

PRAYERS OF THE OLD TESTAMENT: *Ancient Prayers for Modern People*

Introduction

Hello friends. My name is Beth Allison. I've been a speaker with KYB for nearly 16 years, and I'm thrilled to give this Introduction to the study *Prayers of the Old Testament – Ancient prayers for Modern People*. The nine prayers we'll be looking at were prayed centuries ago by people of a different language and different culture. Yet what really struck me as I was preparing the study, is that their heartfelt cries are common to all people throughout all the generations. Cries like, *Where are you God? Do you care about my suffering? Are you even listening? How long, Lord, do I have to wait for your answer?* If you can relate to any of these cries of the heart, then this study is very much for you.

1. WHAT IS PRAYER?

Prayer is a two-way conversation with God. It is both speaking *and* listening. Prayer isn't dependent on formulas or dependant on fancy words. And the Bible clearly tells us that God responds to anyone who comes to him in faith, believing that he hears and will answer (Hebrews 11:6).

But that raises some questions. Why should we pray when God already knows our needs (Philippians 4:6)? And why does Jesus tell us to *keep on praying* when we've already made our requests known to God (Luke 11:8; 18:1)? Isn't that a bit like nagging God? And do our prayers really make any difference at all to what's happening in the world?

Those types of questions go to the heart of prayer. I remember reading a book on prayer where the author said when we don't pray, God isn't disappointed *in* us; rather he's disappointed *for* us because we are short-changing ourselves spiritually. Yes God already knows our needs and yes he does want us to keep on asking. Why? Because God is **love** (1 John 4:8,16), and that means his highest priority is **relationships**. God's deepest longing is for each one of us to have a deep, intimate, trusting relationship with him. That's why a life of listening prayer is so important for our spiritual health, because it nourishes our relationship with our heavenly Father. Prayer keeps us connected with God and prayer invites his Spirit to direct us (Galatians 5:16).

When we open ourselves to God through listening prayer, we're actually partnering with God to see his kingdom come to earth, firstly in our own lives. Prayer opens ourselves up to be changed by the Holy Spirit to become more like Jesus (2 Corinthians 3:18). It's the pathway to friendship and intimacy with God. But prayer is also the way we partner with God to see his kingdom come into the world. The Holy Spirit, the Spirit of prayer, guides us *how* to pray in seemingly impossible situations, and the Holy Spirit shows us what God wants *us* to do to achieve his purposes here on earth. When we pray, God both works *in* us and *through* us.

The prayers in this study may be ancient, but there is such a timelessness to them. Same heart cries for help, comfort, rescue or forgiveness. Same desperate longings to be heard. Same agonising over sin. But above all the same God who still listens, forgives, hears and acts when we pray (Daniel 9:19). He is still the same God whose love and compassion never changes (Lamentations 3:22-26).

2. DIFFERENT TYPES OF PRAYER

What is clear from these Old Testament pray-ers is that we can pray in many different ways. Let's look at some of those different types of prayer.

a) Prayers of lament

I wonder if you have ever been so overwhelmed by a situation that you haven't even had the words to tell God how you are feeling, your situation is just too painful and overwhelming? That is **Hannah's** story. She was unable to have children and was beside herself with grief. We're told that Hannah wept bitterly before the Lord; pouring out her broken heart (1 Samuel 1:10). But she was still praying. Hannah was praying because she was choosing to turn *toward* God in all her pain and all her brokenness, and not walk *away* from him. That's what's called a prayer of lament. God understands prayers of anguish when sometimes we don't even have the words to say. It's such a great comfort to know that when we don't have the words to pray, the Bible tells us that the Holy Spirit within us pleads on our behalf in harmony with God's will (Romans 8:26-27).

And if you've ever been angry with God, then you're in good company. **Job** and **Jeremiah** didn't hold back from telling God what they thought about him. Job actually felt that all his suffering and loss was so unjust that he even questioned God's ability to rule the world fairly. The great prophet

Jeremiah swung between despair and faith, between trust and torment because the prophetic ministry God had called him to brought such terrible opposition and persecution.

But Hannah, Job and Jeremiah all knew that turning away from God wasn't an option. It was better to keep seeking God in the dark places, in the desperate hope that somehow, somewhere God would turn up. And he did. For all three of them. The wonderful truth is that God will never reject us when we come to him with our questions, with our anger and complaints. The key is that in our desperate state, we turn *toward* God and not away from him.

b) Prayers of confession and repentance

In Psalm 66:18 the psalmist says "If I hadn't confessed the sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened [to my prayer]." Sin is partly what we do or not do. But sin is also who we *are*. We all have a sinful nature. And sin grieves the heart of God; sin hinders our prayers; it breaks our closeness with God and hinders the work of the Holy Spirit within us.

