Deep Breathing of the Soul: Honesty in Prayer

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Deep breathing of the soul: Honesty in prayer

Honesty in prayer is crucial for our life with God. Prayers in Scripture teach us this. Many biblical prayers are filled with grief and protest, but God does not turn away. He is not offended by our honest complaints. One of the primary characteristics of prayer in the Bible points to honesty, often expressing hurt and frustration. For example, the core of Exodus explains the act of placing pain before God: “Then the children of Israel groaned because of the bondage, and they cried out; and their cry came up to God because of the bondage. So God heard their groaning, and God remembered His covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. And God looked upon the children of Israel, and God acknowledged them” (Exod. 2:23–25).

The prayers of Hannah

When studying 1 Samuel, the narrative of Hannah (1 Sam. 1–3) is often passed over to concentrate on the life of her noble son, Samuel. However, the length of her narrative implies that Hannah deserves attention.

Hannah’s first prayer is an intense cry to God in “bitterness of soul and . . . in anguish” (1 Sam. 1:10). She does not have her husband, Elkanah, pray for her in the sanctuary—she prays. And her prayer is the first by a woman recorded in the Old Testament. Before her, other women, such as Rebekah, prayed to God (Gen. 25:22), but their words are not recorded. Hannah prays and pledges to God that if granted a son, he would be dedicated as a Nazarite (1 Sam. 1:11). Earlier God provided the Nazarite vow to those who would personally choose such consecration (Num. 6). In this case, Hannah makes such a vow for her unborn child, one yet to be conceived. Later Hannah brings Samuel to Shiloh in fulfillment of her vow to God: “Now when she had weaned him, she took him up with her, with three bulls, one ephah of flour, and a skin of wine, and brought him [Samuel] to the house of the Lord in Shiloh” (1 Sam. 1:24).

Note the significance of Hannah initiating this service. Elkanah was a Levite (1 Sam. 1:1; 1 Chron. 6:33–38), and he had the prerogative of bringing his son to Shiloh. Yet it was Hannah who went to the tabernacle to fulfill her vow. She brings a very expensive offering as she dedicates her son, Samuel, to God’s service and returns home without Samuel, leaving him in the temple—an offering without parallel in Scripture.

At this moving moment, Hannah again pours out her heart to God. This second prayer is not a gentle lullaby as typically attributed to mothers. Instead, she has vigorous shouts of triumph, speaking of war where the enemies of the Lord will be broken in pieces and concluding by mentioning a king (1 Sam. 2:10). In Hannah’s day there was no monarchy. Yet, Hannah’s prayer refers to an anointed king. This devout woman prophesies the glorious Messiah king!

One cannot help but be impressed with the strength of Hannah’s relationship with God as reflected in her prayers. She prayed so intensely that the high priest chided her for being drunk. She also praised God exuberantly. We can learn many valuable lessons from Hannah’s prayer life.

First, Hannah goes straight to God to pour out her pain and grief in her first prayer. She did not consider prayer a proper eloquent exchange between a polite, reverent believer and God. No, when Hannah was hurting, she cried out in anguish. She also profusely praised God, demonstrating that He does not act as just a last resort in times of crisis. She represents part of the extensive biblical tradition of praying that reveals a depth and intensity, unlike many today who rush through prayer as a ceremony.

Hannah’s prayer in extreme distress encourages us, knowing that God is mindful of our negative emotions—that we do not need to pretend positive feelings when we come to Him. In fact, God appreciates our complete honesty. He already knows, even before we pray, of our most hidden thoughts. He must be glad when we finally face ourselves truthfully. Biblical prayers reflect this kind of integrity.
Second, note Hannah’s attitude of thanksgiving in her second prayer. Indeed, this prayer is one of the rare ones in Scripture that do not ask God for anything. Instead, the prayer is the outpouring of Hannah’s profound faith in and praise of God’s sovereignty: “My heart rejoices in the Lord; my horn is exalted in the Lord. I smile at my enemies, because I rejoice in Your salvation.

“No one is holy like the Lord, for there is none besides You. Nor is there any rock like our God.

“Talk no more so very proudly; let no arrogance come from your mouth, for the Lord is the God of knowledge; and by Him actions are weighed. . . . He will guard the feet of His saints, but the wicked shall be silent in darkness.

“For by strength no man shall prevail. The adversaries of the Lord shall be broken in pieces; from heaven He will thunder against them. The Lord will judge the ends of the earth. He will give strength to His king, and exalt the horn of His anointed” (1 Sam. 2:1–3, 9, 10).

Hannah’s prayer life portrays the faith life of a person who maintains a vital relationship with God even when struggling with difficult personal problems. This occurred at a time when her faith community was not healthy. Eli, the high priest, was soon to be reprimanded by God. The ark was about to be captured by the Philistines. Yet Hannah does not withdraw from sanctuary worship. Nor does she give up her faith in despair. Rather, she steadfastly maintains her communion with God during those troubling times.

To Hannah, faith was more than positive thinking. To her, God was not a type of celestial valet doling out blessings upon request. Nor was He some impersonal force maintaining the universe. To her God was very real. Apparently she often communed with Him and knew she could be completely honest with Him. Hannah’s prayers are part of the rich Old-Testament tradition of prayer.

The prayers of the psalmists

The psalmists often cry out in pain and protest. Note three of the many such examples in the Psalter. The first one speaks of an inner turmoil, a weakening of the heart, and an outward expression of the burning the psalmist experiences: “I was dumb and silent, I held my peace to no avail; my distress grew worse, my heart become hot within me. As I mused, the fire burned; then I spoke with my tongue” (Ps. 39:2, 3, RSV).

