

1 Samuel 1:4-20 Hannah's Prayer

I wonder if you've ever prayed passionately or desperately for something; or if you've been in a place where everything seems so hopeless that prayer is all you have left?

If so, you'll relate to Hannah in our reading from 1 Samuel this morning. In this story about Hannah's prayer, we are given an intimate glimpse into the heart of a young woman's agony of spirit and her encounter with God. It's as if we were the proverbial fly on the wall...

We find out that Hannah was one of 2 wives. Back then, polygamy was acceptable, because there was such a great emphasis on having a male heir to carry on the family name and to inherit the property. If a wife was unable to produce an heir, then it was acceptable to take a 2nd wife and try again.

In this story, we see some real emotional abuse from 2nd wife Peninnah towards 1st wife Hannah. Peninnah seems jealous of husband Elkannah's obvious love for Hannah. It would be reasonable to assume that Elkannah married Hannah for love, and Peninnah for an heir. It seems Peninnah felt that, and tormented Hannah where it hurt most - her childlessness. In that culture, a woman unable to produce an heir was considered worthless and barrenness was in fact seen as as a curse from God. Hannah would not have needed Peninnah's help to be miserable. How awful it must have been to live with her constant taunting. We're told it went on year after year.

Then one year, at the annual pilgrimage to the Temple in Shiloh, Hannah could bear it no longer. She poured out her heart to God:

“O LORD of hosts, if only you will look on the misery of your servant, and remember me, and not forget your servant, but will give to your servant a male child, then I will set him before you as a nazirite until the day of his death. He shall drink neither wine nor intoxicants, and no razor shall touch his head.”

It was a passionate prayer; a desperate prayer; a bargaining prayer.

It was also a revealing prayer - showing us how Hannah viewed God, and how she related to him:

*** Her prayer revealed that she saw God as impersonal & distant.**

Hannah did not address God in a personal or intimate way. She addressed God, **'Oh LORD of hosts'**. It is one of the names of God in the Old Testament that referred to God's awesome power - he was the God of the Exodus, the

God of all the armies of heaven and earth. He was mighty and he was remote - a God to be revered and feared.

*** Her prayer revealed that she had a very low opinion of her own worth**

In her prayer, Hannah acknowledged her insignificance, calling herself a 'servant'. At that time, servants were mere possessions, worth less than even the livestock in the field. In her own mind, she was of no real value because she was a woman, and to make matters worse, the only thing that could have given her any sense of worth - bearing children - had been denied her as well.

*** Her prayer revealed that she didn't know God personally**

Hannah belonged to a sacrificial religion. God could only be approached through the offering of a sacrifice to cleanse the worshipper and persuade God. Because of how Hannah saw God, and how she saw herself, she felt she needed to bargain with God if she was going to ask him for something. She needed to offer a sacrifice. She offered the only thing she could think of. Not herself - she wasn't worth anything, She offered God the son he could give her.

“...if only you will look on the misery of your servant, and remember me, and not forget your servant, but will give to your servant a male child, then I will set him before you as a nazirite until the day of his death. He shall drink neither wine nor intoxicants, and no razor shall touch his head.”

***After she'd prayed, Hannah didn't hear from God directly, but encountered him through a third party.**

Eli the priest witnessed Hannah in prayer. Initially he thought she was drunk, but after hearing her story, he was moved to bless and encourage her. He said, "Go in peace; the God of Israel grant the petition you have made to him.”

Note the language here. Eli didn't say, "I'll pray that God will hear you and grant your request." As the priest, he was God's representative and spokesman, and he simply made a prophetic statement: "The God of Israel grant you the petition you have made to him.”

Hannah left feeling encouraged. We're told she went home and had dinner, and cheered up immensely. In her encounter with the Eli the priest, Hannah had encountered God.

God answered Hannah's prayer. She conceived and bore a son, whom she named Samuel, which means 'I asked the Lord for him'.

This is a story which speaks to us through contrast.

What do I mean by that? Simply that when we look at Hannah's prayer, it highlights how different our prayer life can be. And our prayer life can be different, because unlike Hannah, we are privileged to enjoy a close and intimate union with God through Jesus Christ.

The Lord's Prayer, which Jesus gave to his disciples as a pattern for prayer makes for an interesting comparison with Hannah's prayer.

Both prayers have similar elements, but when compared closely, The Lord's prayer is significantly different!

1. Both prayers begin with an address which gives God honour and respect:

Hannah prayed, "Oh Lord of Hosts..." - or in other words, "Oh powerful Lord, God of the armies of heaven and earth..."

The Lord's prayer gives honour and respect also - **but in the context of an intimate, personal relationship**: "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name"

2. Both prayers petition God for things we need.

Hannah's prayer was a passionate plea for a son to put an end to her torment, but with no concept of the love or grace of God. She felt she had to give God something in return in order for God to answer her prayer.

In the Lord's prayer, we also petition God for the things we need, but around those petitions, there are two significant differences from Hannah's prayer.

1. The Lord's Prayer acknowledges that **the coming of God's kingdom and God's will being done in heaven and on earth** come before our personal requests:

So the Lord's prayer says:

"Your kingdom come.

Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven"

and *then* the prayer continues with our petitions,

"give us this day our daily bread,"

“Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us,”
and “save us from the time of trial, and deliver us from evil”

2. In the Lord’s Prayer, the petitions are followed by a declaration of faith - that God is able to answer these prayers because of who he is. The Lord’s Prayer concludes,

“For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours, now and forever.”
The Lord’s Prayer speaks of a different relationship with God from the one Hannah knew.

The God we pray to is our heavenly Father, whom we come to know intimately, as we love him, serve him, pray to him, and meet with his family.

The God we pray to is a God of love and mercy and grace - which means we don’t have to bargain with him or offer a sacrifice to get him to answer our prayers.

We can ask God’s help, or intervention, or we can praise and adore him, or we can just chat with him as we would with a friend - because he loves us, and more than that, lives *within* us.

The God we pray to will answer us as we seek his kingdom first above all things.

The God we pray to is King of Kings and Lord of Lords, and he is Lord of Hosts - as Hannah rightly acknowledged - but he is **completely on our side!** We can trust that as we bring our petitions to him as the Lord who loves us, he will answer and grant those petitions in a way that is best for his kingdom, as well as best for us.

When we look at the story of Hannah, from this side of the cross, it’s easy to see her as part of a culture whose knowledge of God was still developing. She may not have known God as we can know God - Yet, God still answered her prayer.

That should encourage us. Because it shows us that while a mature knowledge of our faith can inform the way we pray, a lack of such knowledge doesn’t stop us from receiving answers to our prayers, or from receiving God’s love and blessing.

If answers to our prayers were dependent on our maturity in the faith, there would be a great many people who would be discouraged in prayer.

While we live in a privileged age where we are offered peace with God through his Son, and the indwelling and empowering of the Holy Spirit, we need to remember that ultimately, the answers to our prayers are not dependent on US.

Answers to prayer have little to do with methodology - that is, the way we pray, or how often we pray, or the words we use. Answers to prayer have everything to do with the grace of God, and our relationship with him as his children.

God will answer the prayers of a child, or a criminal, or an intellectually disabled person, or a saint. God answers our prayers because he loves us and wants to partner with us in bringing about his Kingdom.

Let's be encouraged by Hannah's story this morning, and give thanks that God hears and answers our prayers.

Let's pray now...