

Learning from Hannah about God.

1 Samuel 1:1-28

Mothering Sunday 2020

The books of Samuel and Kings begin with a story about a **woman**, because God works through lives that are committed to him, yet insignificant in the eyes of the world. It reveals his grace and love and shows us for our encouragement that **he is in control of everything**. Hannah was this woman, and she was 'deeply troubled' and well she might be.

In the first place she was childless. Now we have all had mothers, every one of us. Some of us can no longer love them, because they are no longer with us - and that gives us pain. But there is another kind of pain for those without children. Often childless women keep away from church on Mothering Sunday, rather than face this pain - *let none of us forget that*. And honouring mothers may hurt those who've never been able to marry - or those who have, but who've never been given this role, this privilege and responsibility. Childless men can hurt too - but to be a woman and not know this fulfilment for which God has equipped them bodily, can be very frustrating and sad. It was doubly so for Hannah because where she lived it was important to be the mother of many children, especially sons.

In the second place she had a rival wife. Perhaps Elkanah had married Peninnah because Hannah was barren, and he wanted sons. We don't know. But we do know that Peninnah did have sons and daughters. We're told Elkanah loved Hannah, but not that he loved Peninnah. Perhaps he did - but it seems likely some insecurity made Peninnah jealous and spiteful. It was not an easy home to live in and be at peace. You may not have a rival wife to contend with - but there can be tensions just as real in your home, between husband and wife, or between either of you and your children. You may need God's peace as much as Hannah did.

But the third reason why Hannah was sorely troubled was perhaps the worst of all. We are told that *the LORD* had closed Hannah's womb, and it was on this account that her rival kept provoking her in order to irritate her. Perhaps Peninnah just crowed over Hannah.

That would have been bad enough. But she may have said, *if God* was keeping Hannah from having children, there must be a very good reason. **God must be paying Hannah back for her sins.** We all have an enemy who takes every opportunity to increase our guilt and rob us of our peace of mind. If it isn't childlessness, it may be some other tragedy in our lives, some other 'if only' that not only takes our eyes off our Saviour and focuses them on ourselves - but robs us of our freedom to trust him, because the devil darkens God's portrait, by insinuating that he is dealing with us as our sins deserve.

What did Hannah do? She was so upset she wept and could not eat. This was no voluntary self-denial - it was a sheer human reaction. What she *did* deny herself was any answering back. We know that because of Elkanah's bewildered response.

And she prayed. With all her heart. In her bitterness of heart she wept much and prayed to the LORD. She poured out her soul to the LORD. **And she made a vow.** Now the Bible doesn't forbid vows - Hannah lived in a day when vows were often made - but it does warn that God takes them very seriously indeed, and they shouldn't be taken lightly. They are meant to be a response of **gratitude** for God's goodness - but they can easily be thought of as a **bargain** to twist God's arm. If You will do this... I will do that. We ourselves may do this for some longed-for outcome, or in some desperate situation.

But God cannot be manipulated. Hannah's vow **was** a token of her desperation, but also of her trust in God. We can tell that when we look at her prayer of praise in chapter two. Her praise is all about a God who overthrows injustice and puts wrongs right. And she exults because God has demonstrated that in her life.

May God encourage us to pray! To ask according to God's will and for what exalts his name. For he is a God who loves us and cares for those who humbly trust him.

Does that mean God always answers our prayers? No, because his wisdom is so much greater than ours! So we need to treat God with reverence and awe, and to acknowledge that **all we receive is of grace alone.** Having said that let me quote two passages of Paul:

*The Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will. And we know that **in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.** (Romans 8:26-28)*

Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 4:4-7)

We've seen what Hannah did. **What did the LORD do?**

1. He encouraged her. Eli's misunderstanding dragged her trouble out in the open. Not that she shared it - it was far too personal - but she publicly confessed her reliance on God. This was no formal prayer involving the lips alone - it was from her very soul. Eli believed her and blessed her, and thereby not only showed his own kindly heart, but revealed God's too. And so God encouraged her and she went away with real peace of mind.

2. Above all God took away her disability and gave her the son she longed for. Samuel was God's provision for Hannah and for all Israel.

I think most mothers are a bit aghast at the thought of Hannah's handing the infant Samuel over to the aged Eli - who was probably already in his seventies. We, in the West, think of weaning taking place 6-9 months after birth - but in days and places with no special baby foods - it was never less than 2 years, often 3 or 4, and might even be until 5 years of age before the child was no longer put to the breast. So we ought to think of Samuel as a little boy who could well fit into Eli's household.

