

### FOCUS VERSES

And Samuel said to the people, “Do not be afraid; you have done all this evil, yet do not turn aside from following the Lord, but serve the Lord with all your heart; and do not turn aside after useless things that cannot profit or save, for they are useless. For the Lord will not cast away his people, for his great name’s sake, because it has pleased the Lord to make you a people for himself. Moreover as for me, far be it from me that I should sin against the Lord by ceasing to pray for you; and I will instruct you in the good and the right way” (1 Samuel 12:20-23).

### OPENING HYMN

“O God in Heaven” (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship* 748)

### OPENING PRAYER

Gracious God, you have created all, claimed all cherished creatures, and always call new creation into being. Grant us now, in this moment, openness to know your will, trust your call, and heed your will and word. In the name of your risen Son, Jesus Christ, Amen.

### BIBLE TEXT:

1 Samuel 12:12-23

### MATERIALS NEEDED:

- Bibles (NRSV preferred)
- Hymnals (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship*)
- Paper and pencils
- A white board, chalkboard or large paper for group questions

## Let us pray

Session one: The paradoxes of prayer

BY ANNA MADSEN

We are called to pray, but for what purpose? Can we persuade God with prayer? Do we actually encounter God in prayer? Is the practice of prayer intended for the sake of the one praying or for the One to whom we pray?

The Bible references all of these scenarios; however, each comes with biblical, theological and practical questions. In this first session on prayer, we’ll investigate the paradoxical truths of this spiritual practice.

■ **Read:** 1 Samuel 12:12-23

*“But when you saw that King Nahash of the Ammonites came against you, you said to me, ‘No, but a king shall reign over us,’ though the Lord your God was your king. See, here is the king whom you have chosen, for whom you have asked; see, the Lord has set a king over you. If you will fear the Lord and serve him and heed his voice and not rebel against the commandment of the Lord, and if both you and the king who reigns over you will follow the Lord your God, it will be well; but if you will not heed the voice of the Lord, but rebel against the commandment of the Lord, then the hand of the Lord will be against you and your king. Now therefore take your stand and see this great thing that the Lord will do before your eyes. Is it not the wheat harvest today? I will call upon the Lord, that he may send thunder and rain; and you shall know and see that the wickedness that you have done in the sight of the Lord is great in demanding a king for yourselves.” So Samuel called upon the Lord, and the Lord sent thunder and rain that*

*day; and all the people greatly feared the Lord and Samuel. All the people said to Samuel, "Pray to the Lord your God for your servants, so that we may not die; for we have added to all our sins the evil of demanding a king for ourselves." And Samuel said to the people, "Do not be afraid; you have done all this evil, yet do not turn aside from following the Lord, but serve the Lord with all your heart; and do not turn aside after useless things that cannot profit or save, for they are useless. For the Lord will not cast away his people, for his great name's sake, because it has pleased the Lord to make you a people for himself. Moreover as for me, far be it from me that I should sin against the Lord by ceasing to pray for you; and I will instruct you in the good and the right way."*

#### INTRODUCTION

This text from 1 Samuel comes at a turning point in the book. The people of Israel have begged Samuel to request a king on their behalf. Neither God nor Samuel were impressed by this request. Although they warned the people of the dangers of a king, ultimately Samuel and God relented, paving the way for the first King of Israel, Saul. In the passage for this session, Samuel appreciates that the people of Israel admit and repent of their demand for a king. Samuel promises that even so, he will pray on their behalf.

#### PARADOXICAL THOUGHT ONE

We pray to God, and sometimes God answers in ways that God would rather not.

Let's look at part of our text again:

■ **Read:** 1 Samuel 12:16-18

*"Now therefore take your stand and see this great thing that the Lord will do before your eyes. Is it*

*not the wheat harvest today? I will call upon the Lord, that he may send thunder and rain; and you shall know and see that the wickedness that you have done in the sight of the Lord is great in demanding a king for yourselves." So Samuel called upon the Lord, and the Lord sent thunder and rain that day; and all the people greatly feared the Lord and Samuel.*

#### A SHIFT IN TRUST

In 1 Samuel 8:4-20, a background text for understanding 1 Samuel 12, the people of Israel pled with Samuel to beg God, on their behalf, for a king. They were noticing that the neighboring countries had rulers, and insofar as Israel didn't, they felt the odd one out. Up until that point, God had been Israel's king, so their request marked a shift not only in Israel's political structure but in the direction of Israel's trust.

