

I ASKED THE LORD FOR HIM

SERIES: THE PRAYERS OF THE SAINTS

By Steve Zeisler

Jesus' disciples once asked him a provocative question. When they encountered a blind man, they asked the Lord, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" (John 9:2). Behind their question was the desire that suffering and sorrow be explainable. Last week we studied the story of Moses in prayer. Moses got into difficult circumstances because of his own foolishness. He was on the west side of the wilderness in a place of difficulty and failure because of his own sin. But what happens when difficulties are assigned to us for no reason we can discern? How do we approach God in such circumstances?

We are in a series on prayer—learning from prayers that we find in the scripture. In 1 Samuel, we will read the prayers of Hannah, who was facing a particular unexplained difficulty: childlessness, which is very hard in any age. One of the toughest things I find in pastoral ministry is counseling couples who want desperately to have children and are not able to. Such couples experience a sense of loss, and some even carry a sense of guilt. They project into the future and think about all they will miss in not having children.

As hard as childlessness is today, it was much worse in ancient times, when the shame that went along with being unable to conceive was much greater. Hannah was one of two wives of the same man. The other wife bore children, so infertility was obviously Hannah's failure. Her husband was able to father children, but she was not able to have them. The passage we will read in a moment specifically tells us that the Lord closed her womb. In fact, we see that comment twice.

Hannah describes herself as miserable. The question is, what caused this misery? There is no reference to any bad choices she made, or any sinful patterns that led to this problem of childlessness. It was a source of extreme difficulty for her, and led her to find, in prayer, that God is faithful. When Jesus' disciples asked him whether the blind man or his parents had sinned, the Lord's answer was neither. The blindness was not the result of anyone's sins. It ultimately existed for the glory of God.

We find in Hannah's story that eventually enormous good came from her struggle. She is allowed to bear six children. One of them is the great Samuel, who turned Israel from its darkest period back toward the light. Hannah prayed, and her recorded prayer is a wonderful example of how we should speak of God in his greatness. In fact, many scholars agree that Mary probably learned to pray as other young girls of her time did—learning the prayer of Hannah in 1 Samuel 2. The *Magnificat* is Mary's prayer of response when she was told she would bear the Messiah. There are clear overtones in that great text in the New Testament of Hannah's prayer in the Old Testament.

There is a wonderful outcome to Hannah's story, but it was not apparent at the beginning that any good could come of it. What we find highlighted is the difficulty. Let's consider the text, beginning in verse 1 of 1 Samuel:

There was a certain man from Ramathaim, a Zuphite from the hill country of Ephraim, whose name was Elkanah son of Jeroham, the son of Elihu, the son of Tohu, the son of Zuph, an

Ephraimite. He had two wives; one was called Hannah and the other Peninnah. Peninnah had children, but Hannah had none.

Year after year this man went up from his town to worship and sacrifice to the LORD Almighty at Shiloh, where Hophni and Phinehas, the two sons of Eli, were priests of the LORD.

Whenever the day came for Elkanah to sacrifice, he would give portions of the meat to his wife Peninnah and to all her sons and daughters. But to Hannah he gave a double portion because he loved her, and the LORD had closed her womb. And because the LORD had closed her womb, her rival kept provoking her in order to irritate her. This went on year after year. Whenever Hannah went up to the house of the LORD, her rival provoked her till she wept and would not eat. Elkanah her husband would say to her, “Hannah, why are you weeping? Why don’t you eat? Why are you downhearted? Don’t I mean more to you than ten sons?”

Once when they had finished eating and drinking in Shiloh, Hannah stood up. Now Eli the priest was sitting on a chair by the doorpost of the LORD’s temple. In bitterness of soul Hannah wept much and prayed to the LORD. And she made a vow, saying, “O LORD Almighty, if you will only look upon your servant’s misery and remember me, and not forget your servant but give her a son, then I will give him to the LORD for all the days of his life, and no razor will ever be used on his head.”

As she kept on praying to the LORD, Eli observed her mouth. Hannah was praying in her heart, and her lips were moving but her voice was not heard. Eli thought she was drunk and said to her, “How long will you keep on getting drunk? Get rid of your wine.”

“Not so, my lord,” Hannah replied, “I am a woman who is deeply troubled. I have not been drinking wine or beer; I was pouring out my soul to the LORD. Do not take your servant for a wicked woman; I have been praying here out of my great anguish and grief.”

Eli answered, “Go in peace, and may the God of Israel grant you what you have asked of him.”

She said, “May your servant find favor in your eyes.” Then she went her way and ate something, and her face was no longer downcast. (1 Samuel 1:1-18)

These events occurred at the end of the historical period known as the time of the Judges in Israel, which was probably the darkest chapter, the most faithless time in the whole history of the people of God. They had entered the land under the conquest of Joshua and immediately got seduced by the gods of the Canaanite people around them. They were divided from one another and were far from the Lord. The worst stories in the Bible are found in the book of Judges: rape, genocide, dismemberment, all kinds of terrible things. The religion of YAHWEH—the religion of the Jews—was crusted over with idolatry and superstition.

