speak Hebrew. Traditional Judaism stresses the importance of praying in Hebrew, although the Talmud states that one can pray in any language he or she understands. This devout man began reciting the only Hebrew he knew: the alphabet.

He continued repeating the alphabet over and over until a rabbi asked him what he was doing. “The Holy One, Blessed is He, knows what is in my heart. I will give Him the letters, and He can put the words together.”

Allow the following examples from some of the oldest biblical texts to guide not only your words but more importantly, your heart, as you gain new insights into God’s purposes in prayer.

Written by Jan Turrentine, managing editor for Acacia Resources, Baptist Center for Ethics, Nashville, Tenn.

Forgiveness and Restoration

Psalm 51

Theme: Prayers of personal confession and repentance allow God to restore us and equip us for service.

Introduction

In 1989, using the findings of the Dowd report, Bart Giamatti, the commissioner of baseball, imposed a lifetime ban from the game on Pete Rose. The report concluded that Rose, arguably one of the greatest players of all time, had bet on baseball games. Gambling by those taking part in the games is dealt with quickly and harshly because it compromises the integrity of the sport.

Although Rose formally accepted the findings of the report, he argued that he had bet on football and horse racing but never on baseball. Finally, in January 2004, after some 14 years of denials, Rose changed his story. Hoping to have the punishment lifted so he might be inducted into the Hall of Fame, Rose publicly admitted he had bet on baseball.

Most surprising about his admission was his decided lack of contrition. In his own words from his book *My Prison Without Bars*:

“I’m sure that I’m supposed to act all sorry or sad or guilty now that I’ve accepted that I’ve done something wrong. But you see, I’m just not built that way. So let’s leave it like this: I’m sorry it happened, and I’m sorry for all the

people, fans and family that it hurt. Let’s move on.”

To truly find forgiveness and restoration, people must first believe that they need it. Our therapeutic culture, however, too often provides us with easy ways to push the responsibility for our actions onto others. We can conveniently use our family, our friends and/or our environment as scape-goats for our own errors, mistakes and sins.

Rose’s non-apologetic apology is emblematic of a societal tendency to minimize or blame others for our own failings. It is an alarming trend, because a failure to see the need for personal forgiveness is a symptom of the spiritually dead.

Faced with the great sin of his life, David’s prayer preserved in Psalm 51 reveals that despite his personal failure, he was a spiritually alive individual. Nathan forced David to face his abuse of power to obtain Bathsheba. David had not only committed adultery with Uriah’s wife but had also sent this general to certain death at the front line. By eliminating her husband, the path was clear for the king to marry Bathsheba. Juxtaposed with the shallow words of Rose, King David’s response to being confronted with his own sinfulness is direct and honest. In his heart-felt communication with God we find the secret to true forgiveness and restoration.

The Biblical Witness

Psalm 51:1-6 Amazing Grace

¹Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. ²Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. ³For I know my transgres-

sions, and my sin is ever before me. ⁴Against you, you alone, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are justified in your sentence and blameless when you pass judgment. ⁵Indeed, I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me. ⁶You desire truth in the inward being; therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.

David began his prayer by asking for mercy. It was a plea without equivocation. It is not a common posture in our culture. Every part of us wants to protect ourselves and show our strength. To need mercy is to admit weakness.

We have mastered the apology that simultaneously blames the person from whom we seek forgiveness. “I’m sorry if anyone was offended. If you would not have been so sensitive, I would have nothing to be sorry about.” In a sly way, this sort of apology avoids taking responsibility.

Or, we hide behind the circumstances. “I’m sorry, but” is followed by a rationalization that minimizes our guilt. It is a way of saying that if you had been in my situation, you would have done the same thing. Forgiveness is not necessary because I was forced into the hurtful action.

David’s plea was naked and raw. He accepted his responsibility for his sin and asked God to provide him with grace. Blotting out (v 1) is the language of commerce and refers to the forgiveness of a debt. The imagery of washing (v 2) has always symbolized the power of spiritual cleansing and is a part of the meaning of baptism. David did not believe that there was anything he could do to undo or make right his sinful action. He threw himself at God’s feet and asked forgiveness.

In Edgar Allen Poe’s story “The Tell-Tale Heart,” the narrator commits what he believes to be the perfect crime. The only

problem is that as he sits above the hidden body, his sense of guilt generates the sound of a beating heart that increases in volume until he confesses. It was this inability to drown out the shame of his action that caused David’s sin to be always before him (v 3). David’s relationship with God would not allow him to easily pass over his own sinfulness.

Verse 4 has a jarring effect. “Against you alone have I sinned.” But what about Bathsheba, and more significantly, Uriah? Hadn’t David sinned against them? Hadn’t the King’s actions destroyed their lives? The psalm suggests that there is a difference between sin and a crime. When people go before a judge, they are convicted of a crime, not a sin. Crimes are committed against people. Sin may involve other people, but it is always a transgression against God’s purposes. David did need to seek forgiveness from people for his hurtful actions, but only God could forgive his sin.

When David wrote that he was born guilty (v 5), it might be taken as a fatalistic Calvinism. It also can be understood, perhaps more helpfully, as an admission that he was born with the potential to sin. He was born a sinner not in the sense that he was born with black hair or blue eyes, but in the way that we say that a person was a born writer or an athlete.

God’s desire for us is that our inward lives and outward actions are integrated into a single way of life. David’s sin was secret to most of the world. God, however, does not seek the façade of righteousness but hearts that are open secrets to the world.

Psalm 51:7-12 Transforming Power

⁷Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. ⁸Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that you have crushed rejoice. ⁹Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities. ¹⁰Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. ¹¹Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me. ¹²Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit.

David continued his prayer with more images of cleansing. He wanted to be clean and whiter than snow (v 7). He asked that God cleanse him with hyssop (v 7). Hyssop played a prominent role in the Passover preparation described in Exodus 12. Moses instructed the Israelites to use blood-coated hyssop to mark their doors so that when the Lord arrived to strike down the Egyptian first-born, their own children would be spared. According to Hebrews, Moses used hyssop to sprinkle blood on the people to formally seal their relationship with God. These uses of the plant confirm that David asked God to shield him from God's judgment and to give him a fresh start.

The joy and gladness (v 8) that David hoped to experience again was not something he could generate on his own. His prayer revealed that he was not seeking to rectify his life by his own effort. He believed that only God could rectify his life. When he referred to his bones that God had crushed (v 8), it was not a way to blame God, but recognition that ignoring God's standards has profound consequences. These consequences are obvious to those who seek to maintain a dynamic spiritual relationship, less obvious but equally dire for those who ignore the divine.

Because David cared about his relationship to God, he was aware that his sin had created separation. He also

was aware that it was God who must reach across that barrier to renew his heart.

I will always remember when I spoke out of turn and hurt a friend. I wrote a heartfelt apology note, and we had a long talk. What struck me in that moment of seeking forgiveness was how out of control I was. No matter what I said or did, or how badly I desired it, forgiveness was only available if offered to me. I knew that if my friend could see into the depths of my heart to my remorse he would have to respond, but I could not create forgiveness for myself. David seemed to stand on that precipice. He knew that forgiveness and restoration were not his to make or take. They were in God's hand, and David's only hope was to open the brokenness of his heart and trust in God's transforming power.

Psalm 51:13-17 Delivered to Declare

¹³Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will return to you. ¹⁴Deliver me from bloodshed, O God, O God of my salvation, and my tongue will sing aloud of your deliverance. ¹⁵O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise. ¹⁶For you have no delight in sacrifice; if I were to give a burnt offering, you would not be pleased. ¹⁷The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

While David was unable to manufacture his forgiveness, he rightly discerned that when forgiveness was offered, he must respond. This news was too good to keep. His relief and joy at God's graciousness constrained him to share.

At this point in the psalm, a significant shift occurs. While the earlier parts of the prayer are primarily individually

centered, here David's prayer began to broaden in scope to the needs of the world. Too often our own prayers never move beyond our own narrow concerns. David recognized that God's forgiveness is not a private and personal matter, but a reason to be vocal about God's grace to others who need to find it for themselves.

David said he would teach, sing and speak of what he had received (vv 13-15). In every way that he could think of, he pledged to tell others that God's forgiveness is available for the asking. The content of his message of hopefulness is that the rituals of repentance (burnt offerings) without contrition of the heart are merely an empty show (v 16). Having experienced the renewing of his heart through God's forgiveness, he recognized that God's interest is in transforming our relationship with God rather than appeasing God through sacrifices (v 17).

Psalm 51:18-19 Restored To Worship

¹⁸Do good to Zion in your good pleasure; rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, ¹⁹then you will delight in right sacrifices, in burnt offerings and whole burnt offerings; then bulls will be offered on your altar.

Scholars have debated whether the final verses of David's prayer of repentance were a part of the original psalm. They seem to point to a later time after the exile. Jerusalem's walls would not have needed to be rebuilt during the time of David's kingship. However, the language could be taken as a symbolic description of God renewing divine protection of the holy city following the contrition of its king.

In a lesson for our own praying, through the progression of this prayer, David disappears. The opening verses are filled with the first person. The focus then becomes on what

David would do once he had been restored. But the last two verses contain no first-person reference. David's personal prayer ends not with his own need but with a request for the good of the people.

While verse 16 declares that God does not delight in sacrifice, verse 19 suggests that once the heart is right, God will delight in sacrifice. This reminds us that forgiveness and restoration are not the end of the process. They are the beginning of a transformed life that is lived in the service of God and others.

Living a Life of Grateful Service

Following the recent death of Pope John Paul II, a surprising news story circulated. In 1981, Mehmet Ali Agca attempted to kill John Paul II. Not only did the Pope forgive the Turkish gunman for the attack, he also subsequently visited him in prison and established a relationship with him and his family.

When asked for comment after the Pope's death, Agca's brother said, "I know that he (Mehmet) is in mourning . . . Would not you be sad if you had lost your brother?" (<http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/f-news/1376901/posts>)

The forgiveness of the Pope changed an attacker seeking his death into one who mourned him as if he were a member of his family. To us, this sort of forgiveness seems beyond our ability. But John Paul could offer true forgiveness and restoration because he had received true forgiveness and restoration from God.

Psalm 51 provides a powerful model that corrects our narcissistic tendency to excuse our own sinfulness. David's prayer provides an example of taking responsibility for our relationship with God.

One purpose of prayer is to restore our relationship with God when it has become broken by our own sin. Those who seek to live in close contact with God cannot help but be aware of their failure as covenant partners.

What can we learn from David's prayer about forgiveness?

1. **Until we acknowledge our need for forgiveness, it is always out of reach.** David did not pray until he recognized his sin. We need to be vigilant in our lives so that we don't gloss over our sin and not see our own need for forgiveness.
2. **We must realize that our sin has serious consequences for our lives.** We tend to think that our sin only affects others. David's prayer reveals that our sin has serious and continuing consequences in our own lives as we live separated from God.
3. **Being forgiven is not the end.** Too often, we assume that once we are forgiven, the process is through. David knew that receiving forgiveness demands announcing it and offering it to others. Living out of forgiveness means living a life of grateful service.

Written by Bob Fox, pastor, Faith Baptist Church, Georgetown, Ky.

Direction and Confidence

Judges 13:1-25

Theme: Prayer invokes God's guidance and assurance as we live our everyday lives.

Introduction

On May 16, 2005, 32.2 million people tuned in to watch the series finale of the CBS TV sitcom "Everybody Loves Raymond." The immensely popular show remained a steady favorite throughout its nine seasons, earning 12 Emmys and numerous additional nominations and awards for excellence in television programming. It consistently ranked in Nielson's top 30 ratings during its run.

Much of the show's appeal resulted from its honest portrayal of an extended family living everyday life. Actual situations from the families of series creator Phil Rosenthal and star Ray Romano gave writers years of comedic fodder.

A married couple, their three cute kids, his obnoxious and intrusive parents and his chronically sad-sack brother formed a TV family that at one time or another probably mirrored almost everyone's family. Add to that mix another family-by-marriage with holier-than-thou parents and a frighteningly quirky brother, and you have all the ingredients for authentic family comedy.

The fictional Barones regularly faced head-on, sometimes quite loudly, the usual family issues: raising children; finding

adequate couple time; dividing household responsibilities; celebrating holidays; attending funerals, weddings and reunions; managing money; supporting school and civic organizations; balancing family and career; peacefully coexisting with neighbors. No episode was complete without at least one good argument and a healthy dose of love, albeit awkwardly expressed at times.

A strong but not always obvious thread in this family's fabric was its faith. Though a character's stated theology was sometimes incomplete and lacked solid biblical support, the family believed that God was involved in the world and in their lives. They attended church regularly, sometimes reluctantly. And on more than one occasion, they sought help from their parish priest when they needed guidance and assurance.

Just as it did for TV's Barone family, life's everydayness for us provides moments of both humor and heartbreak, hope and fear. While the issues may seem common and thus easily resolved, the details are usually quite different for each of us. Opportunities that present themselves and decisions and choices we must make can sometimes be terrifying. While one contemporary philosophy tells us, "Don't sweat the small stuff," another, wiser one advises, "God is in the details."

Scripture soundly affirms the latter philosophy and assures us that God indeed wants to be intimately involved in the everydayness of our lives, offering us direction and confidence when we pray.

The Biblical Witness

The people of Israel were well acquainted with God's faithful and direct intervention in their lives. Under the

leadership of Moses and Joshua, they learned they could depend upon God's deliverance even in the face of hardships and seemingly insurmountable difficulties. The book of Judges records the next chapter in Israel's history, a time marked by struggle and transition toward leadership by kings.

We normally think of a judge as someone who mediates or offers wise counsel in legal disputes. In the case of this biblical record, however, "judges" refer primarily to military rulers who led Israel in fighting its enemies. The Hebrew people tended to see these judges as individuals God called to lead during a specific time of crisis. Rather than exercising authority over all of Israel, they instead ruled over only a few tribes and usually returned to normal life once the crisis at hand had passed. Scripture records that some led more honorably and successfully than others.

Onto this canvas of a succession of judges, an otherwise ordinary couple painted a significant stroke. In the process, their examples offer us some lessons in prayer as we seek God's direction in the everydayness of our lives.

Judges 13:1-7 A Simple Trust

¹The Israelites again did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, and the LORD gave them into the hand of the Philistines forty years. ²There was a certain man of Zorah, of the tribe of the Danites, whose name was Manoah. His wife was barren, having borne no children. ³And the angel of the LORD appeared to the woman and said to her, "Although you are barren, having borne no children, you shall conceive and bear a son. ⁴Now be careful not to drink wine or strong drink, or to eat anything unclean, ⁵for you shall conceive and bear a son. No razor is to come

on his head, for the boy shall be a nazirite to God from birth. It is he who shall begin to deliver Israel from the hand of the Philistines.”⁶Then the woman came and told her husband, “A man of God came to me, and his appearance was like that of an angel of God, most awe-inspiring; I did not ask him where he came from, and he did not tell me his name;⁷but he said to me, ‘You shall conceive and bear a son. So then drink no wine or strong drink, and eat nothing unclean, for the boy shall be a nazirite to God from birth to the day of his death.’”

This account opens with a familiar refrain in Israel’s experience: The people had once again sinned and lived disobediently, breaking their covenant agreement with God. And God, faithful to the covenant, had punished them by giving them over to their enemies; in this case, the Philistines. The cycle had become predictable: sin, oppression, repentance, deliverance, blessing, followed by more sin. And the cycle would repeat itself.

The initial action in this passage involves a woman who is essential in the ensuing story, though we never learn her name and in fact discover her identity only through her husband, Manoah, “of the tribe of the Danites,” (v 2). Manoah’s tribe of Dan had as its borders Ephraim to the north, Benjamin to the east, Judah to the south and Philistia to the west, thereby exposing it to the brunt of oppression from the Philistines.

Manoah and his wife had no children; verse 2 indicates she was “barren.” That scripture records this very personal detail should at least cause us to wonder what God might have in mind for her, considering the amazing ways God worked in the lives of other childless women including Sarah, mother of Isaac; Rebekah, mother of Jacob and Esau; Rachel, mother of Joseph and Benjamin; and later Hannah, mother of Samuel.

A major clue comes in the very next verse, when “the angel of the LORD appeared” (v 3) to her. The “angel of the LORD” had appeared to others in Israel’s history, including Moses and Joshua, although such appearances were far from everyday occurrences. We don’t know whether Manoah’s wife had prayed and asked God to intervene on her behalf. In any event, his appearance seems quite abrupt.

He delivered both wonderful news and some rather unusual instructions. He announced that although she was barren and had had no children, she would become pregnant and give birth to a son.

He then told her to avoid “wine or strong drink” and “anything unclean,” (v 4), again stressing that she would “conceive and bear a son” (v 5). Next, he instructed her to raise the boy as “nazirite to God from birth” (v 4), which meant the boy would abstain from drinking alcohol, cutting his hair and touching corpses (see Num 6).

Unlike most nazirite vows, which lasted for a specified duration, this woman’s son was to be a nazirite “from birth” (v 5), indicating that he had been chosen for a most special task. Another clue to his unique role lies in the dietary restrictions the woman received. She would follow the same guidelines during her pregnancy that her son would be expected to follow throughout his life.

This boy would indeed be special. He would “begin to deliver Israel from the hand of the Philistines” (v 5).

From verse 6 we might conclude that the woman did not speak in response to the message from the angel of the Lord, because she appears to have gone immediately to tell her husband what she had experienced. She told him

that she “did not ask him where he came from, and he did not tell me his name” (v 6).

The woman’s report of her encounter to her husband is noteworthy both for what she adds and what she leaves out. She called the individual she met a “man of God” and described his appearance as “like that of an angel of God” (v 6).

The woman then repeated almost verbatim the instructions she received, with one very noticeable exception. The angel of the Lord told her that the boy would be “a nazirite to God from birth” (v 5). The woman told her husband that the boy would be “a nazirite to God from birth *to the day of his death*” (v 7, italics added). She did not tell her husband about the role their son was to play in delivering Israel from Philistine oppression.

