

1 Preamble

Readings:

- 1 Samuel 1:9-20
- Numbers 6:1-8

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2 Introduction

I want to tell you a story today. A story from the bible.

It is a story about a lady with a problem. But better than that, it is a story about a lady who looked to God for the solution to her problem, who found a solution, who followed through with everything that she needed to do to take hold of that solution, and who found that God not only solved her problem, but blessed her beyond her requests or expectations.

It is the story of Hannah, the Mother of Samuel.

3 Hannah's problem

The story of Hannah is recorded for us in the first two chapters of the first book of Samuel, and probably happened about 1200 years before Christ. It is often seen as simply a prelude to the story of Samuel — a prelude which helps us to see that God was constantly working in Samuel's life from the very beginning and prepares us to see how God used Samuel as a mighty figure in the history of Israel. But today I don't want to focus on Samuel at all. I just want to look at his mother, Hannah. And to look at her problems.

Hannah's problem can best be seen by looking at her family tree, or at least a few little branches of it.

Hannah was married to a man named Elkanah. As far as we know he was a good and righteous man. It appears that he worshipped God and certainly travelled to the temple at least every year to worship there. We also know that he loved Hannah. It was not with her husband, Elkanah, that Hannah's problem lay, but slightly lower down in the family tree with their children. They didn't have any.

Hannah was, it appeared, barren. They had tried, but she couldn't have any children. The bible tells us that "The LORD had closed her womb" (1SAM1:5) which doesn't necessarily imply that God had deliberately chosen for her to be barren, but simply that she was clearly barren and that God, being in control of all things, was in control of her womb as well.

Being unable to bear children is not a particularly uncommon condition, either then or now. I suspect many of us know of someone in our family or among our friends who would have children if they could, but cannot. And I'm sure we have all heard of the IVF program and other initiatives to help couples who are otherwise unable to have children.

But while it is not that uncommon, it is not a particularly frequent condition either. Hannah would doubtlessly have been surrounded by many women who were quite able to have children. And while today we as a society know that not being able to have children does not reduce someone's value as a person any more than any other medical or physical condition, it has not always been so. The prevailing culture in Hannah's time valued women largely for their ability to be good wives and mothers, and a woman who couldn't bear a child was neither a success as a wife or a mother.

So Hannah's problem was not only that she would like to have children but couldn't, but also that her neighbours and friends would be likely to look down on her because of this inability.

We see this clearly as we widen our view of her family tree. Hannah was married to Elkanah, but Elkanah was also married to another lady, Peninnah. Bigamy has certainly never been God's preferred option, and while he never encouraged it, He had not, at this time, explicitly forbidden it, and it certainly was a part of the culture of the time.

So Elkanah had two wives, and his other wife, Peninnah, had children, apparently quite a few. It appears that Hannah did not have a good relationship with Peninnah — Peninnah was teasing and provoking Hannah about not having children while she, Peninnah, had plenty.

So here is Hannah's problem — she cannot have children and this affects her happiness, her sense of self worth, her relationship with Peninnah, and presumably her standing in her community. Her husband Elkanah does love her and doesn't mind about the lack of children, but that is not enough to make up for all the hurt.

4 Hannah seeks a solution

Hannah does not dwell on her misfortune and wallow in self-pity, but instead she looks for a solution. The bible does not explicitly tell us how she sought a solution, but by examining the form of solution that she found we can work backwards and make some educated guesses.

Hannah prayed to God, to the LORD of hosts, and asked:

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.

The beginning of this prayer is perfectly understandable, with Hannah asking God to understand her situation and her pain, and to give her a child. But she promises the child would serve God his whole life and would not shave. The bit about shaving certainly needs some explanation and even the promise of service to God isn't completely clear — surely God is quite capable of finding his own servants, and it isn't clear that the child, once fully grown, would be sure to honour Hannah's promise.

To understand this prayer we must, as Hannah surely did, delve into the history of Israel and find out how God has dealt with barren women in the past. I'm sure Hannah would not have lifted a nice leather bound M.O.V (Moses' Original Version) off the shelf and checked the concordance for "Barren". Nor would she have been able to pop into the local library for a copy. But she would have undoubtedly heard much of the Law and the History of Israel from her husband, or from her father, or maybe from an Uncle or other wise and learned man in the village. She would not have consulted a paper copy but rather her memory and she would undoubtedly have found the story of Samson which we have in the book of Judges from chapters 13 to 16.

I'm sure you all know at least some of the story of Samson. He was a very strong man in Israel who fought the Philistines, often single handed, but who succumbed to a lady named Delilah who betrayed him by selling his secret that if his hair were cut, he would be helpless.

But again, it is not his story that interests us but that of his Mother. His mother, who isn't named in the bible, was barren, just like Hannah.

An angel of the Lord appear to this lady and promised that the Lord would take away her barrenness and give her a child, but that this child must be a Nazarite from birth and would be used by God to deliver Israel from the oppression of the Philistines.

The Nazarite code is detailed in Numbers 6. Being a Nazarite involves making a vow of separation to the Lord. It involves avoiding alcoholic drink and in fact everything else derived from the grape vine. And it involves not using a razor on their head: they must let their hair grow uncut.

It is not clear under what circumstances a person might be expected to make a vow of a Nazarite, or what exactly the significance of the various restriction are (though I'm sure there are plenty of theories in any good Christian library) but the similarity between the circumstances of Samson's birth and of Hannah's prayer are too great to be overlooked. The facts of one case and the hope of the other is that God intervenes for a lady who is barren and gives her a child, but this child is to serve God his whole life, and not to use a razor on his head.

It would seem as though Hannah were thinking "Perhaps I could be like Samson's mother. What God has done before he can certainly do again."