The specific reference here to Hophni and Phinehas makes the point. These two were like other priests during the era of the Judges: charlatans and mercenaries who used religion for personal gain. Before long, God destroyed these two for their blasphemy. This was not an encouraging time to wonder about the ways of God, to seek him. These were difficult days, not unlike our own where the darkness in the world and the inadequacy of the church seem greater all the time. Yet, we read of Hannah, longing for blessing from God. I want to suggest four things that might connect us to her story.

Four things that taken together, year after year, finally got her to the point where she cried out in her misery, her bitterness, and her hopelessness; she cried out to the Lord.

The first of these four was Peninnah's voice. There was no escaping it. The woman who lived in the same house, who regularly boasted of her children and who in subtle and perhaps overt ways made a point of Hannah's inadequacy, rubbed salt in the wounds. When you have something that hurts you deeply, the last thing in the world you want is a constant reminder of it. And yet there was no way to quiet Peninnah's voice. Even if her speech could be silenced, her body language would make the same point: "I have children and you have none."

Many of us have circumstances in which the thing we hate most or fear most is brought up frequently, and we are made to face the difficulty over and over again. Hannah might have wished that Peninnah understood her. After all, she is the only other woman in this story, one who knows what it's like to be a woman in times when women weren't well favored. She might have been able to be Hannah's advocate and friend, but Hannah realized that Peninnah was someone who was just going to make it worse. Many women hope that if men don't understand them, at least the sisterhood might provide a place of help or comfort, yet in this case that was not so.

A second observation we can make about this is the difficulty of holidays. At the same time every year Elkanah's family would go up to the tabernacle for a festival. The festival had a core of worship, but it was also clearly a time for a party. In this setting there was the giving of gifts, the holiday meal, and a festive atmosphere. Yet Hannah was made more miserable every time the holidays came around.

Now that's not unfamiliar to us either. For many who suffer in their families, the occasions that are supposed to be the happiest are often the most miserable. The expectation that we should be together and love one another and give gifts, can become an occasion to be angry at what is missing. Observers remind us that for some, the holidays are the worst time of year. In fact, suicides go up in December in this country. Hannah went up "year after year" and found herself provoked, hurt and hopeless.

The third thing we can observe here is bad pastoring. At a crucial point, Hannah finally decides to turn to the Lord. She recognizes that the promises of the world, the people in her life, the institutions that are supposed to help aren't helping at all. So Hannah turns to the Lord and the pastor thinks she's drunk. He scorns her struggle and rebukes her. Now this starts to get a little close to home for me, frankly, because bad pastoring is easily done. Rather than speak for God in this setting, Eli says exactly the wrong thing.

Church can disappoint you. The spiritual leaders you would expect better things from are often not the people who do you the most good. We find that the human players in this drama repeatedly fail Hannah. Whether it's the other woman who might have understood but didn't; the family festivals and gatherings that are supposed to make her feel better and don't; or the pastor who rebukes her when she is praying.

Fourth, Hannah has a clumsy husband. I'm glad, actually, that the dynamics of family life described here are 3,000 years old. There is nothing new under the sun. It makes me feel more comfortable with my own clumsy husbanding. It's clear that Elkanah loves his wife, but it doesn't help. "I gave you an extra piece of pie. Isn't that good enough? Aren't I better to you than ten sons would be? I do love you, what more can I do?" Hannah knows that he loves her, but she also knows that her husband can't fix what she is suffering with. She is married to a good man and it's not enough.

In all the places Hannah looks, she finds that her needs aren't met and it's getting harder. She is ashamed of herself and resentful of life, and desperately afraid that the future is going to be filled with more disappointment and dark clouds. In

all of this, Hannah finally decides to go directly to God. Verse 10 is an important turning point: “In bitterness of soul Hannah wept much and prayed to the LORD.” The bitterness we can understand. The weeping we would expect, but in addition to weeping, she made another decision: “. . .and [turned] to the Lord.” This is the hinge on which this story changes.

We read the first of two prayers: the short text beginning in verse 11, and then a much longer prayer in chapter 2 of 1 Samuel. The first prayer begins with recognition of her need: “O LORD almighty, if you will only look upon your servant's misery and remember me, and not forget. . . .” Hannah makes a vow. She tries to make a bargain with God: “If you will give me a son, I'll give him back to your service.” It's clear in this that she is not mature in the ways of God. The bargain suggested in this prayer is not condoned or taught elsewhere in scripture. God does not bargain with those who come to him. We can't give him anything we haven't received from him, and even then, he doesn't operate in deal making. God acts as he will: sovereignly and graciously, but for his own reasons, not in order to get what we offer him in return.

The prophet Micah made this point: “Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?” (Micah 6:7). The answer is clearly, “no.” Hannah was trying to offer her firstborn back into the service of God. Micah, wiser and longer in God's service, knew this was a great foolishness. David made the same point in Psalm 51, “You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart. . . .” (Psalm 51:16, 17a). These men had walked longer with God. They did not assume to make God offers in return for his blessing.