Judges 13:8-14 **A Parent’s Prayer**

⁸Then Manoah entreated the LORD, and said, “O, LORD, I pray, let the man of God whom you sent come to us again and teach us what we are to do concerning the boy who will be born.”⁹God listened to Manoah, and the angel of God came again to the woman as she sat in the field; but her husband Manoah was not with her. ¹⁰So the woman ran quickly and told her husband, “The man who came to me the other day has appeared to me.”¹¹Manoah got up and followed his wife, and came to the man and said to him, “Are you the man who spoke to this woman?” And he said, “I am.”¹²Then Manoah said, “Now when your words come true, what is to be the boy’s rule of life; what is he to do?”¹³The angel of the LORD said to Manoah, “Let the woman give heed to all that I said to her. ¹⁴She may not eat of anything that comes from the vine. She is not to

drink wine or strong drink, or eat any unclean thing. She is to observe everything that I commanded her.”

Whether Manoah asked anything of his wife is not clear. It appears that upon hearing his wife’s news, he immediately “entreated the LORD” and asked that God again send the man of God who had earlier appeared. His request appears honest and noble. He expressed the need to learn “what we are to do concerning the boy who will be born” (v 8).

God answered Manoah’s prayer, although “the angel of God” (v 9) appeared again to the woman, not to Manoah. The woman “ran quickly” (v 10) and told her husband about his reappearance. When they returned to him, Manoah apparently needed further proof or assurance that he was indeed the same individual who had appeared to his wife previously.

After the angel confirmed his identity, Manoah then asked more specifically about “the boy’s rule of life; what he is to do” (v 12). Perhaps he wanted to know specifics so that he could be better prepared to teach the boy the things he would need to know to live his life most effectively and faithfully. But his question went unanswered. Manoah and his wife had received all the information they needed at that time. The angel simply reiterated his earlier instructions.

Judges 13:15-18 **The Proper Response**

¹⁵Manoah said to the angel of the LORD, “Allow us to detain you, and prepare a kid for you.”¹⁶The angel of the LORD said to Manoah, “If you detain me, I will not eat your food; but if you want to prepare a burnt offering, then offer it to the LORD.” (For Manoah did not know that he

was the angel of the LORD.)¹⁷ Then Manoah said to the angel of the LORD, “What is your name, so that we may honor you when your words come true?”¹⁸ But the angel of the LORD said to him, “Why do you ask my name? It is too wonderful.”

Manoah’s response to the angel was typical and reflected the expected hospitality of his culture: he offered to prepare a meal. The angel refused the meal but suggested instead that Manoah prepare a burnt offering to the Lord. The writer parenthetically notes that Manoah did not know that this individual was “the angel of the LORD” (v 16).

Manoah then asked the angel’s name, but the angel did not tell him. Again, Manoah knew everything he needed to know, and the time had come for him to respond appropriately.

Judges 13:19-25 **A Promise Fulfilled**

¹⁹So Manoah took the kid with the grain offering, and offered it on the rock to the LORD, to him who works wonders.²⁰ When the flame went up toward heaven from the altar, the angel of the LORD ascended in the flame of the altar while Manoah and his wife looked on; and they fell on their faces to the ground.²¹ The angel of the LORD did not appear again to Manoah and his wife. Then Manoah realized that it was the angel of the LORD.²² And Manoah said to his wife, “We shall surely die, for we have seen God.”²³ But his wife said to him, “If the LORD had meant to kill us, he would not have accepted a burnt offering and a grain offering at our hands, or shown us all these things, or now announced to us such things as these.”²⁴ The woman bore a son, and named him Samson. The boy grew, and the LORD blessed him.²⁵ The

spirit of the LORD began to stir him in Mahaneh-dan, between Zorah and Eshtaol.

If this childless couple had not had enough excitement for the day, what happened next undoubtedly left them completely amazed. As Manoah offered the sacrifice in worship, the angel “ascended in the flame” (v 20), causing the couple to fall on their faces to the ground. It was then, according to verse 21, that Manoah realized that “it was the angel of the LORD” (v 21).

The reactions of Manoah and his wife to this fact are interesting. Manoah was afraid that they would die, because they had seen God. Perhaps he recalled what God had said to Moses: “You cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live” (Ex 33:20).

His wife, on the other hand, responded calmly and rationally. If God had planned to kill them, she reasoned, God would not have accepted the offerings or shown or announced such things to them as they had just seen and heard. In other words, she reassured her husband, God had not led them this far only to kill them. Her thinking was both faith-filled and practical: She had to continue to live in order to have the promised son.

In time, the unnamed woman gave birth to a son, whom she named Samson. As he grew, God blessed him, and God’s spirit “began to stir in him” (v 25). Samson had evidently received sufficient instruction and guidance from his parents to recognize God’s presence in his life.

Unwavering Faithfulness

Many years ago, my extended family enjoyed a number of laughs after one of my cousins announced her pregnancy.

Though she apparently had never considered the possibility of motherhood, she chose to view it as just another of life's experiences. "Women have babies every day," she said.

An avid and accomplished equestrian, her life revolved around horses, stables and rodeos. She spent her weekdays riding, grooming and otherwise caring for her horses and weekends participating in and traveling to and from competitive rodeo events. Her world was almost entirely horse-centered.

As her pregnancy progressed, she realized that she would probably have to make some changes in her life once the baby arrived. "Women" might have babies every day, but she didn't!

When I asked her about continuing her horse riding and rodeo participation, though, she had that part all figured out. "Aw, shoot, that's no problem," she replied in all seriousness. "I bought one of those little corrals they make for babies, and I'm going to stick him in there while I ride. I'll be able to see him through that net they put around it, and if he cries, I'll just pop one of those suckers in his mouth and hop back on my horse."

That plan was not without its flaws, and she soon realized she needed God's help in raising her child. Though adolescence and the death of his father presented some particularly difficult times, she continued to rely on her faith as she guided her son to early adulthood.

After years of childlessness, Manoah and his wife found themselves in similar circumstances. They'd never had a child before and were not sure what to do, especially for a child who, according to the angel, had been chosen by God for an especially important task. This child would certainly

need some special instructions and the best in parenting skills. They did what wise people do. They prayed.

The experiences of Manoah and his wife remind us that:

- God wants to be involved in our lives in specific and intimate ways, including raising children and the many other issues that arise in the everydayness of life.
- God speaks when we are in positions to hear and obey.
- God understands our questions and doesn't mind us asking. God holds all the answers but is not obligated to tell us everything we think we need to know, or everything we ask out of simple curiosity.
- Prayer allows us to express and expose our doubts and fears, seek God's reassurances and grow our faith.
- Prayer bolsters our faith and equips us to encourage others whose faith may be wavering or weaker.
- Often in order to find answers to the questions we ask of God in prayer, God expects us first to act on what we know to be right. Details unfold for us about next steps once we act in faith and obedience to the insight God provides us.
- Worship of God is the proper response to God's intervention in our lives.

Like my cousin, Manoah and his wife trusted God, invested faithfully in their son and his potential and then allowed him

to grow up, make mistakes and live with their consequences. Judges 14-16 reveals that Samson was quite human, with both admirable strengths and great weaknesses. He broke covenant and nazirite vows, worshipped idols, made unwise moral choices and displayed poor leadership. His life reflected that of the people of Israel.

And just as God responded to Israel's corporate cries for help, God also responded to Samson's.

Even when we are unfaithful to God, God is faithful to us and will give us what we need to live our lives when we confess, repent and pray for guidance.

Written by Jan Turrentine, managing editor, Acacia Resources, Baptist Center for Ethics, Nashville, Tenn.

Petition and Hope

1 Samuel 1:1-20

Theme: Prayer recognizes that God gives us what is right and best for our lives.

Introduction

"So whose mother are you?"

Although it made me smile, the question nonetheless caught me off guard. No one had ever asked me that before, and I wasn't sure how to respond, especially to a five-year-old.

Sarah was attending her first worship service after a lifetime of extended sessions at church. Everything was new and exciting to her, but the best part for this charming and gregarious child was the people. While she was well-behaved throughout the service and didn't actually distract me, I found myself watching her closely. I was amused by her wide-eyed reactions and honest expressions. When the service was over, she immediately turned around and "introduced" herself to me with her very direct question.

I'd seen Sarah at church all of her life, but she didn't really know me. Till now, to her I was simply one of those tall people she assumed to be much like her parents. In her worldview, every adult female was surely someone's mother, just as every adult male must certainly be

someone's father. (I suppose I should've been grateful she didn't ask me whose grandmother I was.)

I replied to Sarah simply by telling her my name and answering that I had no children. I explained that I was a friend of her parents and was happy that she and I could be friends too. "But you don't have a little girl at your house that I can play with?" she asked.

Once she found out I couldn't give her what she wanted, she quickly moved on to talk to someone else, much to the relief of her somewhat embarrassed mother. We were both even more relieved that Sarah had not asked her question of a church member seated nearby who had had multiple miscarriages and longed for a child, the sadness always present in her eyes.

While a survey by the US Census Bureau reports a record number of childless women, and other industrialized nations also report a trend of women bearing fewer children or choosing to remain childless, childlessness is not the preferred choice for all women. Statistics reveal that one in five Americans face infertility at some point, and millions of others worldwide deal with miscarriage, stillbirth or the death of a child. Countless couples want nothing more than to become parents. Like Hannah, they pray fervently and honestly, asking God to give them what they most want.

What do we say to someone for whom God seems silent, even remote, in the face of their prolonged and honest prayers? Why doesn't God answer their prayers in a way similar to Hannah's?

The questions are hard ones, but the answers are often even more difficult. Whatever the focus of our prayers, when God says no, it hurts. And perhaps one of the most painful

realities is the fact that we can become so singularly focused and relentless in our specific requests to God that the things we seek become idols for us.

At times we might all resonate with the thoughts of C.S. Lewis, who said, "We are not necessarily doubting that God will do the best for us; we are wondering how painful the best will turn out to be."

How do we live with the certainty that God indeed gives us what is best and right for our lives when that is vastly different from what we want?

One of God's purposes in prayer is to lead us to want for our lives what God wants for us, even when that looks very different from the lives we envision for ourselves. We sometimes forget that God's purposes extend beyond us and what we want and embrace the whole world, past, present and future.

Hannah's story reminds us that God responds to our prayers with both our personal desires and the divine plan in full view. Even when our desires do not fall within God's plans, God shows us the way to a future that is not simply right and good, but best.

The Biblical Witness

While the book of 1 Samuel is primarily the story of the evolving nation of Israel, it begins with the very intimate account of a deeply distressed woman named Hannah. Her heartfelt desire for a child fit into God's plan that Israel discover her future through a prophet named Samuel.

Though unknown to Hannah, Israel stood on the precipice of tremendous social and political change, and the child

God would give her would be instrumental in helping prepare the way for this transformation. At the time of Hannah's prayer, Israel faced threats from without and within. The Philistine empire loomed large and ready to incorporate them, but they lacked the leadership necessary to deal effectively with this crisis. Further, corruption within the priestly ranks had led to moral decay.

Samuel, central to the answer to Hannah's prayers, was also central in God's plan to shape a new future for Israel.

1 Samuel 1:1-8 **A Sad Heart**

¹There was a certain man of Ramathaim, a Zuphite from the hill country of Ephraim, whose name was Elkanah son of Jeroham son of Elihu son of Tohu son of Zuph, an Ephraimite. ²He had two wives; the name of the one was Hannah, and the name of the other Peninnah. Peninnah had children, but Hannah had no children. ³Now this man used to go up year by year from his town to worship and to sacrifice to the LORD of hosts at Shiloh, where the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were priests of the LORD. ⁴On the day when Elkanah sacrificed, he would give portions to his wife Peninnah and to all her sons and daughters; ⁵but to Hannah he gave a double portion, because he loved her, though the LORD had closed her womb. ⁶Her rival used to provoke her severely, to irritate her, because the LORD had closed her womb. ⁷So it went on year by year; as often as she went up to the house of the LORD, she used to provoke her. Therefore Hannah wept and would not eat. ⁸Her husband Elkanah said to her, "Hannah, why do you weep? Why do you not eat? Why is your heart sad? Am I not more to you than ten sons?"

We discover Israel's story within the interwoven stories of its people, some of them quite prominent; others, rather

obscure. Hers is also the story of how a loving God worked through individual lives and the events that affected them to further the divine plan. This chapter in the story of "a certain man . . . Elkanah" (v 1), along with his wives Hannah and Peninnah, opens an important scene in the nation's ongoing drama.

Because Hannah's name is mentioned first (v 2), it's possible that Elkanah married her first and later married Peninnah so that she could give him the heirs Hannah had been unable to bear for him. Hannah means "charming" or "attractive," while Peninnah means "fertile" or "prolific."

In that culture, the value of women lay largely in their ability to bear children, more specifically, sons. Science had certainly not progressed to the point that they could understand infertility as a medical reality; instead, they interpreted it as God withholding blessing. Given the likelihood that they would outlive their husbands, childless women faced a dismal and uncertain future, one most certainly lived as paupers.

The family's annual pilgrimage to Shiloh further exacerbated the sorrow Hannah felt because of her childlessness. Elkanah was evidently a devout man, taking his family there year by year "to worship and to sacrifice to the LORD of hosts" (v 3). Shiloh at this time was the central shrine for the ark of the covenant, the symbol of God's presence.

Elkanah's dedication to worship was especially commendable considering that Hophni and Phinehas, the priests at Shiloh and sons of Eli, had terribly abused their offices by stealing the meat that had been offered for sacrifices, treating the offerings with contempt and sexually abusing women (see 1 Sam 2:12-17; 22).

Hannah's sense of isolation intensified with the distribution of meat offered as sacrifices. While Peninnah and her children were together entitled to a greater quantity than Hannah, Elkanah would nonetheless give Hannah a double portion "because he loved her, though the LORD had closed her womb" (v 5). He meant well by this gesture; it was no doubt an attempt to treat her with special care. Peninnah was as uncharitable to Hannah as Elkanah was charitable, taunting her because of her childlessness.

Verse 6 refers to Peninnah as Hannah's "rival," often translated "enemy" or "adversary." Scripture seldom uses this term to describe family relationships, more often attaching it to relationships between groups of people or nations. "So it went on year by year," (v 7), providing Peninnah with regular opportunities "to provoke her severely, to irritate her, because the LORD had closed her womb" (v 6).

Elkanah loved Hannah in spite of her childlessness; Peninnah taunted her for the same reason. The extra attention she received from both at this time of annual pilgrimage and worship was more than she could bear, causing her to weep and lose her appetite (v 7). Hannah's was a deep sadness Elkanah longed to alleviate but could not understand.

"Am I not more to you than ten sons?" he asked her (v 8). With all his good intentions, it is interesting to note that Elkanah did not say to Hannah, "You are worth more to me than ten sons." While that probably would not have eased her pain or lessened her longing for a child, it might have silenced Peninnah's taunts, at least for awhile.

1 Samuel 1:9-18 **A Solemn Vow**

⁹After they had eaten and drunk at Shiloh, Hannah rose and presented herself before the LORD. Now Eli the priest was sitting on the seat beside the doorpost of the temple of the LORD. ¹⁰She was deeply distressed and prayed to the LORD, and wept bitterly. ¹¹She made this vow: "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 nazirite until the day of his death. He shall drink neither wine nor intoxicants, and no razor shall touch his head." ¹²As she continued praying before the LORD, Eli observed her mouth. ¹³Hannah was praying silently; only her lips moved, but her voice was not heard; therefore Eli thought she was drunk. ¹⁴So Eli said to her, "How long will you make a drunken spectacle of yourself? Put away your wine." ¹⁵But Hannah answered, "No, my lord, I am a woman deeply troubled; I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink, but I have been pouring out my soul before the LORD. ¹⁶Do not regard your servant as a worthless woman, for I have been speaking out of my great anxiety and vexation all this time." ¹⁷Then Eli answered, "Go in peace; the God of Israel grant the petition you have made to him." ¹⁸And she said, "Let your servant find favor in your sight." Then the woman went to her quarters, ate and drank with her husband, and her countenance was sad no longer.

Scripture shifts here from describing something that happened "year by year" (v 7) to something that happened during a particular year. Hannah "presented herself before the LORD" (v 9). Taking advantage of the fact that she was again at Shiloh, the place where God had promised to meet God's people, Hannah went directly to God with both a specific request and a solemn vow.

In a bold assumption for someone with no status, Hannah believed that the God of Israel might not only care that she

was sad but also act on her behalf. “Look at how miserable I am,” she said. “Take notice and don’t forget.”

In the same breath, Hannah promised to give back to God the very thing she requested of God. If you give me a son, she said, “then I will set him before you as a nazirite until the day of his death” (v 11). Hers was a serious and unusual vow. The nazirite vow was not typically for a lifetime; further, Hannah made the vow on behalf of her as-yet-unborn son. Men who took the nazirite vow generally did so for a period of time, and during that time, abstained from alcohol and other strong drinks and did not cut their hair.

From a statement tucked neatly at the end of verse 9 we learn that Eli the priest was present when Hannah approached the temple. Eli observed her as she prayed, and though her lips moved, she made no sound, leaving him to conclude that she was drunk (v 13).

Things seem to have gone from bad to worse for Hannah. Her struggles with infertility left her feeling devalued and useless; her husband’s other wife taunted her mercilessly; her husband couldn’t understand why she was so sad and thought he should be enough to satisfy her. And now the priest thought she was drunk!

When confronted with Eli’s accusations, rather than lash out or lose control, Hannah was respectful but firm, explaining that she was “deeply troubled . . . pouring out my soul before the LORD” (v 15). She spoke of her “great anxiety and vexation,” (v 16), obviously convincing Eli of her sincerity and sobriety.

Without even knowing what she asked of God or vowed to God, and without any hint of what this might mean for his

future, Eli blessed her, saying “the God of Israel grant the petition you have made to him” (v 17).

Following Eli’s affirmation and blessing, Hannah’s “countenance was sad no more” (v 18). She returned to her husband and her life, assured that God had heard her and would respond.

1 Samuel 1:19-20 **A New Future**

¹⁹They rose early in the morning and worshiped before the LORD; then they went back to their house at Ramah. Elkanah knew his wife Hannah, and the LORD remembered her. ²⁰In due time Hannah conceived and bore a son. She named him Samuel, for she said, “I have asked him of the LORD.”

After they worshiped God, the family returned home, both Hannah’s future and the future of Israel in God’s hands. Bruce C. Birch, in *The New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary*, notes the parallels between Hannah’s personal story and the story of the people of Israel. Both at one time lived in what seemed hopeless and impossible situations, Israel in captivity in Egypt and Hannah enslaved in a life devalued by infertility.

Just as God remembered the Israelites and led them out of Egypt into a new life, God also remembered Hannah. Samuel, God’s gift to her and her gift to God, marked the beginning of a new future for Hannah and for Israel, helping Israel move from judges to monarchy. Samuel would later anoint both Saul and David as kings of Israel.

