

“Hannah’s Struggle”

1 Samuel 1:1-28

Problem

¹ There was a certain man of Ramathaim-Zophim of the hill country of Ephraim whose name was Elkanah the son of Jeroham, son of Elihu, son of Tohu, son of Zuph, an Ephrathite. ² He had two wives. The name of the one was Hannah, and the name of the other, Peninnah. And Peninnah had children, but Hannah had no children.

Rising Action

³ Now, this man used to go up year by year from his city to worship and to sacrifice to the LORD of hosts at Shiloh, where the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were priests of the LORD. ⁴ On the day when Elkanah sacrificed, he would give portions to Peninnah his wife and to all her sons and daughters. ⁵ But to Hannah he gave a double portion, because he loved her, though the LORD had closed her womb. ⁶ And her rival used to provoke her grievously to irritate her, because the LORD had closed her womb. ⁷ So it went on year by year. As often as she went up to the house of the LORD, she used to provoke her. Therefore Hannah wept and would not eat. ⁸ Elkanah, her husband, said to her, “Hannah, why do you weep? And why do you not eat? And why is your heart sad? Am I not more to you than ten sons?”

⁹ After they had eaten and drunk in Shiloh, Hannah rose. Now Eli the priest was sitting on the seat beside the doorpost of the temple of the LORD. ¹⁰ She was deeply distressed and prayed to the LORD and wept bitterly. ¹⁰ And she vowed a vow and said, “O LORD of hosts, if you will indeed look on the affliction of your servant and remember me and not forget your servant, but will give to your servant a son, then I will give him to the LORD all the days of his life, and no razor shall touch his head.”

¹² As she continued praying before the LORD, Eli observed her mouth. ¹³ Hannah was speaking in her heart; only her lips moved, and her voice was not heard. Therefore Eli took her to be a drunken woman. ¹⁴ And Eli said to her, “How long will you go on being drunk? Put away your wine from you.” ¹⁵ But Hannah answered, “No, my LORD, I am a woman troubled in spirit. I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink, but I have been pouring out my soul before the LORD. ¹⁶ Do not regard your servant as a worthless woman, for all along I have been speaking out of my great anxiety and vexation.” ¹⁷ Then Eli answered, “Go in peace, and the God of Israel grant your petition that you have made to him.” ¹⁸ And she said, “Let your servant find favor in your eyes.” Then the woman went her way and ate, and her face was no longer sad.

Climax

¹⁹ They rose early in the morning and worshiped before the LORD; then they went back to their house at Ramah. And Elkanah knew Hannah his wife, and the LORD remembered her. ²⁰ And in due time Hannah conceived and bore a son, and she called his name Samuel, for she said, “I have asked for him from the LORD.”

Falling Action

²¹ The man Elkanah and all his house went up to offer to the LORD the yearly sacrifice and to pay his vow. ²² But Hannah did not go up, for she said to her husband, “As soon as the child is weaned, I will bring him, so that he may appear in the presence of the LORD and dwell there forever.” ²³ Elkanah her husband said to her, “Do what seems best to you; wait until you have weaned him; only may the LORD establish his word.” So the woman remained and nursed her son until she weaned him. ²⁴ And when she had weaned him, she took him up with her, along with a three-year-old bull, an ephah of flour, and a skin of wine, and she brought him to the house of the LORD at Shiloh. And the child was young. ²⁵ Then they slaughtered the bull, and they brought the child to Eli.

Conclusion

²⁶ And she said, “Oh, my LORD! As you live, my LORD, I am the woman who was standing here in your presence, praying to the LORD. ²⁷ For this child I prayed, and the LORD has granted me my petition that I made to him. ²⁸ Therefore, I have lent him to the LORD. As long as he lives, he is lent to the LORD.”

