

HANNAH & MARY

CHRISTMAS SERVICE



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1 Samuel 2:1-10
Luke 1:46-55
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For many people in our world, the so-called power of God is nowhere to be found. Many people who follow Jesus read about the power of God in the Scriptures, but they're not sure they experience much of it themselves. Where, today, do we find the power of God? Is it possible for the power of God to go from an abstract biblical concept to a felt, lived experience?

Hannah's prayer

There was a woman in Israel named Hannah, who lived more than three thousand years ago. She had it bad. First, she was barren, which was cause for shame in her world. The Lord, in fact, had closed her womb. Second, she was taunted by her husband's other wife, who was able to have children. Third, her husband was insensitive to her plight. Fourth, when she prayed and wept in the temple, asking for a son and promising to dedicate him to the Lord, the priest accused her of being drunk. Yes, Hannah had it bad, but the Lord heard her prayer. She conceived, gave birth to a son, and named him Samuel. True to her vow, she didn't possess the gift, her son, but released him, dedicating him to the Lord. Then she composes and prays this poem:

1 Samuel 2:1-10:

¹Then Hannah prayed and said:

**"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.**

**²"There is no one holy like the LORD;
there is no one besides you;
there is no Rock like our God.**

**³"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.**

⁴"The bows of the warriors are broken,

but those who stumbled are armed with strength.

**⁵"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.**

**⁶"The LORD brings death and makes alive;
he brings down to the grave and raises up.**

**⁷The LORD sends poverty and wealth;
he humbles and he exalts.**

**⁸He 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.**

**⁹He will guard the feet of his saints,
but the wicked will be silenced in darkness.**

"It is not by strength that one prevails;

¹⁰those 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"**

Hannah begins with her own story but soon loses herself in a much larger story: the story of the kingdom of God.

With great anguish of heart, she had prayed for a son and then, miraculously, she received a son. However, she is consumed not with what the Lord has given her or with what she is giving the Lord but with the Lord himself.

Hannah is consumed with the attributes and works

of the Lord: who he is and what he does. The attribute that captivates her is the power of the Lord. The work that captivates her is what the Lord does with his power: he brings down the powerful and lifts up the weak. The Lord subverts the established order and turns the world upside down.

How did Hannah learn such things? She learned then by lamenting her barrenness and pouring out her soul to the Lord. Where did she learn such things? She learned them in her own womb! Indeed, Hannah prays, “She who was barren has borne seven children, / but she who has had many sons pines away.” Hannah had given birth to one son, Samuel, but he could represent seven sons all by himself (seven being the number of completeness) for the role he would play in the kingdom.

Hannah begins by observing that “in the LORD my horn is lifted high.” Inasmuch as an animal’s raised horn was a symbol of strength, Hannah is saying that the Lord has made her strong. She concludes by asking the Lord to give strength to his king, lifting up “the horn of his anointed.” (The last two lines would be better translated “May he give strength to his king / and [may he] exalt the horn of his anointed.”)

What king? There is no king. Ah, but there will be, and Hannah, as she encountered the Lord, could read the times. She discerned that Israel needed a king, and the Lord enabled her to peer into the future. She prays for the Lord to strengthen the king of Israel as he has strengthened her. In fact, her prayer launches the kingdom in a new direction. Hannah not only loses herself in the larger story of the kingdom of God, she also sees her story as bound up with the larger story.

The two stories—hers and God’s—were even more connected than she knew. Her son Samuel became Israel’s first prophet. As a prophet, he anointed David, the king. What did he anoint him with? Oil from a horn. Indeed, the Lord answered Hannah’s prayer: he lifted up the horn of David, his king. How did David learn about the power of the Lord? The same way that Hannah did. Like Hannah, David lamented his barrenness (he had to wait twenty years after being anointed king to be enthroned as king). Hannah learned about the power of the Lord in the barrenness of her womb; David, hounded by his enemies, learned about the power of the Lord in the barrenness of the wilderness.