Only God could have provided Hannah and Israel the futures they realized. Faced with their own limitations and

haunted by their needs, they encountered new possibilities when they expressed their needs to God and allowed God to work through people and circumstances to give them what was right and best.

One Thing at a Time

The 1965 film “The Sound of Music” has captured the imagination of millions of people around the world. Based on the 1949 book *The Story of the Trapp Family Singers* by Maria Augusta von Trapp, it chronicles the true story of the von Trapp family and their harrowing 1938 escape from their beloved Austria, after Nazi Germany took control of the country.

Had they stayed, Baron von Trapp, an ex-naval officer, would have been forced to assume a position in the service of the German military. Bolstered by the faith of Maria, the Baron’s second wife, the family—including nine children and a tenth on the way—chose to escape, traveling on foot across the Austrian Alps into Italy to face a new but uncertain future.

The film only partially portrays the risks the family took. Because they didn’t want to arouse suspicion, they left as though they were going on one of their frequent family mountain hikes. In actuality, they left behind the family fortune for good, carrying only what they could in their arms or backpacks.

“Overnight we had become really poor,” Maria von Trapp wrote in her book *Maria*. “We had become refugees. A refugee not only has no country, he also has no rights. He is a displaced person. At times he feels like a parcel which has been mailed and is moved from place to place.”

“It would have been easy for God to show us the plan for this period, as He had it all fixed up,” she wrote in *The Story of the Trapp Family Singers*. “But then again we would not have learned that most valuable lesson, so He left us in the dark and gave us only one thing at a time.”

When we pray, God responds, giving us exactly what is best for us. Sometimes that is only one thing; often it is something other than what we ask. But it is always best for us, and in answering us, God gives us hope. In all things, even and especially when we cannot see or understand, God is doing everything that we need.

“The next moment is as much beyond our grasp, and as much in God’s care, as that a hundred years away,” C.S. Lewis wrote. “Care for the next minute is as foolish as care for a day in the next thousand years. In neither can we do anything, in both God is doing everything.”

Written by Jan Turrentine, managing editor, Acacia Resources, Baptist Center for Ethics, Nashville, Tenn.

Loyalty and Trust

1 Samuel 7:2-14

Theme: Prayer releases God's deliverance and protection.

Introduction

I was baptized in a beautiful sanctuary in the mid-1960s in East Atlanta. It was a good beginning to my Christian pilgrimage. My early days in the Christian journey as an older child and then as a youth in that church were filled with blessings. By my middle teen years the neighborhood around the church was in great transition, both racially and economically. Members were leaving.

In the midst of the decline, our family moved our church letters to a suburban congregation. My parents wanted a good youth program for their two sons and believed the declining church would be unable to provide all we needed for our spiritual development. Eventually the congregation sold its property to an African-American congregation and relocated out from the city.

As an adult I recognized that I carried some mixture of feelings away from that experience of leaving the church in the changing neighborhood—feelings that included at least some sadness and shame. My increasing understanding of Jesus, the gospel and the kingdom of God called into question the experience of Christians leaving a wonderful church as a neighborhood changed its racial mix.

Twenty-five years later I found myself driving by the church where I was baptized. It was Friday afternoon, but the front door of the sanctuary was wide open. I parked and walked in for the first time since my family's last Sunday in worship so many years ago. A group of church members was in the balcony working on a re-carpeting project. I spoke to them and asked if I could come in and pray.

What a wonderful flood of sweet memory I experienced! I sat on the pew five rows back, left of center, where my family sat most Sundays. I walked to the platform, stood in the pulpit and peered into the baptistry in front of the beautiful stained-glass picture of the baptism of Jesus. I prayed an honest, open prayer before the Lord of both confession and thanksgiving.

On my way out some of the church members in the work party came down from the balcony and introduced themselves. I told them my story. They listened carefully. After thanking them for letting me spend time in my boyhood church home, I turned to leave. "Wait," a church deacon said. "We want to pray with you."

Those faithful volunteers broke from their work to surround me. In that circle, they prayed for me. Theirs was a prayer of thanksgiving, that before their church had ever acquired these buildings, God had been at work, calling a "fine young man like this man" to be first a believer, then a preacher. In that prayer I experienced God's great loyalty to me on my journey, witnessed to me by those wonderful saints. A dark memory in my spiritual pilgrimage was redeemed in that prayer for me. On that day I learned how to "raise my Ebenezer". It was a Hallelujah day!

The Biblical Witness

1 Samuel 7:2-4 Before Deliverance Comes

² From the day that the ark was lodged at Kiriath-jearim, a long time passed, some twenty years, and all the house of Israel lamented after the Lord. ³ Then Samuel said to all the house of Israel, "If you are returning to the Lord with all your heart, then put away the foreign gods and the Astartes from among you. Direct your heart to the Lord, and serve him only, and he will deliver you out of the hand of the Philistines." ⁴ So Israel put away the Baals and the Astartes, and they served the Lord only.

This text immediately raises questions: Why was the ark of the covenant at Kiriath-jearim? What happened in the earlier narratives of 1 Samuel to explain the dilemma Israel faced? Why was Israel lamenting after Yahweh?

Following the well-known story of the birth of Samuel and Hannah's subsequent gift of her beloved child to serve Eli, the priest at Shiloh, we learn that the sons of Eli were worthless men. They lacked an intimate relationship with and knowledge of Yahweh. They were ignorant of the proper role of the priest in sacrifice. They were guilty of sexual misconduct with the women who served at the doorway of the tent of meeting (see 1 Sam 2:12-17, 22).

A visit from God's messenger warned Eli that his sons' evil would not go unpunished (1 Sam 2:27-36). The voice of the Lord at night told Samuel of the coming calamity for the house of Eli, because the sons were practicing such evil and their father Eli had not rebuked them sufficiently (1 Sam 3:1-14).

Chapter four of 1 Samuel tells of the defeat of Israel at the hands of the Philistines. From their encampment at Aphek,

the Philistines attacked the Israelites, who were camped at Ebenezer, instantly killing 4,000.

Hophni and Phinehas, Eli's evil sons, took the ark of the Lord into the Israelite camp, counting on the powerful symbol of divine presence to turn the tide of battle. But it was the Philistines who rose up with courage and won an even more decisive victory.

The Philistines routed the entire army of Israel, killing 30,000 foot soldiers in the battle. Hophni and Phinehas also died. The Philistines took the ark of the covenant, and, at the news of such calamity, Eli fell over backward, broke his neck and died.

The holy ark in the hands of the unholy Philistines brought them nothing but bad luck, so they sent the ark back across their border on an unattended, cow-drawn cart. The border town, Beth-shemesh, fared no better with the ark, and it came to reside in Israelite territory in the "city of forests," Kiriath-jearim (1 Sam 5-6).

In this sort of wilderness outpost the ark languished for twenty years, and the Israelites languished spiritually as well during this time. Young Samuel, now grown and mature, called on the people to put away their false gods and seek God with their hearts directed only toward the Lord.

The text indicates that indeed they put away their gods and served the Lord only. Obviously, in this twenty-year period the Israelites had brought the Canaanite fertility gods into their lives, worshiping the male (Baals) and female (Astartes, or Ashtaroah) deities of their neighbors.

The Deuteronomic theology of the narrative is significant here. The emphasis is on Israel's covenant with the Lord. When they lived up to their calling as the people of God, the

result was blessing. But their lives were cursed when they failed the demands of covenant living and introduced other gods into their lives.

Thankfully, Samuel rose up and called Israel to repentance and faithfulness to Yahweh. Thankfully, after twenty long years, Israel was ready to listen to its prophet and return to serving the Lord.

1 Samuel 7:5-12 **So That's What Ebenezer Means!**

⁵Then Samuel said, "Gather all Israel at Mizpah, and I will pray to the Lord for you." ⁶So they gathered at Mizpah, and drew water and poured it out before the Lord. They fasted that day and said, "We have sinned against the Lord." And Samuel judged the people of Israel at Mizpah. ⁷When the Philistines heard that the people of Israel had gathered at Mizpah, the lords of the Philistines went up against Israel. And when the people of Israel heard of it they were afraid of the Philistines. ⁸The people of Israel said to Samuel, "Do not cease to cry out to the Lord our God for us, and pray that he may save us from the hand of the Philistines." ⁹So Samuel took a sucking lamb and offered it as a whole burnt offering to the Lord; Samuel cried out to the Lord for Israel, and the Lord answered him. ¹⁰As Samuel was offering up the burnt offering, the Philistines drew near to attack Israel; but the Lord thundered with a mighty voice that day against the Philistines and threw them into confusion; and they were routed before Israel. ¹¹And the men of Israel went out of Mizpah and pursued the Philistines, and struck them down as far as Beth-car. ¹²Then Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Jeshanah, and named it Ebenezer; for he said, "Thus far the Lord has helped us."

In this beautiful narrative, the spiritual energy of the people is restored at the assembly at Mizpah. As they gathered there, the people returned to a place of earlier judgment and covenant renewal. It is clear that in Samuel, they had a leader anointed with the charisma of God's spirit, a leader in keeping with the tradition of the charismatic judges who had ruled over Israel.

The nature of the water-pouring ritual is not clear. But coupled with the fasting, it is assumed that both the water pouring and the fasting indicated that the people were genuinely repentant for their twenty years of languishing and their worship of other gods.

The renewal of the Israelites struck fear in the Philistines, who plotted a preemptive strike. The people correctly appealed to Samuel, their charismatic new leader, to intercede with prayer. He both prayed and offered a sacrifice, performing his priestly role with a correctness before the Lord that was sorely missing in the sons of Eli. The newfound faithfulness of the people and their prophet Samuel to the covenant moved the Lord to confuse and rout the Philistines. The thundering voice of God made it clear that God had seen the repentance of the people, heard the intercessory prayers of Samuel and was acting mightily on their behalf. A renewed, faithful people were rewarded with victory by the faithful God of their covenant.

Samuel responded with gratitude. He took a stone and erected a holy monument, an "Ebenezer," which means "stone of help." A cycle had come full circle. The painful memory of earlier defeat at Ebenezer was redeemed by the saving act of God and the establishment of the new memorial Ebenezer. For Samuel, this first test of his leadership on Yahweh's behalf was filled with blessing and he said, "Thus far the Lord has helped us."

1 Samuel 7:13-14 **The Hand of the Lord**

¹³So the Philistines were subdued and did not again enter the territory of Israel; the hand of the Lord was against the Philistines all the days of Samuel. ¹⁴The towns that the Philistines had taken from Israel were restored to Israel, from Ekron to Gath; and Israel recovered their territory from the hand of the Philistines. There was peace also between Israel and the Amorites.

What was the result of a prayerful leader asking for God's blessing to fall on a repentant people? What changes came when the people were sincerely sorry for their unfaithfulness, renounced their idolatry and served the Lord with their whole hearts? In this instance, the results are remarkable. An enemy was subdued. Lost territory was recovered. And, shalom came. The peace of God was established when a rebellious people turned to God in prayer and restored their loyalty and trust in the Lord.

The Pathway of Renewal

The Old Testament tells its stories of the people of God in a cyclical narrative. The people sin. Their sin brings about confusion, distress and judgment. They cry out to God and God requires of them repentance and recommitment to covenant faithfulness. Then God delivers and peace ensues. The story of Samuel's leadership at Mizpah follows this pattern.

Too often we see our salvation as a one-point-in-time experience. Most Christians in the Baptist tradition are clear about the crucial time of decision to profess faith and follow Christ as Lord and Savior. But this is only the beginning of a journey lived in covenant relationship with God.

Sometimes we fail to help one another understand the cycles of faith and the need for restoration at various points along our journey.

Many of us can understand the languishing faith for twenty years that Israel experienced while the ark resided at Kiriath-jearim. Our walk with God at times lacks freshness and power. The hope is that when we recognize these times of spiritual dryness we will "lament after the Lord" as Israel did. Yet too often we fail to take our spiritual condition seriously. A materialistic culture can distract and entertain us in such a way that we neglect to notice the significant decline in our spiritual vitality.

This biblical account reminds us of the need for confession. It teaches us that the pathway of renewal is through prayer that reaffirms our loyalty to and trust in God. Samuel demonstrated marvelous spiritual leadership in his call to repentance and his willingness to intercede for the people. Most striking is the faithfulness of God to the covenant people who were willing to seek restoration and renewal in their relationship.

When our walk in a covenant relationship with God is faltering, there is hope for renewal. Prayer for restoration accompanied by repentance and seeking God with our whole hearts can make a difference. We can be restored by a faithful God. Then the old hymn's lyrics come alive as we sing, "Here I raise mine Ebenezer; hither by Thy help I'm come!"

Written by Jack Glasgow, senior pastor, Zebulon Baptist Church, Zebulon, N.C.

Identity and Purpose

2 Samuel 7:18-29

Theme: Prayer reminds us that God alone is God and we find our purpose in relation to God.

Introduction

“Preachers are not called to be politicians but soul winners,” warned Jerry Falwell in 1965, pointing a finger at Martin Luther King, Jr. and his civil-rights activism. “Nowhere are we commissioned to reform the externals. The Gospel does not clean up the outside but regenerates the inside.”

During the following decade, however, Falwell changed his tune, marching Christian conservatives and fundamentalists to the center ring of politics with fever-pitched piety, claiming they were on God’s side. And the Moral Majority was born.

In 2003 President George W. Bush followed in Falwell’s steps as he spoke to the National Religious Broadcasters. “America has always been a religious nation—perhaps never more than now,” he proclaimed. When he declared the Iraqi war to be a cause based on religious tenets of “good versus evil, right versus wrong, human dignity and freedom versus tyranny and oppression,” he received a standing ovation from conventioners. Bush continued, claiming that America sought no selfish gain in this war and that we were “on the side of God.”

Although the Iraqi war divides Christians into various schools of thought, danger lurks in believing so easily and without a doubt that we are on God’s side. Even Germany claimed to be on God’s side during World War II. Hitler fashioned belt buckles emblazoned with “Gott Mit Uns,” meaning “God with us.”

Religious political stands and prayers can be deadly dangerous, missing the mark of who God is and what God wills.

Recognizing that God does not side with the citizens of any one nation but desires the citizenship of all in the kingdom of God brings us closer to understanding who we are and who God is. Instead of insisting God is on our side or assuming we are on God’s side, our prayers should reflect that God alone is God; we are not God. Only then we can relate properly to God and pursue God’s purposes.

The Biblical Witness

Second Samuel 7 records a political prayer of David shaped by his concerns as a dynasty king. His bold, somewhat brash, prayer is one of deference, doxology and demand of God. Gone are his usual personal, almost conversational tones with God beautifully expressed throughout the Psalms. Something is vastly different here.

Yet David’s prayer can influence our own prayers for our nation. His words reveal that it is never wrong to pray boldly, even emphatically, for our nation. But the key to our prayers rests with being God’s people, desiring what God desires. David never listed what Israel had done to place them in God’s favor. David simply prayed that God be God and Israel be God’s people as they lived together in God’s

eternal covenant of receiving and giving unconditional love, grace, mercy and redemption.

Deference to God **2 Samuel 7:18-21**

¹⁸Then King David went in and sat before the Lord, and said, "Who am I, O Lord God, and what is my house, that you have brought me thus far? ¹⁹And yet this was a small thing in your eyes, O Lord God; you have spoken also of your servant's house for a great while to come. May this be instruction for the people, O Lord God! ²⁰And what more can David say to you? For you know your servant, O Lord God! ²¹Because of your promise, and according to your own heart, you have wrought all this greatness, so that your servant may know it.

Prior to this passage, Nathan pronounced a divine oracle. David would not build a permanent house, the temple, for God. Instead God would build an eternal house, a dynasty, for David. And through David's lineage (not the ark, the old order or even the temple to be built by his son), God's presence would shape history and God's people. In essence, God signed a blank check to David and his offspring, granting God's unconditional love and grace to be fleshed out in human realities where injustice and unrighteousness, both personal and political, abounded.

David responded to Nathan's oracle with an emotional outburst of prayer. Braiding awe, honor and reverence, David began, "Who am I?," a phrase still used today, although often sarcastically, to indicate deference to a superior.

David referred to himself in servant language, contrasting his fleeting, insignificant life with God's divine eternal

majesty and power. Surely listening to Nathan's prediction resurrected old feelings of amazement that God would clothe this mere shepherd boy with kingly garments. David painted himself and his lineage as a "small thing" in God's eyes. (Solomon would echo this sentiment later in his prayer in 1 Kings 3:7.) Any credit for all this greatness, David claimed, belonged solely to God's design for his life.

Four times in these opening verses David addressed God as "Lord God," a highly formal title. Used nowhere else in 1 and 2 Samuel, the term suggests David's ultimate humility before God, although such deference would soon be matched by his demands. Unfortunately, David's language, though humble and deferential, almost sounds void of intimacy with God. Courtly language replaced the inquiring, searching, personal prayers of David the shepherd, the warrior and the fugitive. Read this prayer alongside Psalm 23, and note the stark contrast. But understandably, David's prayer life, heavy with concerns for Israel, must morph into grander, more political than personal concerns.

Doxology to God **2 Samuel 7:22-24**

²²Therefore you are great, O Lord God; for there is no one like you, and there is no God besides you, according to all that we have heard with our ears. ²³Who is like your people, like Israel? Is there another nation on earth whose God went to redeem it as a people, and to make a name for himself, doing great and awesome things for them, by driving out before his people nations and their gods? ²⁴And you established your people Israel for yourself to be your people forever; and you, O Lord, became their God.

Overwhelmed as he reflected on the divine nature of God and his own human nature, David personified utter praise

and adoration. He offered a doxology fit for a Sunday morning church anthem. Nothing and no one compares to God, he shouted. His words mirror Hannah's earlier song of prayer in 1 Samuel 2:1-10 as she exalted, "There is no Holy One like the Lord, no one besides you;...He raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap; he seats them with princes and has them inherit a throne of honor." How strongly David must have identified with that! He himself, counted among the poor, had inherited a throne of honor.

Nothing and no one compares to Israel, as well, he stated. God raised Israel to be distinct, set apart from all other people on earth. Israel is unique because God is unique. And God is doing a new thing in world history with Israel, specifically through David. Israel and David eternally entwine because of God's unconditional promise. In a paraphrase of that promise (v 24), David not-so-subtly reminded God of God's own words: "I will take you as my people, and I will be your God" (Ex 6:7a).