And he worshiped the LORD there. (1Samuel 1:1-28 ESV)

Last week we actually began our series on the book of *Samuel* by looking at the purpose of the book of *Judges* and in the process, I pointed out several things. To begin with, it is helpful to remember that the Hebrew Bible was divided into three parts: the Law,¹ the Prophets,² and the Writings.³

¹ Genesis-Deuteronomy

² Judges, Samuel, Kings, Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Isaiah-Malachi

³ Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon, Ruth, Esther

Modern Christians most often consider the books of *Judges* and *Samuel* to be “historical books,” however, Israel would have seen them as part of the Prophets. While they certainly convey their message by means of true history, these books were composed in order to persuade Israel (and us) of something.

In the case of *Judges*, the author’s intention is to persuade us that *Israel needs a king*. We saw how he made his case by looking at a general outline of the book:

- I. Faltering Conquest (1-2:5)
- II. Cycles of Good and Bad under the Judges (2:6-16)
- III. Anarchy without a King (17-21)

In this outline we saw that Israel’s conquest of the Promised Land faltered because it lacked the unified leadership that only a king could offer. We also saw that while judges (temporary military leaders) offered Israel temporary deliverance from time to time, they weren’t effective enough to break Israel’s continued cycles of good and bad (sin, affliction, despair, deliverance—lather, rinse, repeat!). Only a godly king/monarchy as per God’s instructions in Deuteronomy 17 could both break these cycles and lead the nation in covenant obedience.⁴

In the final chapters of *Judges* we see anarchy. The Levites lead the nation into a downward spiral that culminates in its comparison with Sodom and Gomorrah and the near full destruction of one of her tribes—Benjamin. Lest we forget the solution to their problems, the author reminds us in the last verse of the book: “In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.” (*Judges* 21:25 ESV)

The book of *Samuel*, also among the Prophets, makes a case similar to that of *Judges*, but is much more specific. The book of *Samuel* wants to persuade us that *Israel, not only needs a king, but, in fact, needs a king from the line of David (in spite of David’s flaws)*. This also helps us to understand why this book spends the first seven chapters or so establishing the credibility of Israel’s last judge—*Samuel*. He is the one who will, at God’s behest, tear the hope of monarchy away from the tribe of Benjamin and place it in the hands of David and his descendants.

With all this said, let’s begin by looking at *Samuel’s* birth in chapter 1 as seen through the eyes of his mother—*Hannah*. We’ll look at three things:

- I. Hannah’s Shame (1:1-8)
- II. Hannah’s Struggle (1:9-16)
- III. Hannah’s Triumph (1:17-28)

Hannah’s Shame (1:1-8)

As we read the opening words of *Samuel*, we see that it picks up where *Judges* ends—in Shiloh. Shiloh was, at this point in Israel’s history, the geographic center of Israel’s universe, the place of their tent of meeting. We’ll also see in a few weeks that, as in the book of *Judges*, it is run by corrupt priests—*Eli* and his sons.

Into this context, there is a ray of hope—a righteous man, *Elkanah*, and his two wives: *Hannah* and *Peninnah*. One wife, *Hannah*, was barren, but faithful. One wife, *Peninnah*, was fertile, but treacherous. Also, *Hannah’s* barrenness is probably the reason that *Peninnah* was taken on as a wife—so that *Elkanah* might have an heir. This was common in the ancient near east and regulated, but not endorsed in the Law of Moses. In a sense, it was their version of infertility treatment.

Notice also, in verse 5, the reason for *Hannah’s* infertility—the Lord had closed her womb. In other words, it was not an accident. God’s plan for *Hannah* included her barrenness. The question is whether or not she would embrace it.

This is the worst thing that could happen to a married woman in the ancient near east. Practically speaking, she was worthless and a shame to her husband and family.

