

TEACH US TO PRAY ... Portraits of Prayer

Week 1: David (Restored Fellowship)

Inspired by John White's book "People in Prayer", this series looks at 6 portraits of people from the Bible who dare to draw near to God in prayer. People pleading, praising, confessing, interceding. People being changed as they draw closer to God.

Different people from within Ruach have prepared each week of this series.

This week's notes have been written by Katherine Hawkins

REPORT

How did you go with the last lot of weekly prayer challenges? How is your prayer life different now than it was a month or two ago?

BRAINSTORM

What do people in the room know about King David of the bible? Brainstorm words or phrases that describe him and what people recall about his life and character. *(1-2 minutes only)*

Reflect: Was everything you came up with about David positive, admirable and holy?

In Acts 13:22 we read that "God testified concerning him: 'I have found David son of Jesse, a man after my own heart; he will do everything I want him to do.'" David is one of our heroes of faith. Yet his sins included deceit, abuse of power, adultery and murder. Serious stuff that God was not pleased about. The full story of a particularly bad series of behaviour can be found in 2 Samuel 11: 1-12:35 (read it at home later), but here is a summary:

The events begin with King David choosing to stay home in Jerusalem while he sent the rest of the Israelite army to fight other nations and kings. David is relaxing and walking on the palace roof when he sees a beautiful woman bathing on her roof. David was immediately drawn to her and sent messengers to find out who she was. The messengers returned and told David that her name was Bathsheba, the daughter of Eliam and the wife of Uriah. Despite David knowing that she was married, he sent for her and slept with her. Bathsheba later sent word to David that she was pregnant.

David was nervous that his sin of adultery would now be found out. He called for Uriah to come home from the battle field so that he would spend a night with his wife and cover up the sin that Bathsheba was pregnant with David's child. However, Uriah refused to sleep with his wife while his fellow men were off fighting. David was filled with anger that his plan did not work. When Uriah went back to war, King David sent a note to the army commander with instructions to have Uriah put at the frontline and to withdraw so that he would die. Bathsheba mourned her husband's death and was then brought to King David to be his wife.

The prophet Nathan visited King David and told him of the Lord's disapproval and displeasure with David.

(Adapted from <https://www.biblestudytools.com/bible-stories/david-and-bathsheba.html>)

The portrait of prayer that we are looking at today is David's prayer of confession and repentance following these events. It is recorded in Psalm 51.

READ: Psalm 51 *(See next page. Print a copy for everyone as they'll need to write on it later.)*

Psalm 51

For the director of music. A psalm of David. When the prophet Nathan came to him after David had committed adultery with Bathsheba.

¹ Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your unfailing love;
according to your great compassion
blot out my transgressions.
² Wash away all my iniquity
and cleanse me from my sin.
³ For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is always before me.
⁴ Against you, you only, have I sinned
and done what is evil in your sight;
so you are right in your verdict
and justified when you judge.
⁵ Surely I was sinful at birth,
sinful from the time my mother
conceived me.
⁶ Yet you desired faithfulness even in the
womb;
you taught me wisdom in that secret
place.
⁷ Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be
clean;
wash me, and I will be whiter than
snow.
⁸ Let me hear joy and gladness;
let the bones you have crushed rejoice.
⁹ Hide your face from my sins
and blot out all my iniquity.
¹⁰ Create in me a pure heart, O God,
and renew a steadfast spirit within me.

¹¹ Do not cast me from your presence
or take your Holy Spirit from me.
¹² Restore to me the joy of your salvation
and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain
me.
¹³ Then I will teach transgressors your
ways,
so that sinners will turn back to you.
¹⁴ Deliver me from the guilt of
bloodshed, O God,
you who are God my Savior,
and my tongue will sing of your
righteousness.
¹⁵ Open my lips, Lord,
and my mouth will declare your praise.
¹⁶ You do not delight in sacrifice, or I
would bring it;
you do not take pleasure in burnt
offerings.
¹⁷ My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart
you, God, will not despise.
¹⁸ May it please you to prosper Zion,
to build up the walls of Jerusalem.
¹⁹ Then you will delight in the sacrifices of
the righteous,
in burnt offerings offered whole;
then bulls will be offered on your altar.