David's prayer style begins to show the influence of his background in Hebrew prayer. Although we often approach God with words we believe are acceptable to God, especially in public prayers, Hebrew prayer allows the entire range of human emotion and thought. A quick glance through the Psalms shows elements of anger (often at God), frustration, joy, thankfulness, demand, resentment, tranquility, desire for revenge, peace and adoration. Attitudes and words are not sanitized to sound appropriate before God and everyone else. Passion rises to God's ears, creating dynamic, intense, personal communication with God. And God never flinches. The next words to come out of David's mouth more fully indicate his strong Hebrew upbringing.

Demand of God

2 Samuel 7:25-29

²⁵And now, O Lord God, as for the word that you have spoken concerning your servant and concerning his house, confirm it forever; do as you have promised. ²⁶Thus your name will be magnified forever in the saying, "The Lord of hosts is God over Israel"; and the house of your servant David will be established before you. ²⁷For you, O Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, have made this revelation to your servant, saying, 'I will build you a house'; therefore your servant has found courage to pray this prayer to you. ²⁸And now, O Lord God, you are God, and your words are true, and you have promised this good thing to your servant; ²⁹now therefore may it please you to bless the house of your servant, so that it may continue forever before you; for you, O Lord God, have spoken, and with your blessing shall the house of your servant be blessed forever."

Just as David brazenly stood before Goliath, he now stood audaciously before God. "And now" signals a move from past to present, and is a Hebrew phrase usually used by a stronger party to demand an action from a lesser party. (Notice David used this phrase three times in this passage.) Four times David used the adverb "forever," emphasizing God's dynastic promise is for all generations.

In essence, because God is incomparable and has made a vow, David expected results. Perhaps he was really saying, "You really should not have made this offer, God, but now that You have, I'm holding you to it."

Again David formally addressed God as "Lord God" and "Lord God of hosts, God of Israel." David would not permit God to be anything less than God promises to be. In fact,

God's word was at stake here. God must live up to God's promise. As David prayed on behalf of his people, he recognized they were God's own—yet God must be the one to shape them, not they the ones to shape God.

As David concluded his prayer, he showed his father's nature. Like his ancestor Jacob (Gen 32:26), David would not let go of God until God blessed him, and blessed him for all time to come. No circumstances or personal despair would deter him from living out God's promise.

David was bold, almost dangerous, in his words. His prayer that began with deference ended with demand. And he was a hard bargainer, seemingly attempting to intimidate God. Perhaps God encouraged this mindset in David during his tumultuous young life.

David now led a nation and their interests. He could only do this under God's promise to be their God and they God's people. Desperately he wanted Israel to be in God's covenant, a covenant of divine love, grace, mercy and redemption. Later David would discover that accountability comes with living under God's promise.

God's Purposes, Not Ours

During an unseasonably cool evening on Monday, May 2, 2005, members of the East Waynesville Baptist Church near Asheville, N.C., gathered with their Board of Deacons. During the meeting, Deacon Frank Lowe and eight other members, three of whom were deacons, were summarily removed from the church roll, removed in bad standing.

Why? They simply disagreed with Pastor Chan Chandler's statement that the church was to be politically active and

anyone who disagreed with his personal views should leave.

In an attempt to bring healing and forgiveness, one church member asked if everyone could go to the altar and pray together. Then they could get on with the Lord's business. Chandler responded that if those who disagreed with him would repent, then they could get on with the Lord's work. If they were not going to repent, they should leave. Members in agreement with Chandler later discussed the possibility of changing the church bylaws to state all members must sign a statement of support for the pastor's political views.

During the earlier presidential election, Chandler demanded that anyone who supported Kerry instead of Bush should repent or resign from the church. He even offered to hold the door for them to leave. Lowe, a member for 43 years, commented that he usually voted the Democratic ticket and his wife the Republican ticket. For them, Chandler's statements crossed sharply over the line of separation between church and state.

As of this writing, Chandler's statements could be in violation of the Internal Revenue Service rules against political endorsements by churches. If so, the tax-exempt status of the East Waynesville Baptist Church could be revoked. Chandler has since resigned as the church's pastor.

Lowe hopes one day to free his church from their rigid belief that they are the only ones on God's side. Meanwhile, he and his wife, Thelma, visit other churches who welcome them with open hearts—and minds.

Through Jesus, God created a new, expanded covenant, one meant for God's kingdom on earth among all people, not just Israel. In God's covenant, no room exists for an "us"

and “them” mentality, or even the view that our nation alone is God’s chosen nation. Despite our good intentions, our opinions and actions may not always be God’s. Like David, we must recognize God is God and we are to be God’s people, people whose sole identity and purpose reflect God’s covenant of compassion, grace, mercy and redemption for the world—even if we, like Israel in David’s day, are often wobbly, confused and weak-spirited.

Written by Ginny Bridges Ireland, acting director, admissions and student services, Wake Forest University Divinity School, Winston-Salem, N.C.

Discernment and Wisdom

1 Kings 3:3-15

Theme: Prayer stemming from proper motives produces godly wisdom.

Introduction

When Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger succeeded Pope John Paul II, he confessed his weakness and inadequacy.

Abraham Lincoln made the same admission. “I have been driven many times to my knees by the overwhelming conviction that I had nowhere else to go,” he said. “My own wisdom and that of those about me seemed insufficient for the day.”

Confidence does not preclude a sense of need.

Jesus recalled Israel’s history and remembered Solomon’s glory. Yet Solomon began his reign with a genuine declaration. “I am only a little child,” he prayed before asking God for discernment. Perhaps the road to discernment and wisdom begins with childlike dependency. The ability to conquer a mammoth-sized task starts with a courageous awareness of need.

For a brief historical moment Solomon’s kingdom was glorious with power, pomp and prestige. While his wisdom and powers of discernment were legendary even during this lifetime, Solomon’s inaugural prayer and God’s response commenced his journey to greatness.

The Biblical Witness

1 Kings 3:3-5 God's Initiative

³Solomon loved the LORD, walking in the statutes of his father David; only, he sacrificed and offered incense at the high places. ⁴The king went to Gibeon to sacrifice there, for that was the principal high place; Solomon used to offer a thousand burnt offerings on that altar. ⁵At Gibeon the LORD appeared to Solomon in a dream by night; and God said, "Ask what I should give you."

Chapter 3 records the formal commencement of Solomon's reign. Succeeding his father, David, to the throne brought many challenges to Solomon. Political, cultural and religious dynamics gathered around the new king who dramatically became the recipient of God's gracious approval.

This passage should encourage those who struggle to make prayer a meaningful priority. We embrace a myth whenever we feel that life must be free of inconsistencies before conversation with God can be meaningful. Often it is from the agitation of hypocrisy and the conflict of inconsistency that a person longs for intimacy with God. Waiting until life is free of problems and free from sinful acts and thoughts in order to pray will render us spiritually powerless.

To be sure, Solomon was conflicted. Religious compromise characterized the beginning and end of his regime. While this king would rise to the pinnacle of wisdom and wealth, his administration was bookended by disappointing acquiescence to the foreign culture around him.

The inspired historian notes Solomon's strong love for the Lord (v 3) but with reservation. The king had begun his

official reign by establishing an alliance with Egypt. As a result, Pharaoh's daughter became Solomon's wife. The precise identity of the Pharaoh is hard to determine. The marriage was a political arrangement sealing the agreement with Egypt.

What did Israel gain as a result—protection, the promise of non-interference or perhaps a few chariots? Regardless, the new relationship with Egypt was a radical departure from past policy that had led the nation to trust in God for its ultimate security.

It doesn't take long for a nation to forget its founding principles. The idea of separation of church and state, once championed by many, has fallen on hard times. Now current policies have eroded this vital principle on which our nation was founded.

Solomon's love for God was tainted by something else. The text indicates that the king worshiped at the high places (vv 3-4), which were elevated shrines erected by the Canaanites to their pagan gods. Some contend that Solomon should have worshiped at the location of the tabernacle since the temple was not yet constructed. What is clear is that he was inconsistent and compromising with his political marriage and his acts of worship.

But Solomon did love the Lord! Sometimes we forget that our love for God never develops in a vacuum. Inconsistent behavior, hypocritical actions and compromised convictions render life ineffective and yet do not dissuade God from responding to our love for God.

God had forbidden Israel to embrace the religious customs of the foreigners who interacted with the nation. That was the

concern with international marriages. The possibility of diluting one's devotion to the God who had entered into a covenant with Israel was always a specter looming on the horizon. God expected a singular, exclusive commitment. The prospect of Egyptian idolatry and the fertility cults of the Canaanites mixed with the worship of Israel's God was scary.

Because the temple was not yet constructed, many felt it practical to rebuild and consecrate for the worship of Israel's God the old centers of pagan sacrifice, the high places. Sometimes convenience and practicality become open doors for compromise and complacency.

Gibeon, six miles northwest of Jerusalem, was the site of the tabernacle for a brief period (1 Chr 16:39). But for Solomon it had become the place for spiritual inquiry. In a grandiose act of mega-worship, Solomon was soon to find himself captivated by an affirming conversation with God.

God's initiative is always an act of grace. We don't deserve it. It was at Gibeon that the Lord made a proposal to Solomon in a nighttime dream. He could fill in the amount on a blank check. Ask for anything. Dreams were often the means of discerning the voice of God. They brought legitimacy to the appearance of God. God has a way of intervening into human affairs and making God's self known.

1 Kings 3:6-9 Solomon's Request

⁶And Solomon said, "You have shown great and steadfast love to your servant my father David, because he walked before you in faithfulness, in righteousness, and in uprightness of heart toward you; and you have kept for him this great and steadfast love, and have given him a son to

sit on his throne today. ⁷And now, O LORD my God, you have made your servant king in place of my father David, although I am only a little child; I do not know how to go out or come in. ⁸And your servant is in the midst of the people whom you have chosen, a great people, so numerous they cannot be numbered or counted. ⁹Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil; for who can govern this your great people?"

Solomon's prayer is instructive for us. He began in a manner that should serve as a pattern for our praying. The king first rehearsed the Lord's past kindnesses especially to his father, David. The supreme expression of divine kindness to David was the fact that he had a son, an heir to his throne. Solomon, like his father, loved God. In spite of his sinful deeds, compromised theology and capitulation to foreign influences, the propensity of Solomon's heart was obvious. His love for God manifested itself in profound gratitude.

King Solomon acknowledged his overwhelming sense of inadequacy upon assuming his father's throne (v 7). He felt accountable for the large number of people comprising the nation (v 8). The burden of leadership, rather than producing arrogance, humbled the great king. Genuine humility is always the key to receiving God's unexpected gifts.

Solomon confessed that he was "only a little child" (v 7). What a contrast to the pompous, political rhetoric in our culture today. After a review of God's kindness, Solomon assessed his current circumstances with amazing accuracy. Without divine help, he was not up to the task.

Think of the daunting challenge facing Solomon. He was following the golden reign of his father, David, and relation-

ships with factions of Israel's population were stormy at best. Larger nations viewed the vassal state with conquest in their eyes. No wonder Solomon looked to God with the dependency of a little child.

Solomon's prayer found root in the soil of humility. It has been suggested that children must look up to everyone. Metaphorically the lesson for us becomes clear. Leaders who are willing and ready to learn from God and others might very well transform the dynamics of hate and fear in our world. A self-sufficient child is an oxymoronic thought. The admission of need is not only the first step to effective praying but also essential to personal growth.

With laser-like precision, Solomon's request was surprising, but to the point. He asked for discernment (v 9), which he viewed as a necessity for governance and for knowing right from wrong. Circumstances and issues can be very complex. A sense of clear direction can bring tremendous relief to those who feel the burden of leadership. But for Solomon it was much more. He felt a sense of stewardship too. These were God's people who had been entrusted to him.

It seems that the seeds of discernment and wisdom had been planted in Solomon's heart even before he voiced his request. He was asking for more than knowledge, common sense or logic. Solomon desired the ability to understand the forces at work around him, knowing that such understanding would inform his ability to decide and act.

1 Kings 3:10-15 **God's Response**

¹⁰It pleased the Lord that Solomon had asked this. ¹¹God said to him, "Because you have asked this, and have not asked for yourself long life or riches, or for the life of your enemies, but have asked for yourself understanding to discern what is right, ¹²I now do according to your word. Indeed I give you a wise and discerning mind; no one like you has been before you and no one like you shall arise after you. ¹³I give you also what you have not asked, both riches and honor all your life; no other king shall compare with you. ¹⁴If you will walk in my ways, keeping my statutes and my commandments, as your father David walked, then I will lengthen your life." ¹⁵Then Solomon awoke; it had been a dream. He came to Jerusalem where he stood before the ark of the covenant of the LORD. He offered up burnt offerings and offerings of well-being, and provided a feast for all his servants.

Solomon's request for discernment pleased God because it did not reflect a selfish agenda, nor was it vindictive. The king simply wanted the powers of discernment in order to make fair decisions in complex judicial matters. The ability to understand personal and social dynamics, to ponder and reflect without knee-jerk reactions and to be active rather than passive when appropriate was certainly part of God's gracious endowment to Solomon. The fact that God proclaimed Solomon's soon-to-be unique reputation ("none like thee," v 13 KJV) seems to be an apt description of God.

In addition, Solomon received two things he did not request: wealth and honor. Plus, he received the conditional promise of long life. Sacrificial worship and festive celebration was Solomon's grateful response. Although King Solomon's reign would end in disappointment, this shining moment during which God gave him such extravagant gifts offers us a lesson in God's purposes in prayer.

The Avenue of Transformation

Prayer was the means of transformation for Solomon. The fact is that genuine prayer always results in change. Our God is not detached from the affairs of divine creation. Thinking about the simple idea of prayer should cause the mind to sizzle. A supreme deity who not only permits but is also desirous of fellowship with his subjects must surely be gracious. Access is miraculous enough. Through Jesus Christ, however, we have much more than access; we have the opportunity for intimacy and friendship.

In his book *Celebration of Discipline*, Richard Foster says, “To pray is to change. Prayer is the central avenue God uses to transform us. If we are unwilling to change, we will abandon prayer as a noticeable characteristic of our lives.”

To pray as Solomon—as “only a little child”—is to unlock the flood-gates of heaven and to position ourselves for dramatic transformation. God will never ignore the honest admission of need from any of us.

Written by Gary Burton, pastor, Pintlala Baptist Church, Hope Hull, Ala.

Vision and Deliverance

2 Kings 6:8-23

Theme: Prayer invites God to intervene for us as we face life’s challenges.

Introduction

One of my earliest childhood memories is of watching television preachers on Sunday morning before my family went to our local Baptist church. Since neither of my parents was really watching the telecasts, the main purpose was to provide some religious music on Sunday morning. (Remember, this was in the days before cassette player, CD player, MP3 player and Sirius radio. The old LPs just did not sound as good as a TV broadcast).

But I did watch the telecasts and took in the different parts, not just the music. What made the biggest impact on me was how the TV preachers encouraged people to pray for anything, and I mean anything—to get a car, to get out of debt, to get a new home, to be offered a new job, etc. They seemed to portray God as a heavenly Santa Claus who responded to the wish lists of the person praying.

Even as a young child, this seemed to me to be a bit too good to be true. I had been taught about God and how God had created the world and held all power and all understanding. Yet I was to believe that if we said the right words, in the right way, this God would deliver my wishes just like Santa Claus brought me my Christmas presents? I just could not believe it.

As I grew and learned more about God, I always guarded myself against seeing God as being controlled by the prayers I offered. In reality, my reaction to my earlier experience with TV preachers led me rarely to ask God to intervene in my life in any way. I knew that the Bible repeatedly encouraged me to take my concerns to God and ask for help. But I could not get it out of my mind that God was not God if I, through my own words uttered in prayer, could control God.

My actual experience may not be all that common. But I do think people in the church share an element of my experience. Many people today have a problem coming to an understanding of how we are to ask God to intervene in our lives without making God into a Santa Claus ready to deliver some goodies to us. As a result we do not approach God when we should nor recognize God's actions when they come.

The Biblical Witness

2 Kings 6:8-10 Prophetic Power

⁸Once when the king of Aram was at war with Israel, he took counsel with his officers. He said, "At such and such a place shall be my camp." ⁹But the man of God sent word to the king of Israel, "Take care not to pass this place, because the Arameans are going down there." ¹⁰The king of Israel sent word to the place of which the man of God spoke. More than once or twice he warned such a place so that it was on the alert.

This passage recalls a time of transition in Israel's history from the spiritual leadership of Elijah to Elisha and the transfer of kingship from Ahab to his heirs. Elijah held

mythical status in Israel and remained in the eyes of Israel, even until the days of Jesus, the embodiment of the spirit of God.

Second Kings 2:11 records how Elijah was taken up in a whirlwind, indicating that Elijah was so special in God's eyes that he should not pass the portals of death. Elisha had been acknowledged as the successor of his master Elijah. In fact, Elijah bestowed a double portion of his spirit upon Elisha. The unfolding pages of 2 Kings reveal the degree to which Elisha measured up to his predecessor, but most people conclude from reading the text that he did not offer the same stupendous types of displays of prophetic power. In fact, Elisha is most often simply called the "man of God" rather than a prophet. Nevertheless, Elisha most assuredly played an important part in the unfolding events in the life of Israel.

From 2 Kings 3 we learn that Moab had rebelled against Israel upon the death of Ahab. The king of Israel aligned with the king of Judah and the king of Edom to force Moab back in place. In the long run, Moab maintained its independence. Things remained calm for a short time, but from Chapter 6 we learn that the king of Aram (Syria) made war against Israel. Quite unsolicited, apparently, Elisha advised the king of Israel how to protect Israel from a confrontation with the Arameans.

2 Kings 6:11-14 A City Surrounded

¹¹The mind of the king of Aram was greatly perturbed because of this; he called his officers and said to them, "Now tell me who among us sides with the king of Israel?" ¹²Then one of his officers said, "No one, my lord king. It is Elisha, the prophet in Israel, who tells the king of Israel the words that you speak in your bedchamber." ¹³He said, "Go

and find where he is; I will send and seize him.” He was told, “He is in Dothan.”¹⁴ So he sent horses and chariots there and a great army; they came by night, and surrounded the city.

