

Women of the Bible: Hannah

1Samuel 1:9-20 and 2:1-10

As we continue our series on the women of the Bible, this morning we're going to reflect on Hannah's story. It's a short story (she only appears in 1 Samuel 1&2), but hers is a deeply significant story. I'd like our focus to be on prayer, and what we learn from Hannah about responding to painful circumstances, or when we're in distress, when life is difficult, or unfair.

Btw, the story of Hannah is read every year on Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year. It's their way of reminding themselves that life is sometimes difficult and can be filled with pains and distressing situations, and that our call in those circumstances is to seek God earnestly, throughout the year, whatever the year may bring. In other words, be like Hannah. Hannah's story is a reminder to pray always, in all circumstances, and entrust ourselves to the Lord. And, her story is another reminder that God is faithful.

To set this story in its historical context: this is the end of the period of judges in Israel. So, it takes place a few decades before the story of Ruth. Hannah's son Samuel became the final judge in Israel. He would eventually

anoint Saul as the first king in Israel, and would then anoint David as king after him.

Before I read the passage, I'd like to make a quick plug: read the Old Testament! Yes, it contains parts that are confusing, and some parts that are even disturbing, because, after all, these stories take place in ancient cultures with ancient worldviews from a few millennia ago, where life was hard and harsh and oftentimes survival was what life was all about.

So, we can be appalled, for example, that polygamy was practiced in ancient times and a man could have more than one wife, as we will hear shortly. But reading the entire Old Testament, including the disturbing parts, helps us to see how far God's people came over the centuries in making things better. Even if there were setbacks along the way. And, as always, it's a reminder that God is faithful through all of the twists and turns of history.

The Bible is a "two steps forward, one step back" book. It's honest about the awful things, which is what makes it a great book. Because it's an honest book. A human book. As I said two weeks ago, as an example, the book of Judges is an account of mostly bad leaders. Yet, it's a book about how God's faithfulness prevailed in spite of those bad leaders, and how God's people moved forward in

spite of them. That's encouraging to me. It wouldn't be encouraging if the hard parts weren't honestly told along with the good. Because, that's life.

With that in mind, here is our account of Hannah. In a few minutes Bethany will read Hannah's prayer, or song, that she prays, or sings, in response. Praying and singing were usually the same thing to people in those days.

1 Samuel 1:3-20

³ Now [Elkanah, Hannah's husband] used to go up year by year from his town 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. ⁴On the day when Elkanah sacrificed, he would give portions to his wife Peninnah and to all her sons and daughters; ⁵but to Hannah he gave a double portion, because he loved her, though the LORD had closed her womb. ⁶Her rival (the other wife) used to provoke her severely, to irritate her, because the LORD had closed her womb. ⁷So it went on year after 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. ⁸Her husband Elkanah said to her, 'Hannah, why do you weep? Why do you not eat? Why is your heart sad? Am I not more to you than ten sons?'

⁹ After they had eaten and drunk at Shiloh, Hannah rose and presented herself before the LORD. Now Eli the priest was sitting on the seat beside the doorpost of the temple of the LORD. ¹⁰Hannah was deeply distressed and prayed to the LORD, and wept bitterly. ¹¹She made this vow: '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.' [Note: the word "nazir" means consecrated, or separated; nazirites lived austere lives. John the Baptist may have been one]

¹² As Hannah continued praying before the LORD, Eli observed her mouth. ¹³Hannah was praying silently; only her lips moved, but her voice was not heard; therefore Eli thought she was drunk. ¹⁴So Eli said to her, 'How long will you make a drunken spectacle of yourself? Put away your wine.' ¹⁵But Hannah answered, 'No, my lord, I am a woman deeply troubled; I have drunk neither wine nor strong

drink, but I have been pouring out my soul before the LORD. ¹⁶Do not regard your servant as a worthless woman, for I have been speaking out of my great anxiety and vexation all this time.’ ¹⁷Then Eli answered, ‘Go in peace; the God of Israel grant the petition you have made to him.’ ¹⁸And she said, ‘Let your servant find favor in your sight.’ Then the woman went to her quarters, ate and drank with her husband, and her countenance was sad no longer.

¹⁹ They rose early in the morning and worshipped before the LORD; then they went back to their house at Ramah. Elkanah knew his wife Hannah, and the LORD remembered her. ²⁰In due time Hannah conceived and bore a son. She named him Samuel, for she said, ‘I have asked him of the Lord.’

This is the word of the Lord.

Let’s talk about prayer—what we learn from Hannah as she prays in the midst of her personal circumstances, and then what we learn from her response.

First a question(s) for reflection: When do you pray? And where? *How* do you pray? What do your prayers sound like, feel like? Over the years I’ve come to observe that some prayers are loud, and emotional. Others are barely whispered. Some are polished and public. Others are raw, messy, and sometimes misunderstood—or, they are understood only by the person praying.

And these are all legitimate expressions of prayer. Hannah has a little bit of everything in hers. Hannah’s circumstances and her response reveal a few things about faith, about prayer, and about God. The first of which is:

1. Faithfulness does not mean a pain-free life (vv. 3–7). I don’t think this is new or surprising to any of us. Faithfulness does not mean a pain-free life.

The first thing we are told is that this family faithfully goes up year after year to worship the Lord at Shiloh. Hannah is in the right place, with the right people, worshiping the right God (for her, we might say)—yet her life is marked by pain, and grief. She is barren in a culture where barrenness meant shame, loss of identity, and social vulnerability. To make matters worse, Peninnah (“her rival”) relentlessly provokes her.