But the case of Samson need not have been the only inspiration for Hannah's prayer, though it is the only one that explains the promise to avoid a razor.

Looking into Israel's history there are other women who were, for a time, barren. Sarah the wife of Abraham was barren for a long time before God's promise was fulfilled in the birth of Isaac who would continue in God's plan. Rachel the second wife of Jacob was also barren for many years until at last God opened her womb and she gave birth to Joseph and as most of us know, Joseph was used by God in a very amazing way to provide food and a home for the people of Israel when they went to live in Egypt during a famine in their home land.

Each of these women had faced the heartbreak of being unable to bare children, and each had ultimately been blessed by God to have a child. But in each case the child was to be used by God for His purposes. It was not unreasonable for Hannah to hope and to pray that God might bless her in a similar way, and use her child as He saw fit.

It is worth noting further that it is not clear that any of these women went on to have large families. The only case where we know for a fact there was a second child is the case of Rachel. She had a second child in Benjamin, and died in child birth. Hannah could reasonably hope for one child. She would have no reason to hope for more and her prayer certainly suggests she is only asking for one child — that would be blessing enough.

5 Hannah fulfils her part of the bargain

So, with all this background understanding of who God is and how he works with His people, Hannah prays and asks for a child. The book of Samuel only records a few lines of the actual prayer, but it is clear that she was praying quite an earnest and lengthy prayer.

Not only are we told that in bitterness of soul she wept, but that she was in prayer for long enough that Eli the priest noticed that something unusual was happening and in seeing her lips move without hearing her voice, thought she was drunk.

It was clearly a prayer from the heart, and a prayer in which Hannah placed all of her hope in God. This is the sort of prayer that God loves, and his answer was, in this case, in the affirmative. Within a year Hannah bore a son.

It would have been easy in this situation for Hannah to have forgotten her half of the arrangement. She might have been so full of joy at having a child at last, and might have become so thoroughly attached to the child that she could not let him go. She might have made excuses as so many of us are tempted to do when God's way doesn't suit our way. "Surely God would not want me to give up my only son" or "God could not be so harsh as to take him from me now".

We do not know what Hannah thought, whether she was tempted, or how attached she allowed her self to be to this beautiful, long hoped for, child. But we do know what she did. She faithfully kept her promise.

When Samuel was weaned - probably sometime between the ages of 3 and 5, and certainly while still young, Samuel was given to Eli to be a servant in the Temple and to serve before God.

As any mothers among you will know, and as any fathers might have a slight inkling of, the bond between a mother and a new-born child is a very strong one, and all the more so when the child has been long hoped for.

The emotional bond formed while the child is still in the mothers womb, and cemented during those first months when the child is so totally dependant on the mother for food, for comfort, for everything, is a bond that is not easily put aside. It can not have been easy for Hannah to have given up little Samuel. But her character of faithfulness and her promise to God demanded it. And she did that which was required.

She did not abandon him completely but thought of him and his needs throughout the year and when she did return to the temple as she did every year with her husband, she brought a little tunic which she had made for him to wear. And the child Samuel grew before the LORD (1Sam2:21).

6 Hannah's blessing

But that is not the end of the story of Hannah. She had a problem, she looked for a solution relying on her knowledge of God, and she found one. She prayed and she promised and God gave her what she asked for, and she kept her side of the bargain as I'm sure God knew she would. But it doesn't end there.

Almost as a foot note, we are told towards the end of the second chapter of first Samuel that Hannah went on to have three more sons and two daughters. She had not asked for a large family, only for one child. And the history of God's working with his people gave no certainty that he would bless a barren woman with a large family.

But God is gracious and God is loving, and God chose to reward Hannah's faithfulness by giving her more than she hoped for: by giving her a large family

How this affected Hannah's relationship with Peninnah we cannot know, but how it affected her happiness, her self worth, and her acceptance by society we can be sure: it gave her the opportunity to prove that she was a good wife and a good mother, and I am confident she proved this quite successfully.

7 A Lesson

But what is there in this story for us? Is it just a heart warming story of prosperity through perseverance? Or is there more that we can take away with us?

I think there is a message in here for any one of us who has a problem that seems to be more than we can manage. Whether it is a problem with health or with relationships, whether it involves financial concerns or concerns for our future, there is a lesson we can learn from Hannah.

Firstly, we are reminded that there is a God who cares. A God who can enter into our sorrow and pain. A God who knows how we hurt and longs to heal. The knowledge of such a God was the basis, the starting point of Hannah's prayer, and it can be the start of ours too.

Secondly, we can learn that there is value in doing a bit of research. God has given us a wonderful resource in the bible. It is a history of how God works with and through ordinary people, to accomplish extra-ordinary things. It is His-Story, and it is well worth looking at how God has worked in the past if we hope to have a part in how he will work in the future.

Jesus assures us that God loves to give good gifts to his children, but that he likes us to ask for them, and particularly he likes us to ask according to His will, his nature, his values.

Hannah did her research and was able to pray a prayer that was exactly in accordance with God's way, because it was firmly based on what he had already done.

No matter what our difficulty, there is someone in the bible who has had a need that is similar or at least comparable. If we look at how God worked in their lives, we wont know exactly how God will work for us, but we will have a basis on which to pray.

And finally we can learn the value of faithfulness, and of sticking with God's way even when it isn't comfortable. The answer that we find in the bible may not be exactly to our liking. It might require hardship, or patience, or suffering, or sacrifice. God sometimes chooses not to change our circumstance, but rather to change our selves.

If we, like Hannah, can humbly accept God's way even when it wouldn't be our first choice, and can faithfully stay with it even when it isn't very easy, we can be sure that the race we run will not be in vain, and God's blessing will be awaiting us, both here on earth, and eternally in heaven.