

World Day of Prayer

"United in Prayer for Justice and Peace"

1 Samuel 2:1-10 & Luke 1:39-55

Prepared by WDPIC

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Bible Study

INTENTION

Through our united prayers, we have made visible God's desire for justice and peace in every corner of the earth. Our century of informed prayer and prayerful action has brought us into participation with God's transforming work. We celebrate the joyful meeting of women across generations—from Hannah and Mary to the women who started a day of prayer for the world in 1887, to those who established a World Day of Prayer in 1927, to our global sisterhood today. The 2027 centennial marks not our beginning, but a significant milestone in a much larger stream of faithful witness that flows through history. Our prayers join this timeless chorus that transcends boundaries, singing of a God who transforms the world. When we gather, we experience the joy of Elizabeth and Mary—a recognition that something new is growing within our movement, bringing life and hope. For 100 years, our movement has refused to be silenced or discouraged, even during world wars and times of deep conflict. As we join the song for our next hundred years, we recommit to creating spaces where justice flourishes and peace takes root.

Opening Prayer

We magnify your name, O God of life. You are the God of widows and orphans, the poor and childless. Thank you for seeing, and caring for, the most vulnerable throughout the ages.

Like a river flowing through time, the prayers of faithful women connect us across centuries and generations. God of our ancestors and God of our future, we thank you for Hannah and Mary, whose songs still flow into our lives today, calling us to prayer and action.

As we study your Word, guide our hearts to understand and feel your presence in our lives. Help us in our struggles, our fears, and our anxieties. And help us see how you are calling us into a future where justice and peace can flourish. Amen.

Introduction

As we celebrate the centennial of World Day of Prayer in 2027, we find ourselves in a world still yearning for justice and peace. For one hundred years, women across the globe have united in prayer, transcending boundaries of nation, culture, and denomination. Our prayers have made visible God's desire for justice and peace in every corner of the earth, yet our work continues.

Throughout our century of faithful witness, World Day of Prayer has intentionally read the Bible through a global lens and from women's perspectives. We have discovered that when women from different cultures and contexts study Scripture together, new insights emerge that might otherwise remain hidden. As we approach our centennial, we continue this tradition of contextual Bible reading, bringing our diverse experiences into dialogue with these ancient texts.

We live in a time of continued inequality and conflict. Many women still face discrimination, gender-based violence, economic injustice, and exclusion from decision-making processes.* Nations remain divided by borders both visible and invisible. Environmental changes threaten the most vulnerable communities first. The powerful often remain on their thrones while the lowly struggle to be heard.

Yet for a century, our prayers have persisted. Through world wars, pandemics, political upheavals, and economic crises, women of faith have never stopped gathering to pray for a better world. This constancy reminds us of the biblical women whose songs of faith still resonate with us today—Hannah and Mary, whose voices rose in praise and prophecy during their own challenging times.

These two women, separated by centuries but united by faith and action, offer us profound wisdom as we mark this significant milestone. Their songs reveal a God who sees those society overlooks, who lifts up the lowly, who stands with the marginalized, and who works through supposedly "insignificant" people to transform the world. As we study their words, we join in their timeless chorus that transcends boundaries and sings of a God who brings justice and peace.

**For more information on women, peace and security globally, see: https://www.unwomen.org/en/articles/facts-and-figures/facts-and-figures-women-peace-and-security*

Background: Hannah and Mary in Context

Hannah's Story

Hannah lived during the time of the Judges, around 1100 BCE, a period marked by political instability, violence, and moral decline. Her story begins with personal suffering that reflects broader social dynamics of power, marginalization, and women's place in ancient society.

As the first wife of Elkanah, Hannah was deeply loved by her husband but unable to bear children, which brought her great shame in a society where a woman's worth was often measured by her fertility. Hannah's rival, Peninnah (Elkanah's second wife), had several children and constantly provoked and humiliated Hannah about her barrenness. Year after year, Hannah would weep and refuse to eat during the family's annual pilgrimage to worship at Shiloh. Her suffering was both personal and social—she experienced both the grief of unfulfilled desire and the stigma imposed by her community.

Hannah's story reveals complex social dynamics at play: although she was the first wife and more beloved by her husband, her inability to bear children placed her in a position of social inadequacy and shame. She was ostracized for failing to fulfill the societal norm of motherhood. Moreover, Hannah faced a precarious future—as a much younger woman than Elkanah, she would likely outlive him and, without a son, would become a fringe member of society with only a life of poverty to look forward to. Her distress was not only emotional, it was also economic and social. Without a child, Hannah had no security, no voice in community decisions, no protection for her vulnerable future.

