

Wings

*“Those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength;
they shall mount up with wings like eagles.”
Isaiah 40:31*



November 27, 2011

Meaningful Prayer

A rich and satisfying prayer life is possible, but it requires the right frame of mind. The prayer of Hannah shows us how it's done.

“And she [Hannah] was in bitterness of soul, and prayed to the Lord and wept in anguish” (1 Sam. 1:10).

As a childless wife in a polygamous marriage, Hannah was well acquainted with the unfairness of life. She knew what it meant to be trapped in a hopeless situation, with no prospect of relief. Like countless others who find themselves in a predicament, Hannah's only recourse was to turn to God in prayer. If we want to learn how to pray effectively, Hannah's prayer makes a good study.

First, notice that Hannah did not concern herself about the verbal formalities of a “correct” prayer format. The account says that she “spoke in her heart . . . her lips moved, but her voice was not heard” (v. 13). The account does not record most of what she said, probably because it wouldn't have made much sense to us anyway. But the prayer was to God, not us, and God knew what she was struggling to articulate in her heart. Unlike public prayers, which must be understood by the hearers in order for them to share in its message (1 Cor. 14:14-16), private prayers are just that—

intensely private conversations with God, full of rambling, incoherent streams of thought that only God can decipher (Rom. 8:26).

Hannah's prayer engaged every bit of her attention. She “poured out her soul” to God (v. 15), seeking to give voice to the frustration of her life. Her prayer was an expression of “the abundance of my complaint and grief” (v. 16), full of emotion, driven by passion. She was so caught up in her prayer that the high priest Eli, standing afar off, thought she was drunk (v. 13). The best prayers are those that put us directly in the presence of God, oblivious to the rest of the world.

Notice also that Hannah's prayer was not a one-sided affair. She understood that merely making demands of God was not enough; she needed to have a personal stake in achieving the desire she was asking of God. So included in her prayer was a vow to dedicate her child to the Lord (v. 11). Her vow was not a casual afterthought; months later, after God granted her request, she followed through on her promise (v. 26-

28). She was *that* serious about it. If we want God to go out of His way to help us, we should have some skin in the game, too. Our prayers should reflect that commitment; they should be an opportunity to reflect on the actions we need to take in our lives.

Hannah's prayer got results. First, there was an immediate psychological benefit: “Her face was no longer sad” (v. 18). Those who develop a healthy prayer life are generally happier people, whether or not their specific requests are granted, because their prayer habits draw them closer to God.

In Hannah's case, God granted her request and gave her a son, Samuel (v. 19-20). Her prayer was answered! But the story of Hannah's prayer would not be complete without looking at her second prayer (2:1-10). Unlike many people, Hannah did not pray to God only when she was in a jam. She remembered to thank God when He had blessed her. So should we.

Meaningful prayer is not a matter of following the right formula, but of having the right heart.

— David King