The king of Aram’s first suspicion when his plans continued to be thwarted by the king of Israel was that there was a spy in his own army. He soon learned that a prophet rather than a traitor stood in his way of success against Israel. In some way, word of Elisha had spread to the army of the Arameans; then the king’s officers informed him. It is curious as to why the officer had not already shared this information with the king even before he was asked. After all, it would be to his benefit as well as the king’s.

Note only did the Aramean officer know of Elisha, he even knew where he was. The king immediately sent his army to surround the city of Dothan, where Elisha resided. Apparently there was no resistance to this move into “enemy territory,” as the army arrived without challenge to lay siege to the city. Previously Elisha had informed the king of Israel of the movement of the Arameans. This time he did not.

2 Kings 6: 15-19

Vision and Blindness

¹⁵When an attendant of the man of God rose early in the morning and went out, an army with horses and chariots was all around the city. His servant said, “Alas, master! What shall we do?”¹⁶ He replied, “Do not be afraid, for there are more with us than there are with them.”¹⁷ Then Elisha prayed: “O LORD, please open his eyes that he may see.” So the LORD opened the eyes of the servant, and he saw; the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha.¹⁸ When the Arameans came down against him, Elisha prayed to the LORD, and said, “Strike this people, please, with blindness.” So he struck

them with blindness as Elisha had asked.¹⁹ Elisha said to them, “This is not the way, and this is not the city; follow me, and I will bring you to the man whom you seek.” And he led them to Samaria.

On the morning of the siege, Elisha’s attendant informed him that the city was surrounded by an army. Unlike the attendant, Elisha was not alarmed and immediately went to the Lord in prayer.

What was it that gave Elisha such calm in these circumstances? Elisha was confident in heavenly protection about him. While he knew of it, the attendant did not. So Elisha asked God to show the attendant why he was so confident. The eyes of the attendant were opened, apparently his spiritual eyes, for he then understood that Elisha was not alone against the Arameans.

Significantly, Elisha’s first response was that he was not alone against the army. Elisha was aware of spiritual forces surrounding him. Fire in Hebrew scripture (for example, the pillar of fire that comforted the Israelites at night, Ex 13:21-22) and in Christian scripture (the tongues as of fire at Pentecost, Acts 2:3) is symbolic of the presence of God. Elisha’s confidence brought calm in the face of overwhelming circumstances. The presence of spiritual power is greater than material powers of this world.

“Chariots of fire” may refer back to the way in which Elijah was separated from Elisha in order that Elijah could be taken up in the whirlwind (2 Kings 2:11). The spiritual powers were specifically the presence of God. The chariots of fire reminded Elisha that the God who was active in the life of Elijah was active in his life as well.

Only the attendant knew of the heavenly protection, so the Aramean army was not deterred in attacking the city to get

to Elisha. Those without eyes of faith are seldom deterred by the reality of the presence of the heavenly protection. They simply do not know it is there. The presence of the spiritual army did not keep the earthly circumstances from changing rapidly. But as the army advanced, it was Elisha who called upon his heavenly protection. When he acted on his knowledge of protection, then the circumstances began to change. Elisha had to be a partner in the process.

Following the attack of blindness, Elisha was able to lead the Aramean army into a trap, bringing them into the very presence of the Israeli army.

2 Kings 6:20-23 **Hospitality and Kindness**

²⁰As soon as they entered Samaria, Elisha said, "O LORD, open the eyes of these men so that they may see." The LORD opened their eyes, and they saw that they were inside Samaria. ²¹When the king of Israel saw them he said to Elisha, "Father, shall I kill them? Shall I kill them?" ²²He answered, "No! Did you capture with your sword and your bow those whom you want to kill? Set food and water before them so that they may eat and drink; and let them go to their master." ²³So he prepared for them a great feast; after they ate and drank, he sent them on their way, and they went to their master. And the Arameans no longer came raiding into the land of Israel.

Elisha prayed again. The Aramean army received its sight and realized that it was now deep in enemy territory. In those days, a ban allowed the captor to slaughter all those who had been taken prisoner. But this circumstance was different in that the king of Israel did nothing to capture the army before him. The capture occurred because of Elisha (and God) alone. Therefore, Israel's king could not follow

the strict interpretation of the ban. Instead, Elisha proposed that the king feed the enemy soldiers and return them to their king. A surprising act of grace for the day, and probably for today as well.

Seeing Through Eyes of Faith

What then are we to conclude about prayer from this passage?

- According to this passage, God initiates the involvement in the everyday affairs of people. This realization preserves God's role as God and not as a being who can be manipulated by observing certain formulas for prayer. We can and should go to God and ask for deliverance, but if it comes, it is God's decision and not some magical power we hold over God by some formulaic incantations. We often draw too firm a line between the spiritual and material worlds. If God has created both, God can move freely between the two, defying our intellectual understanding of the dividing line between the two spheres.
- God sometimes involves third parties in circumstances in order to resolve them. In a strict sense, this story is a battle strategy story between two kings. Yet God speaks to a person who is technically a bystander and brings a word for the situation. This occurs twice: when the initial evasions of the Aramean army are made and when Elisha advises the king on the implementation of the ban. The answer God offers may be as close as the wisdom displayed by a friend, a minister, a family member or perhaps a stranger.

- God is concerned with the circumstances we face in this life. God is not, as Bette Midler sang, looking at us from a distance (I have always liked the music of “From a Distance,” but not the theology!). Often we relegate God to being a God of eternal salvation and end God’s concerns there. We are right to guard against a view of God as one who takes sides in the outcome of ballgames or the decision about what type of car to buy. But that hesitancy has often led us to limit God’s concerns in ways that are not biblical.
- Eyes of faith are required to see the working of God. Elisha’s attendant did not readily see the spiritual forces that were assembled. Elisha saw them, however, from the beginning. It was only after Elisha prayed that the attendant’s eyes were open. God was already at work; it was the purpose of the prayer to be able to see what God was doing.
- We must nurture our minds and spirits to be watchful and aware of the way God will provide. Elisha was not surprised by God’s rescue; he expected it.
- God’s desire is to find a graceful and redemptive solution to the problems and circumstances we face. Instead of the slaughter of an army, God’s solution through Elisha was the feeding of those who were hungry. This solution brought a period, albeit brief, of peace between Israel and Amram. If the solution we think God is giving us is not graceful and redemptive, then we must seriously question that the solution is from God.

No passage of scripture can fully explain the ways in which God responds to our prayers for divine intervention. This

passage does, however, provide us a skeleton that will probably take us the rest of our lives to flesh out.

Written by Wayne Hager, pastor of Calvary Baptist Church, Mount Airy, NC and president of Yokefellow Cooperative Ministry, a crisis ministry in Mount Airy.

Faith and Possibility

2 Kings 20:1-11

Theme: Prayer recognizes that restoration, healing and wholeness come from God.

Introduction

His personality was larger than life. His laugh preceded him down the corridors of the seminary where he served as dean of students and director of the supervised field education program. His door was always open to any student who needed advice, encouragement or a tension-relieving laugh.

Byron loved his Lord and he loved people—especially the students—and that love was warmly reciprocated. After a fruitful career in pastoral ministry and denominational leadership, this position was the capstone. The opportunity to share with a new generation of pastors-in-training his pastoral wisdom born out of experience and a life lived for the gospel was pure joy for him.

It was a shock to the entire college when Dr. Fenwick was diagnosed with a particularly virulent cancer. The prognosis was three months. For Byron, it was a stunning blow; still feeling energetic in his mid-sixties, he couldn't believe that his earthly mission was coming to an end when he still had so much left to do, and to offer.

The first response of Byron, his family, his church, his denomination and its seminary was to turn to prayer. Prayer

for understanding, for strength, for peace—and for healing. Although Byron and his wife, Lorraine, arrived at a place of deep peace with whatever should happen, they never ceased to petition God for complete healing for Byron.

The original three months stretched into two years. Amazingly, until the last few weeks, Byron continued to live life to the fullest, pouring himself into his responsibilities at the seminary and making the most of precious time spent with his family. A significant blessing was the relatively good health and energy Byron enjoyed until his last weeks. This allowed him to work and play and live at his own inimitable pace and with Byronesque enthusiasm. An immeasurable gift was the extra time he was granted with his two young granddaughters and the wonderful memories he added to their memory bank.

When godly people are struck down at the height of their productive earthly lives, our natural response is to ask why. We may be confused and conflicted over the appropriate prayer response. Should we resign ourselves to the inevitable, make out our wills and tie up the loose ends of our present lives? Or should we petition God to intervene in the natural order and to grant us a reprieve—to make a special case for us?

The Biblical Witness

2 Kings 20:1-3

A Face Turned Toward God

¹In those days Hezekiah became sick and was at the point of death. The prophet Isaiah son of Amoz came to him, and said to him, "Thus says the LORD: Set your house in order, for you shall die; you shall not recover."²Then Hezekiah turned his face to the wall and prayed to the

LORD: ³"Remember now, O LORD, I implore you, how I have walked before you in faithfulness with a whole heart, and have done what is good in your sight." Hezekiah wept bitterly.

We are introduced to Hezekiah in the eighteenth chapter of 2 Kings, as one of the exemplary kings of Judah who "did what was right in the sight of the Lord" (18:3). Sirach extolled him as one of three kings (with David and Josiah) who alone did not "commit trespass" (Sirach 49:4). Most scholars now believe that he reigned from around 715 to 687/686 BCE, during the time of oppressive Assyrian dominance under Sargon and Sennacherib.

The nation Hezekiah had inherited from his weak father, Ahaz, was spiritually and morally lax; religious observance was compromised by foreign cults and superstitions. Under the influence of the prophet Isaiah, Hezekiah began to institute spiritual reforms at the very beginning of his reign, cleansing the Temple, reorganizing worship and attempting to stamp out idolatry, superstition and formalism (these are fully recorded in 2 Chr 29–31), and destroying "Nehushtan," the bronze serpent that was an object of worship.

As the Chronicler notes, "Hezekiah did this throughout all Judah; he did what was good and right and faithful before the Lord his God. And every work that he undertook in the service of the house of God, and in accordance with the law and the commandments, to seek his God, he did with all his heart; and he prospered" (2 Chr 31:20-21). Hezekiah also embarked on an ambitious program to strengthen the capital, Jerusalem, fortifying the city's defenses and bringing the water supply from the spring of Gihon into the city by the remarkable engineering feat of a 1,749-foot-long tunnel cut under the foundations of the city.

When we encounter Hezekiah in this passage, "in those days," he was thirty-nine years old, and in the fourteenth year of his reign, 701 BCE. Sennacherib had swept down through the coastal lands and rampaged through Judah, conquering 46 walled towns and deporting over 200,000 inhabitants. He was now at the gates of Jerusalem, holding the city in siege; he had already demanded a huge tribute that Hezekiah had paid; but now he demanded that the Judeans transfer their complete loyalty from Yahweh to him (see ch. 18).

During this political crisis, Hezekiah became deathly ill. His spiritual mentor, Isaiah, advised him to set his affairs in order (that is, to ensure an orderly succession), for he would not recover. Refusing to accept his impending fate, Hezekiah instead beseeched Yahweh to remember his whole-hearted faithfulness to the God of Israel.

2 Kings 20:4-7 **A Declaration Turned Around**

⁴Before Isaiah had gone out of the middle court, the word of the LORD came to him: ⁵"Turn back, and say to Hezekiah prince of my people, Thus says the LORD, the God of your ancestor David: I have heard your prayer, I have seen your tears; indeed, I will heal you; on the third day you shall go up to the house of the LORD. ⁶I will add fifteen years to your life. I will deliver you and this city out of the hand of the king of Assyria; I will defend this city for my own sake and for my servant David's sake."⁷Then Isaiah said, "Bring a lump of figs. Let them take it and apply it to the boil, so that he may recover."

Isaiah was barely out of the room when he received a surprising new word from God: Yahweh would grant Hezekiah another fifteen years of life—an unusual reversal of a prophetic judgement.

It is important to understand that the fate of the king was bound up with the fate of the nation. God would deliver both Judah from destruction and the king from death for God's own sake and for David's sake—a striking contrast to Hezekiah's prayer that was centered on his own achievements.

Sennacherib's army was struck down by the angel of the Lord during the night, sparing Jerusalem and the nation.

Some biblical scholars suggest that the cause of this catastrophic death may have been a plague, such as the bubonic plague—a theory that would also explain the skin disorder that Hezekiah suffered. Isaiah recommended a poultice of figs to heal the condition (v 7), figs being used for medicinal purposes from very early times. (Today, the fig's healing property as an agent for drawing out infection is receiving renewed medical attention.) A common medicinal remedy was the agent for Hezekiah's healing.

Set in the larger context, the deliverance of Jerusalem can be understood as being God's response to Sennacherib's blasphemous challenge to supplant God in the people's loyalty, and further, to preserve David's lineage (Manasseh, Hezekiah's heir, was not born until three years after Hezekiah's healing). From this perspective, Hezekiah's healing was inextricably linked to the healing of the nation. From the beginning of Hezekiah's reign, Hezekiah had sought to purify religious observance. Considering the highly idolatrous and corrupt reign that preceded him (that of his father, Ahaz), it would not be surprising that much still remained to be accomplished.

Yahweh promised to add fifteen years to Hezekiah's life, in effect doubling the length of his reign. Although numbers were frequently used in a symbolic way in Hebrew culture, it

is difficult to determine the significance of the number of extra years granted to Hezekiah. In any event, he lived to continue his good governance of Judah for some time.

2 Kings 20:8-11

A Shadow Turned Back

⁸Hezekiah said to Isaiah, "What shall be the sign that the LORD will heal me, and that I shall go up to the house of the LORD on the third day?" ⁹Isaiah said, "This is the sign to you from the LORD, that the LORD will do the thing that he has promised: the shadow has now advanced ten intervals; shall it retreat ten intervals?" ¹⁰Hezekiah answered, "It is normal for the shadow to lengthen ten intervals; rather let the shadow retreat ten intervals." ¹¹The prophet Isaiah cried to the LORD; and he brought the shadow back the ten intervals, by which the sun had declined on the dial of Ahaz.

Unlike his father, Ahaz, who had refused Isaiah's invitation to ask God for a sign (Isa 7:11-13), Hezekiah requested a sign from God as a confirmation of the promise of healing. The sign he received is an inscrutable one, and remains the subject of some speculation by biblical scholars. The word translated here as "dial" can be translated as "steps" or "degrees"; most recent scholarship interprets this as a series of steps on which the sun marked the progression of time by casting a shadow.

While it was natural for a shadow to lengthen, it would not normally recede. Hezekiah asked for such a miracle; Isaiah prayed to God, and the shadow on the dial/steps miraculously retreated ten intervals or steps. (We see here a comparison to the sun standing still in Josh 10:12-13.) Just as God had commanded Isaiah to "turn back" (v 5) upon hearing Hezekiah's prayer, God now turned back the

shadow of death even as the shadow on the stairs was turned back.

Hezekiah was granted another interval of time to continue his work. Yahweh's honor was vindicated by the destruction of Sennacherib's army, and in the wide-spread reports of Hezekiah's illness and recovery (20:12).

Complete Healing and Wholeness

The leave-taking for Reverend Dr. Byron Fenwick was a glorious celebration of his life and witness. Through word, music, tears and laughter, the funeral service testified to Byron's passion for ministry and to his commitment to his Lord, his family and his students. As was repeatedly claimed, "Byron showed us how to live well, and how to die well."

But in the midst of the celebration, deep grief and anguished questions also arose. Why had he died so soon? Had God not heard the prayers of Byron and the countless faithful for healing?

As temporal, finite creatures, we are very much bound by our experience of time. Considering that three-score-years-and-ten is still our earthly expectation, each year is a precious commodity. But in the eternal plan of life, how do we measure the difference between 15 years and two years?

As Byron himself professed, his two extra years were an answer to prayer and a gift to himself and to many others. His students were given a profound lesson in what it means to minister in the very midst of life and death—a lesson that in its existential reality reached into their inner beings; they will be better pastors for his example.

The faith of many he encountered in his last months was immeasurably strengthened by Byron's assurance and faith. His honesty in sharing times of grief and sorrow for opportunities he would not realize allowed others to confront their own mortality—a considerable factor in a culture that rushes head-long in denial of aging and death. Medical professionals and visitors witnessed what it meant to approach death with a serene confidence.

Most importantly, Byron was given time to spend with his family at a depth of relationship that many people are afraid to explore. Together they built a storehouse of memories that will sustain and nourish his children and his grandchildren for their lifetimes. His beloved wife received the gift of spiritual peace: a few days before he died to this world, Byron had a profound spiritual experience. Sharing this encounter with Lorraine, he said simply, "I've just been with Jesus at the foot of the cross." He then assured her that Jesus was waiting to take him home, and he was ready. Knowing that Byron was at peace, Lorraine was able to release him with the sure and certain knowledge that Byron had indeed been granted complete healing and wholeness.

God had answered the prayer for restoration more profoundly than any mortal could have expected or imagined.

Written by Carol Anne Janzen, lecturer in Christian education, Acadia Divinity College, Wolfville, Nova Scotia.

Dependence and Intervention

2 Chronicles 20:1-19

Theme: Prayer recognizes our dependence upon God and God's ability to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves.

Introduction

Admiral James Stockdale spent eight years in the “Hanoi Hilton” as a prisoner of war in Vietnam. He faced insurmountable odds, surviving brutal torture and hunger. Stockdale stated that two qualities helped him and his soldiers endure: a willingness to face the difficult circumstances head-on and an unshakable confidence that they would survive.

According to Stockdale, the soldiers who did not survive created unrealistic expectations for themselves. They convinced themselves they would be “home by Christmas” or would be rescued in the near future. Only those who admitted their difficulties and maintained their faith found their freedom again.

During a difficult time in the history of ancient Judah, King Jehoshaphat honestly confronted the difficult facts of imminent danger. The king found faith by recounting God's faithfulness and listening to a word of hope from the musician Jehaziel. Jehoshaphat's prayer placed the battle in God's hands and changed the lives of the people within his community.

The Biblical Witness

2 Chronicles 20:1-5 Real Crisis

¹After this the Moabites and the Ammonites, and with them some of the Meunites, came against Jehoshaphat for battle. ²Messengers came and told Jehoshaphat, “A great multitude is coming against you from Edom, from beyond the sea; already they are at Hazazon-tamar” (that is, Engedi). ³Jehoshaphat was afraid; he set himself to seek the LORD, and proclaimed a fast throughout all Judah. ⁴Judah assembled to seek help from the LORD; from all the towns of Judah they came to seek the LORD. ⁵Jehoshaphat stood in the assembly of Judah and Jerusalem, in the house of the LORD, before the new court,

By the time Jehoshaphat received word that the Moabites and Ammonites were joining forces to attack Judah, two things were certain: he was not going to suffer the same fate of his former counterpart Ahab who was defeated at Ramoth-Gilead; and he did not have the arsenal to withstand a military engagement against a “multitude.”