⁴ “When you come to the land that the LORD your God is giving you, and you possess it and dwell in it and then say, ‘I will set a king over me, like all the nations that are around me,’ you may indeed set a king over you whom the LORD your God will choose. One from among your brothers you shall set as king over you. You may not put a foreigner over you, who is not your brother. Only he must not acquire many horses for himself or cause the people to return to Egypt in order to acquire many horses, since the LORD has said to you, ‘You shall never return that way again.’ And he shall not acquire many wives for himself, lest his heart turn away, nor shall he acquire for himself excessive silver and gold.

“And when he sits on the throne of his kingdom, he shall write for himself in a book a copy of this law, approved by* the Levitical priests. And it shall be with him, and he shall read in it all the days of his life, that he may learn to fear the LORD his God by keeping all the words of this law and these statutes, and doing them, that his heart may not be lifted up above his brothers, and that he may not turn aside from the commandment, either to the right hand or to the left, so that he may continue long in his kingdom, he and his children, in Israel.” (*Deuteronomy* 17:14-20 ESV)

On the other hand, Peninnah didn't make things any easier. In fact, verses 6-7 say, "And her rival used to provoke her grievously to irritate her, because the LORD had closed her womb.⁷ So it went on year by year. As often as she went up to the house of the LORD, she used to provoke her."

The relationship between Hannah and Peninnah should remind you of a similar relationship between two other women in the Old Testament—Sarah and Hagar. Remember that Sarah, Abraham's wife, was barren and he took Hagar as a wife in order to produce an heir, producing a contentious relationship in the process.

In verse 8, there are echoes of another famous [female] rivalry, that between Leah and Rachel. Remember, that before Rachel had ever even been able to conceive, her sister, Leah, as well as their hand-maidens, had produced ten sons. Putting it lightly, this bothered Rachel. On the other hand, when she finally did conceive, she bore Joseph, the son who would ultimately save Israel.

Why do these connections matter? Because it places Samuel in the same league as the great patriarchs of Israel—Abraham, whose wife Sarah was barren; Isaac, whose wife Rebecca was barren; and Jacob, whose wife Rachel was barren. If the purpose of this book is to persuade us that Israel needs a king like David to lead them in covenant faithfulness, this connection gives the one who would effect the transition from rule by judges to that of a monarchy a tremendous amount of emotional credibility. He was the prophet/judge who would anoint the king Israel needed.

In much the same way, fast-forwarding from Samuel, the incredible birth narrative of John the Baptist would give him credibility as the prophet who would prepare the way for David's most important son—Jesus.

Hannah's shame puts her in great company. It is also indicative of one of the great themes in this book and, in fact, the whole Bible: God exalts the humble, but opposes the proud. It's a story with which our hearts are familiar. Who among us can read the account of Peninnah provoking Hannah, year after year, and not become angry or at least cheer for Hannah. We want her to win. God wants her to win, too—but not without some struggle.

Hannah's Struggle (1:9-16)

Apparently, verse 9 is picking up the action during one of the family's visits to Shiloh. The "party" has begun to wind down and Hannah, in despair, goes to the temple to pray. As part of the context, we find out that when she gets there, the priest, Eli, is also there.

Hannah begins to pray and "wept bitterly." Then she does two things that no other woman in the Old Testament ever does—one of which is a first for anyone in the Old Testament, male or female. She makes a vow, or promise, appealing to God as "the Lord of Hosts." Neither of these things is ever done by a female in the Bible, and Hannah is the first person, male or female, to refer to God as "the Lord of Hosts" (which means something like "the Lord of Battle" or "sovereign Lord").

What is a vow and why is she making it? A vow, in the simplest sense, is basically a promise that often sounds much like a *quid pro quo* (you do something for me, I'll do something for you). Her vow: if you (a) look on the affliction of your servant; (b) remember and not forget your servant; and (c) give your servant a son; then (a) I will give him to the Lord all the days of his life, and (b) no razor shall touch his head. She's making a Nazarite vow on behalf of this hoped-for child.⁵ In other words, if you give me a son, not only will I give him back to serve you, but I'll give him back as a "super-priest."