Hannah was a woman of determined faith who refused to accept her situation passively. Rather than succumbing to despair, she took initiative to seek God directly through prayer. Scripture tells us, "In her deep anguish Hannah prayed to the Lord, weeping bitterly" (1 Samuel 1:10). This prayer lifted from a place of crisis showed that Hannah was fighting for her very survival and dignity in a world that had no place for a childless woman.

In her desperation, Hannah prayed fervently at the temple, vowing to dedicate her child to God's service if the Lord would remember her. The high priest Eli mistook her silent, passionate prayer for drunkenness—an ironic misreading that speaks to how women's authentic expressions of faith are often misunderstood, misrepresented, and misinterpreted by those in positions of power. Even Elkanah's loving response—"Am I not more to you than ten sons?"—reveals his inability to fully comprehend Hannah's situation from her perspective. He could not understand what it meant to be a woman in her society, facing a future of marginalization and poverty.

Prayer takes on special meaning in times of suffering or crisis, when reliance on God's help becomes essential for survival. Hannah's prayer was both deeply personal and profoundly theological. Yes, she wanted a child for herself, but she also understood that her soul's desire aligned with God's purposes. She was not merely asking for a private blessing but offering herself as a partner in God's work in the world.

God heard Hannah's prayer and granted her a son, whom she named Samuel ("God has heard"). True to her promise, after weaning him, Hannah brought Samuel to the temple to serve God

under Eli's guidance. Through her faithfulness, this seemingly insignificant woman from an obscure family became the mother of one of Israel's greatest leaders. Hannah's initiative and courage changed not just her own life but the entire course of her people's history. Her song of thanksgiving, recorded in 1 Samuel 2:1-10, transcends her personal circumstances to become a powerful proclamation of God's character and justice.

Mary's Story

More than a millennium later, in a small Galilean village under Roman occupation, a young woman named Mary received an unexpected divine visitation. The angel Gabriel announced that she would conceive and bear a son who would be called the Son of the Most High. Unlike Hannah, who had longed desperately for a child, Mary had not sought this responsibility. As an unmarried young woman (likely a teenager), pregnancy put her in a precarious position—not just risking shame to her family and her betrothal to Joseph, but potentially endangering her very life in a society where the punishment for perceived adultery could be stoning.

Imagine the turmoil in Mary's heart—fear, confusion, wonder, and perhaps even anger. Her life plans were suddenly overturned; her future became uncertain. Despite these overwhelming emotions, Mary responded with remarkable faith: "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word" (Luke 1:38). This wasn't a placid acceptance but a courageous embrace of a dangerous calling, knowing full well the risks she would face.

Mary's "yes" to God must be understood not just as spiritual obedience but as embodied, risky, costly commitment. Her pregnancy would bring shame not just on herself but on her entire family, potentially endangering their social standing and economic security. In communities where reputation and honor determine access to resources and relationships, Mary's situation threatened everyone connected to her. Yet she trusted that God sees and values those whom society overlooks and condemns.

Shortly after the annunciation, Mary "went with haste" to visit her relative Elizabeth in the hill country of Judea. This was not a casual visit—Mary had urgent reasons to seek out Elizabeth. First, the angel had specifically mentioned Elizabeth's miraculous pregnancy as a sign. If such an impossible thing could happen to an elderly woman, perhaps Mary could better comprehend her own impossible situation. Second, Elizabeth's home offered safety. As the wife of Zechariah, a priest, Elizabeth's household held a position of respect that could temporarily shield Mary while she processed what was happening. Third, and perhaps most importantly, Mary needed someone who might understand and believe her—a trusted confidant who could serve as a safe harbor in the storm.

We must resist romanticizing this biblical story. These were difficult times with limited resources. Mary's journey to Elizabeth's home would have been arduous and potentially dangerous for a young woman traveling alone. This wasn't a serene holiday visit but a desperate flight to sanctuary while Joseph had yet to receive his own angelic visitation that would convince him to stand by Mary.