His experiences with Ahab taught him something. The crafty monarch let his marriage rather than his relationship with God determine his political strategy. He surrounded himself with prophetic babblers who told the king what he wanted to hear. He defied the prophet Micaiah after he warned the king about going into battle. A disguise did not prevent arrows from finding the heart of Ahab (2 Chr 18).

Jehoshaphat returned home from the battle a changed man. Lucky to be alive, he reorganized his administration to ensure the nation's spiritual stability (2 Chr 19). He revived

the old judicial system and renovated the courtyard in front of the temple (v 5). He appointed spiritual administrators to assist the people in various districts and used them to encourage a return to studying and reviewing God's laws.

The new judicial system came in handy during the crisis. Acknowledging the imminent threat, the king's fear became the impetus for spiritual awakening. Before resorting to armed conflict, he chose a different weapon against the multitude. Ahab had enlisted the prophets to be "yes" men; Jehoshaphat called the people together for prayer. He did not distinguish between prophets and priests; he placed the burden on everyone to do as the judges instructed them. They cried out to God; even entire families were involved (v 13).

The people knew what was at stake. The Lord granted a land for them to inhabit as a tangible sign of blessing. God also gave a temple, the place where communication with God through prayer and sacrifice took place. If they attempted to defend their land on their own, they risked losing places to live and pray. As author Leslie Allen stated, "While Moab mobilized the army, Judah mobilized for worship."

2 Chronicles 20:6-12 **Powerless People**

⁶and said, "O Lord, God of our ancestors, are you not God in heaven? Do you not rule over all the kingdoms of the nations? In your hand are power and might, so that no one is able to withstand you. ⁷Did you not, O our God, drive out the inhabitants of this land before your people Israel, and give it forever to the descendants of your friend Abraham? ⁸They have lived in it, and in it have built you a sanctuary for your name, saying, ⁹If disaster comes upon us, the

sword, judgment, or pestilence, or famine, we will stand before this house, and before you, for your name is in this house, and cry to you in our distress, and you will hear and save. ¹⁰See now, the people of Ammon, Moab, and Mount Seir, whom you would not let Israel invade when they came from the land of Egypt, and whom they avoided and did not destroy—¹¹they reward us by coming to drive us out of your possession that you have given us to inherit. ¹²O our God, will you not execute judgment upon them? For we are powerless against this great multitude that is coming against us. We do not know what to do, but our eyes are on you."

Jehoshaphat's prayer reflected the nature of his earlier actions. Using a series of rhetorical questions, the king channeled the fears of the people toward trust in God. Jehoshaphat evoked trust from the people's hearts by facing the conflict directly. He admitted his own powerlessness, expressing vulnerability to the problem: "We do not know what to do" (v 12). He did not skirt the issue of the oncoming problem. He asked God to defend the land and the temple. As other laments in the Psalms demonstrate, the king clearly acknowledged the crisis and pledged fidelity toward God and willingness to face the foe on the Lord's behalf.

Adding further weight to his argument, he called out the people of Ammon and Moab. They had been protected by God, but "now" (v 10) God should see their attacks as a personal battle against the Lord's people.

The king's speech had a powerful effect on the listeners. The king spoke for the people to God, sharing their hopes and fears. He identified with their needs and was unafraid to take them to the Lord or confess his own worries. In the same way, the king also spoke to the people for the Lord.

By recounting the redemptive history of God's work for Judah, he subtly indicated that he expected God to do the same during this battle. God created the world (v 6) and conquered the enemies in the Promised Land (v 7). The people built the temple for God as a testimony to the power of God's name (v 8).

2 Chronicles 20:13-17 **Stand Still and See the Victory**

¹³Meanwhile all Judah stood before the Lord, with their little ones, their wives, and their children. ¹⁴Then the spirit of the Lord came upon Jahaziel son of Zechariah, son of Benaiah, son of Jeiel, son of Mattaniah, a Levite of the sons of Asaph, in the middle of the assembly. ¹⁵He said, "Listen all Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem, and King Jehoshaphat: Thus says the LORD to you: 'Do not fear or be dismayed at this great multitude; for the battle is not yours but God's. ¹⁶Tomorrow go down against them; they will come up by the ascent of Ziz; you will find them at the end of the valley, before the wilderness of Jeruel. ¹⁷This battle is not for you to fight; take your position, stand still, and see the victory of the LORD on your behalf, O Judah and Jerusalem.' Do not fear or be dismayed; tomorrow go out against them, and the LORD will be with you."

The king asked everyone to pray, but Jahaziel provided the answer to the prayer. The phrase "the spirit of the Lord came upon him" indicated that Jahaziel was not one of the designated prophets in Israel. This musician, however, could trace his ancestry back to the Davidic throne (v 14). His sensitivity to the spirit of the Lord and his family ties made him a credible candidate for reporting God's answer to the cries of the people.

Appropriately, the answer came through one who represents the people. Unlike Ahab who turned only to the pro-

fessional prophetic school to receive answers he wanted to hear, Jehoshaphat realized that the spirit of the Lord can fall upon whomever it chooses.

Jahaziel spoke, or possibly sang, the call to action. He told the people to take courage and not fear because God would fight on their behalf. The instructions were simple:

1. The people would be involved in the conflict. They would demonstrate their confidence in God's protection by personally moving onto the field of battle. Their posture and actions would express their faith in God. Unlike the Moabites who scurried around (vv 23-24) attacking one another, Judah would stand still and watch.
2. God would provide a sure defense, and they would share in the victory God would win on their behalf. They would arm themselves sufficiently because the battle was in God's hands.

In the midst of calamity, Jahaziel demonstrated to the people that physical presence was a sufficient defense. God joined with the people who expressed their faith in God and fought on their behalf.

2 Chronicles 20:18-19 **God is Able**

¹⁸Then Jehoshaphat bowed down with his face to the ground, and all Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem fell down before the LORD, worshiping the LORD. ¹⁹And the Levites, of the Korathites and the Korahites, stood up to praise the LORD, the God of Israel, with a very loud voice.

Jehoshaphat and the people responded to the oracle by worshiping before the crisis was over. The circumstances

had not changed, yet the word of God was enough to assure them of victory. They rejected the maxim “Seeing is believing.” As the king indicated earlier (v 2), their eyes were fixed on God, not the multitude. Their belief in the Lord provided sufficient vision.

Their worship expressed their dependence on God and confidence in the strategy. They bowed humbly and reverently to God, and the Levites sang loudly in adoration of God’s salvation. Their united front effectively demonstrated their total dependence on God. The king and people shared the burden of a threat and the joy of an answered prayer.

The response also indicated an important facet of a life of prayer and fasting. The people showed confidence because they knew that God was in charge. The actions of prayer and fasting prepared them to trust fully in the outcome of the battle and to demonstrate their dependence on God.

The residents of Judah learned that spiritual disciplines are not levers to manipulate God’s response. Actions such as prayer and fasting are gifts God has given us to be conduits to allow “the spirit of the Lord” to change the hearts of people. How God carries out a response to a request is part of God’s greater purposes. Prayer and fasting were the vehicles that Jehoshaphat chose to use to make the people more receptive to the decision and to indicate their dependence on God.

Psalm 46, one of the psalms associated with the sons of Korah, articulates the same attitude that these Korahites (v 19) showed. God is a refuge during times of trouble (Ps 46:1), and nations fall at the sound of his voice (46:6). He ends war by eliminating the weapons of the military (46:9).

The response of the individual is simply to “be still and know that I am God” (46:10).

Well-Placed Trust

Times of crisis allow people to realize their dependence upon God. Believers discover in tangible ways that God can and will live up to the power and faithfulness we verbally ascribe to God in trouble-free times. While we are often tempted to take matters into our own hands, we eventually discover, like Jehoshaphat, that we are quite powerless and do not know what to do. God is our only hope. While a believer still must confront “the enemy,” God will intervene and win the battle. God can do for someone what she cannot do for herself.

After Brian Nichols went on a shooting rampage in a courthouse in Atlanta, Georgia, on March 11, 2005, police were stymied at their efforts to find him. Enter an unlikely candidate for understanding God’s direction but certainly one whom God was willing to use.

Ashley Smith, who freely admitted that her life had been on the wrong track, had been studying *The Purpose Driven Life*. She was trying to break the cycle of arrests, petty crimes, drunk driving and poor parenting that plagued her younger years. She was about to be another one of Brian Nichols’s victims in his crime spree until she began to read the book to him. She prayed with him, discussed her own family situation and responded to his threats of violence with nonviolence.

“God has helped me before,” she later told reporters. This time her confidence in God was evident again. She challenged Nichols while he held her captive, in the bathroom. “I tried to explain to him that he killed a 40-year-old man that

was probably a father, a husband and a friend.” Eventually Nichols allowed her to leave; Smith telephoned 911 and the authorities arrested Nichols.

Like Jehaziel, Smith was not the one equipped with the best tools of law enforcement. She was an unlikely candidate to bring peace to a difficult situation. While others were praying for Nichols’ arrest, the Lord used another resource outside of conventional law enforcement to bring justice to a tragic situation.

Smith was confident before she was captured that God would take care of her. She had to remain still and know of God’s presence in her life.

Written by Bill Shiell, senior pastor, First Baptist Church, Knoxville, Tenn.

Memory and Mercy

Nehemiah 1:1-11

Theme: Prayer gratefully acknowledges God’s unchanging faithfulness to us even when we are unfaithful to God.

Introduction

Where were you on September 11, 2001? How many times have you been asked that question?

I was working in my office when my wife phoned from across campus and told me that a plane had just hit the World Trade Center. I dismissed it as just another tragic accident. Then, moments later, the phone rang again. It was my wife informing me that a second plane had struck the buildings. I, like everyone else, knew something was horribly wrong.

We gathered with students and other faculty in the student center on our campus to watch the reports, the confusion and the chilling videos coming out of New York and Washington. We all watched in shock wondering if we were in the middle of a nightmare. Although we were 1,000-plus miles from those areas, like all Americans we were living the most ghastly day in US history.

How should we have responded to those events? Anger. Revenge. Fear. All of these emotions swirled in our hearts and minds on that day and the days to follow, but none of them really helped. Yet many faithful people knew the source of our only hope for restoration: God. Religious

groups of every persuasion gathered in the days following 9/11 and called on God to give hope, strength and mercy.

When faced with the desperate situation of his people, Nehemiah understood that God was their only hope. He knew better than those around him that if his people were to find any hope out of their present despair, they would need to turn to the God whose mercy and power could lift them up, indeed had lifted them up for generations.

But Nehemiah also remembered something that we often forget when it comes to calling out to God for help. He remembered that confession is an essential part of prayer. Before he could call out to God in petition, Nehemiah knew that he must confess his sins and the sins of his people.

Yes, Nehemiah and his people faced a tragic situation. But Nehemiah remembered the God who is merciful and in his remembrance he called out to the covenant God in faith-filled prayer.

The Biblical Witness

Nehemiah 1:1-4 Great Trouble and Shame

¹The words of Nehemiah son of Hacaliah. In the month of Chislev, in the twentieth year, while I was in Susa the capital, ²one of my brothers, Hanani, came with certain men from Judah; and I asked them about the Jews that survived, those who had escaped the captivity, and about Jerusalem. ³They replied, “The survivors there in the province who escaped captivity are in great trouble and shame; the wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been destroyed by fire.” ⁴When I heard these words I sat down and wept, and mourned for days, fasting and praying before the God of heaven.

The opening verses of the book of Nehemiah introduce us to the main character of the story, Nehemiah, and to the problem that he and the rest of God’s people faced: the tragic situation of Jerusalem.

Many of Nehemiah’s people, the nation of Judah, had returned to Jerusalem after the Babylonian captivity. Some, however, like Nehemiah, had remained after Cyrus the Great conquered Babylonia in 538 B.C. At the time the group from Jerusalem arrived, Nehemiah was serving the King of Persia in the capital city of Susa, located in modern-day Iran.

Upon seeing the visitors from Jerusalem, Nehemiah immediately asked about the Jews who had escaped the captivity. Perhaps Nehemiah was hoping to hear good news about the remnant that had returned. Yet the group from Judah brought tragic news of a desperate situation. The problem seems to have been a lack of morale among the people and a situation characterized by shame and trouble. The source of the problem was the failure of the people to rebuild the protective wall around Jerusalem, thus making them very susceptible to outside invaders.

What’s in a name? For this group, Nehemiah, which literally means “God has comforted,” meant everything. Perhaps they had intentionally come to him because he was known for bringing God’s comfort in situations of despair. Certainly the contrast we read in these opening verses about Nehemiah’s name and the plight of Judah introduce us to the potential of what God could do. God would, through the prayer and leadership of Nehemiah, bring comfort to the people.

Moreover, the story does not hide the fact that Nehemiah was certainly different from those who had come to him.

They seem to have been in great distress over this situation and could only talk about the trouble and shame that Jerusalem was in.

What was Nehemiah's response? He wept, mourned, fasted and prayed to the God in whom he and his people would find comfort.

Nehemiah 1:5-7 **Failure and Offense**

⁵I said, "O Lord God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments; ⁶let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer of your servant that I now pray before you day and night for your servants, the people of Israel, confessing the sins of the people of Israel, which we have sinned against you. Both I and my family have sinned. ⁷We have offended you deeply, failing to keep the commandments, the statutes, and the ordinances that you commanded your servant Moses.

Nehemiah began his prayer to God like we would assume. Yet the words he spoke were not empty phrases of false flattery. Rather, his adoration of God was Nehemiah's way of placing himself in proper relation to the Lord God of heaven, a title referring to the sovereign power of God over all of creation. Nehemiah did not, however, limit his own understanding of God to the awesome power of the Creator. He also proclaimed God's greatness in being a faithful God who loves those called to be God's people. In this way, Nehemiah reminded God of the promises made to God's people.

Having set himself in proper relation to the God of creation and covenant, Nehemiah called upon God to hear his

prayer. He asked God both to hear the words of confession and supplication and to see the anguish of his own heart and mind as he sat, wept and prayed for days. Again, Nehemiah maintained his proper position before God by designating himself as God's servant. But Nehemiah also understood his role as mediator between God and Israel.

In this role, he went on behalf of Israel to confess their sins. Yet he did not excuse his own failure to live faithfully before God as he included himself as a part of sinful Israel, which Nehemiah considered to be his family. Nehemiah was not a man of excuses and he did not hide behind feeble explanations. He simply, honestly and forthrightly stated, "We have sinned against you."

We might read verse 7 with some misunderstanding. The people of Israel had sinned because they had failed to keep the covenant by not obeying commandments, statutes and ordinances God had given to them early in their history. Does this mean that Israel had transgressed every commandment that God had given? Not necessarily. But Nehemiah's statement revealed his heart before God. He understood that failure in one part of the covenant was failure in all of it. In other words, Nehemiah saw the transgressions of Israel, however minimal others may have thought they were, as putting Israel outside the bounds of God's covenant. He had a deep sense of Israel's offense against God and an intense conviction to remove that sin.

Nehemiah 1:8-11 **Faithfulness and Mercy**

⁸ Remember the word that you commanded your servant Moses, 'If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the peoples; ⁹ but if you return to me and keep my commandments and do them, though your outcasts are under the

farthest skies, I will gather them from there and bring them to the place at which I have chosen to establish my name.’
¹⁰ They are your servants and your people, whom you redeemed by your great power and your strong hand. ¹¹ O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servant, and to the prayer of your servants who delight in revering your name. Give success to your servant today, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man!” At the time, I was cupbearer to the king.

The transition in verse 8 marks a move from confession of failure and sin on the part of Israel to reminding God of the promises God had made to Israel through Moses. The call to remember did not imply that somehow God had forgotten the past. Rather, Nehemiah called on God to act on the promises made. God had already done this in regard to the scattering of the people because of their disobedience, which God promised in Deuteronomy 4:25-31. This scattering was still, in the mind of Nehemiah, a burden carried by Israel and it prevented the full restoration of Israel as God’s people.

Therefore, Nehemiah called on God to enact the promise of restoration if the people returned to him, a promise made by God in Deuteronomy 30:1-5. Nehemiah’s confession of Israel’s sin in verses 5-7 was a step in the direction of obedience, and Nehemiah asked God to bring about the full ingathering of God’s scattered people. The place to which God would gather the people was the place God had chosen to establish God’s name, the city of Jerusalem.

Nehemiah further reminded God that the people of Israel were God’s servants and God’s people. Despite their unfaithfulness, these were the people who worshipped God and the ones with whom God had made a covenant. They were the ones God had redeemed by God’s power in the Exodus event and thus God had a responsibility toward

them. Nehemiah did not, however, mean to imply that God had to act for Israel’s sake. Rather, Nehemiah called on God to be faithful to divine character by fulfilling God’s promises as the covenant God of Israel.

Nehemiah closed by repeating his petition for God to hear his prayer. He voiced his prayer both for himself and for his people, Israel. As mediator, Nehemiah not only stood in the gap for Israel, he also assured God that Israel would repent and would worship the name of God above all others.

Nehemiah’s prayer, however, turned to action as he called on God to grant him mercy in the sight of the king, whom Nehemiah served as cupbearer. This request called on God to grant him favor as he sought permission from the king to go to Jerusalem to give comfort to his people.

Our Only Hope

My oldest son, who is about to turn thirteen, has been learning a hard lesson recently. He enjoys playing soccer, and we have been very supportive of his drive to achieve his personal goals. But he, like many pre-teens, has a tendency to confuse his position in the parent-child relationship and has challenged our authority at times. We have chosen to hit him where it hurts: to deny him his privilege of playing soccer when he rebels.

As loving parents, we know full well the joy he gets from his sport, and we hurt when we must take him out. But we are continually reinforcing to him that before he can get back to playing the game he loves, he must show repentance for his actions. He must understand his wrong, and he must work to rectify his actions. Then, as loving and faithful parents who desire the best for him, we can return him to his joy.

