

St. Paul's Lutheran Church, Muskego, Wisconsin

August 6, 2017

Prayer is Powerful: God Hears!

- 1. Father, enable me to say, "Amen!"**
- 2. Father, make my life a doxology.**

1 Samuel 1:9-17; 2:1-10

⁹ Once when they had finished eating and drinking in Shiloh, Hannah stood up. Now Eli the priest was sitting on his chair by the doorpost of the Lord's house. ¹⁰ In her deep anguish Hannah prayed to the Lord, weeping bitterly. ¹¹ And she made a vow, saying, "Lord Almighty, if you will only look on your servant's misery and remember me, and not forget your servant but give her a son, then I will give him to the Lord for all the days of his life, and no razor will ever be used on his head."

¹² As she kept on praying to the Lord, Eli observed her mouth. ¹³ Hannah was praying in her heart, and her lips were moving but her voice was not heard. Eli thought she was drunk ¹⁴ and said to her, "How long are you going to stay drunk? Put away your wine."

¹⁵ "Not so, my lord," Hannah replied, "I am a woman who is deeply troubled. I have not been drinking wine or beer; I was pouring out my soul to the Lord. ¹⁶ Do not take your servant for a wicked woman; I have been praying here out of my great anguish and grief."

¹⁷ Eli answered, "Go in peace, and may the God of Israel grant you what you have asked of him."

2 Then Hannah prayed and said:

*"My heart rejoices in the Lord; in the Lord my horn is lifted high.
My mouth boasts over my enemies, for I delight in your deliverance.*

² *"There is no one holy like the Lord; there is no one besides you;
there is no Rock like our God.*

³ *"Do not keep talking so proudly or let your mouth speak such arrogance,
for the Lord is a God who knows, and by him deeds are weighed.*

⁴ *"The bows of the warriors are broken, but those who stumbled are armed with strength.*

⁵ *Those who were full hire themselves out for food,
but those who were hungry are hungry no more.*

She who was barren has borne seven children, but she who has had many sons pines away.

⁶ *"The Lord brings death and makes alive; he brings down to the grave and raises up.*

⁷ *The Lord sends poverty and wealth; he humbles and he exalts.*

⁸ *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.*

“For the foundations of the earth are the Lord’s; on them he has set the world.

⁹ *He will guard the feet of his faithful servants,
but the wicked will be silenced in the place of darkness.*

*“It is not by strength that one prevails; those who oppose the Lord will be broken.
The Most High will thunder from heaven; the Lord will judge the ends of the earth.*

“He will give strength to his king and exalt the horn of his anointed.”

(Spoken in a whisper.) Shush! Someone is listening.

When you share secrets, you don’t want anyone else to hear.

What secret do you have that you want no one else to hear? We all have them. It might be something you’ve done. It might be something you want or someone that you want. It might be a feeling that you have that is embarrassing. Shush... don’t talk about it... someone might be listening!

But someone is always listening! Someone who can keep a secret. Someone who understands. Someone who can do something about it. God is always listening.

I know that some of you may not feel that way right now. In fact, my guess is that all of us have felt that way sometime in our lives. Sometimes it just doesn’t seem like God is listening, or if he is, he really doesn’t care about the secrets that are destroying our lives.

But I’d like to introduce you to a woman who may have felt that way too, but in the end she named her son “God Hears” or Samuel so that she would always remember that God hears, that God is always listening when we share with him the secrets of our hearts.

My prayer for myself and for each of us here today is that through this study God the Father would enable each of us to speak an “Amen” to the idea that God is always listening and that the Father would then make our entire lives a song of praise, a doxology... Because God hears!

The woman I’d like you to meet is named Hannah. She isn’t a perfect Old Testament “Christian” and she doesn’t live in a perfect Old Testament “Christian” home. She is just someone like many of us, who are more influenced by the values of the world around us than we’d like to imagine.

Hannah is married to a religious man named Elkanah. Every year they would faithfully go up to the Tabernacle and sacrifice there as God had commanded... at the Passover in early spring, at Pentecost in early summer, and at the Feast of Tabernacles in the fall.

That all sounds great, except the society in which they lived valued polygamy. Elkanah was married not only to Hannah, but also to a woman named Peninnah. They should have known better. God at creation had announced what marriage was all about... the union of one man and one woman for life. “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his

wife, and the two will become one flesh” (Genesis 2:24). Jesus later would explain, “So they are no longer two but one. What God has joined together, let not man separate” (Matthew 19:6).

