

Prayer as a Cry for Help

Eugene Hensell, OSB

People who pray find themselves very attracted to prayers of petition. The reason for this is that a large portion of prayer focuses on asking God for help. The usual form in which this is done is the petition. There are other prayer forms such as intercession, thanksgiving, and praise, but petition by far is the default mode. We find this very same tendency in the Bible.

One need only page through the book of Psalms to discover that the majority of psalms are prayers for help. There we find many petitions expressing some form of lament or complaint. These prayers usually are rooted in situations of distress both personal and communal. Prayers for help, however, are by no means limited to the Psalter. We find them in the narrative and prophetic books of the Old Testament as well as in the gospels and letters of the New Testament (e.g., Gen 18:16-33; Judg 16:23-31; 2 Sam 7:18-29; Jer 32:16-25; 2 Cor 1:3-11; Luke 23:39-43). The situations of distress that give rise to prayers for help come from a wide variety of backgrounds. Sometimes God is perceived as being inconsistent or unfair. At other times it appears that God lacks compassion for the way people suffer. Still again people feel that God has abandoned or rejected them. Whatever the situation may be, it always seems to involve individuals or communities confronted with the reality of human limitation. Humans have run out of their own resources to solve their problems. In desperation they turn to God for help. Nevertheless, behind this extreme anxiety is a foundation of confidence and trust that infuses these prayers for help with hope. There is even a sense of boldness found in them.

Here following are three examples of prayers for help. The first involves Moses interceding for his people (Num 14:13-19). The second illustration shows Hannah imploring God to remove her curse of barrenness (1 Sam 1:9-20). The final instance will follow Jesus into the garden of Gethsemane, where he confronts God about his future fate (Mark 14:32-42).



Moses Prays for Miriam to Be Healed, illumination, ca. 1450–1455 by Hesdin of Amiens. Museum Meermanno Westreenianum, the Hague.

Moses Intercedes for His People (Num 14:13-19)

The context for this passage is the potential rebellion of the Israelites against God for bringing them into a hopeless situation. **The land of Canaan is inhabited by people much stronger and better equipped for battle than are the Israelites. Even though this land is so wonderful that it seems to flow with milk and honey, there is no way that the Israelites will be able to**

conquer it (Num 13:25-33). Aaron and Moses receive the brunt of the people's anger for bringing them to this situation. The people want to choose a new captain and go back to Egypt. To do otherwise would mean certain death for everyone.

Moses and Aaron attempt to calm the rebellious people and encourage them that if God is pleased with them they will be victorious and enter the Promised Land. These pleas fall on deaf ears and the people threaten to stone Moses and Aaron (Num 14:1-10). God's response to all this is not promising. Throughout the entire wilderness journey the Israelites have complained about poor accommodations, boring food, and what they perceive as a serious lack of care on the part of God. This latest threat of rebellion seems to have pushed God over the top. God informs Moses that this kind of behavior on the part of the people cannot continue. It seems obvious that they will not change, so God wants to disinherit them utterly and start over again with Moses in charge. God's decision seems to be final and without room for negotiation (Num 14:11-12).

The response of Moses to God's powerful anger is both clever and intriguing. Moses' intercession with God focuses not on what the people have done or what they deserve. Instead, Moses boldly suggests that God's plan is a bad one because it would seriously damage the divine reputation. Foreign kings would hear about this and mock God for not being able to lead the people as promised (Num 14:13-16). Moses goes even further by quoting God's own self-description back to God:

The Lord is slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, forgiving iniquity and transgression, but by no means clearing the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children to the third and fourth generation. (Num 14:18; Exod 34:6-7)

The amazing thing about this extended prayer (Num 14:13-17) is that it works! Moses gets the help he is seeking from God, not because the people somehow deserve it but because God's steadfast love requires it. The help Moses wants from God is that God pardon the people's iniquity. The motivation Moses employs is to remind God of who God really is.

Hannah Implores God to Remove Her Curse of Barrenness (1 Sam 1:9-20)

Barrenness was considered a curse in biblical times. The woman herself need not have been the source of the curse. It could stem from situations generations earlier. It was understood that she inherited the sins of her ancestors. The Bible describes several well-known women who suffered from barrenness, but through the intervention of God their barrenness was transformed into grace and they became fertile and bore children, often-times famous children. This calls to mind especially Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel



Hannah Prays in the Temple; The Birth of Samuel, ca. 1250 by William de Brailes.
Walters manuscript, Walters Art Museum.

(Gen 17:16-19; 25:21-26; 29:31-30:24), and Samson's mother (Judg 13:2-5). It is within this circle of faithful women that Hannah, the mother of the famous prophet Samuel, must be situated.

Hannah had a husband, Elkanah, who loved her deeply but could not fully grasp the complexity of the situation. There was serious conflict between Hannah, who was barren, and Elkanah's other wife, Peninnah, who was extremely fertile (1 Sam 1:6). Elkanah thought he could console Hannah with his generosity and love (1 Sam 1:8). He failed to realize that this was about Hannah feeling unjustly cursed and humiliated because she could never reach her full potential as a woman who could bear children. It is at the yearly visit to the shrine of Shiloh that Hannah boldly decides to present herself before the Lord (1 Sam 1:9-11). Here she bitterly pours out her soul to the Lord in prayer. Not only does she ask God to remove her barrenness by giving her a male child, but she also makes a vow wherein she promises to dedicate and return this child to God as a Nazirite forever (Num 6:5).