Nehemiah seems to have understood better than those who came to give the report that God was not bringing full restoration to God's people because there had not been genuine confession and repentance for the offense they had committed against God. God certainly knew their deepest needs and Nehemiah did not have to voice them to God for God to know them. But God was not going to act on their behalf without their recognition of their sin against God.

Was God obligated to answer the prayer of Nehemiah? From the standpoint of Nehemiah and Israel, the answer is no. They had been unfaithful, not God. But in a very real sense, God was obligated to answer Nehemiah's prayer because God had made promises to Israel, and, in keeping with God's character of faithfulness despite the unfaithfulness of the people, God was obligated to fulfill those promises. God does not forget the promises God makes to God's people, but God does expect these people to invoke God's character of faithfulness through confessional prayer.

Nehemiah's prayer is a model prayer for Christians today. His prayer reminds us of our need to recognize God's mercy as our only hope, to recognize the authority and faithfulness of God and to recognize, confess and repent from our own sinfulness. This is not a magic formula used to get results from God. God already knows and is willing and faithful to meet our deepest needs. But we can move God to act according to God's character when, in prayer, we understand and admit our unfaithfulness and our need of divine mercy.

Written by Drew Smith, pastor, Cedar Grove Baptist Church in Arkadelphia, AR.

Confession and Insight

Daniel 9:1-19

Theme: Prayer recognizes God's great and undeserved mercy toward us even when we are rebellious and disobedient.

Introduction

Within the Protestant tradition, many Baptists struggle with confession. As a pastor I have attempted to incorporate the Prayer of Confession as a regular part of our worship experience. Most people participate, though not with as much feeling as they give to other parts of the service. Occasionally I will hear someone wonder why we include confession as a part of the service, because "it is such a downer, and worship should be about praise and adoration." They may be willing to allow the phrase, "and forgive us where we have failed you" to slip into our corporate praying, but to get more specific or focused is problematic.

A few brave souls have even challenged the whole practice by appealing to the fact that we are saved by grace. Confession to them seems too much like a kind of works righteousness. In addition, they appeal to the once-for-all aspect of salvation: "If Jesus died on the cross to forgive me of my sins, and once I am saved I am always saved, then why do I even need to continue to confess my sins?"

This reflects a typical Baptist, if not Protestant, tendency to settle the issue of forgiveness and grace at a particular

point in our lives, assuming that we never have to deal with it again. Yet over and over again the Bible presents us with people of God who felt a need to confess their sin.

If we struggle with the need to incorporate confession in our prayer life, we resist the notion of the corporate confession of sin—past, present and future. Many years ago, a group of us presented a resolution to the Southern Baptist Convention that called on the messengers to acknowledge the sin of racism that helped birth the Convention. It also invited the messengers to seek God's forgiveness for our own sin in that regard, as well as the sins of our forbearers.

The Resolutions Committee rejected our resolution for two reasons: corporate confession of sin was biblically questionable, and it is not possible for us to confess the sins of and seek forgiveness for our ancestors. Yet Daniel 9 records a confession by Daniel not only for his own sin but also for the sin of those who caused God's judgment and the sin of the community in exile. The amazing thing about Daniel's prayer is that the very act of confession opened for him new ways of understanding God's relationship to and work among God's people.

The Biblical Witness

The book of Daniel is an enigma. No one knows for sure when it was written or by whom. Much of the material deals with the Babylonian captivity of Judah, but other parts seem to reflect a knowledge of the oppression of the Jews by the Selucids. One thing can be affirmed: The book of Daniel is an extended reflection on the way God deals with a people whom God has judged and punished. Its overall intent is to give hope to God's people.

This particular passage stands out because, unlike much of the rest of the book, it contains no visions or interpretations of visions. It is a simple reflection on a dilemma, combined with a prayer for God's mercy.

Daniel 9:1-2 Daniel's Dilemma

¹In the first year of Darius son of Ahasuerus, by birth a Mede, who became king over the realm of the Chaldeans—²in the first year of his reign, I, Daniel, perceived in the books the number of years that, according to the word of the LORD to the prophet Jeremiah, must be fulfilled for the devastation of Jerusalem, namely, seventy years."

History is at best vague on the person of Darius son of Ahasuerus. This makes dating this passage somewhat difficult, so we cannot precisely determine how long into the Babylonian captivity this narrative occurs. It could have taken place as early as 39 or as late as 136 years into the event. Most commentators opt for a date at least 70 years past the beginning of the exile.

The passage begins with a transition of kings. For the exiles, no doubt every change of rulers brought both hope and fear: hope that the new king would allow them to return home; fear that a new monarch would only mean an uncertain extension of the exile.

During this time of promise and peril, Daniel had been reading the prophet Jeremiah where he discovered the prediction that this exile would last 70 years. No doubt this troubled his spirit, because he could see no end in sight. If we are dealing with a timeframe of 100 or more years after the destruction of Jerusalem, then surely Daniel's soul was

troubled. If Jeremiah's prediction was of God, then why had the exile extended so far past the 70 years?

Daniel 9:3 **Daniel Seeks an Answer from God**

³Then I turned to the Lord God, to seek an answer by prayer and supplication with fasting and sackcloth and ashes.

Knowing that he would not find an answer in Jeremiah's writings, Daniel decided to go directly to the source of Jeremiah's prophecy. But notice how he approached God. Before praying, he prepared himself through fasting and sackcloth and ashes, which are acts of preparation for times of intense prayer.

Daniel placed himself before God as an agonized searcher. The wording of this verse indicates that this posture of mourning and penitence preceded his prayer and continued throughout his prayer.

Daniel 9:4-6 **We Have Sinned**

⁴I prayed to the LORD my God and made confession, saying, "Ah, Lord, great and awesome God, keeping covenant and steadfast love with those who love you and keep your commandments, ⁵we have sinned and done wrong, acted wickedly and rebelled, turning aside from your commandments and ordinances. ⁶We have not listened to your servants the prophets, who spoke in your name to our kings, our princes, and our ancestors, and to all the people of the land."

Daniel's prayer may be somewhat surprising. Rather than approaching God and demanding clarification of

Jeremiah's prophecy or asking God to be accountable for the delay in fulfilling the prophecy, Daniel confessed the sin of his people. And his prayer of confession became the answer he was seeking.

His confession began with an affirmation of God's basic nature. God is "great and awesome" (v 4). Surely Daniel was aware of the prophet Isaiah's affirmation: "your ways are not our ways, nor are your thoughts our thoughts..." (Isa 55:8). Not only is God great, but God is faithful to God's word. The theme of God's steadfast love and covenant faithfulness appears over and over again in the scriptures. God's steadfast love in the face of Israel's chronic unfaithfulness was the ground Israel's hope.

The prayer continues with a painful cataloging of Israel's failures. Notice the ugliness of the words Daniel chose: sinned, rebelled, acted wickedly. In the face of God's steadfast love, Israel had acted deplorably.

Daniel 9:7-10 **God's Righteousness, Our Shame**

⁷"Righteousness is on your side, O Lord, but open shame, as at this day, falls on us, the people of Judah, the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and all Israel, those who are near and those who are far away, in all the lands to which you have driven them, because of the treachery that they have committed against you. ⁸Open shame, O LORD, falls on us, our kings, our officials, and our ancestors, because we have sinned against you. ⁹To the Lord our God belong mercy and forgiveness, for we have rebelled against him, ¹⁰and have not obeyed the voice of the LORD our God by following his laws, which he set before us by his servants the prophets."

Daniel continued his contrast between God's faithfulness and Israel's disobedience, only in starker terms. God is righteous, we are shameful; God is merciful, we are rebellious.

In the Bible, righteousness is inherently a relational term, because it is tied to covenant loyalty. Despite what we may have been taught, righteousness is not a matter of keeping the rules or doing all the right things. It is a matter of faithfulness to God and to our neighbor. When we sin against the covenant, we are not so much breaking rules as violating a relationship.

When God established a covenant with Abram, there were few rules. Abram was simply called to follow God to a land where he would become the father of a great nation. The Mosaic covenant, while full of instructions, nevertheless outlines the parameters of a relationship between God and the people. The new covenant referenced in Jeremiah 31, with which Daniel would have been familiar, was a covenant of intimacy, with the law being written on the heart and people knowing God directly.

No wonder that the prophets often spoke graphically of Israel's unrighteousness as adultery or whoredom. To sin against the covenant was to break trust with God, to join oneself with other gods in the same way a man might to a prostitute. Our sin brings shame, because it is personal. It violates the most basic relationship of our lives.

Daniel 9:11-14 **The Lord is Right**

¹¹“All Israel has transgressed your law and turned aside, refusing to obey your voice. So the curse and the oath written in the law of Moses, the servant of God, have been

poured out upon us, because we have sinned against you. ¹²He has confirmed his words, which he spoke against us and against our rulers, by bringing upon us a calamity so great that what has been done against Jerusalem has never before been done under the whole heaven. ¹³Just as it is written in the law of Moses, all this calamity has come upon us. We did not entreat the favor of the LORD our God, turning from our iniquities and reflecting on his fidelity. ¹⁴So the LORD kept watch over this calamity until he brought it upon us. Indeed, the LORD our God is right in all that he has done; for we have disobeyed his voice.”

Whatever questions Daniel may have had about God's fairness now seem fully resolved. The Mosaic covenant contained blessings and curses. Covenant faithfulness brought God's blessing. Covenant faithlessness resulted in the withdrawal of God's protecting presence. Daniel acknowledged that he and the other exiles were without appeal to their own merit.

As harsh as this may sound to our ears, the reality is that confession is not only a recognition of our unfaithfulness, it is an acknowledgment that God is the final arbiter of our relationship with God.

Daniel 9:15-19 **Forgive, Listen, Act**

¹⁵“And now, O Lord our God, who brought your people out of the land of Egypt with a mighty hand and made your name renowned even to this day—we have sinned, we have done wickedly. ¹⁶O Lord, in view of all your righteous acts, let your anger and wrath, we pray, turn away from your city Jerusalem, your holy mountain; because of our sins and the iniquities of our ancestors, Jerusalem and

your people have become a disgrace among all our neighbors. ¹⁷Now therefore, O our God, listen to the prayer of your servant and to his supplication, and for your own sake, Lord, let your face shine upon your desolated sanctuary. ¹⁸Incline your ear, O my God, and hear. Open your eyes and look at our desolation and the city that bears your name. We do not present our supplication before you on the ground of our righteousness, but on the ground of your great mercies. ¹⁹O Lord, hear; O Lord, forgive; O Lord, listen and act and do not delay! For your own sake, O my God, because your city and your people bear your name!”

Here Daniel’s prayer took a dramatic turn. After fully acknowledging the culpability of Israel for their plight, he threw himself and the people on God’s mercy. At this point he reminds us of Moses, as he pleaded with God to spare Israel.

First Daniel reminded God of God’s prior faithfulness in delivering the people. Second, he appealed to God’s interest in preserving a people who can witness to God’s graciousness. Third, he asked that God would restore God’s glory in Jerusalem and fulfill the promise made to Abraham. Finally he reminded God of the intimate, deeply-mutual nature of the relationship between God and the people. They bore God’s name, therefore their fate was a witness to God.

Though he made the best case he could for God to act, Daniel recognized that God’s choice is God’s choice. Whatever God chose to do would be the true expression of God’s righteousness. God would ultimately determine which course of action would bear the best witness to the world. No doubt Daniel believed that God would act to deliver the people.

The Doorway to God’s Grace

Keeping in mind that the timeline of Daniel is somewhat ambiguous, it might not be totally unfaithful to the biblical text to assume that God answered Daniel’s prayer through Cyrus the Persian. Though God’s response was not immediate, God did allow Ezra and Nehemiah to lead a contingent of exile back to Jerusalem and begin the process of rebuilding the city walls and the Temple. Perhaps Daniel’s confession opened the way for God’s grace.

Following the attacks of September 11, 2001, Americans were in a state of shock and disbelief. How could this happen? Who hates us so much? Why did God allow so many innocent people to die? In our shock and anger, we began to cast about trying to find out who to blame. Our leaders found the enemy in Muslim extremists, as well as the North Koreans, who they pronounced as evil. Those who perpetrated these heinous crimes were enemies of our way of life who hated our freedoms.

Some voices in our midst asked us to back away from such incendiary rhetoric and examine our own culpability. They asked us to reflect on how our actions in the world community may have fueled, in part, the hatred and fervor that makes terrorism an option for some. These voices advocated a different response to terrorism than raw power and warfare. They believed we should not only seek to isolate those who do terrorist acts, but we should work to alleviate those conditions which fuel terrorism’s fire.

These voices were shouted down as being unpatriotic, weak and totally off-base. After all, we have nothing to be sorry for, we are the good guys whose only desire is for people to live in peace and freedom. Since September 11,

2001, we have never paused to examine how our actions affect, positively and negatively, others.

What would have happened in the days and months following that tragic day if American Christians had joined Daniel in a time of fasting with sackcloth and ashes? What would have been different if we had joined Daniel in an honest prayer of confession? Would God have been able to do a different work in our world?

Confession, whether corporate or private, opens us to new possibilities and perspectives. Confession opens the door for God's grace to operate in and through us, because confession pushes aside all our pretense and pride. When we confess, we recognize our dependence on God's insight and wisdom. As we enter into honest and specific prayers of confession, we pray with Jesus, "not my will, but your will be done."

Written by Jim Holladay, pastor, Lyndon Baptist Church, Louisville, KY

Perspective and Justice

Habakkuk 3:1-19

Theme: Prayer provides us with perspective and assurance of God's intervention that will ultimately lead to justice.

Introduction

Early in the tension-filled days of the Montgomery bus boycott, Martin Luther King, Jr. sat alone at his kitchen table. Shaken by a death threat directed at his family, King weighed his strong sense of calling in light of the overwhelming problem of racial injustice and his own family's welfare. He considered giving up his participation in the burgeoning civil rights movement.

But there in the privacy of his kitchen, King had a vision of God's presence that rejuvenated his commitment to the cause of racial justice and reconciliation. According to one biographer, King believed he heard the voice of Jesus himself, telling him to "fight on":

*He promised never to leave me,
never to leave me alone.
No, never alone.
He promised never to leave me,
never to leave me alone. . . .*

Amid dangerous circumstances and an uncertain outcome, that clear assurance led King to conclude, “I can stand up without fear. I can face anything.”

The cry for justice is as old as sin and as new as the morning headlines. From Genesis to Revelation, it echoes through the pages of scripture. Woven inextricably into the story of the people of Israel, the call for justice is also a familiar refrain for oppressed people in any culture and any age.

The cry for justice resounds especially in the writings of the Psalms and the Hebrew prophets. Sometimes the plea was shouted in frustration and righteous indignation; sometimes it could only be whispered amid pain and doubt. Sometimes it was preached; at other times it was lived. But whether in word or in deed, it was always prayed. In those prayers, the heart’s cry for justice was lifted to the God who listens and who acts. Indeed, justice is borne in the heart of God where it finds its everlasting partner in the form of God’s mercy.

The prophet Habakkuk gave voice to the plea and prayer for justice. In the book’s opening sentences, the prophet laments the injustice of his society in a style characteristic of the laments in the Psalms (see 1:2-4). This dialogue between the prophet and God closes with God’s assurance that if Habakkuk will wait in faith, injustice will be dealt with in God’s appointed time (2:3-4). In the second section (2:5-20), five woes, cast in the classical style of the Hebrew prophets, are flung as taunts toward Babylon by the very nation it had crushed, confident that God’s certain judgment will eventually fall on the oppressor (see 2:16). Building on the first two sections, chapter 3 is comprised of a poetic prayer or hymn, calling God to action.

The Biblical Witness

In reading the prayer of Habakkuk chapter 3, perhaps most of us should begin by confessing that it is not merely the language that seems foreign to us. If you, like I, come to the scriptures from the vantage point of white, middle class Americans, we would do well to acknowledge that our perspective is limited. Most of us know little from our own experience about the pain, helplessness and hopelessness that accompanies generation after generation of oppression and injustice.

Beyond this humble confession, however, there is much in this ancient prayer that speaks to our own crises of faith, for none of us is immune to the pain of suffering or unfairness.

Habakkuk 3:1-2 **A Prophet’s Prayer**

¹A prayer of the prophet Habakkuk according to Shigionoth. ²O LORD, I have heard of your renown, and I stand in awe, O LORD, of your work. In our own time revive it; in our own time make it known; in wrath may you remember mercy.

We know nothing about the life of the prophet Habakkuk, although the language and allusions in the book that bears his name suggest he was a seventh-century contemporary of Jeremiah. Just as the book’s opening verse provides a title for the “oracle” seen by the prophet, this opening line of Chapter 3 titles the prayer that follows. It also delineates a new section, distinct from the first two chapters, while still tying the theme of the prayer to the cry for justice that permeates Chapters 1-2.

The prayer shares much in common with the Psalms. The Hebrew word for “prayer,” *tefilah*, is a title given to five psalms of lament (Pss 17, 86, 90, 102, 142) and to an early collection of Davidic psalms (cf. Ps 72:20). The same term occurs frequently within the Psalms, most often in laments where the writer makes intercession for divine intervention and vindication in response to oppression or injustice (see, for example, Pss 4:1; 6:9; 17:1; 54:2; 55:1; 69:13; 86:6; 88:2; 102:1; 109:4,7).

The origin and meaning of the term *Shigionoth* are uncertain. The corresponding *Shiggaion* appears as the title of Psalm 7, another lament. With the preposition “on,” or “according to,” the phrase suggests some kind of musical direction and perhaps a musical cry for justice against sin, as in Psalm 7, which David “sang to the Lord.” This is further supported by the three-fold repetition of *Selah*, a marginal note that apparently offered instruction to the music conductor. Like many of the psalms, Chapter 3 is both a hymn and a prayer offered in worship.

In a style characteristic of psalms of lament, the prophet’s prayer begins with a recollection of God’s past actions in Israel’s history. Habakkuk was familiar with God’s impressive resume. His prayer was not some vague supplication addressed “to whom it may concern.” It was addressed to Yahweh, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and the God of Moses who led the Hebrews out of the slavery of Egypt into the Promised Land.

The prophet didn’t need a personal interview and three character references to be convinced of the veracity of God’s reputation. Standing “in awe” of God’s “work” (v 2), Habakkuk appealed to God’s actions in the past as a basis for God’s help in the present. His appeal for mercy amid God’s wrath (v 2) was grounded in God’s covenantal com-

mitment to Israel. The call to revive or renew God’s deeds or works of the past also suggests that Israel had strayed from its part of the covenant.

