

# People Under pressure



The Bible is full of stories. Real stories of real people. In this series we will look at 5 people from the Old Testament who each faced a different issue that challenged them in their life and in their walk with God. And in their stories we can learn some things that will help us with our story, as we too face all sorts of pressures. Enjoy!

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# Hannah

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## for a starter

Expectations are wonderful things...so long as you meet them. Each culture and sub-culture has their own set of expectations. What are some of the expectations you feel in your world? (e.g. for some females it may be being beautiful and thin, for some males it may be being tall and sporty, etc)

## into it

Barren. A word feared by Jewish women of the past. In the days of BC children were the signs of success for a woman. So if you were married and still didn't have any kids, the pressure was on. Let's have a look at Hannah's story to see how she handles the pressure. Read on...

## read 1 Samuel 1:1 - 2:11

- Begin by sharing any general reflections, questions and thoughts on the passage.
- Put yourself in Hannah's shoes for a minute.
  - Every year Hannah would go with her husband and family to the Feast of Tabernacles, which celebrated with 'joy and feasting' God's blessings on the year's crops (i.e. the fertility of the land in stark contrast with Hannah's fertility).
  - Every month Hannah's hope for a child would be dashed with the arrival of her period.
  - Every day, as Peninnah's children ran around the house, Hannah would have their laughter and shouting ringing in her ears.
  - And to top it all off, Peninnah kept rubbing her nose in it.How would you feel if you were Hannah?
- Do you think her husband understood what she was going through? And do you think his response to Hannah's misery added to or alleviated her pain?
- Hannah sounded pretty miserable. She wasn't living up to the expectations of others around her, or her own expectations. How do you handle situations like that? What sort of response does it bring out in you? (e.g. some talk to everyone about how they're feeling, others go deathly quiet, some get violent, others get drunk,..)
- How did Hannah respond in this story?
- How can you best explain 1 Samuel 1:18 where Hannah, who was deeply troubled and not eating anything, suddenly snaps out of it – especially considering that nothing tangible has changed and Hannah will be returning to the same home with the same people and problems?
- Look at Hannah's prayer in 1 Samuel 2:1-10. What stands out to you about the way Hannah views God?
- Do we only believe in God's power when we see it in action?
- What, if anything, from Hannah's story could we take and make work for us?

## getting honest

Hannah's child was Samuel. He was the crucial line to God as Israel set up its monarchy. Out of Hannah's barrenness and nothing, God made something. And God has a long track record of making 'somethings' out of 'nothings'. Spend a couple of minutes by yourself thinking about areas of your life where you feel you are 'under-performing' or not meeting expectations or just generally feeling pressure in. Talk to God about it and ask him to make something significant out of your 'nothing'.

## has God been here?

What has this experience been like today as we've done this? To finish off, it'd be great to share anything that has been said or read today that has impacted and/or challenged you – or even if you haven't been able to get into it, that'd be good to say too. This is a great chance to get real with each other.

# Jeremiah

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### for a starter

The sweet taste of success! There is nothing like it. Success is what makes life satisfying. But when it comes down to it, what does it actually mean to be successful? What is success? For a starter, as a group come up with your combined list of the 5 most successful people of the last 10 years. They can be in any field and any nationality. When you've agreed on your list, discuss the question: in your eyes, what are the things that made these people successful?

### who is Jeremiah?

God asked Jeremiah to be a prophet, telling the Israelites things that God wanted them to hear. And although he was timid by nature, Jeremiah agreed. So he was God's messenger to his people for some 40 years (626-586BC). Unfortunately, most of what God wanted to say at the time was hard for the people to swallow, so Jeremiah was seen as a bit of a prophet of doom. He said that because the people weren't listening to God and relying on him, then God would give them the chaos they wanted. So, during Jeremiah's lifetime, five kings came and went from the throne, his people were taken into captivity, and Jerusalem and the temple were destroyed. This was the 'darkest hour' for Judah. Jeremiah never married and had only a small handful of friends. As far as tradition goes, after being carried off against his will into Egypt, he was stoned to death. Wouldn't you love to be in his shoes?

### read together the following passages

These are about some of the tough times Jeremiah faced in his life.

Jer 18:13-18

Jer 19:14-20:2

Jer 26:1-11, 24

Jer 32:1-2

Jer 36:1-3, 20-26

Jer 37:11-16

Jer 38:1-6

Jer 42:19-43:3

- Do you think Jeremiah was a failure?

Jeremiah was called by God to be a prophet...and his job description looked pretty demanding:

"I will pronounce my judgements on my people because of their wickedness in forsaking me, in burning incense to other gods and in worshipping what their hands have made.

