

Hannah, - A Woman At Prayer (I Sam. 1:1-20)

The hymn writer James Montgomery was born in Ayrshire, in the eighteenth century. He wrote the well-known hymn, "Prayer is the soul's sincere desire, uttered or unexpressed ... the burden of a sigh, the falling of a tear; the upward glancing of an eye, when none but God is near". ... That is exactly the scene 3,000 years ago when Hannah was kneeling at the altar in Shiloh, ^{I Sam. 1:10} And she was in bitterness of soul, and prayed unto the LORD, and wept sore.

This First Book of Samuel is known in the Hebrew Bible as the First Book of the Kings, and it is divided into three main sections, concentrating on ... (i) Samuel (the prophet and king-maker), (ii) Saul (the people's choice of king), (iii) David and Solomon. ... From the birth of Samuel to the death of Saul, at the end of the book, is about one hundred years. Samuel lived at the same time as Samson, and Saul would have come to the throne just a few years after Samson's death. So, the setting is within the twilight years of the period of the Judges, - when Israel was a *theocracy*, when God governed and directed the nation, - and ended with the establishment of a 'theocratic monarchy', when God chose Saul and then David and Solomon.

Our story centres upon a woman who longed to become a mother. She lived during a period of relative peace (Jdgs. 10:1) to the north of Jerusalem in the hill country, in the territory of Ephraim (c.1100 BC). Elkanah, the woman's husband, was an Ephraimite and a Levite priest. He had two wives, - Hannah (who was childless) and Peninnah (who had many sons and daughters, v.4).

Elkanah was a good man who loved God, and a dutiful husband and father. However, he practised bigamy and that was a source of problems in his family. Bigamy was never God's intention for the creation ordinance is one man and one woman, ^{Gen. 2:24} Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh ... However, bigamy was accepted and it illustrates the spiritual decadence in the land that a 'religious' leader was 'content' to ignore God's order, and the people accepted it!

Yet, even out of disobedience, God prepared to do a mighty thing in the land. There is never an excuse for disobedience to God's word, but nevertheless, He sometimes 'turns it' to suit His purposes ... and this was what He did in the opening chapter of I Samuel. Firstly, ...

HANNAH'S PROBLEM (vv.1-8) The name Hannah means 'favoured'. However, she could not give her husband Elkanah ('God has

obtained/possessed') a child, a son, for she was barren (v.2,6). To compensate, her husband married another woman. This was similar to how Sarah had told her husband Abraham to take another wife Hagar to produce a child (Gen. 16:3, Ishmael), which developed into devastating circumstances existing to this day.

Because Hannah could not have children, and because Elkanah was a priest, his community expected him to show the signs of God's blessing, that is, to have sons. He loved Hannah, but for the sake of his prestige, he disregarded the one man-one woman principle in Genesis, and he married a second wife whose name was Peninnah ('jewel'), and she *was* able to give him many children. ...

But Elkanah, you are a priest, a Levite, you minister before the ark of the Lord at Shiloh, and people look up to you. ... Besides, it was not the Lord's will for Hannah to have children for the LORD had shut up her womb (v.5). It was not Hannah's fault, or Elkanah's, but it was God's will. However, regardless, Elkanah married another woman who would provide him with children. ... Hannah was heartbroken.

Disobedience to God's Word does not solve problems. Instead, it *breeds* problems, and when the many children of Peninnah (v.4) were up and running around, Peninnah made Hannah's life a misery with her jibes and taunts (v.6). The worst time of the year came when all the family made their annual trip to the tabernacle at Shiloh. This was a highlight of the year. ... The history behind it ... After the children of Israel had come out of their forty years of wandering in the wilderness of Sinai, they entered and gradually conquered Canaan, and, at a place called Shiloh, Joshua divided up the land among the twelve tribes (Joshua 19). Shiloh was also where the Ark of the Covenant was settled and remained for 369 years (during the period of the Judges) before it was captured by the Philistines (I Sam. 4), and later recovered, and eventually taken up to Jerusalem by King David. Shiloh, therefore, had become an annual pilgrimage of celebration where whole families attended. Understandably though, not for Hannah for her loneliness was all-the-more emphasised because she would be on her own, while Peninnah had all her children with her. And then when Elkanah displayed how he loved Hannah more than Peninnah, Peninnah was jealous and when they went to the house of the Lord in Shiloh, Peninnah's taunting of Hannah increased, ⁷ And as he did so year by year, when she went up to the house of the LORD, so she provoked her; therefore she [*Hannah*] wept, and did not eat.

It was an awful atmosphere in the household and Elkanah did not know how to cope with it, nevertheless, he tried to offer Hannah his own brand of male

sympathy, ⁸ Hannah, why weepst thou? and why eatest thou not? and why is thy heart grieved? am not I better to thee than ten sons ... “Why weepst thou?” ... *You don’t know, Elkanah!!* ... Because he had married this other woman, he was ‘out of his depth’ and he could not alleviate **Hannah’s problem**.

HANNAH’S PRAYER (vv. 9-16) When her husband was unable to understand, and when Peninnah constantly goaded her, and when the rest of the family were joyfully engaging themselves in their trip to Shiloh, Hannah quietly and on her own turned to the Lord. Here we find a beautiful truth upon which every child of God depends, it is simply this, *the Sovereignty of God* ... even over those aspects of our life we do not understand.

Hannah had a sufficient grasp of God’s sovereignty for when she was in bitterness of soul *I deeply distressed*, she turned and prayed unto the LORD, and wept sore (v.10). ... She *turned* to Jehovah. She knew there was no point turning to Elkanah, or Eli, Hophni or Phineas ... but she turned and prayed to the LORD for she recognised it was *His* will, - for whatever reason, - she was childless. She was desperately sad, but even through her tears, she understood God was in control.