When Elizabeth greeted Mary, her unborn child (John the Baptist) leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit, blessed Mary. This moment of recognition and solidarity

between women of different generations gave Mary the space to find her voice. For the first time since the angel's visit, Mary received validation and understanding. Elizabeth's recognition transformed Mary's fear into prophetic clarity. An older woman created space for a younger woman's voice—she affirmed rather than silenced, recognized God at work rather than condemned the scandal. The fear in Mary's heart began to transform into strength and clarity. Her response, known as the Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55), echoes many themes from Hannah's song and reveals Mary's deep understanding of scripture and prophetic tradition.

An important distinction to note is that while Hannah sang her prophetic song in the central sanctuary (the Tabernacle), Mary sang her prophetic song in Elizabeth's residence. This shift from institutional space to domestic space reflects an early development in how worship and prophetic witness would evolve in the Christian period, with homes becoming important centers of worship alongside formal sanctuaries.

The encounter between Elizabeth and Mary demonstrates the power of intergenerational relationships among women. Elizabeth, representing older wisdom and experience, creates space for Mary, the young prophet, to find her voice. Our wellbeing and our ability to speak truth are deeply connected to the community that surrounds us. Elizabeth, representing older wisdom and experience, creates space for Mary, the young prophet, to find her voice. She does not dismiss Mary's experience as impossible or condemn her situation as shameful. Instead, she blesses Mary and affirms that God is at work in her life.

This dynamic mirrors what happens in World Day of Prayer when women of different ages, cultures, and experiences come together to study Scripture and support one another's faith journeys. When we create communities where women can speak their truth without fear of condemnation, where different generations affirm rather than compete with each other, we become like Elizabeth's home—sanctuaries where prophetic voices can emerge.

Study of the Texts

Note: This Bible study contains many questions for reflection and discussion. Feel free to answer as many or as few as time allows. Some groups may choose to work through the study over multiple sessions.

This Bible study invites us to engage with these ancient texts while bringing our own questions and experiences to the conversation. As we read Hannah's and Mary's songs, we create a dialogue between their contexts and ours, allowing their words to shed light on our contemporary struggles for justice and peace. This contextual approach helps us discover new insights for our own lives and communities.

1. Observation: What do the texts say?

(Read both passages aloud, perhaps using different voices for Hannah and Mary. You might consider having them read by women of different ages, to emphasize the intergenerational aspect.)

1 Samuel 2:1-10

1 Hannah prayed and said: "My heart exults in the Lord; my strength is exalted in my God. My mouth derides my enemies, because I rejoice in your victory.

2 There is no Holy One like the Lord, no one besides you; there is no Rock like our God. 3 Talk no more so very proudly, let not arrogance come from your mouth, for the Lord is a God of knowledge, and by him actions are weighed. 4 The bows of the mighty are broken, but the feeble gird on strength. 5 Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread, but those who were hungry are fat with spoil. The barren has borne seven, but she who has many children is forlorn. 6 The Lord kills and brings to life; he brings down to Sheol and raises up. 7 The Lord makes poor and makes rich; he brings low; he also exalts. 8 He raises up the poor from the dust; he lifts the needy from the ash heap, to make them sit with princes and inherit a seat of honor. For the pillars of the earth are the Lord's, and on them he has set the world.

9 He will guard the feet of his faithful ones, but the wicked will perish in darkness; for not by might does one prevail. 10 The Lord! His adversaries will be shattered; the Most High will thunder in heaven. The Lord will judge the ends of the earth; he will give strength to his king, and exalt the power of his anointed."

Luke 1:39-55

39 In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, 40 where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. 41 When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit 42 and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. 43 And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? 44 For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. 45 And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

46 And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, 47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, 48 for he has looked with favor on the lowly state of his servant. Surely from now on all generations will call me blessed, 49 for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name; 50 indeed, his mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. 51 He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. 52 He has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly; 53 he has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty. 54 He has come to the aid of his child Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, 55 according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

Discussion Questions:

1. What words or phrases stand out to you in each text? Are there any words or phrases in your local language that carry special meaning?

2. What similarities do you notice between Hannah's song and Mary's Magnificat?

3. What differences do you observe between the two songs?

4. Both songs move from personal experience to broader community concerns. How do you see this progression in each text?

5. What insights do these songs give us about Hannah and Mary's relationship with God? How do their words reveal their understanding of who God is?

6. What do these songs tell us about:
    a. God's character?
    b. God's actions in the world?
    c. The relationship between God and those who are marginalized?
    d. The role of women in God's redemptive work?

7. What do you notice about the meeting between Mary and Elizabeth? How does this intergenerational encounter create space for Mary's prophetic voice?