When King **David** was confronted about his adultery with Bathsheba he did not try to deny or defend himself. In a brutally honest prayer in Psalm 51 David confessed and repented of his sin. And he asked God not just to forgive him, but to also "create in him a clean and pure heart" (Psalm 51:10). David knew that he would continue to sin unless God helped him and renewed him from within.

Psalm 51 is a powerful prayer for all of us. When we are born again, God declares us to be as holy and blameless as Jesus. But the reality is we do sin, we act selfishly, we speak unkindly, we're reluctant to forgive or quick to take offence. God wants us to come to him quickly and frequently to own up to where we have done wrong and ask him for forgiveness. I love the assurance of 1 John 1:9 that when we confess our sins to God, God is faithful and just and will both forgive us and cleanse us. That's the key to dealing with condemnation, guilt and shame. (1 John 1:8-9). Come quickly to God to confess our sin and to receive his forgiveness and his cleansing. May the confession of Psalm 51 become a regular part of our devotional life so that we can walk in peace, we can walk in spiritual and emotional freedom.

c) Prayers of praise

King **Jehoshaphat** was facing total destruction by the enemy. It would have been so easy to give into crippling fear or despair, but instead Jehoshaphat prayed this powerful prayer of dependence and faith. With an enemy army bearing down on him, he stops and prays, “O God, we don’t know what to do, *but our eyes are on you*” (2 Chronicles 20:12).

God assured them of success. But do you remember how they defeated the enemy? Through praise and worship. Singing praises to God does not deny our very real struggles and fear. It doesn’t deny the situation we are in. But it shifts our focus from ourselves onto our great God who is mighty to save and rescue us.

A friend recently told me of her experience of praise as she was about to open up a link on her phone to check the results of a CT scan. I retell this story with her permission. She said, *“As I went to click on the link, a worship song suddenly started to play on my phone. I don’t recall ever playing that song on my phone. Here are the words to the song -*

‘You deserve the glory and the honour
And we lift our hands in worship
As we praise your holy name.
For you are great. You do miracles so great
There is no one else like you.’”

My friend said *“I never did look at my results. I just let the song permeate my spirit. I knew the Lord had reached down from heaven to remind me he was going to be with me no matter what the results were.”* As it turned out my friend’s cancer had returned after a ten year remission. My friend said, *“God knew my story before I did and he had a way through it.”* It was the way of praise and worship which, she says, increased her faith and increased her confidence not only in God’s presence but also in his miracle working power.

Jehoshaphat’s prayer is a great lesson in not allowing fear to have the final word. We need to choose to praise God; choose to fill our minds and homes with songs of praise that remind us of God’s unchanging character and power to make a way when there seems to us to be no way.

And praise in the midst of the storm also helps gives us eyes to see where God is *already* at work, even though we're still not through the crisis. That was **Jonah's** experience. Being inside a fish was not exactly the safest of places to be, but it was certainly better than drowning. That's why Jonah prayed his prayer of thanks and praise while he was still in the fish. God had helped him thus far, and that gave Jonah hope that God would continue to rescue him.

I love the words to the song "*I Choose to Worship*" –

*I will praise you through the fire
Through the storm and through the flood
There is nothing that could ever steal my song.
In the valley, you are worthy
You are good when life is not.
You will always and forever be my song."*

d) Prayers that boldly stand on God's word and character

It's hard when you've given your all in ministry to serve others, and then those people turn on you when the going gets tough. That was **Moses'** story. But in a prayer of extraordinary humility and selflessness, Moses prayed that God would not destroy the people as he had threatened, but rather that God would forgive them their sin and rebellion because of his great love. Listen to how Moses prayed -

"Please, Lord, prove that your power is as great as you have claimed. For you said that you are slow to anger and filled with unfailing love, forgiving every kind of sin and rebellion..."
(Numbers 14:17-18).

I so love this prayer. Moses is quoting God's own words back to him "*For you said, Lord.*" Moses is saying "*Lord, please act towards Israel according to who you have declared yourself to be in your word.*" It is powerful when we pray God's words back to him.

That is what **Daniel** did centuries later when he reminded God of the promise he had given to the prophet Jeremiah that the Israelites would be released after 70 years of captivity. Daniel discovered that the seventy years were nearly up and Daniel knew that the most effective prayer was to pray that God would do what he had promised to do.

