

HANNAH'S SONG

TEXT: 1 Samuel 1 and 2

Today we are taking a break from the Gospel of Mark. We're going way back to the early part of the Old Testament to the book of First Samuel and the story of a woman named Hannah.

For many years Hannah had been barren and suffered bitterly because her husband Elkanah had another wife, Peninah, who bore many children. Peninah regularly reduced Hannah to tears, chiding her for being unable to conceive a child. Elkanah made a clumsy attempt to comfort her; "Am I not better for you than ten children?" I don't think that helped much. The family went on an annual pilgrimage to Shiloh where the Temple then stood and there one day she prayed. She vowed that if God gave her a son, she would in turn give that son to God, to serve in the Temple. Her prayer was granted, and she gave birth to a son, whom she named Samuel, interpreting the name as "asked from God". As soon as he was weaned she took Samuel and left him with the priest Eli in Shiloh. Each year when she returned there on the annual pilgrimage she would visit him and give him a new coat. She later bore Elkanah three more sons and two daughters.

Hannah's story echoes similar stories about barren women who gave birth to a special child late in life due to the special favor of God – Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, Samson's mother Manoah, and Elizabeth in Luke's gospel.

Hannah's song of triumph is more like the celebration of a military victory than the birth of a child. It exudes gratitude and thanks.

Listen to her song:

*"My heart exalts in the Lord; my strength is exalted in my God.
My mouth derides my enemies, because I rejoice in my victory.*

*There is no Holy One like the Lord, no one besides you; there is no Rock like our God.
Talk no more so very proudly, let not arrogance come from your mouth;*

*For the Lord is a God of knowledge, and by him actions are weighed.
The bows of the mighty are broken, but the feeble gird on strength.
Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread, but those who were hungry
are fat with spoil.
The barren has borne seven, but she who has many children is forlorn.
The Lord kills and brings to life; he brings down to Sheol and raises up.
The Lord makes poor and makes rich; he brings low, he also exalts.
He raises up the poor from the dust; he lifts the needy from the ash heap;
To make them sit with princes and inherit a seat of honor.
For the pillars of the earth are the Lord's and on them he has set the world.*

*He will guard the feet of his faithful ones, but the wicked shall be cut off in darkness,
For not by might does one prevail.
The Lord! His adversaries shall be shattered; the Most High will thunder in heaven.
The Lord will judge the ends of the earth, he will give strength to his king;
And exalt the power of his anointed.”*

Is there anything that evokes joy and gratitude more than the birth of a baby? Hannah's song exudes gratitude and thanks. “My heart rejoices in the Lord. In the Lord my horn is lifted high”. This might well be a literary model for Mary's Magnificat.

God reversed Hannah's bad fortune. He remembered her “bitterness of soul...much weeping...deep troubles...and great anguish”. God alone is in control. And so Hannah named her baby Samuel, “Because I asked the Lord for him”. The name Samuel means “God has heard”.

Now, for a word of caution. As much as we love hearing the stories of God as the champion of and in solidarity with the oppressed, we can easily read this story as presenting God as the Santa Claus at the mall promising you everything you want. But that is not what this story is about.

In Hannah's prayer, God is presented as the one who helps the weak. Hannah and Peninnah represent the weak and the strong in the world. Even though the strong often mock the weak, God hears and rescues the Hannahs of the world. Hannah's prayer addresses the arrogance of the proud, contrasting their haughty words with God's knowledge, which is vast and far beyond their understanding. “The bows of the mighty are broken,” she says, “but the feeble bind on strength”. She begins her prayer with “My

heart exults in the Lord; my strength is exalted in the Lord". Hannah recognized that her strength came from God and not from herself. She was not proud in her strength but rejoiced in God's ability to make a weak person strong.

Hannah's story also teaches us that God can use human weakness to accomplish great things. Samuel, Hannah's son, grew up to be a great man of God – the final judge and the prophet who anointed the first two kings of Israel. So, since Samuel appears to be the hero, why was Hannah's story even necessary? Why not just start in the tabernacle or at the start of Samuel's judgeship? Why not simply let him be born to a God-fearing couple and send an angel to tell them to dedicate their son to God? In sort, why involve Hannah's grief? I believe it is because God is glorified in Hannah's story. Her witness, her trust in God, and her faithfulness in bringing Samuel to God as promised – all evidence of God working in Hannah's life.

God's care for individuals has been seen since the very beginning of Scripture: God provides a partner for Adam, a new land for Abram, and protection for Hagar. God has cared about barren women in the cases of Sarai, Rachel and Samson's mother. The presentation of Hannah's ordeal and ultimate triumph is special in that, of the barren women, she alone is granted the place to sing her mothering song in the text, a privilege the Gospel of Luke will later grant to Mary. In the time of Hannah, barrenness was a source of tremendous shame for both the family as well as the woman, who gets a double-shot of it, first from the community, but then from her family, who experience her as a "lost opportunity", like a first round draft pick who can't perform at the required level, who seemed to be such a good idea at the time but who, despite all the best hopes, doesn't pan out.

There are often different shades of meaning to the same Hebrew word, and in the story of Hannah and Samuel this brings out an important theological point. The Hebrew text is often transliterated to say that Samuel was given to Hannah as sort of on loan for a time. Her act of devotion in fulfilling her vow to God was simply returning to God what

she had “borrowed” for a while. This child was a gift of God and therefore was in a position to carry out God’s purposes for God’s people.

Hannah probably never dreamed when she prayed for a son that someday her son would be a prophet of God, a judge and a leader in the nation of Israel. Samuel did become a mighty servant of God. She probably never dreamed that once she had Samuel she would be blessed with many more children. And she probably never dreamed that her prayer would become part of God’s Holy Writings.

Hannah’s life shows us that God does indeed hear and answer the prayers of those who come to God in faith. Despite the traumas we may face in the world around us, God is always there to help. As Hannah prayed, “For the pillars of the earth are the Lord’s, and He has set the world upon them. He will guard the feet of His saints”.

Hannah’s song echoes down through the ages. It is echoed in the beautiful Magnificat that Mary sings when she learns that she will be the Mother of God’s Son. Hannah’s song expresses her praise for God’s delivering her from her problems and giving her strength. Praise was the appropriate expression of gratitude for God’s hearing Hannah’s prayers and transforming her from a desperate housewife into a devout housewife.

I wonder how often we forget to offer praise to God for who God is and what God has done for us. Especially when we think about how God understands our problems, hears our prayers, and transforms us. In Hannah’s story, there is a clear pattern that goes from problems to prayer to praise. Do we see it? Can we live it? Amen.