

HANNAH'S PRAYER

1 Samuel 1:1-2:11

Key Verses: 1:10-11

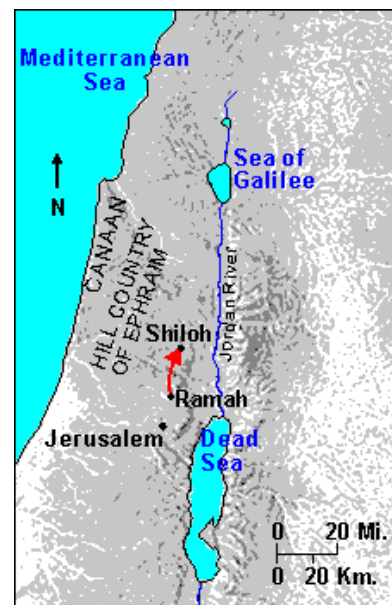
In bitterness of soul Hannah wept much and prayed to the Lord. And she made a vow, saying, "O Lord Almighty, if you will only look upon your servant's misery and remember me, and not forget your servant but give her a son, then I will give him to the Lord for all the days of his life, and no razor will ever be used on his head."

Behind the great servant of God, Samuel, was his mother Hannah, a woman of faith and prayer. She was a woman of courage as well. Her story of prayer, faith, and dedication should be an inspiration for all of us.

Hannah lived in a critical period of Israel's history. During the times of the judges, people did everything as they saw fit. The pattern of idolatry, repentance, and backsliding was repeated time and again. The people needed a spiritual leader who could set the course of the nation on a right path according to God's word. Samuel would be the person and Hannah was instrumental in bringing him into the world. Let us learn from Hannah about how to become men and women of prayer in our generation.

First, Hannah and her family (1-8). Around 1100 B.C. in Israel, there was a man named Elkanah who lived in Ramah, located just north of Jerusalem. He was from a priestly line of Levi (1Ch 6) who lived in the territory of Ephraim. He had two wives, Hannah and Peninnah. Hannah was barren but Peninnah had sons and daughters. Elkanah was a godly man. Every year, he took his whole family to Shiloh, about 15 miles north of Ramah where the house of God was located at that time, to worship and offer sacrifice to the Lord Almighty (3).

Elkanah's family seemed pretty normal, except for one thing. He had two wives. Why? Most likely he took a second wife after it was discovered that Hannah was barren. He now had sons and daughters from Peninnah. But all was not well with the family. Unlike the claim by some polygamous Mormon families, having two women in the house caused a lot of conflicts. There was tension under the calm surface that erupted whenever they made the trip to Shiloh. When they had a meal together at the house of God, Elkanah showed his affection for Hannah by giving her a double portion of meat. Peninnah did not like this. She provoked Hannah to irritate her, because she was jealous of Hannah for getting her husband's love. (This reminds us of the problems that Abraham's family had when Ishmael was born through Hagar, the concubine.) Look at verses 7-8. *This went on year after year. Whenever*



Hannah went up to the house of the Lord, her rival provoked her till she wept and would not eat. Elkanah her husband would say to her, "Hannah, why are you weeping? Why don't you eat? Why are you downhearted? Don't I mean more to you than ten sons?"

Hannah suffered a lot because of her human condition. And it was no fault of her own. It is like some of us who are born with the looks that are below average or with a bone structure that makes us look bigger than supermodels no matter how much dieting and exercise we do. It is no fault of our own and yet we suffer because of the human condition. It seems unfair. In fact, verses 5 and 6 repeat the fact that the Lord had closed Hannah's womb. This implies that God had a plan for Hannah in this. What was God's purpose in closing her womb? In hindsight, we can see that it was to raise her up as a woman of prayer and faith who could bring a servant of God to this world. Through our Bible studies, we learn time and again that Christian suffering is not without a meaning and purpose. Suffering often leads us to seek God more sincerely and grow in faith.

Still, Hannah suffered a lot, not knowing what the purpose of God was for her life. Why would God close her womb? She probably felt cursed and disgraced. It was especially painful for her to make the trip to Shiloh each year. Peninnah took all her sons and daughters. Her children surrounded Peninnah, talking and laughing together. Hannah felt alone. She probably felt that God had an issue with her to let her suffer like that. When we have a serious problem in life, we are tempted to think this way as well. We often compare ourselves to others and ask God, "Why did you make me like this? Why don't you give me this thing I really want?" It is because we don't know the depth and width of God's love for us. The problem God gave us might be just one piece of a 5,000-piece jigsaw puzzle for our life. By looking at the one piece, we cannot see the whole picture that God has drawn for us. We have to trust him by faith. Jennifer K. Dean says the following about finding God's will for us: "Don't put a period where God has put a comma."

Hannah did not abandon her faith in God despite her life problem. Her husband loved her. But she was not satisfied with his love. She went to the Lord personally and prayed. And because of her situation, her prayer was very real, sincere and intense. When we have a severe problem, our prayer becomes more sincere and intense. Hannah poured her soul to God in prayer. Let us think about her prayer.