But Elkanah, Hannah and Peninnah were influenced by society and society’s values about marriages just like we Christians are sadly influenced by the values of the world around us.

When God’s design for marriage is ignored, God’s wisdom becomes evident. Elkanah loves Hannah more than Peninnah... so rather than a relationship of unity, it is a relationship of envy. Peninnah has lots of kids and Hannah doesn’t. And not surprisingly Peninnah uses that against Hannah. The Bible account says, “Her rival kept provoking her in order to irritate her” (1 Samuel 1:7). What a mess Elkanah and Peninnah and Hannah have made of their lives! You would think God would just want to ignore this whole mess...

By the way, do you ever feel that way? Do you ever feel that your life is such a mess with so many mistakes of the past that God can’t possibly want anything to do with you? I feel that way quite often, that’s why I like this family. It is a dysfunctional family that God still loves! Amazing grace, grace that gives hope to me!

So Hannah goes up to the tabernacle with her family and pours out the painful secrets of her heart. But is God listening?

We confess that God hears and answers our prayers when we say “Amen” at the end of our prayers. “Amen” comes from the Hebrew word for “I believe.” When you say, “Amen,” at the end of your prayer, you are saying, “I believe that God hears.”

Could Hannah say “Amen, God is listening”? Hannah had experienced so many things that would make it hard for any of us to say, “Amen!” I call them “Amen blockers.”

The worst “Amen blocker” for me is **the silence of God.**

How long had Hannah been praying for children? Many of you who have asked God for a child know from experience how hard God’s silence can be! You pray for years and years. Peninnah has one child after the next. Hannah never gets pregnant. This isn’t a one-and-done prayer. This is going on for years. And God’s answer... **silence.** There is no answer.

King David’s questions in Psalm 13 are often mine. “How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and every day have sorrow in my heart? How long will my enemy triumph over me?”

It is hard to say, “Amen, I believe God hears!” when all you hear in answer to your prayers is silence.

Another “Amen blocker” is ridicule. Hannah prays for a child. And all she hears is the ridicule of her co-wife Peninnah.

You’ve heard that ridicule too. What about those of you who have prayed to be rescued from a bully... whether that bully be someone at school, or a bully at work... or even worse... a bully in your own home. You pray and pray. Is God’s listening? All you hear are more taunts.

The words of Psalm 73 are mine:

“This is what the wicked are like—always carefree, they increase in wealth... They say, ‘How can God know? Does the Most High have knowledge?’” (Psalm 73:12 and 11).

It is pretty hard to say, “Amen! I believe!” when all you hear is the ridicule of others.

How does Elkanah react to this? He doesn’t get it. “Hannah, why are you weeping? Why don’t you eat? Why are you downhearted? Don’t I mean more to you than ten sons?” (1 Samuel 1:8). He is scolding her for being unhappy.

Isn’t this kind of failure of family another “Amen blocker”? Your family doesn’t even understand you, so why should you think that God hears and understands?

And what is hardest for me to admit to you today... one of the worst “Amen blockers” is the failure of the church. The high priest sees Hannah praying... but there are no words. She is pouring out the secrets of her heart and she wants only God to hear. Her lips are moving but there is no sound so Eli accuses her of being drunk!

How many times has the church failed her children! How many times has the message we conveyed been a message of condemnation? How it breaks my heart to hear people say that their non-Christian coworkers and neighbors are nicer to them than their fellow church members! How it breaks my heart... how it must break God’s heart... that someone battling an addiction receives more unconditional love in a recovery group than they do in church.

If the church has failed you by judging you or failed to help you or failed to take your questions and struggles seriously... forgive us! I know that those failures can be a powerful “Amen blocker.” But don’t let the failure of the church to hear keep you from believing that your God hears!

In spite of all these Amen blockers... a silent God, ridicule from others, family members who don’t understand and a church that failed her... in spite of all these “Amen blockers,” Hannah prayed and could say, “Amen! I believe God hears!”

What are the “Amen makers” that can produce that same miracle in our hearts and give us hope?

First Hannah prays to the LORD Almighty. In this account in 1 Samuel 1 is the first place where this name is used. It can be more literally translated, “LORD of hosts” or “LORD of armies.”