"Get yourself ready! Stand up and say to them whatever I command you. Do not be terrified by them, or I will terrify you before them. Today I have made you a fortified city, an iron pillar and a bronze wall to stand against the whole land--against the kings of Judah, its officials, its priests and the people of the land. They will fight against you but will not overcome you, for I am with you and will rescue you," declares the LORD. Jer 1:16-19

And just to make things a little more plain, God gave Jeremiah an insight into how they'd respond...

"When you tell them all this, they will not listen to you; when you call to them, they will not answer." Jer 7:27

- Ok. So God told him it would be tough. And maybe he said the things God wanted him to. But still, wasn't he a failure? Wasn't God expecting him to bring about repentance and improvement in Israel?
- What then, is your definition of success and failure? What place do results and tangibles have in your definitions?
- What are some of the criteria you might use to judge whether or not you have been successful in your life?
- Jeremiah experienced intense feelings of rejection, failure and probably depression. The results of his work weren't good. **read Lamentations 3:13-24**. What did Jeremiah do here to pull himself out of his misery? Sometimes things won't work out for us either. In what ways might his approach help us?

### getting honest

"With what shall I come before the LORD and bow down before the exalted God? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God." Micah 6:6-8

What God calls 'success' is laughable by the standards of the world we live in. By God's standards, power, fame and fortune are more likely to *stop* you attaining true success rather than defining it. Spend a minute by yourself thinking about your true hopes and dreams. You have limited time and energy and only one life. Is the ladder you're climbing resting against the wrong building? Talk to God about it.

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# Jonah

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### for a starter

Sharing. O yeah, sure we're into that. It's good to help others out. But theory and practice sometimes don't go together quite so easily. Here's a good scenario to compare answers on: **what would you do** if you were doing a major assignment that was tough. You spent all day looking for books in the library but nothing seemed to be what you were after. By pure chance, on your way out, you stumble across the book that will give you the answers you want. After completing your assignment and returning the book, you meet a couple of students (who don't do lots of work) and they are saying they've had a bit of a look but can't find anything helpful with the assignment. Would you share your find with them?

### who is Jonah? (and we're not talking about Lomu)

Jonah was an Israelite prophet of God during the reign of Jeroboam, the king of the Northern Kingdom of Israel in the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC. As a prophet, Jonah was used to delivering messages from God to people who had stuffed things up. But this assignment was different. God asked Jonah to take a message to Nineveh, the capital of Assyria. The Assyrians as a people were into all sorts of gods, and their army was infamous for its savage cruelties. Surely God was the God of Israel – what was he doing showing interest in anyone else – especially these 'gentile dogs'? Read on...

### read Jonah ch 1-4

- Begin by sharing any general reflections, questions and thoughts on the passage.
- As a prophet, Jonah was used to doing some tough assignments. So why, then, do you think he ran away from this task?
- And then came the whale incident. While Jonah was inside, he obviously had a bit of time to think and compose a little prayer. What is the 'feel' and the gist of Jonah's prayer (ch 2)?
- How did the Ninevite people respond to Jonah's message? Would you have expected this if you were Jonah?
- When God didn't send devastation on Nineveh, Jonah was displeased and angry (4:1). Why? Why should he be so angry about someone else's good fortune? And how can you make sense of this anger especially in light of Jonah's prayer in ch 2?
- How did God respond to Jonah's anger? (*and if Jesus had of responded to him he probably would have told him the parable of the workers in the vineyard Mat 20:1-16*)
- Can you identify with any of Jonah's feelings and sentiments?
- Why does this happen and what can we do about it? (note also the warning Jesus gives us if we don't do anything about it mt 18:23-34)

### getting honest

Jonah was selfish. He wanted to keep all the 'good stuff' to himself. Don't you? But God is different. He recklessly spreads his 'good stuff' to one and all. If he didn't, then we would never have gotten the invitation to join his family of love in the first place. God has given to us, and he expects us to join him in passing the 'good stuff' on to others. So...spend a couple of minutes by yourself thinking about the people around you – especially those you don't like and who you feel don't deserve your help. Think about practical ways you can share with them.

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# Joseph

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## for a starter

Things have a habit of going wrong...especially with things beyond your control. And it can seem difficult to see how God can make anything good out of *this*. So to start with, why don't you share your stories of things that have gone wrong for you which don't seem to have any positive outcome (humorous or otherwise!).

## who is Joseph?

Abraham was at the start of things, and he had a son: Isaac. Isaac had two sons: Esau and Jacob. And Jacob (also called 'Israel'), had 12 sons. These sons became the foundational beginning for the 12 tribes of Israel. And one of these is Joseph. Joseph's story runs through Genesis ch37-50 and contains many up and down moments...mostly down moments. His story begins with a dream of greatness, only to be followed by many moments of misery brought on by other people, which seemed to be taking him further away from his dream rather than closer to it. And in all of this tough stuff, God seemed to be pretty quiet, giving no immediate light on what was going on. So what do you do when your dreams don't materialise?

If Joseph lived today, we would probably consider him a "victim" of unjust circumstances - a man whose personal "rights" had been ignored or violated. But how did Joseph see himself?