Samuel did as they wanted, and God agreed to let Israel have a king. However, God commanded Samuel to first announce a warning: Turning toward an earthly king and away from God as King would bring misery and despair upon Israel.

The text from 1 Samuel 12, then, takes place after Israel got what they asked for: King Saul.

In 1 Samuel 12:16-17, Samuel is at the end of his prophetic vocation. But he's not quite content to leave without making this point one more time: God preferred prophets to kings.

Embedded in these verses, there's even a double-entendre we don't get in English. The Hebrew name of the king whom they demanded—"Saul"—means "to ask." Ultimately, in Saul they got what they asked for. In "Enter the Bible," an online resource from Luther Seminary, Old Testament scholar Mark Throntveit suggests that Samuel might even be a bit snarky in this exchange with Israel. "Does his voice drop with sarcasm as he sneers, 'Well, here's the king you have chosen?'" Throntveit asks. It appears that Samuel hasn't yet quite worked through his own feelings of offense!

So to remind Israel again of who is indeed king—and who has more sway with God than a mere earthly king—Samuel asked God to cause a storm in the middle of the hot and dry season of the harvest.

God was happy to oblige.

With flair, Samuel demonstrated that although Israel got what they asked for, faith in a king should not be trusted more than faith in God or, for that matter, faith in God's prophets.

**Share aloud or reflect:**

1. When are times that you prayed and received precisely what you didn't want?
2. Have you ever defied what you were fairly sure was God's intent for you?
3. Why might God 'give us up' to ourselves?
4. Are there occasions when God's hands are tied by the hardness of our hearts and the consequences of our choices?

**PARADOXICAL THOUGHT TWO**

We pray to God, both to change God and to be changed by God.

■ **Read:** 1 Samuel 12:19-23:

*All the people said to Samuel, "Pray to the Lord your God for your servants, so that we may not die; for we have added to all our sins the evil of demanding a king for ourselves." And Samuel said to the people, "Do not be afraid; you have done all this evil, yet do not turn aside from following the Lord, but serve the Lord with all your*

*heart; and do not turn aside after useless things that cannot profit or save, for they are useless. For the Lord will not cast away his people, for his great name's sake, because it has pleased the Lord to make you a people for himself. Moreover as for me, far be it from me that I should sin against the Lord by ceasing to pray for you; and I will instruct you in the good and the right way.*

In contrast to the doom and gloom and threat of his warning in chapter 8, Samuel has finally caught Israel's attention. Here he seeks to comfort his people—people who are now afraid of the consequences of their insistence on a king. Not only are they afraid for the well-being of their nation, but for their well-being before the anger of the Lord.

Samuel's response is interesting: In Chapter 8 he is clearly ticked that Israel wanted a king more than a prophet—i.e., more than him.

However, here his heart seems to have softened.

There is almost a sense of a mother, fiercely angry at a child, who immediately relents of her fury when the child suddenly looks up with trembling lips and welling eyes, realizing what she or he had done wrong.

In this passage, Samuel the prophet, Samuel the truth-teller, becomes Samuel the comforter. Of greatest assurance, as a parting gift, Samuel promises to pray for Israel: "Moreover as for me, far be it from me that I should sin against the Lord by ceasing to pray for you; and I will instruct you in the good and the right way."

This act of prayer is a two-fold piece, as Samuel describes it: 1) He will hold the people of God before God in prayer, advocating for their well-being (the Hebrew word for "pray" here is better understood as "intercede on behalf of,"); and 2) he will relay to Israel what he, in his prayers, has gleaned is God's will.

The editors of the *HarperCollins Study Bible* make an interesting footnote on the text at this point: "With the advent of kingship, the role of the

prophet in the new age is defined as twofold: the prophet will be an intercessory between Israel and the Lord and an advocate of morality and justice.”