LORD is that name in all caps that is God’s Old Testament personal Savior name... a name that reminds us that his love is unchanging... it isn’t dependent on us... as though he loves us more on days we are good boys and girls and less on those days when we don’t do his will. No, his love is unchanging. You are his child because of His decision. I just read yesterday the first verses of Romans 1. There we Christians are called God’s loved ones, the ones he has called, the ones he sees as saints.

How can that be? This unchanging love is evident in the cross of Christ. Romans 5 reminds us that Jesus died for the “ungodly.” He willingly went to the cross to die for you. You are forgiven, loved, chosen by God.

He is the LORD Almighty. He is the God of armies, the God who can accomplish what his love desires for us. He was willing to fight for us on Maundy Thursday in the Garden and Good Friday on the cross. He is willing to fight for you today.

Paul reminds us in his second letter to the Christians in Corinth: “No matter how many promises God has made, they are ‘Yes’ in Christ. And so through him the “Amen” is spoken by us to the glory of God” (2 Corinthians 1:20).

It is that focus on Christ and his cross that enables us to say, “Amen! God hears” in spite of the silence and ridicule and failures of others.

The faithfulness of our God is also an “Amen maker.” When I read that God heard Hannah’s prayer, and I see over and over again that the LORD Almighty worked miracles in answer to prayer, that faithfulness of God enables me to say, “Amen. Even though God seems to be silent, I know God is listening.” The song of Ethan in Psalm 89 comes to mind: “I will sing of the love of the LORD forever; with my mouth I will make your faithfulness known through all generations” (Psalm 89:1). How encouraging to hear of God’s faithfulness in the past! How encouraging to hear my family members and my small-group members sharing stories of God’s faithfulness to them.

God’s faithfulness is an “Amen Maker.”

The final “Amen Maker” I want to celebrate today is what I call “The long-view.” I am amazed that Hannah, at the end of her prayer, talks about the king and the anointed one. “He will give strength to his king and exalt the horn of his anointed” (1 Samuel 2:10). There is no king at this time in Israel. She is focusing on something that won’t happen for one hundred years when the kings rule over Israel... but ultimately 1200 years at the coming of the Christ.

We may not see it now, “But he will exalt the horn of his anointed.” At the end of the world, we shall see that God’s strength was always victorious.

God hears! Amen. It is certain!

The LORD’s Prayer closes with a doxology. This was probably added as part of the church’s worship. This is the response to our “Amen.” If I know that God answers prayer, then I want to praise God.

Hannah praised God with her song. She celebrates the LORD who answered her prayer. It is fitting that we come together week after week to declare to each other God’s faithful love and to offer up our praises to him.

But the most amazing doxology is her actions.

She prayed for one thing. A son. But she promised that if God gave her a son, she would return that son to the LORD in full-time ministry. As soon as he was old enough to be weaned, probably about 3 years old in those days, she took him to the temple and dedicated him to service to our God. What a song of praise that action was!

What are you and I praying for? Don't be afraid to ask. But ultimately everything is the LORD's and everything I am and have is the LORD's. I want my whole life to be a doxology. So I am praying, "Father, work that devotion in my heart. Enable me to believe what Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5:14-15: "Christ's love compels us, for we are convinced that one died for all and therefore all died. And he died for all that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and rose again."

Many of you know that the committal service at the graveside ends with a doxology. The next time I'm at a grave, as I lead in the singing of the doxology, there will be a secret prayer... a prayer that I know that God hears. My prayer is that the doxology sung at my death will announce to those who mourn, "I believe! God hears! He has heard my prayers. With God's help I have lived a life of praise. And so my life closes as it was lived. A doxology to the God who hears."

Praise God from whom all blessings flow,
Praise Him all creatures here below,
Praise Him above you heavenly hosts,
Praise Father, Son and Holy Ghost. Amen.

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My Next Step: Praying Through the Psalms

Psalms is the Old Testament prayer book that can guide us in our prayers and keep our eyes focused on the cross, remind us of God's faithfulness, and give us a view towards eternity. Over the next few weeks, select a psalm to pray through each day.

- Psalms of confession: 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, 143
- Psalms about Jesus: 2, 8, 16, 22, 23, 110, 118
- Psalms recalling God's faithfulness: 78, 89, 103, 104, 105, 106, 107
- Psalms for times of distress: 13, 27, 34, 42, 73
- Psalms of hope: 31, 46, 91, 121, 139
- Psalms of thanksgiving: 95, 96, 97, 98, 99, 100, 146, 147, 148, 149, 150