Praying God's word, of course, doesn't guarantee that we'll get the exact answer we're wanting. As we pray, God may change our desires, or change the way we pray. That's why we need to learn to **listen** for the voice of God. But the starting off point is that God is a promise-keeping God. And he loves it when we pray his own words back to him.

For example, God has promised to give us a hope and a future (Jeremiah 29:11); he has promised to replace weeping with joy (Isaiah 61:3); God has promised to be our ever-present help in times of trouble (Psalm 46:1); to supply all our needs (Philippians 4:19); God has promised to forgive us (1 John 1:9); to always be with us (Matthew 28:20). That's why it is so important to marinate our minds in God's word. The more we know God's character and promises, the more confident we can be in praying his word back to him.

3. PRAYING ACCORDING TO GOD'S WILL

A question which is often asked in relation to prayer is how do we know that we are praying according to God's will (see 1 John 5:13-14)? Clearly that's no problem if God says yes! Just remember to thank God for his goodness and faithfulness. **Solomon's** story is a sober reminder that we should never take answered prayer for granted. God answered Solomon's prayer for wisdom and Solomon used it to great effect. But later in life he squandered the gift and his end is such a tragic one. Answered prayer is a gift of grace. We must never lose our gratitude for all the ways God has answered our prayers.

WAIT....

Probably more often than we would like, God delays his answer. He asks us to wait and we're not very good at waiting are we? I often have to remind myself that in my finite thinking God appears to be late in answering my prayers, but the Bible reassures me that he is actually always on time (2 Peter 3:8)! Why the delay, often to our most urgent of prayers?

Often God wants to teach us something. That is why listening to his voice is so important.

In her waiting **Hannah** learned the priceless lessons of surrender and trust. I'm absolutely sure the longings to be a mother were still there, but deeper still was a God-given peace and faith that God was good and would indeed work out his perfect purposes.

When **Jehoshaphat** prayed “God, we don’t know what to do, but our eyes are on you” he didn’t then immediately mobilise the army. No. He and all the people waited, waited for the Lord to speak. And God did, through a prophetic word. This story of Jehoshaphat is such a lesson in learning not just to make our requests, but to take time to be still, time to intentionally wait and listen for God’s voice. God may speak to us through his word, through a strong impression or conviction; he may speak to us through circumstances, through others or through nature. What is so important is that we don’t just make our requests to the Lord and then rush out of the house, rush through the day, drop exhausted into bed at night, and then wonder *Lord, why aren’t you speaking to me?* He is. But are we listening?

Sometimes, like King **David**, God wants to highlight something within us that is grieving the Holy Spirit – such as unforgiveness, anger or jealousy. And remember, God only ever sheds a spotlight on those things because he wants us to reflect the character of Jesus. After all, we are a new creation, and listening prayer is key to allowing the Holy Spirit to transform us bit by bit, day after day, month after month into becoming more and more like Jesus.

That’s why God didn’t give up on **Jonah** who was angry that God would be so compassionate and so forgiving to the Ninevites, whom Jonah believed should never be shown such mercy. God loved Jonah despite Jonah’s disobedience, incredible anger and sulking. God certainly didn’t give in to Jonah’s demands, just as he doesn’t give in to ours. Rather God held a continuing prayerful conversation with Jonah, patiently rescuing him and challenging him about his faulty beliefs.

Tantalisingly, we don’t know how Jonah turns out! But I think that’s deliberate. It challenges us to ask ourselves some deep questions as we wait for answers to our prayers: What are we learning in the waiting? How are we changing? What are we learning about ourselves? What are we learning about God? Are we listening and are we responding to the prompts of the Holy Spirit? As we listen and respond, we can become more certain of what God wants for us.

Perhaps through our prayers, God want to give us a greater revelation of himself

I’m very impacted by **Job** who never got an explanation to his questions or to his terrible suffering, but he had an encounter with God, his spiritual eyes were opened. Job journeyed deeper into faith and knowing God more intimately, and for Job, that was enough.

Some of you may remember Betty Cuthbert, an Australian athlete and four-time Olympic champion who died in 2017. Later in life she developed multiple sclerosis. People encouraged her to seek prayer for healing. Betty later said, *“Well, I wasn’t healed, but I met the Healer.”*

At times in our prayers we will be confronted with the mysteries of God. But the prayers of **Job** and **Jeremiah** challenge us not to trade our intimacy with Jesus for questions that may not be answered this side of eternity.

NO....