8. Notice how both women spoke of God's justice as already accomplished, even though injustice still existed in their times. What does this prophetic perspective teach us?

2. Interpretation: Hannah and Mary's Songs in Dialogue with Our World

A. Understanding Their Relationship with God

1. Hannah describes God as her "Rock" while Mary calls God her "Savior." What do these images tell us about how they experienced God in their lives?

2. How did their relationship with God give them courage to speak boldly despite their vulnerable positions in society?

3. Both women demonstrate what one scholar calls moving from "humble servants granted private gifts" to becoming "public witnesses of God's mercy." How do you see this transformation in their stories?

4. Prayer has been defined as "a type of union with God concerned with petition, praise, and thanksgiving, which may be thought, spoken, chanted, or sung." How do Hannah and Mary's songs expand our understanding of what prayer can be?

B. Learning from Their Songs and Stories

1. Both songs describe God reversing the fortunes of the powerful and vulnerable. How does this vision connect to our theme "United in Prayer for Justice and Peace"?

2. Hannah moved "beyond her personal circumstances to consider the broader operations of the Lord's hand." How do you see this same movement in Mary's song?

3. Both Hannah and Mary speak of God reversing economic fortunes—the hungry being filled, the rich sent away empty, those who were full now hiring themselves out for bread. What do these economic reversals mean in your community? What does it mean that both women declare God is actively intervening to redistribute resources and power?

4. Both women's songs echo Psalm 113, which speaks of God lifting up the poor and making "the barren woman a home, making her the joyous mother of children." How might this psalm have shaped their understanding of God's character?

5. Mary's song echoes Hannah's across generations, showing continuity in women's prophetic witness. How might our 100-year World Day of Prayer history continue this tradition?

6. Hannah declares "for not by might does one prevail" (v. 9). This challenges the world's assumption that power comes through military strength or force. How does this vision connect to women's approaches to creating justice and peace? What does it mean that both Hannah and Mary proclaim God's power works differently than worldly power?

7. Consider the different spaces where these songs were offered—Hannah in the Tabernacle (institutional space) and Mary in Elizabeth's home (domestic space). What might this teach us about where and how we pray and witness?

C. Connecting Personal and Communal Prayer

1. How might we follow Hannah and Mary's pattern of beginning with personal thanksgiving before expanding to broader justice concerns?

2. Both women were ready to seize opportunities when they came. How can we prepare ourselves to be ready for the opportunities God sends our way?

3. Hannah and Mary both took action when opportunities arose. What concrete steps might God be calling you or your community to take?

4. How has prayer sustained you and your community during difficult times, just as it did for Hannah and Mary?

3. Discussion: Connecting to Our Theme

Conclude the conversation by summarizing what the theme "United in Prayer for Justice and Peace" means in light of Hannah's and Mary's songs. Consider the following questions:

1. What do Hannah and Mary teach us about the power of prayer to envision and create a more just world?

2. Hannah and Mary didn't just pray for comfort in their difficult circumstances—they prayed prayers that proclaimed God's justice and called for concrete change. How do these songs challenge or comfort us as we face injustice and violence in our own time?

3. How might Hannah's and Mary's examples inspire us to use our own voices for justice and peace?

4. What does it mean for us to be "united in prayer" across generations, cultures, and denominations as these women were united across time? How did Elizabeth and Mary model this unity?

5. Both Hannah and Mary lived under systems that marginalized them—yet they proclaimed a God who reverses unjust power structures. What systems in our world need God's reversal? How does our prayer become an act of resistance against systems of oppression?

6. Both women demonstrate that a woman's voice matters and can lead to change. How might we amplify women's voices in our communities?

7. These women's songs look backward to God's faithfulness and forward to God's promises. As we mark our centennial, how do we similarly honor our past while embracing our future?

Application: Moving to Prayerful Action

The participants may choose one or more of the following activities:

Individual Reflection

Write your own prayer or song inspired by Hannah and Mary that speaks to a justice issue in your local context. Consider moving from personal experience to broader societal concerns as these women did. You might begin with thanksgiving for God's presence in your life, then expand to speak about God's desire for justice in your community or nation. Like Hannah and Mary, don't be afraid to name specific reversals you long to see—who needs to be lifted up? What unjust power structures need to be brought down? Who is hungry and needs to be filled?