Some folks would say, “There it is ... accept it and move on!” ... What would have happened though if Hannah had settled upon accepting her predicament, and didn’t expect anything better, and had not turned and prayed to the Lord? ... Samuel would not have been born, and that would have affected the history of Israel! ... But her barrenness cast her on the Lord more for she ‘prayed her heart out’ knowing God could answer and even give her a son.

Here is *her exemplary Godliness*. She was being crushed by her barrenness and by Peninnah’s constant taunts ... but she took them without lashing back, and when she sought the Lord, she did not call down judgement on Peninnah. Instead, she made a personal plea for the Lord to heal her from her infertility.

She had no bitterness towards God, nor towards Elkanah’s other wife. She didn’t blame anyone. She didn’t cry, “Lord, why did You allow this?” ... But Hannah, like all who love the Lord, knew in her sadness, the Lord’s purpose for her was ultimately for her good, and His glory (Rom. 8:28). And even though the affliction and anguish were almost unbearable, she brought her troubles before God’s throne for His help and healing. When she had nowhere else to turn, she had God in Heaven to Whom she brought her heartache for she believed He could deliver her out of all her distresses (cf. Ps. 107:6).

Have we trials and temptations? ...

Can we find a friend so faithful Who will all our sorrows share?
 Jesus knows our every weakness Take it to the Lord in prayer.

And alongside her *exemplary Godliness*, she also showed *whole-hearted commitment* because she promised, - even before her son was born, - she would dedicate her child to the service in God's house (v.11). "God, if You give me a son, I shall give him back to You for Lord, all I have is Yours (v.29)".

She was not bargaining with the Lord ... far from it. Through her prayer, she glorified Him. God was bringing this childless woman to His altar as the next link in His plan for His people. ... Samuel was being promised, not only to succeed his father as a priest, but – more than that, - Hannah, the woman who could not have children, - in her prayer, - was trusting God He would give her a son, and he would grow into a mighty man of God in service to the nation of Israel. ... *What a prayer this woman made!*

She was on 'holy ground', - as holy as the ground upon which Moses stood on Mt. Sinai/Horeb ... for she was speaking to the same Almighty God! ... A *simple* prayer from a *sorrowing* woman to a *Sovereign* God (v.11). ... **Hannah's problem, Hannah's prayer ...**

HANNAH'S PEACE (vv.17-20) The blessing from the high priest Eli began the entrance of the peace of God into her soul, Go in peace: and the God of Israel grant thee thy petition that thou hast asked of him (v.17). When the prayer was released from her heart, she had taken her "burden to the Lord and [left] it there".

She turned, and looked at old Eli, and addressed him with the courtesy due for a priest, Let thine handmaid find grace in thy sight (v.18). ... But there was more in it than just a common salutation for she was already trusting in God to answer the prayer of her heart. ... And then she returned home, and did eat, and her countenance was no more sad (v.18). ... It is beautiful, isn't it! There was no more heartache. We are not even told if she shared what happened with her husband. She simply went back home and 'got on' with living and believing. ... Her son had not yet been conceived but God gave her the assurance He had heard her prayer. ... God hears the cries of His people, *Is. 65:24* And it shall come to pass, that before they call, I will answer; and while they are yet speaking, I will hear

Already Hannah's life was 'on the change'. In due course, she gave birth to a son, and called his name Samuel *I God has heard I*, saying, Because I have asked him of the Lord (v.20) ... She recognised God was answering her prayer and she gave Him the glory, even *before* Samuel was born. ... The impossible was happening

because God had taken a childless woman and made her into a grateful mother ... another link in the chain of the plan for His people.

Look at how beautifully the Holy Spirit puts it, the LORD *remembered* her (v.19), ... and she, Hannah, *forgot* the sorrow which had previously blighted her life. And within the year, she had given birth to a son, and called him Samuel (v.20) ... as far as we are aware, her only child. What a gift! ... And what a contrast for none of Peninnah's children were mentioned.

In our weaker moments, we are sometimes tempted to ask ... Where is God in my life? What is He doing with me? Why has He not used me in some great way others would have noticed? ... Look again at Hannah ... Peninnah probably kept on goading her. Elkanah kept on loving her. Life went on as it always had until, in the will of the Lord, the time was come about after Hannah had conceived, that she bare a son, and called his name Samuel (v.20).

What would have happened if Hannah had not prayed to God? She would have ended up an old woman before her time, and childless. Instead, she cast her cares upon the Lord, and He showed how He cared for her by drawing her closer to Himself, and His purposes were fulfilled in and through her.

Perhaps something is casting its shadow over your life and you cannot understand why the Lord has allowed it to happen ... and you can relate to Hannah. God's Word promises you, *Ps. 55:22* Cast thy burden upon the Lord, and He shall sustain thee: He shall never suffer the righteous to be moved ... The apostle Peter repeats it, *1 Peter 5:7* Casting all your care upon Him; for He careth for you. ... The hymn writer experienced it too,

“If your body suffers pain and your health you can't regain,
And your soul is almost sinking in despair ...
He will make a way for you and will lead you safely through,
Take your burden to the Lord and leave it there.

Ps. 30:5 Weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning ... Hannah took her burden to the Lord and left it there. ... **Her problem ... Her prayer ... Her peace.**

“Trust in the Lord and don't despair, He is a Friend so true!
No matter what your troubles are, Jesus will see you through”.