It's good to see that **Elkanah agreed with Hannah's vow** - he could have cancelled it; the law made provision for that - but he encouraged her and prayed for her and together they offered a generous thanksgiving as well as Hannah's presenting Samuel to the LORD, to be a life-long servant of the Lord.

What are we to make of all this? It's so remote from our own culture. If we, who are English, have any memories of small boys packed off to prep. school at the age of 7, only to be seen thereafter at school holidays - we shall not be very sympathetic to Hannah! Certainly, when it came to God's own Son, he was in one sense handed over at birth to human parents - but in another we can say God's plan for Jesus was that he should grow up naturally in his parents' home from infancy to mature manhood.

What Hannah did with Samuel reveals her great love of God and trust in him, but it was, I'm sure, a real sacrifice. Of course, all motherhood - parenthood - can bring some very painful experiences. **Where does the example of Hannah, fit into God's plan for us?**

We would all acknowledge the place of **prayer** and be encouraged by God's **promises** to us. The difficulty comes when, despite prayer, the pain of some situation in our families still persists.

How would you have talked to Hannah in her childlessness? Would you have assured her that she had but to pray sincerely - and God would answer her request? If so, you would have been giving **false comfort**. For we live in a fallen world, and our path may not be smooth. The human body may not function as God originally intended it should; accident, illness and death may be our lot here, for reasons which have nothing to do with our personal sin or guilt - but may have something to do with **what God wants to do, to bring us** and others to know him better, and become more like Jesus.

The other thing which Hannah did was to present Samuel to the Lord. We might say she gave him up, she relinquished him - to the Lord. There is a lesson for us there, too.

How often our parental pain concerns our children's behaviour - and we go through agonies of guilt over what we've done or failed to do. We beseech God's throne for our son or daughter's salvation, or about the influence of others upon them, or about habits they've got themselves into. That isn't wrong, of course, but we need to remember that **our children are free to make choices and they also are sinners by nature**. But, as God has not forced his way into our own lives, so he also respects the freedom our children have to make choices. A childless man once prayed that he might be a father - but only if the child would grow up to be good. And immediately God said to him - *what about me and Adam?!*

What we can be certain of - we more than Hannah - is that **God is with us in our pain**. What we can pray for, knowing it to be his will, is that our children have their eyes opened to God's abhorrence of wrong - but also of **his love** towards them.

We must roll our burden of guilt onto the Lord - and **we must hand over all our expectations to him also**. Our children are not given to us just for our own joy, satisfaction, pride, or support. **They are a trust**, that we may love, nurture and bring them up in the knowledge of the Lord. And that's where it ends.

God asks only that we are faithful to the stewardship he has given us. But to give up our children is to set them free. **What do I mean?** Clearly it is **not** to give up our parental responsibilities - our children need food, shelter, clothing, love and training. We are to give them all of these.

We do not abandon either our responsibility or our authority to fulfil that responsibility. What we **are** to do is **to be the kind of parent that God is to us**. He combines loving care and instruction with a refusal to **force** our obedience. He longs to bless us, but he doesn't overwhelm us with his blessings. Our rebellion causes him grief - but he still urges us to turn back to him. If we persist in going our own way, God allows us to learn by bitter experience that it is better to obey him.

When we let our children go - we give them back to God. We release them from controls that arise from needless fears or selfish ambition.

We forsake the ***right*** to be ***proud***. Let our boast be in ***God's*** goodness to them and to us, in giving them to us in the first place.

We forsake the right to ***perpetual*** enjoyment of our children. We should not think of buying their affection. Is my first concern their moral development - or my own needs? We forsake the right to ***possess*** our children. We do not own them; we cannot say 'your duty is to stay with me'.

We forsake any ***repayment*** of what we have done for them. We forsake our right to undisturbed ***peace*** or ***respectability*** in the sight of others. Our children can ruin that - but there are things more important than the 'praise of men'. We have to allow them to face the consequences of their own actions. We cannot protect children for ever.

Hannah did all this - she gave up her right to possess, to enjoy, to be proud before her rival, to control Samuel's development, or to be repaid for all her tears. ***She did not know*** her son would change the destiny of Israel, towering above the nation's history as the founder of two dynasties of kings, and setting the moral tone of the nation for generations to come. But the fashioning of such a man was ***the work of God himself***.

We are to trust God - rather than our own ability to manage the lives of our children.