Strength in barrenness

Some of us can identify with Hannah more or less directly: we would love to have children, but heretofore

we haven’t been able to. Many of us can identify with Hannah metaphorically: whether we want children, have children, or can’t have children, we feel barren. We feel unproductive, unable to generate much of anything. We long for fruitful lives, but the seasons come and go, and we’re still waiting. If God closed Hannah’s womb, could it be that the Lord himself has prevented us from being fruitful? Perhaps, like Hannah, we feel a sense of shame. Some people, if they don’t outright taunt us, like Hannah’s rival, or ridicule us, like the priest, may be insensitive to our plight, like Hannah’s husband.

How do we learn about the power of God? The same way Hannah learned it: by lamenting our barrenness and pouring out our souls to God. Where do we learn about the power of God? The same place Hannah learned it: in our barrenness. However God answers your prayers, he will strengthen you—he will lift up your horn—through your prayers. Jesus, as he poured out his soul in Gethsemane, praying for the cup to be removed from him, received strength from the Father to drink the cup. Thus, as you pour out your soul to God, you not only learn about the power of God, you also experience it.

As I headed into my late thirties, still single, after yet another relational heartache, I sought to become more attentive to my heart. Instead of shouting down the barrenness with observations that most people in our world have it a lot worse than I do and that, all things considered, I was blessed, I allowed myself to feel what I felt. I gave full vent to my feelings, lamenting and pouring out my soul to God, filling page after page in a journal with raw feelings that flowed from my pen. Moreover, instead of simply trusting God to bring a woman into my life if and when he chose to, I fervently and unreservedly prayed for him to do so. As I lamented, as I poured out my soul, as I prayed, I experienced a new intimacy with God and felt strangely strengthened, not least for my ongoing quest for a wife.

In what way do you feel barren? Lament, pour out your soul, pray, and you will experience the power of God. Lament with the hymnist: “O come, O come, Emmanuel / And ransom captive Israel / That mourns in lonely exile here / Until the Son of God appear.”

Hannah looked beyond the reign of David, for she asked that the Lord would “judge the ends of the earth,” thus praying for the consummation of the kingdom of God (again, this is most likely the language of supplication rather than assertion regarding the future). David’s reign came and went and never reached the ends of the earth. Thus Hannah sends up a prayer and sends it out into the ages. Will God in heaven hear her prayer? Will anyone on

earth hear it? Perhaps we send up, and send out, similar prayers, longing for God to vanquish evil and right all wrongs, especially in light of the recent shootings in Newtown, Conn. What will happen to our prayers?

Mary's prayer

There was a woman in Israel, or, more likely, a girl, named Mary who lived in the first century, more than one thousand years after Hannah. She hailed from the region of Galilee, which was considered second-class next to Judah, its neighbor to the south. Moreover, she lived in the town Nazareth, so insignificant a place that even a fellow Galileans ridiculed those who lived there (John 1:46). Mary, a virgin, was betrothed to a man named Joseph, but because of her youth, gender, and still-single status, she occupied the bottom of the social strata in her world. No one would have considered her a candidate for anything special.

Nevertheless, an angel named Gabriel, familiar to Jews because he helped the prophet Daniel understand visions regarding the future, appeared to Mary and told her that she would conceive by the Holy Spirit and give birth to the long-expected Messiah, the Son of God, whose entry into the world we now celebrate at Christmastime. With that, Mary faced at least two difficult choices: first, whether to believe the strange visitor, and second, whether to be obedient to his message, which would mean embracing the shame of pregnancy prior to marriage and possibly losing the little status she had, connected as it was to Joseph's household. Nevertheless, she told the angel, "I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said." After visiting her previously barren cousin, Elizabeth, who was also found to be miraculously pregnant with a son, John the Baptist, Mary composes and prays this poem:

Luke 1:46-55:

⁴⁶And Mary said:

"My soul glorifies the Lord

⁴⁷and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

⁴⁸for he has been mindful

of the humble state of his servant.