Hannah didn't know any better. She lived in such a dark time that she probably hadn't been taught to pray well. But what she did was very important. She said, “I am so miserable. I don't have anything to offer you except my misery. I've tried everything else. There is no living in my life, nothing and no one can fix this. Lord, will you look on me in my misery?” And what she essentially says is this: “If you will, I'll give you my life. I don't know if you're hearing this. I don't know what leads you to act on someone's behalf. All I have to offer you is a broken life. But if you will hear me, I will give you my life back. I want to know you and I want your help for me.”

These words are similar to the prayers of many who are finding God for the first time in foxholes: “Lord, get me out of this mess, please. And if you get me out of this mess, I'll give you my life.” God, in his tenderness, honors prayers like that. We have nothing to offer, but what we're saying is “Please help, I have nowhere else to turn.” Hannah's vow is less important than her acknowledgement of her need. Even so, God uses this prayer. Samuel ends up being *Samuel* as a result of this. The key to it is the recognition that she had given up looking for anyone else—the priest, her husband, the world—to fix her situation and she turned directly to the living God himself. The second prayer of Hannah is in chapter 2, beginning in verse 1:

Then Hannah prayed and said: "My heart rejoices in the LORD. . .

[Now, just as a starting point, look at how different that is from the start of the earlier prayer: “O Lord, if you will look on your servant's misery. . . .”]

**“My heart rejoices in the LORD;
in the LORD my horn is lifted high.
My mouth boasts over my enemies,
for I delight in your deliverance.**

**There is no one holy like the LORD;
there is no one besides you;
there is no Rock like our God.**

**Do not keep talking so proudly
or let your mouth speak such arrogance,
for the LORD is a God who knows,
and by him deeds are weighed.**

**The bows of the warriors are broken,
but those who stumbled are armed with strength.
Those who were full hire themselves out for food,
but those who were hungry hunger no more.
She who was barren has borne seven children,
but she who has had many sons pines away.**

**The LORD brings death and makes alive;
he brings down to the grave and raises up.
The LORD sends poverty and wealth;
he humbles and he exalts.
He raises the poor from the dust
and lifts the needy from the ash heap;
he seats them with princes
and has them inherit a throne of honor.**

**For the foundations of the earth are the LORD's;
upon them he has set the world.
He will guard the feet of his saints,
but the wicked will be silenced in darkness.**

**It is not by strength that one prevails;
those who oppose the LORD will be shattered.
He will thunder against them from heaven;
the LORD will judge the ends of the earth.
He will give strength to his king
and exalt the horn of his anointed.” (1 Samuel 2:1-10)**

Probably about four years have passed from the first prayer of Hannah to this second one. She becomes pregnant, she has a son, and he lives to weaning age, which would have been later in that culture than in ours. During this time, Hannah continues her walk with the God she turned to when desperate. She has learned to understand the wonder of his presence. She has seen her prayers answered. She has reflected, perhaps, on truth that she had learned in the past and she sought out things of God she hadn't before. She has become someone who believes God is going to do her good; he can be trusted, and followed.

In the pursuit of this relationship, she is now able to pray words of praise to God, but also words of instruction to anybody who will hear her. This time her voice is exuberant in saying these extraordinary things about God. She silences

those who would boast and those who tell lies. Maybe Peninnah should be quiet, finally. As should Elkanah, who did his best but couldn't say the right thing, and maybe Eli as well, who got it wrong when he tried to talk to his flock. And, maybe the voices inside her own heart that had condemned her. She is telling all those who defy the good news of God's grace to be silent. "I will tell you what God is like! There is none like him. He has no rival. These hilltop shrines and rituals and idols are all useless. There is no other God, only one. He knows what is true. He evaluates rightly. He is aware of people like us. He understands our circumstances."

What does God do in the world when he acts? He finds the downcast. He ministers to the hurt. He looks for the set-aside. He raises up the poor. Those who are arrogant enough to say that they are proud of their accomplishments, who don't understand the needs they have, are people who find God distant from them. They might well find that their circumstances worsen. But those who are broken and lost and fearful he raises up. This is the God Hannah had come to know and can now speak of with such clarity and passion. Finally, she ends her prayer by saying, "This is the one who laid the foundation on which the earth sits. This is the one who will be there at the end of history to judge everything. He is from before the beginning and will lower the curtain at the end of time."

Hannah spent a long time wishing her circumstances were different, wanting them to change and growing more desperate. She looked for answers in the world. She looked for people who could alter her circumstances, but the problem was that the Lord had closed her womb. She was brought to the point where she would turn to him and ask for help. In facing God directly for the first time, Hannah found an answer. God did meet her. She came to him with nothing but hurt, she offered him herself, and she was willing to be changed by his answer. Her difficulty was to the glory of God as much as the blind man's in John 9 was. Hannah was able to pray a great prayer of thanks, a great announcement to others that God cares for those who suffer, and raises up the down trodden.

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