At this point the focus of the story switches from Hannah to Eli, the priest in charge of the shrine at Shiloh. He is as pastorally inept as Hannah is faithful. He has been observing her in fervent prayer. However, **Eli is so incompetent and insensitive that he cannot distinguish between prayer and drunkenness (1 Sam 1:12-14)**. He confronts Hannah and accuses her of being drunk, probably something he would never have done if the person he sees had been a man. At this point, however, Hannah is not about to let a bungling priest distort her prayer with false accusations. In no uncertain terms she informs Eli that the intensity of her prayer derives from her great anxiety at being looked upon as a worthless woman due to her barrenness, and not to the influence of alcohol (1 Sam 1:15-16). Without any indication that he really understands what Hannah is saying, Eli sends her away in peace, confirming that God will grant her the help for which she has prayed. Somehow, no real thanks to Eli, Hannah returns home from the shrine of Shiloh knowing that her prayer will be answered. **Her sadness is lifted and her barrenness removed (1 Sam 1:18-19)**.

In this story Hannah is a prime example of one of God's suffering people who cries out for help in prayer. **Her suffering is theological, personal, and social. She could easily make her own the pleading of Psalm 6:1-2: "O LORD, do not rebuke me in your anger, or discipline me in your wrath. Be gracious to me, O LORD, for I am languishing; O LORD, heal me, for my bones are shaking with terror."**

Jesus Prays in Gethsemane (Mark 14:32-42)

The scene in which Jesus, accompanied by his disciples, goes into the garden of Gethsemane to pray about his fate is one of the most powerful moments in the entire Gospel of Mark. By this time it is clear to Jesus that the course his ministry has taken could very well lead to his death. Mark is not hesitant to show that Jesus is extremely disturbed by this serious and dangerous situation. He is described as being "distressed" and "agitated." These are so-called gut verbs, used to show deep emotional disturbance. Jesus tells his disciples, **"I am deeply grieved, even to death" (Mark 14:33-34)**. He gives his disciples instructions to keep awake while he goes into the garden alone to pray. **He needs help, and he knows that God is the only one who can provide it.**

What follows is a very dramatic prayer expressed in the form of a negotiation. Jesus is firmly convinced that God is all-powerful and can do anything. Therefore God can "remove this cup" from him. Jesus does not want to continue on this course that will end with his certain death, even though he will concede in obedience if absolutely necessary **(Mark 14:35-36)**. **He uses the intimate form "Abba" to address God, indicating his filial relationship with the Father.** Jesus is relying on God's power to change the course of his life, now so quickly approaching death. It is almost as if Jesus is reminding



Jesus Praying at Gethsemane, pyrography of an icon.

God that God does indeed have such power. But Jesus does not get the answer for which he had hoped. Still, he does not stop there. He goes back and again does the same thing, and again his request is refused. He repeats this still a third time with no success. The divine plan will stay the course and Jesus will carry it out. This is not what Jesus wanted, but it is what he agreed to.

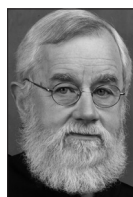
The disciples do not keep awake and watch. They remain oblivious to everything that has gone on a short distance from where they remain sleeping (Mark 14:37-41). Jesus does not reprimand them. In fact, a dramatic and

strange transformation seems to have overtaken him. While he did not get the answer he sought from God, he did get the help he needed. His emotional turmoil has vanished. Now he is calm as he realizes that the hour of his fate has arrived and he is up to the task of meeting it. From this moment to the end he will assume the role of the Suffering Servant described by Isaiah (Isa 52:13–53:12). He will be the innocent lamb led to the slaughter. God has given Jesus the help he needs to face the terrible fate that awaits him (Mark 14:42).

Conclusion

The many prayers for help that we find in the Bible give us a broad view of the human condition in all its frailty. Even this brief sampling shows us that the Bible does not portray these people as without hope, regardless of their distressful situations. They are not afraid to confront God and to make their needs known. They have a faith that encourages both risk and boldness in their approach to God. No holds are barred, no questions or feelings taboo. They can never predict the outcome of prayers for help. Nevertheless, they have confidence that somehow God will provide help, even if it is not the kind of help they sought. Quite often the help God provides is empowerment to meet the challenges they face. At other times we see that the result of God's help is transformation of the person whereby the pain of lament and complaint is transformed into praise for God's goodness. This is expressed especially in the lament psalms. The prayers for help show that not all our questions about God will be answered. Still, there are no questions we cannot ask.

Father Eugene Hensell, OSB, is a Benedictine monk from St. Meinrad Archabbey. He is a member of the faculty of St. Meinrad Seminary and School of Theology. He also does extensive retreat work with clergy and religious.



Copyright of Bible Today is the property of Liturgical Press and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.