Second, Hannah prays to the Lord with tears (9-11). Once when they had finished eating and drinking in Shiloh, Hannah stood up. She didn't have any appetite for food. She had something else on her mind. She waited until everyone finished eating and drinking and then got up. What did she do? Let us read verses 10-11. *In bitterness of soul Hannah wept much and prayed to the Lord. And she made a vow, saying, "O Lord Almighty, if you will only look upon your servant's misery and remember me, and not forget your servant but give her a son, then I will give him to the Lord for all the days of his life, and no razor will ever be used on his head."* Hannah was in deep agony. In bitterness of soul, she wept much and prayed to the Lord. Peninnah kept on provoking Hannah to the point that she could not eat. But Hannah did not struggle with Peninnah.

She did not try to get even with Peninnah who was arrogant and annoying. Instead, she went to the Lord. When someone provokes us, it is easy for us to struggle humanly with the person. We often think about how to get back at the person. But we must learn from Hannah to come to the Lord in prayer instead.

What was Hannah's prayer topic? It was for God to look upon her misery and remember her and give her a son. It is significant to notice that this was not a prayer of defeat. She had complained to God for many years for closing her womb. Nothing happened. It was frustrating. But she did not give up. Instead, she became a woman of mature faith through her suffering. She came to God once again. This was not a prayer of resignation. She was pouring out her soul to the Lord (15).

Hannah prayed, but nothing is mentioned about Peninnah's prayer life. She didn't pray. Everything seemed to be going well with her life. So she didn't have to struggle in prayer. Their neighbors probably thought that Peninnah's life was blessed by God, but not Hannah's. But we know that this is not true. Hannah became a blessed woman who is admired by many people throughout history including us. Many of us name our daughters Hannah; no one remembers Peninnah as a woman of faith. Whether our life is going well or not, it is important for us to come to God and surrender ourselves to him in prayer.



In her prayer, Hannah made a vow to God that, if God granted her a son, she would give his son to the Lord for all the days of his life and no razor would ever be used on his head (i.e., his life would be devoted to God as a Nazirite). At first glance, this sounds like she was bargaining with God to take her shame away in return for her future son. But this wasn't a speculative deal she was trying to make with God. She knew what her vow would mean to her. A son would be more precious to her than her own life. He would be the apple of her eye. She knew this. And yet, Hannah said she would offer him to the Lord. We can say that she trusted in God and love God so much to the point that she would offer her son who would be more than her own life.

We can imagine how God was pleased with her prayer. In those days, people did everything as they saw fit (Jdg 21:25). They did not love God. They did not obey God's word. In this situation, God wanted to raise up a servant of God who would guide his people as their shepherd. God found an instrument for this in Hannah. Her prayer and vow unlocked the will of God to raise up a great man of God, Samuel. From our prayer study, we learn that "prayer is not an activity, but a relationship. Prayer is not a formula, but a life." Hannah's prayer teaches us that prayer is opening our lives to God, acknowledging our total dependence on him.

Third, God answers Hannah's prayer (12-20). Someone was watching Hannah as she prayed, but he did not understand her. It was Eli the priest. He was sitting on a chair by the doorpost of the Lord's temple (9). He saw that Hannah's lips were moving but her voice was not heard. Some people pray loudly to pour out their souls to God. Others

pray quietly. God hears both. Hannah's prayer was a quiet one. It was barely audible. Verse 13 says that she was praying in her heart. Watching her mouth, Eli thought she was drunk. He rebuked her, saying: *"How long will you keep on getting drunk? Get rid of your wine"* (14). *"Not so, my lord," Hannah replied, "I am a woman who is deeply troubled. I have not been drinking wine or beer; I was pouring out my soul to the Lord. Do not take your servant for a wicked woman; I have been praying here out of my great anguish and grief"* (15-16). In her distress, Hannah called to the Lord. She cried to her God for help (Ps 18:6).

In this incident, Eli was a priest who seemed to lack spiritual discernment; he couldn't tell if Hannah was drunk or praying. But Hannah did not treat him with disrespect. This shows her spiritual maturity. Her mind did not become crooked even after the years of suffering. Eli blessed her saying, *"Go in peace, and may the God of Israel grant you what you have asked of him"* (17), which Hannah responded with *"May your servant find favor in your eyes"* (18).

Look at verse 18b. *Then she went her way and ate something, and her face was no longer downcast.* There was a clear contrast between before and after here. Before her prayer, Hannah was sad and miserable about her life. She had no appetite for food. She had no desire to drink wine to lift her spirit. She was a woman who was deeply troubled. But Hannah after her prayer was a different person. She ate something. Her face was no longer downcast. There was hope in her eyes. So what caused this change? From what we read, we can only conclude that Hannah felt that God would answer her prayer. On what basis? Perhaps she finally realized that God was waiting for her to surrender herself so that she might be ready to bear a great man of God by faith. 1 John 5:14-15 say the following: *"This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us-- whatever we ask--we know that we have what we asked of him."*

Many times we experience this personally as well. When we pray according to our selfish desires, we feel uneasy even as we pray to the Lord. But when we pray for God's will to be done on earth as it is heaven, he gives us peace. When we pray to the Lord to use us according to his will, he gives us the confidence that he hears us. Hannah felt certain that God would use her according to his will. She felt a great burden lifted from her shoulders. She felt free. She ate food and her face brightened.

How did God answer her? Look at verses 19-20. *Early the next morning they arose and worshiped before the Lord and then went back to their home at Ramah. Elkanah lay with Hannah his wife, and the Lord remembered her. So in the course of time Hannah conceived and gave birth to a son. She named him Samuel, saying, "Because I asked the Lord for him."*

Fourth, Hannah presents Samuel to the Lord (21-28). After Samuel was born, Elkanah continued to serve God by going up to Shiloh with his family to offer the annual sacrifice to the Lord and to fulfill his vow (21). But this time, Hannah did not go (22). She said to her husband, *"After the boy is weaned, I will take him and present him*

before the Lord, and he will live there always.” She wanted to wait until the boy was weaned when she could go and present him before the Lord. Elkanah was gentle and kind to her. He told her: “Do what seems best to you.” (This reminds us of Abraham’s words to Sarah when she was suffering from Hagar’s mistreatment.) Elkanah also encouraged Hannah to follow God’s will. He said, “only may the Lord make good his word” (23). So Hannah stayed at home and nursed her son until she had weaned him, which was probably about three to five years. During this time, we can imagine how Hannah nurtured the boy Samuel both humanly and spiritually. Most certainly she prayed with him and studied the word of God with him. She told him how God answered her prayers.

After Samuel was weaned, Hannah took him with her to the house of God in Shiloh, along with sacrificial offerings (24). After slaughtering the three-year-old bull, they brought the boy Samuel to Eli. And she said to the priest, “*As surely as you live, my lord, I am the woman who stood here beside you praying to the Lord. I prayed for this child, and the Lord has granted me what I asked of him. So now I give him to the Lord. For his whole life he will be given over to the Lord.*” And he worshiped the Lord there (26-29). Thus she fulfilled her vow before God. Her son was so precious to her. But she kept her vow to the Lord. How could she do this? She was able to dedicate her son to God for his entire life, because she loved God (the source of the blessing) more than her son (the blessing). She was like Abraham who was willing to sacrifice his one and only son Isaac as a burnt offering to God. Hannah also trusted God that he would take care of her son. She had faith in God. When she said, “*I prayed for this child, and the Lord has granted me what I asked of him. So now I give him to the Lord,*” she was expressing her faith in God who is sovereign (2:10b). God was pleased with her faith. He blessed Hannah with three more sons and two daughters (2:21). Of course, Hannah did not forget Samuel. She prayed for him. Each year, she brought him a new robe just like Eli’s (2:19). She thought about Samuel and prayed for him as she made the robes for him. Later in his life, Samuel would move to Ramah, his parents’ hometown, and lived there (7:17).



Fifth, Hannah praises the Lord (2:1-10). The first part of Chapter 2 is Hannah’s song of praise to God. Hannah prayed and said, “*My heart rejoices in the Lord; in the Lord my horn is lifted high. My mouth boasts over my enemies, for I delight in your deliverance. There is no one holy like the Lord; there is no one besides you; there is no Rock like our God*” (1-2). The source of her joy was the Lord God. Her focus was not her son, but God. She was happy to know God personally, the God who hears our cries. “There is no one holy like the Lord,” she said. Her song was all about God. She did not say, “Thank you for giving me a son. My son is the apple of my eye; I love him more than anything in the world,” even though I am sure she felt that way. Instead, Hannah praised God who heard her prayers. “My heart rejoices in the Lord,” she said.

Hannah's song teaches us several things about God: There is no one holy like the Lord; there is no Rock like our God; the Lord is a God who knows, and by him deeds are weighed. The Lord brings death and makes alive; he brings down to the grave and raises up. The Lord sends poverty and wealth; he humbles and he exalts. He raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap; he seats them with princes and has them inherit a throne of honor. The foundations of the earth are the Lord's. He will guard the feet of his saints, but the wicked will be silenced in darkness. Despite the world she lived in, Hannah saw how God was in control. She saw God as solid as a rock whom we can depend on (2:2). God is the one who knows what we do (2:3). Our God is sovereign over all the affairs of people (2:4-8).

Most of all, Hannah says in verse 10: *"...The Lord will judge the ends of the earth. He will give strength to his king and exalt the horn of his anointed."* We must remember the sovereignty of God over this world so that we may see the events of this world (both personal and societal) in a proper perspective.

In today's passage, we learned that God used Hannah when she learned to surrender herself to God in prayer. God blessed her to be the mother of a great servant of God, Samuel. May God help us to be men and women of faith and prayer like Hannah! May God raise up many women of prayer like Hannah among us!