DISCUSSION

- In verse 1, what is David appealing to as the basis for forgiveness? Underline or circle those two aspects of God's character that are the basis for His mercy.

Notice that in this prayer David doesn't make an excuse for his sin. Often, when we are caught out or confronted with our sins our reaction is to try and salvage our image, to minimise the offence, to make excuses for ourselves, and/or drag others in to share the blame.

- Have you observed that to be true in your own life and in the lives of others? (You can probably think of some public "apologies" made by politicians, sports people, celebrities, business leaders, and even church leaders that show this.)

John White says: "The basis of God's forgiveness to you is never that "you could hardly be blamed under the circumstances." Extenuating circumstances do not constitute a basis for mercy. Your only hope for mercy is the character of God." For example, as we saw in verse 1, His unfailing love and great compassion. This means that no matter where we might rank our sin on a scale of minor to horrendous, our hope is in God alone. We trust in the righteousness of our Saviour, not the thought that we deserve special consideration.

- What do you think about the first part of verse 4? *"Against you, you only, have I sinned ..."*

What about Uriah? What about Bathsheba? Don't they matter? Doesn't God care about what happened to them? Yes, he does. He is their God.

The natural consequences of David's actions, and ours, will still need to be faced. Spiritual pardon and restoration with God does not mean that someone is let off the hook from facing such consequences and dealing with the damage caused in other areas and to other people.

However, in wronging people such as Uriah and Bathsheba David has done more than hurt them. He has scorned and defied God and His laws.

John White again: "We tend to see the social context of sin rather than its divine context. Human relationships are more important to us than relationships with God." Consequently verse 4 shocks us.

- Do you think this is true?

The phrase "I have sinned against the Lord" forms the core of Psalm 51. Having faced that truth, David opens himself up to God's cleansing and restoration of fellowship. This cleansing and restoration is the point of the prayer of confession.

The worst effect of sin is alienation, alienation from God, and alienation from his people. It was not merely cleansing David wanted but cleansing as a gateway to restored fellowship. With restored fellowship comes joy and an increased spirit of praise and thanksgiving.

- Mark the verses that show this

Restoration does not come by mere ritual and sacrifice (v17). Outward religious observances are no substitute for a right attitude towards God and sin.

John White: "We ourselves forget this. We try to compensate for sin by our 20th century sacrifices. We atone by trying harder, being extra kind to someone we have hurt, by praying longer and more frequently. Yet none of these are acceptable to God... HE wants us simply to say "There is nothing I

can do to make up for what I have done. I have done something which you and you alone can put right.”

- What sort of “20th or 21st century sacrifices” have you ever made to try and please God when you’ve done something wrong? How hard is it for you to trust in his forgiveness, cleansing and restoration without trying to earn or repay it in some way?

PRAYER ACTIVITY

Take some time now individually to consider what you may need to bring to God in confession and repentance today. Based on the Psalm 51 portrait of prayer, write or just privately pray your own prayer of reconciliation. You can use the following points to guide you:

- Give yourself over to the mercy of God
- Admit your sin, making no excuse for it
- Recognise that you have sinned against God
- Acknowledge that it is only God, through Jesus Christ, who can and will cleanse you
- Ask for restored relationship and tell God what that means to you.

WEEK 1 PRAYER CHALLENGES

If Jesus is teaching us to pray, then we learn by doing. Take the “weekly challenges” seriously and you will grow in your prayer life AND encourage others as you report on your progress each week.

Choose one of these prayers from Psalm 51 to focus on in prayer. Choose one for the week or different ones on different days.

- Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions (v1)
- Cleanse me with hyssop and I will be clean; wash me and I will be whiter than snow. (v7)
- Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me (v10)
- Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me (v12)
- Open my lips, Lord, and my mouth will declare your praise (v15)

TEACH US TO PRAY ... Portraits of Prayer

Week 2: Hannah (Power in Reverse)

Inspired by John White's book "People in Prayer", this series looks at 6 portraits of people from the Bible who dare to draw near to God in prayer. People pleading, praising, confessing, interceding. People being changed as they draw closer to God.

Different people from within Ruach have prepared each week of this series.