Habakkuk 3:3-15 **A Theophany**

³*God came from Teman, the Holy One from Mount Paran. Selah His glory covered the heavens, and the earth was full of his praise. ⁴The brightness was like the sun; rays came forth from his hand, where his power lay hidden. ⁵Before him went pestilence, and plague followed close behind. ⁶He stopped and shook the earth; he looked and made the nations tremble. The eternal mountains were shattered; along his ancient pathways the everlasting hills sank low. ⁷I saw the tents of Cushan under affliction; the tent-curtains of the land of Midian trembled. ⁸Was your wrath against the rivers, O LORD? Or your anger against the rivers, or your rage against the sea, when you drove your horses, your chariots to victory? ⁹You brandished your naked bow, sated were the arrows at your command. Selah You split the earth with rivers. ¹⁰The mountains saw you, and writhed; a torrent of water swept by; the deep gave forth its voice. The sun raised high its hands; ¹¹the moon stood still in its exalted place, at the light of your arrows speeding by, at the gleam of your flashing spear. ¹²In fury you trod the earth, in anger you trampled nations. ¹³You came forth to save your people, to save your anointed. You crushed the head of the wicked house, laying it bare from foundation to roof. Selah ¹⁴You pierced with their own arrows the head of his warriors, who came like a whirlwind to scatter us, gloating as if ready to devour the poor who were in hiding. ¹⁵You trampled the sea with your horses, churning the mighty waters.*

In response to the prophet’s appeal, God appeared, and the heart of this poetic prayer is a theophany—an appear-

ance or manifestation of God. Although much of the Hebrew in this section is difficult to translate, two themes stand out.

God is sovereign. The God to whom Habakkuk prayed is the sovereign Lord of the universe. The language of this passage describes the glory, power and majesty of the God of all creation, whose presence shakes the whole earth and causes age-old mountains to crumble, and before whom all the peoples of the earth tremble in fear. God is depicted as a powerful king whose authority extends to the edges of the universe, from the mountains and seas of the earth to the sun and moon in the sky. God's brightness is like the sun. God's glory extends over heaven and earth. God reigns supreme and is in ultimate control of all earthly affairs.

God acts. The sovereign God of the universe does not make a quiet entrance. God is seen as a fierce and mighty warrior who appears in full battle regalia, armed with bow and spear, and leading chariots and horses into glorious victory over the divine enemies.

Habakkuk did not pray to a passive God, a divine bystander who is removed and aloof from human affairs. Instead, God saves, God rescues and redeems those God has chosen. God protects the powerless and oppressed, meting out justice on those who "came like a whirlwind," gloating that they would devour "the poor who were in hiding" (v 14).

Of course, these ancient, warlike images of God are an incomplete picture of the larger, biblical understanding of God. They come long before Jesus, whose life and teachings gave a new face to God and offered new insight into the character of God. Nevertheless, a consistent theme throughout scripture is that God is a God of justice. God

relentlessly pursues justice on behalf of the poor, the powerless and the oppressed. God intervenes, although the divine timetable cannot be measured by human standards.

Habakkuk 3:16-19 **Faith in the Meantime**

¹⁶I hear, and I tremble within; my lips quiver at the sound. Rottenness enters into my bones, and my steps tremble beneath me. I wait quietly for the day of calamity to come upon the people who attack us. ¹⁷Though the fig tree does not blossom, and no fruit is on the vines; though the produce of the olive fails, and the fields yield no food; though the flock is cut off from the fold and there is no herd in the stalls, ¹⁸yet I will rejoice in the LORD; I will exult in the God of my salvation. ¹⁹GOD, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, and makes me tread upon the heights. To the leader: with stringed instruments.

In the wake of such a vision, the prophet could do little but tremble. Habakkuk was keenly aware of God's ability to wipe out Israel's enemies with a mere wave of the hand, a knowledge that left the prophet with lips quivering and knees knocking.

Yet when the theophany ended and the vivid images of a mighty God faded into the sky and the thunderous sounds of God's righteous indignation gave way to the stillness of the desert, the prophet was left alone with only his memories—and his faith. God has acted before, and there is both comfort and crisis in that knowledge. The comfort comes from knowing who God is and what God has done in the past. But the crisis comes in the reality of the present moment.

The prophet chose to "wait quietly" for God's rescue and for God's judgment to come upon Israel's enemies (v 16b)—

whenever that time would come. But the harsh reality of the present is that there is no evidence that God will come to the rescue.

It is here, in the “in between” time, that Habakkuk’s faith speaks to our own experience. The references to Israel’s agricultural-based economy in verse 17 are unfamiliar to most of us. Few of us know much about fig trees, olive trees, flocks of sheep or herds of cattle. Yet the meaning easily reaches across centuries and cultures.

The three-fold “even though” phrases of verse 17 flow into an expression of joy and trust as the prophet’s faith demonstrated in verse 16 reaches full expression in the “yet” statement of verse 18. The parallel verbs affirming Habakkuk’s joy echo the psalmists’ assurance of things unseen yet hoped for—a confidence characteristic of the lament form that underlies this entire chapter. Lament and complaint give way to praise. Though calamity comes, declared the prophet, “yet I will rejoice in the LORD.” “I will exult in the God of my salvation,” even if rescue and vindication do not occur in his lifetime.

Such “even though” faith has been lived, spoken, prayed and sung by people of faith through the ages. It has seen the church through devastating times of persecution and suffering. It has given courage, strength and hope to the poor and the oppressed.

Perhaps you have been through an “even though” or “even when” experience that led you to deeper faith and to a new level of prayer. *Even though* physical healing does not come, *even when* no one seems to care and it feels like I’m all alone, *even though* the job that seemed like a perfect fit is offered to someone else, *even when* senseless tragedy strikes and life is suddenly turned upside down, *yet* I will believe, and I will rejoice in God. Whether in triumph or

defeat, in joy or in sorrow, in health or in sickness, in prosperity or in poverty, “God, the Lord, is my strength” (v 19).

Verse 19a, like much of the prayer, is clearly dependent on Psalm 18, and the image of “the feet of a deer. . . on the heights” is found only in these two passages and in 2 Samuel 22 (v 34), which is also parallel to Psalm 18. Scholars believe these words were also meant to be sung in worship.

“I love you, O Lord, my strength,
The Lord is my rock, my fortress, and my deliverer,
my God, my rock in whom I take refuge,
my shield, and the horn of my salvation and my
stronghold. . . .
From his temple he heard my voice,
and my cry to him reached his ears.
He made my feet like the feet of a deer, and set me
secure on the heights” (Ps. 18:1-7, 33).

I have never asked God to make my feet “like the feet of a deer.” I prefer my own size 8 with toes attached, rather than hooved feet. But the prophet was speaking metaphorically, of course. God’s strength, and Habakkuk’s trust in that strength, enabled the prophet to walk with the lightness and sureness of a deer in the forest—and to tread with certainty “upon the heights” where the ascent is difficult and the air is thin, but the vistas are stunning and the perspective is humbling.

Faith’s Footnote

The prayer that began with a musical reference now ends with a musical footnote: “To the leader, with stringed instruments” (v 19b), another reminder that the poetry of prayer was also intended to be sung. At times faith is better sung than spoken. Sometimes hymns give expression to thoughts and feelings we could never put into words.

Travis Orton, known to family and friends as “Buddy,” was my wife’s father. He died at age 46, two years after surgery for a massive, cancerous brain tumor. In a reversal of the traditional order, Melanie’s mother asked that the memorial service follow rather than precede the graveside service and burial. Believing that death does not have the final word, it seemed right that the memorial service should be a celebration of her husband’s life and that the lasting images from that day should be a church gathered to sing and pray rather than that of a coffin lowered into the grave.

So, we gathered in a little Baptist church in White Hall, Arkansas. Through tears we stood and sang “Great is Thy Faithfulness”:

*Morning by morning, new mercies I see.
All I have needed thy hand hath provided.
Great is thy faithfulness, Lord, unto me.*

It was our own “even though” statement of faith. It was another way of saying, *even though* this wonderful husband, father and friend is gone from us, *even though* we will no longer see his smile and hear his laughter, and *even though* our prayers for him seemed in those moments to have been buried with his lifeless body, *yet* we will rejoice in the Lord and exult in the God of our salvation.

When such moments come, may each of us declare with Habakkuk that “God, the Lord, is our strength.”

*Written by David Wilkinson, minister of education and discipleship,
Broadway Baptist Church, Fort Worth, Tex.*

Presence and Security

Psalm 46

Theme: Prayer reminds us of God’s unchanging power and presence in our lives.

Introduction

If memory serves, my first Bible, received in the primary Sunday school class in a country church, was a New Testament and Psalms from The Gideons International.

Organized in 1899, the Gideons give away 59 million Bibles each year, through the work of 236,000 members located in 179 countries around the world.

They focus on hotels and motels; hospitals, nursing homes and domestic-violence shelters; schools, colleges and universities; military and law enforcement personnel; firefighters and emergency medical technicians and prisons and jails.

For a missionary organization that says of the Bible, “Christ is its grand subject, our good the design, and the glory of God its end,” the New Testament is a no-brainer. But what about the Psalms?

Truth is the Psalms have always held a special place for Christians. The New Testament quotes from the Psalms more often than any other Old Testament book except Isaiah. Ephesians and Colossians instruct believers to

speak, admonish and teach one another with “psalms and hymns and spiritual songs” in worship.

Athanasius, the church father in the fourth century, recognized that the Psalms have a unique place in the Bible. While most of the Bible speaks to us, he observed, the Psalms speak for us. “Each of these books, you see, is like a garden which grows one special kind of fruit,” he wrote. “By contrast, the Psalter is a garden which, besides its special fruit, grows also some of those of all the rest.”

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the martyred Christian who wrote *The Cost of Discipleship*, regarded the Psalms as his favorite book in the Bible. His last publication before his execution in Nazi Germany in 1940 was *The Prayer Book of the Bible: An Introduction to the Psalms*.

“The Psalter impregnated the life of early Christianity,” Bonhoeffer wrote. “Yet more important than all of this is the fact that Jesus died on the cross with the words of the Psalter on his lips.”

Bonhoeffer said it makes good sense that the Psalms are often bound together with the New Testament, because they are in harmony with the Lord’s Prayer in teaching Christians how to pray.

“It is the prayer of the Christian church,” he wrote of the Psalter. “It belongs to the Lord’s Prayer.”

The Biblical Witness

At times when the Reformation seemed lost, Martin Luther would say to his friend Melancthon, “Let’s sing the Forty-Sixth Psalm.” It became inspiration for his most famous

hymn, “A Mighty Fortress,” which has been described as “the battle hymn of the Reformation.”

A Mighty Fortress Is Our God

Psalm 46:1

¹God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.

While now popular for individual devotional reading, the Psalms were originally used primarily in public worship as the hymnal and prayer book of their day. The use of plural pronouns “us,” “our” and “we” in Psalm 46 identify it as a corporate confession for the worshipping community.

The poet begins with a simple but bold assertion of faith, “God is our refuge (shelter) and strength” and a “help” in times of trouble.

The word translated as “refuge” is one of the most important in the Book of Psalms, occurring 23 times as sort of a one-word refrain.

To take refuge means to trust in or rely on God. Underlying the idea is the assumption that God rules over the world, not the forces of evil that might otherwise appear to prevail.

The setting for this psalm may be the miraculous deliverance from the Assyrians in 701 B.C., prophesied by Isaiah and in response to King Hezekiah’s prayer, as told in 2 Kings 18-19, though scholars do not agree.

Though This World ... Should Threaten to Undo Us

Psalm 46:2-3

²Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea; ³though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble with its tumult. Selah

The tumult described in verses 2 and 3 reads like a worst-case earthquake/tsunami scenario, with mountains slipping into the sea and waters churning with foam. The scene is even worse, though, when considering a pre-scientific worldview.

In the Ancient Near East, the mountains were viewed as both the foundations that anchored the dry land and the pillars that held up the canopy of the sky. Without them, the watery chaos beneath the earth would rise, and the sky would fall.

What the psalmist describes might be compared in our day to a global winter following a nuclear war or, in a lighter vein, what the movie “Ghostbusters” described as “real wrath of God stuff.”

“Fire and brimstone coming down from the sky... rivers and seas boiling... 40 years of darkness... earthquakes, volcanoes... the dead rising from the grave... human sacrifice, dogs and cats living together—mass hysteria.”

Amid all this, the believer has complete serenity in God’s faithful presence.

A radio message promoting a television drama story line based on a cataclysmic event ended with the ominous words: “And the only thing we can do is pray...” For the psalmist, however, prayer was not the last resort but rather the first.

Our Helper He Amid the Flood Psalm 46:4-7

⁴There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High. ⁵God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved; God will help it when the morning dawns. ⁶The nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter; he utters his voice, the earth melts. ⁷The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge. Selah

Verse 4 shifts to focus on the city of God and God’s activity on its behalf.

The frightening roar of waters in verse 4 is calmed to become a flowing stream from the Lord’s presence in the Temple. The stream is metaphorical, since there were no actual springs flowing from the altar in Jerusalem. The allusion may be to the pouring of water in Temple rituals, and symbolic of the endless stream of God’s blessings.

God is present, as well, when roaring nations coming up against Jerusalem were foiled. Jerusalem’s security was not in military might, the psalmist says, but in God, whose presence can cause the most powerful kingdom to dissolve or “melt.”

Amid life’s mayhem there is one constant—God—and the holy place symbolic of God’s presence.

Scholars identify most psalms as having distinct form or literary type. They usually classify the 46th psalm as a “Song of Zion,” extolling the holy city and temple of Jerusalem as the dwelling place of God. The idea may seem foreign to modern readers, who think of God as being everywhere, or omnipresent, all the time.

But the worshipping community in ancient Israel did not think of God in abstract or philosophical terms. For them God was a presence, an agent of redemption active in history.

While Christians may not think of God primarily in terms of space, we can relate to the thought of God being revealed in a person, Jesus Christ.

We also can think of the church, while not containing God, as a special place where we gather for divine encounter. “God has promised to be present in the worship of the congregation,” Bonhoeffer wrote.

When facing discouragement and doubt, we, too, can remember what God has done to help us in the past and draw encouragement from the support of a worshipping community.

Psalm 46 is essentially an affirmation of faith in God, and not Jerusalem, per se, and is sometimes, therefore, also described as a song of confidence or trust.

His Kingdom Is Forever Psalm 46:8-11

⁸Come, behold the works of the LORD; see what desolations he has brought on the earth. ⁹He makes wars cease to the end of the earth; he breaks the bow, and shatters the spear; he burns the shields with fire. ¹⁰“Be still, and know that I am God! I am exalted among the nations, I am exalted in the earth.” ¹¹The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge. Selah

Here the Psalm shifts to a vision that still refers to Jerusalem but has broader implications as well.

All are invited to “come and see” the works of God. This brings to mind Philip’s similar invitation to Nathanael in John 1:46. When Nathanael saw Jesus’ works, he exclaimed, “You are the king of Israel.”

God’s works also include desolations, where desolations are needed, and causing wars to cease. In the ancient world, it was a king’s primary responsibility to establish peace for his people. This is also God’s work.

To warring peoples God commands, “Cease fire” and “know that I am God.”

God is exalted among “the nations,” or the Gentiles, in all the earth. With such a God as “stronghold,” the believer can feel nothing but confident.

Such solace must have been welcome in Luther’s time of social and religious upheaval. Even in a world “with devils filled,” he wrote, “We will not fear, for God has willed his truth to triumph through us.”

Where do we place our trust? US currency carries the words, “In God we trust,” but in reality many Americans put more trust in money than in God.

There has been much debate in the United States over whether the words “one nation under God” ought to be recited in the Pledge of Allegiance. Yet many Americans believe security exists in a strong military, political leaders and economic policies, rather than in trusting God alone. How would our society look if it really were ordered by the priorities that matter most to God?

The good news in Psalm 46 is that our ultimate security lies not in our own strength, wisdom or effort, but in God. As

Luther said, “Did we in our own strength confide, our striving would be losing.”

Confidence and Gladness

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a theologian and pastor in Germany during the 1930s. He wanted no part of the “German Christian” establishment, a designation for church people who saw in Hitler and the Nazi program a sign of hope for Germany and the German church.

Rather Bonhoeffer joined with a movement called the “Confessing Church,” people who viewed Hitler as such a threat that the church was forced into a state of confession, with the only answer being yes or no.

On a lecture tour in America in 1939, friends begged Bonhoeffer to remain. Though tempted, he took one of the last ships to return to his certain doom. Years later he wrote from prison that he never regretted his return or anything that followed. “It all happened in full daylight and with good conscience,” he wrote. “The fact that I sit here now I reckon also as participation in the fate of Germany, to which I committed myself.”

Though originally a pacifist, Bonhoeffer became discouraged when even the Confessing Church refused to give its life for the Jews and instead sought finances and official recognition by the Nazi government. He turned to ties with the political and military resistance movement.

After serving 18 months in a Gestapo prison in Berlin, Bonhoeffer was executed April, 9, 1945, for participating in a failed plot to assassinate Hitler. He was 39.

In *The Cost of Discipleship*, Bonhoeffer coined the term “cheap grace,” which he described as “grace without price” and “grace without discipleship.” For Bonhoeffer, “Christianity without discipleship is always Christianity without Christ.”

“Costly grace,” on the other hand, must include bearing the cross. “To endure the cross is not a tragedy,” he wrote. “It is the suffering which is the fruit of an exclusive allegiance to Jesus Christ. When it comes, it is not an accident, but a necessity... the suffering which is an essential part of the specifically Christian life.”

Bonhoeffer believed that prayer involves more than simply pouring one’s heart out to God. Rather it means learning to listen and speak to God, “whether the heart is full or empty.”

“No man can do that by himself,” he wrote. “For that he needs Jesus Christ.”

Bonhoeffer viewed the Psalms, along with the Lord’s Prayer, as indispensable in teaching Christians to pray.

“God’s speech in Jesus Christ meets us in the Holy Scriptures,” he wrote. “If we wish to pray with confidence and gladness, then the words of Holy Scripture will have to be the solid basis of our prayer.

“For here we know that Jesus Christ, the Word of God, teaches us to pray. The words that come from God become, then, the steps on which we find our way to God.”

Written by Bob Allen, managing editor, EthicsDaily.com, Baptist Center for Ethics, Nashville, Tenn.

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