My friend, Pastor Tim Olson, nicely frames the dynamic of verse 23 this way: “If prayer affects God, it affects the Body of God, and if it affects the Body of God, it affects God.”

Taking both 1 Samuel 8 and 1 Samuel 12 together, God does indeed hear prayer. However, in prayer God intends us to hear God.

If we do hear—and heed—God, a new reality is called into being that gives a new framework for the next prayer.

If we don’t hear—or heed—God, yet a different new reality is called into being, that gives a new framework for the next prayer too.

In this parting verse, Samuel wants to communicate to Israel that he will indeed cherish Israel in his heart and in his prayers and send their pleas to God on their behalf. However, intercession to God leads to instruction from God. God hears our prayers, and then responds to them: God’s will, namely what Samuel calls “the good and the right way.”

His vocation as prophet calls him to both pray on behalf of and offer God’s intentions for the people of God.

**Share aloud or reflect:**

5. Who serves as a prophetic voice in your congregation? In your family? In your nation?
6. What are ways in which God’s instruction is conveyed?
7. Can you think of occasions in your personal life or in your congregational life when God’s “good and right way” was heeded and or was not?

8. On what basis does the body of Christ determine whether they are hearing God’s will or their own will or the will of a king?

9. In very different eras and in very different contexts, Sojourner Truth, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Leymah Gbowee served as prophetic voices to their communities and to their oppressors and detractors. On what basis do we evaluate these voices and others as prophetic and worthy of being heeded?

**CONCLUSION**

We often hear that God answers prayers. However, that doesn’t mean that God always answers our prayers as we want or as we expect. That said, these passages suggest that sometimes God *does* answer our prayers exactly as we frame them, even when God disagrees with our petition. There seems to be a relationship between our requests, the motivation for our requests and our willingness and ability to hear and respond to God’s response. Perhaps this passage invites us to consider the basis of our prayer requests, our receptivity to God’s word in return to us and our trust that, as Samuel says, “...the Lord will not cast away his people, for his great name’s sake, because it has pleased the Lord to make you a people for himself.”

**CLOSING PRAYER**

Gracious God, we give you thanks for your steadfast commitment to your people, even when we stray. Help us discern your will and heed it, and help us pray on behalf of your children and serve them, so that your righteousness may be seen and prevail. Amen.

**CLOSING HYMN**

“Lord, Listen to Your Children Praying,” (ELW 752) 

### SESSION MATERIALS

Bibles, pens, paint swatch strips or colored ribbons

### GOALS

To consider what our god/God is; to pay attention to those who pray and feel unheard; to offer opportunities to pray in community and alone.

# Let us pray

Session one: The paradoxes of prayer

BY ANNA MADSEN

### CONVERSATION TOPIC ONE: ALLEGIANCE

■ **Read Exodus 20:1-3:** *“Then God spoke all these words: I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me.”*

It’s not coincidental that the First Commandment of the Ten is, “You shall have no other gods than me.”

That is, God knew that there are options. Anything we consider to be most important—even in a passing moment—is our god; it’s the thing or the person to which we give our loyalty and our allegiance.

So when God said, “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me,” God was doing two things: identifying who God is by way of a history of liberation and acknowledging that even the saving event of the Exodus wouldn’t be sufficiently impressive to convince God’s people of unswerving loyalty; they would be (and are) chronically tempted by other gods.

Martin Luther defined a god as that in which or in whom we place our ultimate trust, namely the thing that in any given moment is most important to us.

It’s not always so easy to tell what is what and who is who, though. False gods can be sneaky. That is, it’s easy to identify malignant gods, things that can obviously destroy us: money, security, fame, addictions and so forth.

However, sometimes even benign things can become our gods: people who are key to us, for example, like children, partners or parents can become more important to us than anything else in the world.

Regardless of whether they are sneaky or obvious, a god demands loyalty or receives it from us whether it wants it or not. For example, if status becomes most important to us, then we sacrifice all of our identity to be defined by it: Our clothes, our house, our car all become expressions of our ultimate trust.