**From now on all generations will call me
blessed,**

**⁴⁹for the Mighty One has done great things
for me—holy is his name.**

**⁵⁰His mercy extends to those who fear him,
from generation to generation.**

⁵¹He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;

**he has scattered those who are proud in
their inmost thoughts.**

**⁵²He has brought down rulers from their
thrones but has lifted up the humble.**

**⁵³He has filled the hungry with good things
but has sent the rich away empty.**

**⁵⁴He has helped his servant Israel,
remembering to be merciful**

**⁵⁵to Abraham and his descendants forever,
even as he said to our fathers."**

Turns out that Hannah's prayer for the Lord to judge the ends of the earth was heard not only by the Lord, it was also heard by Mary. Mary's poem is hardly original. Its originality consists in the manner in which she draws on other sources, chiefly Hannah's poem. Hannah, the barren woman who couldn't conceive yet did conceive, sent her poem out into the ages, and it landed more than a thousand years later in the heart of a virgin, the girl who couldn't conceive yet did conceive.

Like Hannah, Mary begins with her own story but then loses herself in the larger story of the kingdom of God.

Unlike Hannah, Mary never prayed for a son. Mary, of course, had not considered the possibility that she, a virgin, would bear a son, much less the Son of God. Hannah knew what to pray for; Mary couldn't have known what to pray for. But the angel told her, "For nothing is impossible with God." God has done something for her she never could have dreamed of doing for herself. Because she knows Hannah's prayer, not to mention the prayers of the psalmists, she knows that God favors the humble; therefore, she observes that the Lord has been mindful of her "humble state." Indeed, the Mighty One has done great things for her, the powerless one. No wonder she explodes with praise.

Her praise, however, is by no means reserved for what the Lord has done for her alone. Because the Lord does great things for Mary, he does great things for everyone, "from generation to generation": he gives the world a savior.

Like Hannah, Mary is consumed with the power of the Lord and what he does with his power—how he brings down the powerful and lifts up the weak, how he subverts the established order and turns the world upside down. How did she learn such things? She learned them not least by listening to the prayer of Hannah. Where did she learn such things? Like Hannah, she learned them in her own womb! In her womb, she found the Lord to be mindful of her "humble" state; in her womb, she learned that the Lord lifts up not only her in particular but the "humble"

as a whole category. Indeed, the Lord is mindful not only of the lowly virgin; he also lifts up all those who humble themselves before him.

Mary begins by observing that the Lord has been mindful of the humble state of “his servant” (Mary); she concludes by observing that the Lord, by impregnating her, “has helped his servant Israel,” in fulfillment of his promises to Abraham—the promises that will reach out to embrace all of Abraham’s descendents, those who believe in the Son of Mary.

Hannah’s son anointed the king of Israel for its season of need; Mary’s son would not only be the king of Israel but also the king of the world, and not just for a season but for all seasons. The prophet John the Baptist, the son of Mary’s cousin, Elizabeth, played the role of Samuel, baptizing Jesus the Messiah and signaling the descent of the Holy Spirit on the anointed one. Hannah prayed for the day when the Lord would judge the ends of the earth. Mary would give birth to the king through whom the Lord would judge the ends of the earth and establish his healing, loving rule (Acts 17:31). Hannah’s prayer launched the kingdom in a new direction; Mary’s prayer speeds the kingdom toward its consummation. Like Hannah, Mary not only loses herself in the larger story of the kingdom of God, she also sees her story as bound up with the larger story.

If Hannah learned about the power of the Lord in the barrenness of her womb and Mary learned about the power of the Lord in a womb no man had touched, then Jesus the Messiah learned about the power of the Lord in the barrenness—the God-forsakenness—of Golgotha, the Place of the Skull, and in a tomb in which no one had yet been laid.

Strength in non-expectancy

None of us can identify with Mary directly: only one virgin conceived by the Holy Spirit and gave birth to the Son of God. Many of us can identify with Mary metaphorically: God does something for us that we never prayed for, something, perhaps, that we didn’t even consider possible. God does something for us that we never could have dreamed of doing for ourselves. Nothing, not even a virgin conception, is impossible with God. Perhaps, like Mary, we feel second-class, insignificant, lacking in status, unlikely candidates for anything special.

How do we learn about the power of God? The same way Mary learned it: by listening to the biblical prayers, not least the prayers of Hannah and Mary. Where do we learn about the power of God? The same place Mary learned it:

in our own non-expectant state, so to speak, when God does something for us that we hadn’t even considered praying for. When God does something for us out of the blue, we find him to be mindful of our humble, powerless state. When the Mighty God does great things for you, you might then, like Mary, glorify the Lord and rejoice in God your Savior. When you rejoice in the Lord, he strengthens you, for, as the Nehemiah indicates, “the joy of the Lord is your strength” (Nehemiah 8:10). Thus you not only learn about the power of God, you also experience it.