This week's notes have been written by Caroline Batchelder

REPORT

How did you go with the last lot of weekly prayer challenges? How is your prayer life different now than it was a month or two ago?

INTRODUCTION

The books of 1 and 2 Samuel are actually one book but its length meant that it fitted onto two scrolls rather than one. This means that we need to think about Samuel as one long book rather than as two shorter ones.

Samuel is made up almost entirely of stories, but it has poems (appearing as prayers or songs) near the beginning, middle, and end, which act as structural markers:

Hannah's prayer (1 Sam 2:1-10)

David's lament (2 Sam 1:19-27)

David's song (2 Sam 22) and David's last words (2 Sam 23:1-7)

These great poems of Israel's Scriptures highlight major themes of Samuel such as human and divine kingship and the raising up of the powerless and abasement of the powerful. They give us some guidelines as to how to interpret the intriguing, varied stories from a time and culture with which we are not familiar.

PRAY

Ask God to open your eyes to himself, his world, and to yourself through the portraits of Hannah's prayers in the first two chapters of Samuel.

READ: 1 Samuel 1

Chapter 1 tells the story of Hannah's prayer and God's answer. 1:1-8 gives background; 1:9-11 tells of Hannah's prayer and vow; 1:12-18 tells of Eli's response and Hannah's confidence; 1:19-27 tells of Samuel's birth and his dedication to Yahweh.

Other background things it may be helpful to know:

- The OT books are in roughly chronological order, and the beginning of 1 Samuel takes place at the end of the Judges period. This was before Israel had any kings, at a time when each tribe and each person 'did what was right in their own eyes' (Judges 17:6; 21:25. Cf. 18:1; 19:1). Everyone was fending for themselves and God's people Israel seemed to be falling apart (see the appalling stories at the end of the book of the Judges).
- In contrast, the books of Samuel begin with the story of a devout and affectionate family who are committed to one another. Despite Hannah's barrenness and Peninnah's scorn, there is hope for Israel in this family who worship together.
- From this family will come the prophet Samuel who will bring Israel's downward spiral of unfaithfulness and military defeat to an end.

SHARE AND DISCUSS: What things do you notice particularly in Hannah's prayers in Chapter 1?

READ: 1 Samuel 2:1-11 'And Hannah prayed and said...'

- What are some of the themes of Hannah's prayer?¹ (Write these down, we'll be referring to them again later.)
- What does it say about the identity of Yahweh? (see vv.2-3, 6-7, 8-9).
- How do you think Hannah's humble, local, domestic situation enabled her remarkable insights into God's character and how he acts in the world (see 'ends of the earth' in 2:10)?
- Why do you think the writer/s of Samuel may have chosen to begin this lengthy account of the prophet Samuel and Israel's first two kings with the story of a childless woman and her cry to Yahweh?

READ: Luke 1:46-55

In Luke's gospel, Mary the mother of Jesus takes Hannah's Prayer as the basis for her own thanksgiving, traditionally called 'the Magnificat' (from 'my soul magnifies the Lord...')

- How does Mary apply the themes of Hannah's prayer?
- What insights does this give you into how God works in the world?

DISCUSSION

- How does Hannah's own story illustrate the themes of her prayer?
- How are these themes relevant to your own life?
- Notice how Hannah's prayer anticipates the introduction of the Israelite kingship in 2:10. What do you think about this?

APPLICATION

- Think about the reversals of power theme in both Hannah's prayer and the Magnificat. Does this give you any insight into God's reversal of worldly power structures in your own life and in our world?
- Following Hannah's example, how can you pray and act for these? **Pray together now** for people in positions of power, and for people who have been victims of the abuse or misuse of power.

WEEK 2 PRAYER CHALLENGES

If Jesus is teaching us to pray, then we learn by doing. Take the "weekly challenges" seriously and you will grow in your prayer life AND encourage others as you report on your progress each week.

- Read Hannah's prayer aloud every morning for a week as part of worship.
- Write a psalm of thanksgiving, using the insights God has given you into his character and the way in which he works in the world.