Sometimes these gods become ours without our consciously realizing it. For example, a woman named Valerie Saiving Goldstein, a graduate student in theology in the 1960s (that took chutzpah!) wrote a piece called “The Human Situation: A Feminine View.” In this article, she began to rethink—and even challenge—the foundational way that the Church, up until that point, had thought about sin. Moreover, she addressed it by way of gender stereotypes—a new, if not taboo, approach.

Saiving Goldstein wrote that traditionally, pride had been seen as the root of all sinfulness. Humility was therefore the antidote to pride.

But she raised the question of whether that paradigm works primarily for men.

In fact, Saiving Goldstein wondered, if you’re female, it may be that the matter is flipped: Thanks to cultural expectations of the role of women, accented all the more by a history of religious messages that women are to be subservient, the root of sinfulness is humility, and the antidote is pride.

The god of too much pride manifests itself in sins such as greed and will-to-power and violence, whereas the god of too much humility shows in tendencies toward manipulateness, passive-aggressiveness and gossip.

While we might see the stark delineation of male and female roles a bit too severe now, certainly in the ‘60s her observations resonated, and I think

one could make the case that today, her insight still offers wisdom.

And she makes another point: We sometimes don’t even see gods for what they are...or even that they are. Martin Luther will be helpful here. When Luther defined God, it’s worth noting that he didn’t say “Father/Son/Holy Spirit.” Instead, he said “...that in which we place our ultimate trust.” Luther was interpreting the First Commandment: It’s not that there aren’t other god-options, rather, it’s a matter of which god-option we will choose.

It’s helpful if we know that the word “ultimate” means last, or final. There’s a related word, however, that means the thing right *before* the ultimate: That word is “penultimate.”

People use both words all the time when they learn biblical Greek. It turns out that Greek has a lot of accent marks above words. Depending upon which syllable the accent mark sits above, the meaning of the word changes. So any student of Greek has to know that the “ultimate” syllable is the last syllable, and the “penultimate” syllable is the second-to-last syllable: For example, in the word “penultimate,” “-mate” is the ultimate syllable, and “-ti” is the *penultimate* syllable.

Luther is suggesting that sometimes we put our trust not in the ultimate (last/final) God (Father/Son/Holy Spirit), but rather in a penultimate (second-to-last) one (money, fame, security and so forth).

We make the ultimate penultimate and the penultimate ultimate. We make God into a god, and gods into God. In this passage from 1 Samuel, the people of Israel made their desire for a king their god: It was their ultimate goal. God and Samuel both knew that their trust in a king was misdirected.

Interestingly, Luther defined sin as misdirected trust: that is, when we trust in something that is not God as if it were. These texts from 1 Samuel may inspire some conversation about penultimate

gods that members of the Bible study might be worshipping—or tempted to worship—in their own lives.

Too, they might inspire conversations about the role of king (in our context, president) in our day and age.

While the U.S. president is understood to be a secular elected official, it shouldn't go unnoticed that our seal says, "In God We Trust."

Some interesting—and perhaps provoking—questions might concern how Christians should view allegiance to the U.S. president, particularly when it may contrast with our baptized allegiance to God.

#### CONVERSATION TOPIC TWO: PRAYERS THAT FEEL UNHEARD

📖 **Read:** Psalm 130

This session demands powerful and gentle attentiveness to people who have suffered, not least of all because their prayers have appeared to have gone unheard.

Think, for example, of the participant who has been unable to bear children, who has had a child die, who has experienced betrayal, sickness and solitude. Consider the one who has engaged in sin, who has trusted a false god and is uncertain of God's response and, even, love.

Psalm 130 was Luther's favorite psalm. He found it a great comfort when he himself suffered doubt (the German word is *Anfechtung*, which can't be well translated into English, but is a bit of a combination of doubt, despair and profound alienation).

Although most scholars believe that it was written by someone who has sinned, and therefore is fearful of God's wrath, it is a psalm that is occasionally used to comfort those who feel forgotten by God and entirely alone.