This reminds us of a truth about life and faith; perhaps an uncomfortable truth: faithfulness does not exempt us from struggle, or suffering. Actually, sometimes the deepest pain is carried by the most faithful people. Hannah’s story pushes back against the idea that if we just do *enough*, or do things *right*, we won’t be hurt. The truth is, God’s faithful people sometimes still ache. They still wait. They still weep.

Related to that... There is a wonderful prayer which is part of the Episcopal church’s evening prayer liturgy called *compline*. The Episcopal church provides set times for prayer throughout the day, with common prayers for everyone to pray. And as the evening closes, or at bedtime, this is part of the compline prayer:

“Keep watch, dear Lord, with those who work, or watch, or weep this night, and give your angels charge over those who sleep. Tend the sick, Lord Christ; give rest to the weary, bless the dying, soothe the suffering; pity the afflicted, shield the joyous; and all for your love’s sake. Amen.” That’s a beautiful prayer which acknowledges that weeping and suffering are part of life, even a faithful life. As it was for Hannah. But that isn’t the whole story. A second truth that Hannah reveals is that:

2. Honest prayer is better than polite silence (vv. 8–16)

Hannah doesn’t pretend she’s fine. She doesn’t offer a neat, carefully worded prayer. The narrative tells us that she was “deeply distressed,” weeping openly, praying from the depths of her soul.

Her prayer is so raw that Eli the priest mistakes it for drunkenness. That moment is striking. The religious leader can’t recognize genuine prayer when it doesn’t fit his expectations. Now, Eli is wise and compassionate so he relents when Hannah explains herself, and he blesses her as she goes. But at first, we can imagine him saying to himself, “That’s not prayer. She must be drunk.” No, Hannah’s prayer is raw, messy, and heartfelt.

This reveals to us the good news: God is not offended by our honest prayers. We don't need to sanitize our pain before bringing it to God. Silent lips, trembling hearts, tear-soaked prayers—God understands them all. Hannah teaches us that prayer is not performance; it is a pouring out. Her prayer is not rehearsed or ritualistic—it is deeply personal.

So, if you need to, let it all hang out! And if you need help knowing how to do that, just read the Psalms. David holds nothing back, just like Hannah. God is not fragile. God can handle our pain, our anger, and our cries for help over the unfairness of things. God never says, “Don't speak to me like that.” In fact, God *welcomes* it, because we are bringing our whole selves honestly to him, which is what God desires, so God can meet us in those sacred places of heart and soul.

3. The next thing we notice in Hannah's story is that she experiences God's peace before God's provision (vv. 17–18)

Eli blesses Hannah, and his blessing is brief, but the effect on Hannah is immediate: “*Her countenance was no longer sad.*” That's a figure of speech that tells us, she felt better. Her spirit was lifted, she had peace, and her face reflected that.

Notice, nothing has changed externally. Nothing has been provided yet. There are no immediate results. But Hannah entrusted her anguish to God, and that was enough to bring her peace.

The apostle Paul's affirms this experience, when he writes to the Philippians: "Be anxious for nothing, but in every situation, by prayer and petition... present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." Paul doesn't say, "Pray and God will give you what you ask for." He says, "Pray, in every circumstance, let it all hang out, and God's peace will guard your heart and mind."

This is a crucial point in Hannah's story and in passages like the one from Philippians: that faith rests in God's character before it rests in God's answer.

We learn that prayer is not merely a mechanism for receiving things—it is a means of placing ourselves in God's care, so we may experience God's peace, even before there is provision.

And the Lord did provide in her case. Verse 19 says, "*The LORD remembered her.*" When it says "the Lord remembered her" this does not imply prior neglect, or that God has memory problems. In Scripture, when God

“remembers” someone, it means that God acts according to his covenant faithfulness, according to his timing. It’s a figure of speech which, in a way, actually says, “I *haven’t* forgotten you. I’ve been thinking about you all along. And, now is the time for you to see how I will act on your behalf.”

The result, in Hannah’s case, is conception, birth, and naming. Samuel’s name—“heard by God”—anchors the entire story in divine responsiveness: God hears. God hears. God hears.

Finally, after Samuel is weaned, Hannah fulfills her promise and takes him to Eli to present him to God, and she responds to everything that has happened with another prayer... Let’s hear her response to God’s action on her behalf. Bethany will read it...

When God answers your prayer, what is your typical response? Gratitude, right? Thank you, thank you, thank you. Hannah’s response is different; it’s more like a manifesto. A salty song of what God will do to the proud and mighty, and a simultaneous lifting up of the lowly.

By the way, does Hannah’s prayer sound familiar?... Have we heard these words before?... Mary, in her song, reaches back to this golden oldie and does her own remake of it, some of it word for word. It’s a prayer that reflects the

turning of everything on its head, a great reversal of fortunes, and of leveling the ground. We'll revisit this when we look at Mary, the mother of Jesus.

Here is one last gem we learn from Hannah. It's from the beginning of her prayer/song. She says: "My heart exults in the Lord; my strength is exalted in my God." Notice what she doesn't say. She doesn't say, "*My heart rejoices because everything is finally easy.*" She doesn't say, "*My heart rejoices because my problems are gone.*" She says, "My heart rejoices in the Lord. My strength comes from God."

What she is saying is that her joy is not rooted in her circumstances—it's rooted in her God. If our joy depends on circumstances, it will always be tenuous. But if our joy is rooted in who God is, it can endure thru seasons of waiting, grief, and uncertainty. Because, as Hannah's prayer confidently asserts, our God is a God of justice, of fairness, of making things right, and of attending to those who are lowly. Answers to prayer are good, provision is good, but what is even better is God knowing our hearts, and us knowing the heart of God, the God of love.

Sweet Hour of Prayer