The second one is a lament and a daring protest: “How long, O Lord? Wilt thou forget me forever? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?” (Ps. 13:1, 2, RSV).

The third one speaks of a person who has been waiting a long time and finally explodes. Rage has been festering, and now the prayer erupts in distress with blunt charges. Many Christians may be surprised at the depth of hostility this prayer seems to reveal and wonder whether this is the proper way to speak to God. But notice, this prayer actually includes hope: “And now, Lord, for what do I wait? My hope is in Thee. . . . I am dumb, I do not open my mouth; for it is thou who hast done it. Remove thy stroke from me; I am spent by the blows of thy hand” (Ps. 39:7, 9, 10, RSV).

This painful complaint is not completely despairing. The person hangs on with an almost painful hope, still believing there is a God to whom this prayer can be addressed. This is not an atheist cursing God. Rather, this is a believer’s honest faith wrestling with God in an unjust and sin-filled world.

The prayer of Bartimaeus

Honesty in prayer is also evident in the New Testament. Bartimaeus, a blind beggar, hears that Jesus is passing...
by and cries out loudly to Him, “Son of David, have mercy” (Mark 10:47). The people around him try to silence him, telling him to be quiet (v. 48), holding that it was not “proper” for blind beggars to cry out to such a prominent and important person. However, in an act of urgent hope and desperate honesty, Bartimaeus cries out all the more. And Jesus hears him and heals him— reassuring him, “Your faith has made you well” (v. 52). The urgent cry brought a divine response. Calling out to God in pain requires great faith, and this cry of faith brought Bartimaeus a new life. “Immediately he received his sight and followed [Jesus] on the way” (v. 52, RSV).

**The prayers of Jesus**

Christ’s prayer life is astonishing. The Gospels are filled with references as to how much Jesus valued and spent time in prayer.

Immediately following His baptism, He prayed (Luke 3:21). Says Ellen White, “Upon coming up out of the water [at His baptism], Jesus bowed in prayer on the river bank. . . .

“The Saviour’s glance seems to penetrate heaven as He pours out His soul in prayer. Well He knows how sin has hardened the hearts of men, and how difficult it will be for them to discern His mission, and accept the gift of salvation. He pleads with the Father for power to overcome their unbelief, to break the fetters with which Satan has enthralled them, and in their behalf to conquer the destroyer. . . .

“Never before have the angels listened to such a prayer.”

Regarding Jesus’ prayer in Mark 6:46 after feeding the 5,000 and resisting the crowd’s desire to crown Him king, Ellen White states, “For hours He continued pleading with God. . . . He prayed for power to reveal to men the divine character of His mission, that Satan might not blind their understanding and pervert their judgment. The Saviour knew that His days of personal ministry on earth were nearly ended, and that few would receive Him as their Redeemer. In travail and conflict of soul He prayed for His disciples. They were to be grievously tried. . . . For them the burden was heavy upon His heart, and He poured out His supplications with bitter agony and tears.”

Preceding His transfiguration, Jesus spent hours in prayer (Luke 9:28, 29). Ellen White notes that “the Man of Sorrows pours out His supplications with strong crying and tears. He prays for strength to endure the test in behalf of humanity. He must Himself gain a fresh hold on Omnipotence, for only thus can He contemplate the future. And He pours out His heart longings for His disciples, that in the hour of the power of darkness their faith may not fail.”

Jesus encouraged Peter with the assurance that He had prayed for him so that his faith would not fail (Luke 22:32).

Although the Jewish religion and worship had a long tradition of praying, when Jesus’ disciples heard Him pray, they realized how much they had to learn about prayer and asked Jesus to teach them how to pray (Luke 11:1).

All four Gospels frequently portray Jesus communing with His Father. The description of His Gethsemane prayer is especially wrenching: “As the agony of soul came upon Him, ‘His sweat was as it were great drops of blood falling to the ground.’ . . .

“. . . The humanity of the Son of God trembled in that trying hour. He prayed not now for His disciples that their faith might not fail, but for His own tempted, agonized soul. The awful moment had come. . . . which was to decide the destiny of the world. The fate of humanity trembled in the balance. . . . [Then] the words fall tremblingly from the pale lips of Jesus, ‘O My Father, if this cup may not pass away from Me, except I drink it, Thy will be done.’ . . .

“Having made the decision, He fell dying to the ground.”

Of the many lessons we need to learn about prayer, seeing God praying to God this way surely ranks supreme. At Gethsemane, Jesus prayed the hardest, “Thy will be done.” This prayer forces us to a deeper understanding of what prayer really is.

Prayer is not a heavenly slot machine where we deposit a prayer and automatically get something and certainly not a magical device. We do not offer suggestions to God to assist Him in helping us. Even worse is supposing that those who get what they pray for are closer to God or have more faith. The refused prayer of Christ in Gethsemane is answer enough to that notion. If we really want to learn how to pray, we need to deepen our grasp of Christ’s death for our sin. And then, “our prayers will be more and more acceptable to God, because they will be. . . intelligent and fervent.”

Prayer—if we have the courage to watch Jesus pray in Gethsemane—seems particularly to involve being completely honest with God and surrendering ourselves fully to Him. Like Christ, we need to wrestle with ourselves and cry to God until we are victorious. All through Scripture we find women and men praying with honesty and intensity, their prayers repeatedly displaying a fervor and honesty not often seen today. They surely valued prayer as “breath of the soul.” They lived with a full understanding that prayer “is the secret of spiritual power. No other means of grace can be substituted and the health of the soul be preserved.”

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1  Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture is from the New King James Version of the Bible.
4  Ibid., 379.
5  Ibid., 419, 420.
6  Ibid., 689–93.