¹ David Tsumura summarises the theme of Yahweh's sovereignty: Yahweh, the incomparably holy one, the rock (2:2), the truly knowledgeable one (2:3), the lord of life and death (2:6), the maker of rich and poor (2:7), the great demoter and promoter (2:8), *The First Book of Samuel*, NICOT, Eerdmans, UK, 2007, 150-151.

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Week 3: Abraham (The Day God Drew Larger)

Inspired by John White's book "People in Prayer", this series looks at 6 portraits of people from the Bible who dare to draw near to God in prayer. People pleading, praising, confessing, interceding. People being changed as they draw closer to God.

Different people from within Ruach have prepared each week of this series.

This week's notes have been written by Ian Freestone

REPORT

How did you go with the last lot of weekly prayer challenges? How is your prayer life different now than it was a month or two ago?

ABRAHAM – THE DAY GOD GREW LARGER

This week introduces the theme of "intercession". Some have called it "standing in the gap". Its understanding the fact that world events and peoples hearts are not "pre-determined" apart from our interaction with God.

[N.B the thoughts in this study are based on a reading of the relevant chapter in 'People in Prayer' by John White].

READ: Genesis Chapter 18.

1. We are told the Lord spoke to Abraham. We are not told how the Lord spoke. The fact is God is always speaking. The word "hear" in the Bible often simply means "to pay heed". John White writes in his book 'People in Prayer' of a saying they have in the north of England: "there's none so deaf as them that won't hear." What are some practical ways in which we can become better listeners to the voice of God?
2. "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do?" White: "If you think about it for a moment you will realize the stupendous implication of this story. The Lord of far-flung galaxies, the Creator of life and of all that exists, the All-Powerful, the All-Knowing, the Inscrutable, the Judge of angels, demons and people is taking the trouble to explain his actions to an individual, and is talking to him without condescension, but in terms that he can understand." How does John 15:15 relate to this. What are the implications for your relationship with God?
3. White suggests that "God has called you to attend a celestial board meeting to deliberate with him on matters of destiny." This raises the whole level of prayer from being centered in my petty needs and woes (although God is interested in them too), to matters of great consequence and our prayers can influence the outcome of events. Some might say that God was going to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah anyway, but this passage is consistent with many other passages of Scripture that this is not a closed universe where all is predetermined but is in fact open and changeable according to our engagement with God. So God is unchanging, but his world is not. Abraham was not about to say, "Save-Sodom-if-it-be-your-will. Amen." White calls "if-it-be-your-will" prayers, 'lazy'. Why do you think he says that? Do you agree?

PRAYER TIME

1. Have a time of prayer for Ruach. Pray that he will intervene in our circumstances to achieve His will. Be guided by him as to what to request.
2. Choose an item of national or international significance for the church, government or nation/s. Pray together for God to intervene. [That is, we are not accepting the “status quo” as unchangeable. We are stepping up as co-partners with God in seeing his will come to pass. This is what ‘intercession’ is all about.

WEEK 3 PRAYER CHALLENGES

If Jesus is teaching us to pray, then we learn by doing. Take the “weekly challenges” seriously and you will grow in your prayer life AND encourage others as you report on your progress each week.

- Read these Scriptures that talk about God “changing his mind”. The word sometimes used to describe it is “relent”. The King James actually says, “and God repented” (fascinating!). It does not mean that his character changed. God is “immutable”. It does mean that his will is dynamic. There is an interplay with our prayers and decisions. Ultimately, of course, God’s Sovereign will is achieved, even in that interplay. Ex 32:9-14; Jeremiah 26:3, 13, 19; Jonah 3:10; 4:2 (in fact, the whole book is about God’s reversal of prophesied judgement), 2 Sam 24:16.
- Choose one item for prayer where it seems as if there is nothing you can do to change the situation. God can! A path of destruction and hopelessness is NOT set in stone. Be bold like Abraham, “draw near” like he did as a friend, and intervene through prayer to see a different reality come to pass.
- Abraham is called the “friend of God” (2 Chron 20:7; Isaiah 41:8). Read the life of Abraham in Genesis starting at Genesis chapter 12 and see how this friendship developed and the importance of 2-way communication in that relationship.
- Read a book on intercession and its impact. “Destined for the Throne” (Billheimer), “Intercessor” (Rees Howell), “And God changed his mind” (Brother Andrew).