

“HANNAH: STRENGTH BEYOND MEASURE”

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Text: 1 Samuel 1:4-20

God’s Word: 1 Samuel 2:1-10 NLT

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⁴ *On the days Elkanah presented his sacrifice, he would give portions of the meat to Peninnah and each of her children. ⁵ And though he loved Hannah, he would give her only one choice portion because the LORD had given her no children. ⁶ So Peninnah would taunt Hannah and make fun of her because the LORD had kept her from having children. ⁷ Year after year it was the same—Peninnah would taunt Hannah as they went to the Tabernacle. Each time, Hannah would be reduced to tears and would not even eat.*

⁸ *“Why are you crying, Hannah?” Elkanah would ask. “Why aren’t you eating? Why be downhearted just because you have no children? You have me—isn’t that better than having ten sons?”*

⁹ *Once after a sacrificial meal at Shiloh, Hannah got up and went to pray. Eli the priest was sitting at his customary place beside the entrance of the Tabernacle. ¹⁰ Hannah was in deep anguish, crying bitterly as she prayed to the LORD. ¹¹ And she made this vow: “O LORD of Heaven’s Armies, if you will look upon my sorrow and answer my prayer and give me a son, then I will give him back to you. He will be yours for his entire lifetime, and as a sign that he has been dedicated to the LORD, his hair will never be cut.”*

¹² *As she was praying to the LORD, Eli watched her. ¹³ Seeing her lips moving but hearing no sound, he thought she had been drinking. ¹⁴ “Must you come here drunk?” he demanded. “Throw away your wine!”*

¹⁵ *“Oh no, sir!” she replied. “I haven’t been drinking wine or anything stronger. But I am very discouraged, and I was pouring out my heart to the LORD. ¹⁶ Don’t think I am a wicked woman! For I have been praying out of great anguish and sorrow.”*

¹⁷ *“In that case,” Eli said, “go in peace! May the God of Israel grant the request you have asked of him.”*

¹⁸ *“Oh, thank you, sir!” she exclaimed. Then she went back and began to eat again, and she was no longer sad.*

Samuel’s Birth and Dedication

¹⁹ *The entire family got up early the next morning and went to worship the LORD once more. Then they returned home to Ramah. When Elkanah slept with Hannah, the LORD remembered her plea, ²⁰ and in due time she gave birth to a son. She named him Samuel, for she said, “I asked the LORD for him.”*

I have always been a fan of Winnie the Pooh. I remember as a young girl, my favorite stuffed toy was my Winnie the Pooh. Forty-something years later, I still have that silly old bear. I remember watching the classic Winnie the Pooh. Regardless of whatever version of Winnie the Pooh you watched, the timeless characters were still the same as they had always been. Including Eeyore. We all know Eeyore pretty well. "Don't mind me," he says all the time. Eeyore, whose tail is nearly always lost, is the animal in the Hundred Acre Woods with the proverbial rain cloud over his head. And Eeyore is always this way; he always has been, and he probably always will be.

As we read the opening verses of the first book of Samuel, we see that Hannah is in much the same state. Though happily married, Hannah is barren. Because of the expectations of society at that time, barrenness was horrendous on many levels. Aside from the great personal sadness that comes with our inability to bear children, Hannah would have also had to deal with the stigmas of a society that placed great value on a couple's ability to produce offspring and continue the family line. Such inflictions were often viewed as the result of sin or disobedience in the eyes of God, and men were shamed if they were not able to produce offspring.

That's probably why Elkanah had two wives, the other one being Peninnah; though he loved Hannah, Elkanah wanted offspring and Hannah was not able to do that for him. So you can imagine the great sadness that Hannah must feel in the face of her barrenness. And then to top it off, it seems that Peninnah provokes and irritates Hannah; that she chides Hannah endlessly because as the Scriptures tell us, "the Lord has closed her womb." It's one thing for Peninnah to give Hannah a hard time when they are alone in the household, but Peninnah chides Hannah even when they are in public, even when they are at the Temple of the Lord. "There goes the Barren One. There she is, no fruitfulness there." We can nearly feel the humiliation Hannah must have been experiencing as this continued year after year.

I imagine that Hannah probably felt much like Eeyore. While the others in Hannah's circle go happily about their lives, Hannah has no companion but her gloom. Even when her husband brings her a double portion of his sacrifices to feed her, Hannah would only weep and not eat. "Don't mind me," we can almost hear Hannah saying, as she tries to avoid the incessant chiding of her rival. "Don't mind me."

Then, one year, as the family made their annual pilgrimage to the Temple in Shiloh, Hannah decided that she had had enough. This is where Hannah is different from Eeyore. You see, Eeyore is content to continue in his dejected state for all time, but Hannah is not. So we are told that after eating and drinking in Shiloh, "Hannah rose and presented herself before the Lord." In my opinion, this is one of the most beautiful lines in Scripture. Hannah rose. Hannah made a conscious decision before God that she was not going to live her life in misery anymore.