Verses 5-6 read:

*I wait for the Lord, my soul waits,  
and in his word I hope;  
my soul waits for the Lord  
more than those who watch for the morning,  
more than those who watch for the morning.*

While the psalmist ends in trusting God's love overcoming the sin, there may be those in this group who are still 'watching for the morning.'

Be at the ready to listen, be prepared to offer them comfort, and be alert to specific ways that their prayers can, in fact, be heard and translated into healing and hopeful action.

#### CLOSING ACTIVITIES

1. The North Carolina Synod of the ELCA posted a creative idea to Pinterest about communal prayer: Gather paint chips or swatches in an array of color schemes and shades, the likes of which you find in a paint aisle display to take home and compare hues.

Invite people to write their prayers on the swatches, finding colors to represent the emotions associated with the prayers.

Consider cutting each prayer into an individual square. You might invite someone in your group with an artistic eye to assemble them into a figure, perhaps to be hung as liturgical art in the narthex or even sanctuary. You might also invite the rest of the congregation to participate.

Using the same principle, you may substitute colored ribbons for this activity, using permanent marker to write prayers on the ribbon. These could be assembled into a mobile.

2. Because often prayer is experienced as speaking to God, but not letting God speak, it might be interesting to provide a way for those attending this study to intentionally listen for God.

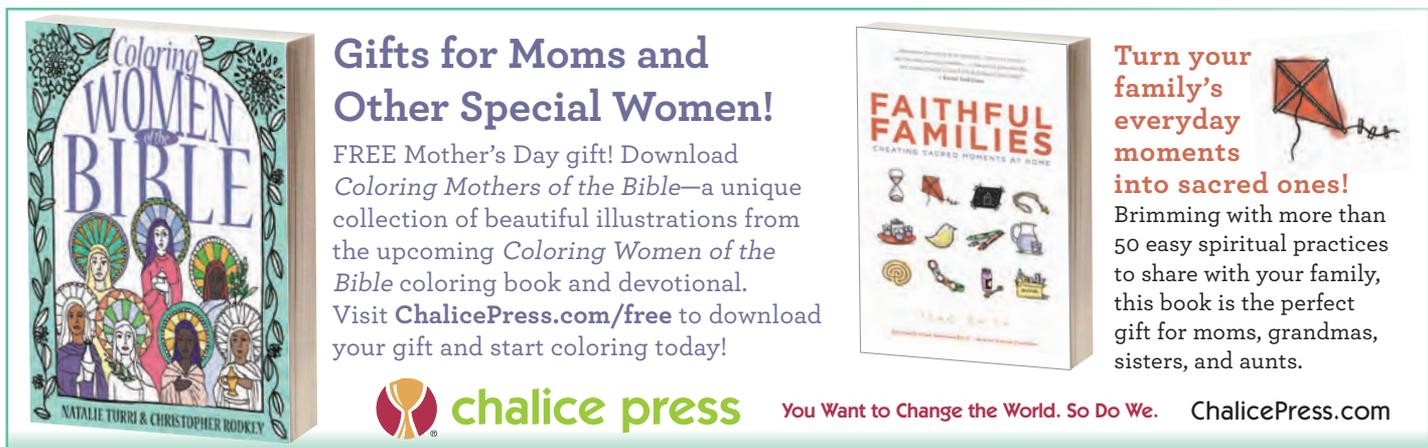
One way of doing that is to invite the women to take some paper and a writing instrument and find a quiet place to pray.

After they have settled into their spot, invite them to write their name, with a colon after it. Following the colon, ask them to write what they would like to offer to God in prayer. Then have them take some time to listen for God's response.

When they are ready, have them write down God's name, and a colon, and then what they believe God has to say to them.

This written conversation can go on for as long as it is helpful. It can be a powerfully effective way to listen not only more clearly to God, but to oneself before God. It can happen that during this dialogue, clarity emerges both in terms of what one determines one feels or wants to express, and in terms of what one believes God's will for oneself to be: The act of writing down what one believes God is saying is a moving and humbling experience!

Depending on the level of trust within the group, the participants could be invited back to share what they have experienced. 🌿



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