## read Genesis ch 37,39 and 40

- Begin by sharing any general reflections, questions and thoughts on the passage.
- His brothers sell him as a slave, he is falsely imprisoned for attempted rape, and just when his hope rises a little with his interpreting of a dream, the cupbearer dashes it by forgetting all about him. And as far as God's involvement goes, all we are told is that God was with him – there is no 2<sup>nd</sup> dream or ongoing explanation to help Joseph make sense of what was going on. If you were Joseph, how would you feel?
- If you had been Joseph's best friend, quietly observing what happened to him at Dothan, Potiphar's house, and the Pharaoh's prison, would you have considered Joseph a 'victim' - someone whose 'rights' had been violated? If he came to you with his story (before being raised up by Pharaoh) what advice or words of help would you have given to him?

Things did take an upturn for Joseph. He was eventually 'found' by Pharaoh and given the no.2 job in the land. And then Joseph was reconciled to his family.

**read Gen 45:1-7, 50:18-21** to see how Joseph viewed the tragic circumstances of his life and the violation of his 'rights'.

- It seems as though Joseph somehow managed to forget all the hardship caused by the people around him. He held no grudges. Is this natural? How could his 'no revenge' response be possible for us to emulate?
- But wait! Joseph's statement, "God intended it for good", was perhaps somewhat easier to make because he actually got to see and be part of the "good". But what about circumstances in which no good seems to come? Would the essence of Joseph's answer be the same or would it need to be modified?
- Someone once said "Christians who blame other people or difficult circumstances for their pain are really making an unconscious attempt to blame God." Do you agree or disagree with this?

## getting honest

It was 13 years from the time Joseph was sold as a slave until Pharaoh gave him the 2<sup>nd</sup> in command job. And then it was about another 9 years before he saw his family and was reconciled to them. It took Joseph some 22 years to see his dream come true. God often seems to work things out slowly. Joseph was lucky he got to see things worked out *this* side of the grave. Others are left wondering about the apparent meaninglessness of their life to the day they die. It comes down to belief: do we trust that God cares about us and is working for us...or not? Spend a couple of minutes by yourself talking honestly to God about your response to this question especially in light of situations where you have felt (or still feel) victimised.

## has God been here?

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### for a starter

Complete loyalty, unswerving devotion, self-giving love. It's the stuff good movies are made of (and of course, guns, for those of you who are Bruce Willis and Arnie fans) Share some of your favourite films which are based around these themes (not the guns).

### who is Ruth?

The selfless characteristics mentioned above seem to be wonderful attributes that are near impossible to attain at the *best* of times, let alone when things are running against you. Enter Ruth, the heroine of the story. She was from Moab but had an Israelite husband. But when her husband and her mother-in-law's husband dies, she is left with a decision to make: whether to remain in Moab with her family and there seek to find another husband, or go with her mother-in-law who was returning to Israel. Ruth chose the later.

Ruth was a very special woman. When she voluntarily moved from Moab to Israel with Naomi, her mother-in-law, she placed herself in a very vulnerable position: a widow without land, without children, without her home culture, without money, without status. Truly a stranger in a strange land. And Naomi was not able to offer her any consolation, either, as she was in the same position of powerlessness herself.

When disaster struck, due to circumstances beyond her control, Ruth chose to follow the very costly and difficult path - the path of faithfulness. And God was with her.

### read Ruth ch 1-4

- Begin by sharing any general reflections, questions and thoughts on the passage.
- Ruth made a huge choice to return with Naomi. And in doing so, her most likely future would be filled with hardship and poverty. Why would anyone make a decision like that?
- By going back with Naomi, Ruth seemed to go above and beyond the call of duty. How far should we go in looking out for the interests of others? At what point do we put our own interests first? Think of some examples/situations from your own life and discuss these together.
- Life is very complex today. We can often feel that we have responsibilities to many different groups of people. How could we be faithful in these different arenas without pulling ourselves apart?
- In what ways, if any, did Ruth reflect something of God's love and faithfulness?
- Going on a tangent for a minute, the book of Ruth doesn't have any spectacular spiritual stuff happening. Do you think God was less involved with Ruth than he was with other stories (e.g. Jeremiah, Jonah)? What does your answer to this say about your view of what it means to be spiritual?

### getting honest

Ruth was a foreigner – an outsider – to the Jews. And yet by her selfless acts she grafted herself into God's people and became part of the lineage of David and, ultimately, Jesus. But her life was lived without fanfare, and there was always the very big chance that her good deeds would go without reward. How far would you be willing to go in 'doing good' without getting recognition for it? This is a big question because much of God's work seems to be done out of sight. No audience is assured except that of God – and even then, his applause can be hard to hear at times. Spend a couple of minutes by yourself sitting with this question. Talk to God about it.

### has God been here?

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