“When we are despised, dejected, rejected, misunderstood, marginalized, or ostracized, there’s no need to spend time simply crying about it.” God desires that we would all do as Hannah did and present ourselves in God’s presence. Whether we are dejected or overjoyed, God desires that we would come into his presence with fervent prayer. Hannah’s prayer was so passionate that the priest Eli, looking on, thought she was drunk or crazy. Sometimes living our lives as God would have us to live them makes us seem strange or weird or crazy in the eyes of those around us, but when we are willing to follow God so unabashedly, great things happen, just as they happened for Hannah. Yet, we have to remember that the tide did not turn until “Hannah rose and presented herself before God.”

Sometimes, we have to rise to the occasion and admit that we are no longer satisfied with the status quo and we’d like some things to change. And then we have to take action in that direction. If I may, I’d like to mention Winnie the Pooh again. My most favorite Winnie the Pooh story is the one where Pooh eats too much honey and then he gets stuck in Rabbit’s hole. Now, we all know how much Pooh loves honey; he takes every opportunity he can get to eat some honey. But when Pooh gets stuck in Rabbit’s hole, some changes have to be made. As much as Pooh loves honey, he’s not so happy in that hole, nor is Rabbit very happy about having Pooh’s backside displayed on his wall. So, rather than continuing to eat honey, Pooh realizes that some things need to change, and he takes action (with Rabbit’s help), and cuts off the honey until he’s finally small enough again to squeeze out of Rabbit’s hole. Pooh could’ve stayed in that hole, eating honey for the rest of his life, but he quickly realized that he wasn’t very happy or comfortable there, so Pooh took determined action to make things change. And that’s what Hannah did too.

Hannah got busy, and we can learn much from Hannah and how Hannah lived a life in faithful submission to God. Hannah teaches us the importance of expressing our need before God. When Hannah entered the Temple on that day in Shiloh so long ago, she held nothing back. Sometimes we get worried that we have to be always stoically faithful, never faltering or seeming needy in the eyes of God.

We admire and value positive thinking, goal setting, and program planning. But the truth is, we all have needs as well, and we have to express those needs before God just as Hannah did. You see, in entering God’s presence in earnest prayer and supplication, Hannah recognized that wholeness in her life lay beyond those things she could control and rested in God as the larger reality of her life. Certainly, there are things in our lives which we can handle on our own accord, but when things spiral out of control, we must fervently turn to God with our needs, trusting that by presenting ourselves in God’s presence, new possibilities will be opened before us.

We can also learn from Hannah the trustful persistence required to claim God’s grace. Even as Hannah prayed passionately in the Temple, she trusted that God’s grace was available to her, even though we are told that it was God who closed her womb. If we reflect on this for a

moment, we realize that there was really something of a boldness in Hannah's persistence before God. God closed Hannah's womb in the first place, how dare she ask that he might give her a son? People might think that we are crazy if we go about asking for the seemingly impossible; and yet, this is what is required to know God's grace in our lives. It's not that God's grace is not offered freely to all, because it is, but to experience the fullness of that grace in our lives requires more than just trekking to the church on Sunday mornings as Hannah traveled to the Temple annually. We have to seek God's grace persistently, trusting always that this grace from God really can transform our lives.

Finally, Hannah demonstrates very clearly that the proper response to the gift of God's grace is to give it back. Hannah knew this from the very beginning. We can imagine Hannah in the Temple; desperate for the teasing to stop, desperate to please her husband, desperate to have a child of her own. We all know what its like, when we so want something, we'll try and bargain to make it happen. We try and make deals with God.

There was a movie starring Burt Reynolds years ago. All throughout the movie his character tried to kill himself. At the end of the movie, he swam out into the ocean, as far as he could possibly go. When he reached that point, he decided he didn't want to die. He began swimming back to shore, and as he was swimming, he started to bargain with God. "I'll give you 75% of all I have, if you get me back." He would go a little farther, "God if you get me back to shore I'll give you 40% of all I have." Finally, as he reached the shore he said, "I'm a man of my word, 20% of all I have is yours God."

We can bargain with God, but when it comes to responding to God's gift of grace, God asks no less than that we would "give it all back;" not 20% or 40%, not even 75%; all of it. From the very beginning, Hannah told God that if he would give her a son, she would dedicate him to God until the day of his death. And sure enough, as soon as Samuel was weaned, Hannah returns to the Temple with offerings and sacrifices, and she dedicates her son to God.

When grace brings new life, we, too, must give back of the grace we have received. We must worship God, praising God for the gift of grace. And then we must leave the sanctuary and go out into the world and serve, sharing God's grace with others.

Hannah was barren, and Hannah was burdened, but Hannah believed and Hannah prayed. We can choose to mope in misery like Eeyore, or we can choose to take action like Hannah. We can listen to the chiding of our rivals around us, or we can trust God's grace to transform our lives, and we can know its fullness in faithful response. Christ calls us into God's presence, and Christ calls us into the world to serve in God's name. God wants nothing less than that our lives would be greatly blessed in God's grace, but it requires that we act on the call from Christ. We can be barren and burdened, or we can believe and we can pray.