Intergenerational Dialogue

Create an opportunity for younger and older women in your community to share their experiences of faith and activism with each other. This might be through:

- A structured conversation where women of different generations interview each other
- A creative project where women share their stories through art, music, or poetry
- A mentoring relationship that pairs older and younger women
- A "wisdom circle" where women of all ages share what they've learned about faith and justice

Elizabeth created sanctuary for Mary when she was most vulnerable, and affirmed Mary's calling when others might have condemned her. How can older women create such sanctuaries today? How can younger women, like Mary, find courage to speak their prophetic truth? How might you create spaces where, like Elizabeth and Mary, women of different generations can recognize and affirm each other's gifts?

Community Timeline

Create a visual timeline that connects the stories of Hannah and Mary with the 100-year history of World Day of Prayer and your local community's involvement in prayer and justice work. Include:

- Key moments in biblical history (Hannah's song, Mary's Magnificat)
- Important events in World Day of Prayer history
- Significant moments in your local community's journey toward justice
- Personal or family stories of faith and activism

How does your community's story fit into this larger narrative of God's work through faithful women? What "reversals" has your community witnessed or participated in? When have you seen the hungry fed, the lowly lifted up, the powerful brought down from their thrones?

Creative Expression

- Create a dialogue between Hannah and Mary as if they could meet across time. What would they say to each other? What would they say to women of faith today?
- Develop a drama or readers' theater presentation of their stories
- Compose music or find existing songs that echo the themes of their songs
- Create visual art (paintings, collages, sculptures) that represents the themes of reversal and justice in their songs
- Write poetry inspired by their prophetic voices

Economic Justice Commitment

Hannah and Mary both proclaim God's commitment to economic justice—filling the hungry, sending the rich away empty, reversing the fortunes of the powerful and the poor. As a group, identify one specific economic injustice in your community—perhaps related to women's wages, access to land or resources, food insecurity, housing, or exploitation of workers. Drawing inspiration from Hannah's initiative and Mary's courage, consider:

- What would economic reversal look like in your specific context? Who would be lifted up? What systems would need to change?
- What is one concrete action your group could take to address this injustice?
- How can you use your voices to speak truth about economic inequality?

Broader Justice Commitment

Identify one concrete action your group can take in the coming year to address an issue of injustice or conflict in your community, inspired by the themes in Hannah's and Mary's songs. Consider:

- Advocating for women's rights and gender equality
- Supporting programs that lift up those living in poverty
- Working for peace in areas of conflict
- Addressing issues that particularly affect women and children
- Creating safe spaces for marginalized voices to be heard
- Challenging systems or policies that concentrate wealth and power in the hands of a few
- Standing in solidarity with those whose voices are silenced or ignored

Remember that small acts of courage can change history. Hannah went to the temple to pray when she had nowhere else to turn. Mary journeyed to Elizabeth's home when she needed support. What is the first step your community can take?

Conclusion

As we mark the centennial of World Day of Prayer, Hannah and Mary remind us that our united prayers are not just words but powerful declarations of God's justice breaking into our world.

Like these faithful women, we are called to sing boldly of the world as it should be, even when the reality around us falls short.

Both women show us that prayer takes on special meaning in times of suffering or crisis. They direct their emotions into prayers that look backward to God's faithfulness in the past and forward to God's promises for the future. Both women transcend their personal circumstances to consider the broader operations of God's hand in the world.

Hannah and Mary demonstrate that persistent prayer and readiness for opportunity can lead to transformation. They show us that a woman's voice matters and can lead to change. Their stories encourage us to find our own voices and to speak boldly about God's desire for justice and peace.

When women of faith unite their voices across generations and nations, God's transformative power is made manifest. Hannah and Mary's songs continue to echo through the centuries, inviting us to add our own voices to their chorus, proclaiming a God who lifts up the lowly, fills the hungry with good things, and brings peace to a world torn by conflict.

May our next century of prayer bring us ever closer to the just and peaceful world that Hannah and Mary envisioned, that God promises, and that all creation longs for.

Closing Prayer

Loving God, you are our refuge throughout history, the present, and the future. Thank you for the witness of Hannah and Mary, whose songs have flowed like a river across the centuries, carrying hope and courage to countless women.

Thank you for working through the most vulnerable and humble in the world. You call us not only to receive private gifts, but to raise our voices in public and prophetic witness.

Help us hear your voice and recognize what we need to do. Give us courage to take even a small step, and help us be open to the opportunities you are sending our way.

Thank you for one hundred years of women united in prayer. As we add our voices to this flowing river of faith, bless each small act we do for you and others. In the name of our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer, we pray. Amen.

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