But what if God says no to our prayers? He clearly shuts the door. We don’t get the job, we’re not healed, we don’t marry the person we’ve so longed to marry, our marriage is not able to be saved? It’s never easy to let go of our hopes and dreams. But one thing I’ve learned through my own disappointments in unanswered prayer, is to keep on trusting God that although the future may not be what we have expected, because of who God is, our life is safe in his hands. God has promised he *will* rebuild the shattered ruins, and he’s promised he *will* work everything for good for his glory and for our very best (Romans 8:28). Despite the situation we may find ourselves in, here’s the truth about God and his character, he remains unchangingly trustworthy and good.

But unless God has clearly closed the door, we follow the encouragement of Jesus to keep on asking, keep on seeking and keep on knocking (Luke 11:9), to keep on pounding that door. Such persevering prayer tells God we’re genuine, it tells God this is not just a casual or half-hearted request, and tells God we will not give up until somehow, somewhere, and in some way, God answers our prayer. There’s something about “shameless persistence” in prayer (Luke 11:8) that touches the heart of God.

4. PARTNERING WITH GOD THROUGH PRAYER

It’s a mystery that God maintains control of history. And yet in some way, our prayers play a role in accomplishing God’s eternal purposes. In his grace, God has chosen to involve us in the fulfilling of his plans and promises.

What a privilege and what a responsibility we have been given to plead before God for our nation, our family, friends and neighbours, just as **Moses** and **Daniel** did on behalf of the Israelites. As royal

priests (1 Peter 2:9) we are called to “stand in the gap” on behalf of a needy world. How urgently do we want to reach those within our circle of relationships? How urgently do we want to see God move in our nation, in the world? We need to get on our knees. We need to be a praying people, a praying church, a praying KYB group. One of the most profound ways we can love someone is by praying for them.

I wonder how many of us have ever thought that a situation is just impossible? Well as our nine Old Testament pray-ers discovered, when we pray, we lift our needs into the hands of the One who is able to do more than we can ask or imagine (Ephesians 3:20). When we pray for example for people’s salvation, we are lifting the work of mission above often seemingly impossible circumstances into the hands of the One who governs everything. Prayer is shifting our focus from the natural to the supernatural.

There are three things we can be certain of in relation to prayer. Firstly, as followers of Jesus we are commanded to *“always pray and never give up”* (Luke 18:1). *“Never stop praying”* says Paul (1 Thessalonians 4:17). Prayer is key to developing an intimate, transforming relationship with God, where we are partnering with God to see his kingdom come.

Secondly, we are told that *“tremendous power is released through the passionate, heartfelt prayer of a godly believer!”* (James 5:16 TPT). We need to take God at his word, and come “boldly” before God’s throne of grace with our prayers (Hebrews 5:16).

Thirdly, God remains solidly in control of our lives and our world. That should give us confidence not only in the one to whom we pray, the one who governs everything, but also how we pray, **Never forget: Ours is the prayer. God’s is the power.**

And don’t let Satan convince you that you haven’t got enough faith. The essence of faith is to place our confidence in God (2 Corinthians 1:8-10). When we make God the object of our trust, we are exercising faith.

Can I encourage you as we come to the end of this Introduction, to spend a few minutes in prayer. There are two requests that I think would be great to ask the Lord as we work through this study –

1. Firstly, ask the Lord to give you new insights that will strengthen your prayer life.
2. Secondly, ask the Lord to lay on your heart those people he specifically wants you to pray for during this study, and ask him to guide you in *how* to pray for them.

It would be good to write down these two prayer points somewhere in your Study Book, and pray those two prayers from time to time during the term. *Lord give me the insights to strengthen my prayer life and who do you want me to pray for specifically during this study and please show me how to pray for them.* Write those prayer requests down. Don't forget to take time to listen. Write down whatever you believe the Holy Spirit is saying to you. At the conclusion of the study, look at what you've written and see how the Lord has answered your prayer.

Well, God bless each one of you on this prayer journey. There is no doubt that prayer takes time, it takes discipline, it's a choice whether or not we pray and it's certainly not always easy. But prayer – prayer where we both speak and listen – is key to a living, growing relationship with God; prayer steadies us when life gets tough; prayer positions us to be used by God. God's kingdom is advanced chiefly by prayer. May these nine Old Testament pray-ers give us a fresh hunger to rediscover the power of prayer.

Let's pray -

"Father, Give us a desire to pray. Please fill us with your powerful spirit of prayer so that *your* heart for the kingdom becomes *our* heart, and *your* will becomes *our* will. May our prayers see your kingdom come – both *in us*, and *through us* to a needy world. We just declare that yours is the power and the glory forever and ever. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen."