

David Weeping: Groaning Prayer

“I have been pouring out my soul before the LORD,” Hannah says. In these words, Hannah tells of a kind of prayer that saints from Bible times to today are familiar with. I will call it “groaning prayer.”

The Apostle Paul, in II Corinthians 5:2, speaks of our groaning while we remain in the tent of our body, while we wait for the eternal life with God. In Romans 8:18ff, Paul reminds the saints that the present sufferings of this present time are not to be compared with the glory that will be revealed in us. He says that since the fall, all creation waits for the glory of the sons of God to be revealed, and meanwhile it groans “as in the pains of childbirth.” Not only does creation groan, Paul points out, but we who have the Spirit “groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies” (8:23). He also says that the Spirit himself “intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words” (8:26). The groaning of creation, the groaning of the saints, the groaning of the Holy Spirit within us is part of our life of faith in this fallen and broken world.

Hannah’s life was reasonably stable, we might even say “middle class,” like ours. She was married to a loving husband, named Elkanah, who provided well for her. She was a member of the covenant people of God; their family worshipped regularly at the tabernacle where Eli was priest. Still, in spite of her stable, solid life, Hannah had great sadness of heart. She was childless. Her husband had another wife, named Peninnah, who bore him children and mercilessly taunted Hannah for her barrenness. Each year Elkanah, Hannah and Peninnah had traveled to the tabernacle in Shiloh to offer their annual sacrifices.

It is at the tabernacle that we see Hannah “pouring out her soul to the LORD.” We read “She was deeply distressed and prayed to the LORD and wept bitterly. And she vowed a vow and said, ‘O LORD of hosts, if you will indeed look on the affliction of your servant and remember me and not forget your servant, but will give to your servant a son, then I will

give him to the LORD all the days of his life, and no razor shall cut his head” (I Samuel 1:10-12).

Eli sees her weeping and her lips moving and he thinks she is drunk. Hannah shares with Eli her heart’s prayer, and he blesses her, and, in hope, Hannah leaves. God does remember Hannah’s prayer and she conceives and gives birth to a son and names him Samuel, which means “heard of God.” Hannah takes time to wean her son. When he is weaned, Hannah brings him to Eli at the tabernacle and dedicates him to God. Chapter two of I Samuel contains the exalting praise and rejoicing of Hannah. We see her having moved from the deepest of sorrows and weeping before God to the greatest of exalting and rejoicing in God.

What is remarkable about Hannah’s prayer is that she exalts in much more than having received a son. It is like her eyes have been opened to see God as the great king in the world, saving, delivering, breaking the mighty and exalting the weak. In Hannah’s prayer the boastful proud, arrogant, strong ones of the world are brought low and the humble, broken, weak ones of the world are lifted up, all by the hand of God. In other words, she prayed for a son but what she got was the vision of the Sovereign God as her God and King and Protector and Deliverer, and she saw the sovereign hand of God in the world and over all things. Even more remarkably, she speaks prophetically about the “king,” the anointed one of God (1:10). The rest of the book of I Samuel will tell the story of how God raised up her son Samuel to eventually anoint David as the greatest King of Israel, and as a type of the future Messiah who would come. Most Biblical scholars believe that the song of Mary exalting, the “Magnificat” is intentionally taken from these words of Hannah (Luke 1:46-55).

So in light of this story, what is groaning prayer? Groaning prayer is prayer that connects us in our personal, particular stories with their troubles and sadness to the Biblical story where God is sovereign King and where Jesus is Savior.

Groaning prayer is prayer that comes to God in your utter weakness, pain, hurting, brokenness, in short, it is coming to God in vulnerable dependence. It is needing God's salvation, God's deliverance. It is the kind of prayer we do when we taste of the "groaning" of life in this broken, fallen, screwed-up world. And because it connects us relationally to God, it is the key that opens up our heart to experience God's salvation and sovereign hand, and by that to exalt in him. Groaning prayer is, in short, about relationship to God, drawing near to God in closeness and dependence.

Many things in our modern, secular west keep us from groaning prayer. Many of us think that God doesn't really care about us and our little life and troubles. He is about "bigger things" than the sadness of our heart. Another thing that keeps us from this kind of prayer is that in our technological society we have found ways to get around God. For those who struggle with infertility, we have fertility drugs. So we try to figure out how to deal with our life apart from crying out to God in weakness. Others drown out their sorrows with drink, drugs, sex, and entertainment.

When we come to God in our weakness and vulnerability, we come to our Savior King. We come to Jesus. We come to God's sovereign plan of salvation where he lifts up the weak, broken, dependent, humble through Jesus and smashes the proud and arrogant who don't need or want a Savior.

For many of us, we never get to exalt and have joy like Hannah does in God's deliverance of her, because we don't dare bring our deep heart desires and needs and sadness to God. We never have the vision she has of God's sovereign work in the world, because we've never cast ourselves on Him alone.

May God give us strength to engage in groaning prayer, and to see the mighty power of His deliverance as we do.

Individual Prayer Guide

Take time this week to Pray. Start by reading I Samuel chapter 1. Then try to be as honest with your heart and with God as you can. Tell God your deep sorrows. Be vulnerable with him. Share your longings of heart, share your sadness, ask him for help. Come to him in weakness and dependence. Then read I Samuel 2:1-10. Use Hannah's exalting in God's deliverance as a launching pad for your own exalting in God. Make her rejoicing in God your own as you add to her prayers words of your own. Rejoice that though Hannah couldn't see how her son would be part of the bigger story of God's salvation of the world through Jesus Christ, you can. Rejoice that in Jesus the broken and weak and vulnerable are lifted up while the proud, arrogant and mighty are brought down.

Community Group Discussion and Prayer

1. What are some of the aspects of Hannah's prayer of groaning in I Samuel 1? Discuss the contrast of her prayer of groaning with her exalting in God in chapter 2.
2. Where do you struggle in praying prayers of groaning?

Practicing Prayer in your Community Group

Take 20 (or so) minutes to pray. Start by praying prayers of groaning, sharing your hearts with God, asking God for his help. Then read together I Samuel 2:1-11, and pray it together. Let its words lead you in rejoicing in and praising God for his salvation through Jesus Christ.

3. What was hard/what was good about this time of "prayers of groaning"?