In my late thirties, I was praying for a wife, but I wasn’t praying for an insight that came to me, right out of the blue one day. If I wanted to be married, I was a man who wanted to lay down his life for a woman, for that is God’s design for husbands (Ephesians 5:25). I had no wife. Then again, the apostle Paul, also in Ephesians 5, calls the church the bride of Christ. I sensed God pointing to the church and saying something like, “There she is; lay down your life for her.” I said okay. Shortly thereafter, some seventeen years ago now, I started the Young Adults Fellowship at our church.

On my fortieth birthday, still single, I received another out-of-the blue gift. The Young Adults Fellowship threw me a birthday party, and as the party was breaking up, one of the members of the fellowship approached me and, surveying the twenty or so remaining people, observed, “Scott, you’ve created a family here!” When the fortieth birthday of a single man might cause him to question whether he would ever have a family, God showed me, out of the blue, that I not only had a family, I had also created one—with the help of the Holy Spirit, of course. What could I do but rejoice? Rejoicing, I was strengthened, not least to continue laying down my life for the bride of Christ.

(Side note: The man who made that comment to me went on to meet his wife at the Young Adults Fellowship. I just received from them—and their five children!—their annual Christmas card. Additional side note: when I was forty-one, I met a flesh-and-blood woman and married her a year later. We have two daughters. But that’s a story for another day.)

What has God done for you that you couldn’t have expected? Rejoice in the Lord, and you will experience the power of God. Rejoice with the hymnist: “Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel / Shall come to thee, O Israel.”

Up and out

Hannah composed a prayer and sent it up to God and out into the ages more than three thousand years ago.

Mary heard Hannah's prayer, used it to compose her own prayer, which she also sent up to God and out into the ages almost two thousand years ago. Hundreds of years later, we hear the prayers of the barren woman and the virgin, and they meet us in our spiritual barrenness and in our non-expectancy.

What do we do with their prayers? We do what they did. Consider, first of all, your own story. On the one hand, consider your barrenness and lament. On the other hand, consider what God has done for you and rejoice. Reflect, pray, and, perhaps like the two women, compose a poem/prayer. Like Hannah and Mary, begin with your own story. When you lament and when you rejoice—when you worship—you connect most deeply with your humanity, for to be human is to worship. Be human: lament and rejoice. When you connect most deeply with who you are—with who God made you to be—you experience the power of God. Feel the power of God in your heart as you lament and rejoice, as you connect with your deepest self. Lament and Rejoice—they seem like opposites, but biblically speaking, they're more like distant cousins that belong in the same family: Worship.

Begin with your own story, but, like Hannah, and Mary, don't end there; lose yourself in the larger story of the kingdom of God. As you lament and rejoice, you find yourself bound together with other humans, others who lament, others who rejoice, others who are barren, others of lowly status. What might you want God to do for them? You might want God to lift up the weak and bring down the powerful; you might want him to overturn the established order; you might want him to consummate his reign, vanquish all evil, and right all wrongs; and you might want him to judge the ends of the earth. You might pray for him to do all these things.

You might, like Hannah and Mary, send a prayer up to heaven and out into the ages. It might even be as simple as the last prayer in the Scriptures: "Come, Lord Jesus" (Revelation 22:20). Will God in heaven hear? Of course he will. Will anyone on earth hear, somewhere down the line, a year from now, a thousand years from now, a million years from now? Of course someone will. Everyone will hear. You will hear! When you see the Lord Jesus coming to consummate his reign, for every eye will see him, you will be there to receive your own prayer. Your prayer will land in your own heart.

If you haven't yet given your allegiance to the king whom

Hannah anticipated and whom Mary bore, you might pray to receive him into your life. This is Christmas, after all, when we celebrate Christ's entry into the world. If you invite him in, his Holy Spirit will enter your life and impregnate it with love. Miraculously, Hannah gave birth. Miraculously, Mary gave birth. Believe in Jesus, and, no less miraculously, you will be born again.