



Part 2 – “The God Who Hears”

1 Samuel 1:9-20

The books of Samuel open with an account of abounding sorrow. Specifically, we are introduced to Hannah, the wife of Elkanah, who for years suffered the loss and shame of being childless. The Scriptures do not sentimentalize sorrow. Hannah’s misery is on full display. Her pain was especially acute in the tabernacle as she bore the mockery of Peninnah, and yet we are inspired by her faithful perseverance. Indeed, Hannah sets an example for us as she seeks the Lord in prayer out of the depths of her sorrow. This

she does because, however bitter have been her experiences, she still knows that the Lord of Hosts is a God who hears the cries of his people.

Hannah’s Distress

Vs. 9 – “After they had eaten and drunk in Shiloh, Hannah rose...” – This is likely a reference to their having consumed the meat they had sacrificed on the burning altar at the tabernacle. Eli, the priest, had taken his place at “the doorpost of the temple of the Lord.” The use of “temple” is a colloquialism meant to refer to the sanctuary which, at that time, was the tabernacle. As we saw in the previous passage, Elkanah would take his family routinely to Shiloh to worship and offer sacrifices to the Lord, but the cruelty of Peninnah would make those occasions especially bitter for Hannah.

Hannah’s Vow

Vs. 11 – Taking vows in the place of worship seems rather alien to most contemporary Christians (weddings notwithstanding), but in Old Covenant Israel the practice was not uncommon. Indeed, “the making of vows was a regular feature of petitionary prayers.”¹ Hannah’s vow is an expression of her agony. She asks the Lord to remember her. Obviously, the Lord does not forget anything. The term “remember,” in this context is a prayer for the Lord to act.

Notice that her vow has an “if you...then I,” structure. This can seem like bargaining with the Lord. Does Hannah presume upon the Lord a transactional relationship? But this is the nature of a vow. It is a promise and plea for blessing.

One would think that a woman in those days who’d suffered the public shame of childlessness would not preemptively promise to give her child back to the Lord, but Hannah’s willingness reveals her motive. Her interest is not in vanity or status. Nor does she demonstrate any intention for payback against Peninnah. As one commentator observes: “Compare Abraham in Genesis 22. Here Hannah promised and gave; there Abraham was promised and was ordered to give. Both acted on faith.”²

Hannah vows that she will uphold her son’s dedication to the Lord “all the days of his life.” She also vows to set him apart as a Nazirite (that is the meaning of “no razor shall touch his head”). The Nazirite vow (Numbers 6:3-4) signified a special consecration to the Lord. It prohibited the man from consuming fermented drinks, cutting his hair, and touching a dead body. All of this means that Hannah promised to relinquish all claims to her son and to give him fully to the Lord’s service.

Hannah’s Comfort

Vv. 12-16 – Hannah is depicted as praying in a way that is fitting for her sorrow and desperation. Eli the priest observes her and erroneously concludes that she is drunk. I cannot help but wonder whether the spiritually dismal state of Israel and the ungodliness of his own sons had made Eli rather cynical. Perhaps he assumed the worst of Hannah because that is what he was regularly exposed to in his role as priest. Hannah quickly corrects the priest – “No my lord, I am a woman troubled in spirit...I have been pouring out my soul before the Lord...I have been speaking out of my great anxiety and vexation.” How can we not be moved by the way Hannah articulates her condition? A few things are worth noting:

¹ V. Philips Long, *1 & 2 Samuel*, TOTC (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2020) p. 40

² David Tsumura, *The First Book of Samuel*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007) p. 118

1. Hannah responded to Eli's insensitivity with respect. The Lord had given to his people three ordained offices: prophet, priest, and soon, king. Even if Eli is out of line, Hannah respected the office he holds. This is yet another indication of her piety.
2. Hannah does not flee from the sanctuary even though her pain has been heightened there. Rather, she remained to pray. She sought the Lord where he made himself known to his people.
3. Her sorrowing heart had not become embittered or unbelieving. In a pattern that we will see many times in the Psalms, Hannah's prayers are persistent, honest, vexed, but not bitter. She turned her distress into prayer.
4. Hannah chose to be comforted. Once Eli realized his error, he spoke words of blessing to her: "Go in peace, and the God of Israel grant your petition..." Hannah willingly received that blessing. She was genuinely comforted. In that moment, stumbling Eli got it right and performed his duty as a priest. Hannah, properly recognizing Eli's role replies: "Let your servant find favor in your eyes." Having prayed and receiving the priest's words of blessing, Hannah dries her eyes, eats, and departs in peace. The great Puritan preacher Matthew Henry wrote that "prayer is heart's-ease to a gracious soul."³

The Lord Remembers Hannah

Vs. 19 – In the morning, Elkanah and his family rose early, worshipped the Lord, and departed for home in Ramah. There, the remarkable happens. Hannah conceives a son. We are told that "the Lord remembered Hannah." That is, he acted and granted conception. Once again, the Lord's sovereignty is noted as the ultimate cause of Hannah's fertility just as his sovereignty is what explained her earlier infertility.

Vs. 20 – "...and she called his name Samuel, for she said, 'I have asked for him from the Lord.'" – We will be hearing much more about this little one. Though there are possible variations based upon which vowels are supplied to the consonants, the name Samuel can mean "asked for," or "the Lord hears." Given the context and Hannah's explanation, this seems to be the meaning she intends in the name.

What Hannah could not know at this point was just how much her son would mean in the history of God's people. Years earlier, the Lord promised the stubborn people of Israel that he would "raise up for them a prophet" like Moses who would "tell them everything I command him" (Deuteronomy 18:18). Samuel would be such a prophet.⁴ But not only that, he would be the chosen prophet of the Lord to anoint Israel's King David whose greater Son would be the great and eternal Prophet, Priest, and King.

Hannah's sorrows had not taken place in the vacuum of an indifferent and random universe. Every tear she shed and every prayer she raised was an expression of her belief that God hears and acts on behalf of his people. We can only speculate about the work the Lord did in Hannah's heart over the years as she prayed and wept and waited.

"We should not be taken aback when unexpected and upsetting and discouraging things happen to us now. What do they mean? Simply that God in his wisdom means to make something of us which we have not attained yet, and he is dealing with us accordingly. Perhaps he means to strengthen us in patience, good humor, compassion, humility or meekness, by giving us some extra practice in exercising these graces under especially difficult conditions. Perhaps he has new lessons in self-denial and self-distrust to teach us. Perhaps he wishes to break us of complacency, or unreality, or undetected forms of pride and conceit." - J.I. Packer

Hannah's story reminds us that even though the sorrows and sufferings of God's people will often be shrouded in mystery, he is sovereign, good, and wise in all of his ways. Hannah's experience is not meant to teach us that the Lord will intervene miraculously in every difficult situation or loss. Certainly, in God's economy of salvation, Hannah played a special role just as Samuel and, later, David will. But ultimately, like all of us, Hannah had to wait for her final consolation which happens not in this life, but the next. Nevertheless, the God who redeemed Hannah's sorrows has not changed. He will not fail to hear the cries of his beloved people. God is a just King who sent his Son as our sympathizing High Priest. The Lord will not fail to do what is right, and it is often in the praying and the waiting that we learn this to be true.

³ Quoted in Gordon Keddie, *1 Samuel* (Newry, Northern Ireland: Evangelical Press, 1988) p. 25

⁴ Long, p. 43