What's equally important to notice is that Hannah is looking for help from the One Who afflicted her. Only a person of great faith can do this. On one hand she knows her barrenness is from the Lord. On the other hand, she also knows that He is the only one that can help her. In other words, she's got a handle on what theologians call the sovereignty of God. This tells us, among other things, that everything happens to us as part of God's plan in our lives.

You see this is what distinguishes the Christian from the moralist. The Christian, when asked what he/she believes concerning God's providence or sovereignty, can reply in words similar to the Heidelberg Catechism saying:

*I trust him so much that I do not doubt He will provide whatever I need for body and soul,
and He will turn to my good whatever adversity He sends me in this sad world.
He is able to do this because He is almighty God;
He desires to do this because He is a faithful Father.*⁶

⁵ For a specific explanation of Nazarite vows, see Numbers 6:1-21.

⁶ *The Heidelberg Catechism*, # 26.

The moralist, on the other hand, says either (a) I'd better be good or else something bad will happen to me; or (b) something bad is happening to me, I must have done something wrong. What the moralist doesn't understand is that he/she could never be good enough to merit any blessings from God. In fact the moralist is almost always asking the wrong question. Instead of asking, "Why do bad things happen to me?" he/she should better be asking, "Why does anything good ever happen to me?"

You see, the Christian understands this so that when some kind of affliction comes he doesn't say, "Why is this happening?", but rather preaches the gospel to himself saying something like, "You promised...therefore, there must be a reason for this..." This is what Hannah is doing when she prays to God as "the Lord of Hosts." She's basically saying, "I embraced my affliction, but you have the power to change it."

Something that a Christian understands that moralists often don't is that sometimes God makes things dark so that when He shines a light, it will appear that much more brilliantly. Consider the cross of Jesus.

After this as she's praying, we read the relatively familiar account of her interaction with Eli. She's praying silently and he thinks she's drunk. On one hand, I think we're supposed to laugh here. On the other hand, I think the object of our laughter is supposed to be Eli, not Hannah. In other words, here is the current spiritual leader of Israel and he's either (a) so used to seeing drunk people at the temple—which apparently he was, saying a good bit about his "leadership," or (b) he's so spiritually inept that he can't tell the difference between a true outpouring of a woman's heart and a babbling drunk person. This is important because, remember, Samuel is going to replace Eli as Israel's spiritual leader and the author is contrasting, and will do more in future chapters, the spirituality of Samuel (in this case Samuel's mother, Hannah) and Eli's house.

Another principle appears here as we see Eli bless Hannah—God often makes a straight blow with a crooked stick. Eli blesses her and says, "Go in peace, and the God of Israel grant your petition...and her face was no longer sad" (vv. 17-18) In verses 19-20, we read they rose early, worshiped, went home and Elkanah knew Hannah his wife and the Lord "remembered her." When this language is used in the Old Testament, it doesn't mean that God had forgotten and has now happened to remember, but rather it is used when God acts on a person's behalf.

In this sense, God has "remembered" all of us by acting on our behalf in the person of Jesus. His paternal care and love have been shown in what he has done for us at the cross.

Notice Hannah's obedience as she fulfills her vow. Notice also the language used as she brings young Samuel to the house of the Lord, "she weaned him...and the child was young." She brings the young child and turns him over to the corrupt authorities to raise. Does that sound familiar? It should because it is the story of Moses. So what has happened so far as we consider Samuel? He's been placed in the same league as the patriarchs when it comes to his birth and the same league as Moses when it comes to his childhood. Again, this is because he will be the one to anoint David as king.

Notice her testimony (verses 26-27). It's almost as if she has to give it. Again, only a Christian can give a testimony to the goodness of God. A moralist can't do this, because to him, God isn't good. Instead, God is not nothing more nor less than a cosmic enforcer of the moralist's standard of behavior. In fact, instead of giving testimony of what God has done for him, the moralist, by definition, spends his or her time giving "testimony" about what he has done for God. Which are you?