

Rob Mathis

Sermon: Hannah; Prayer, Pain and God's Provision

1 Samuel 1 and 2 selected

8.23.26

This morning we are exploring the Old Testament character

Hannah, who features prominently in the first few chapters of the

Book of 1st Samuel. Hannah was born and raised in the town of

Ramathaim Zophim (or Ramah) in the 11th century BCE. Her name

in Hebrew means “Favor” or “Grace”. Hannah is well-known as the

mother of Samuel, the last of Israel's judges. Samuel was a powerful Old

Testament leader, prophet and judge, and ushered in the era of the

Israelite monarchy. Before we dive into the Scripture reading this

morning, let's look at Hannah herself;

She was one of two wives of a man named Elkanah, from the tribe

of Ephraim (the other of Elkanah's wives was Peninnah). Hannah spent

many years unable to conceive and bear children, while Peninnah had

many children with Elkanah. Not only was Peninnah successful in

having and raising children, but she also harassed Hannah to a point

where Hannah suffered mental anguish over this. **Every year the**

“family”, Elkanah, his two wives and Peninnah’s children, all went up to Shiloh to worship at the Tabernacle there. The cruelty from Peninnah was so bad, 1 Samuel 1 says, that Hannah would end up weeping and be unable to eat. It was indeed a miserable time for her.

The story of Elkanah and Hannah is a painful yet seemingly familiar one, with Hannah unable to bear children, Elkanah having a second wife who had many kids, and the conflicts and pain that developed between the two wives. Does this story sound familiar? It should; two of the original patriarchs of the Jewish faith, Abraham and Sarah and Jacob and Rachael both had challenges conceiving and all lived with tremendous conflict and pain as a result of their husband’s polygamist practices.

So, lesson number one from my sermon this morning: do not be a polygamist. This may come as a shock, but it is a messy situation that rarely if ever works out. Besides, it’s illegal.

Let's turn to 1 Samuel Chapter 1, verses 9-20:

1 Samuel 1:9-20

⁹ Once when they had finished eating and drinking in Shiloh, Hannah stood up. Now Eli the priest was sitting on his chair by the doorpost of the Lord's house. ¹⁰ In her deep anguish Hannah prayed to the Lord, weeping bitterly. ¹¹ And she made a vow, saying, "Lord Almighty, if you will only look on 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."

¹² As she kept on praying to the Lord, Eli observed her mouth. ¹³ Hannah was praying in her heart, and her lips were moving but her voice was not heard. Eli thought she was drunk ¹⁴ and said to her, "How long are you going to stay drunk? Put away your wine."

¹⁵ “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. ¹⁶ Do not take your servant for a wicked woman; I have been praying here out of my great anguish and grief.”

¹⁷ Eli answered, “Go in peace, and may the God of Israel grant you what you have asked of him.”

¹⁸ 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.

¹⁹ Early the next morning they arose and worshiped before the Lord and then went back to their home at Ramah. Elkanah made love to his wife Hannah, and the Lord remembered her. ²⁰ So in the course of time Hannah became pregnant and gave birth to a son. She named him Samuel,^[b] saying, “Because I asked the Lord for him.” (In Hebrew, Samuel means, “God has heard”.)

So, Hannah, who became the mother of the great Israelite prophet Samuel, was a woman who lived with deep pain and shame. And while many today choose not to have children, in Hannah's day in Israel, there was no such thing as "choice". Hannah's duty to God, her husband and society was to bear children, and especially to give her husband a male heir. And for an Israelite woman in that day, not to bear children was an excruciating pain that often pierced many a woman's very soul. Why, might you ask? Well, in ancient Israel there were no laws supporting men or women in their old age. Women had no real rights, and no ability most of the time to earn a living, and so parents depended on their children to take care of them. Men had all the power, all the say, and could thus take care of their elder parents and maintain farms and businesses and have as many wives as they chose. There was also this cultural misunderstanding that if a woman did not bear children, it was her fault. The misbelief was that there must be "something wrong with" the woman.

And now the last part of 1 Samuel 1:

²¹ When her husband Elkanah went up with all his family to offer the annual sacrifice to the Lord and to fulfill his vow,²² Hannah did not go. She said to her husband, “After the boy is weaned, I will take him and present him before the Lord, and he will live there always.”^[e]

²³ “Do what seems best to you,” her husband Elkanah told her. “Stay here until you have weaned him; only may the Lord make good His^[d] word.” So, the woman stayed at home and nursed her son until she had weaned him.

²⁴ After he was weaned, she took the boy with her, young as he was, along with a three-year-old bull,^[e] an ephah^[f] of flour and a skin of wine, and brought him to the house of the Lord at Shiloh. ²⁵ When the bull had been sacrificed, they brought the boy to Eli, ²⁶ and she said to him, “Pardon me, my lord. As surely as you live, I am the woman who stood here beside you praying to the Lord. ²⁷ I

prayed for this child, and the Lord has granted me what I asked of him. ²⁸ So now I give him to the Lord. For his whole life he will be given over to the Lord.” And he worshiped the Lord there.

So, from Samuel’s birth, until he was weaned by his mother, Samuel kept close to his mother, and in fact Hannah did not take him up to the annual feast at Shiloh during his first years of life. I am sure Hannah, who had been barren and had experienced much shame, now wanted to savor every minute with her little boy. And while we don’t know from the passage how old Samuel was when he was weaned, likely he was a wee lad when his mother took him to the tabernacle at Shiloh to dedicate Samuel to God’s service.

So, this is where I make my second point about context and culture; remember I suggested none of you consider polygamy as a viable option for your life here in America. The second thing is, and I want to jump right in on this, because I imagine some of you are already thinking, “Gosh, maybe we could bring our kids to the church and let the pastors raise them for us!” Now, Pastor Brian is still out of town, but I

am pretty sure he and Gwen are not going to be okay with doing an “Eli” kind of thing! I am also fairly positive from my years working in law enforcement that were you to leave your little ones on the church steps with a note saying you would check on them in a year, at the next Jewish festival, you would definitely end up dealing with the long arm of the law. Just saying, as I want to make sure you are clear before we go on.

Okay, all seriousness aside, as we wrap things up today, in some ways I absolutely agree with you if you are having some trouble relating to this Israelite woman from over 3,000 years ago, living in a small, remote village as the second wife of a polygamist husband who has several children by another woman. And harder still to relate to this woman giving up her three-year-old child to some old man living in the Tabernacle at Shiloh. Personally, I find that creepy. **And truthfully, that is okay not to be able to relate to such practices. Those are not times we really can relate to very well. The Israelite society of three thousand some years ago was quite rigid, especially for women, and very different than modern day 21st Century America. But if we can**

get past the societal uniqueness, we can look at who Hannah was as a woman, a wife, and eventually a mother. We see her deep longing for children, something women the world over have experienced. And she felt the pain of barrenness. Of feeling as though God was overlooking her or perhaps judging her as unfit or even a sinful person. **Those were the times and yet they were wrong. God was not judging Hannah, nor punishing her. She was a devout and faithful woman.** And like Hannah then, we, women and men, will have times when we hurt, when we just flat out cannot understand how our life has gotten to where it is. And, like Hannah, I believe God beckons us to turn to Him, to spend time with Him in honest and open prayer. Folks, I know I have said this before, and it is the absolute truth. Life this side of Heaven is no picnic, nor should our lives be a pursuit of base fulfillment here on earth. Whatever you want to call it, “The American Dream”, or as one very famous and I think erroneous preacher says, “You need to live your best life now”. Or the bumper sticker that says, “He (or she) who dies with the most toys wins”. That is not at all God’s purpose or plan for any one of us.

Folks, there are two sides to the coin here. And Hannah showed us that; she was broken, hurting, feeling a deep desire to have children. She went to God in prayer, open and looking to Him. In this case God answered Hannah in the affirmative, and gave her a son, a son that would change the trajectory of Israel's history. And Hannah found a place of joyful surrender, and ultimately she gives this child, Samuel, to the Lord for His special life-long ministry.

But many many times the answer is “no”. It was for quite some time with Hannah. And it will be and has been for many of us. So, does that translate into God not loving us? Does “no” mean we have missed His best life for us? The answers here are, in my perspective, a resounding “no”! And that is what I want to leave you with. God's grace and mercy and love are for each of His children. But, truthfully, as smart as we think we are, we honestly do not have the whole picture. Period. We do not. And we won't until we make it to the other side. Now, we can ask. We can and I think should pray our hearts out. Let our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ know everything that is on our minds and

in our hearts. Tell Him, and give it all to Him, and, by the way, listen for His answers. And when you listen, realize sometimes He will tell you directly, sometimes He will use circumstances and other people, and sometimes he may even use dreams. **But know this; God Almighty knows you better than you know yourself. God knew Hannah, knew her then, knows her now, and loves her. And God loves each of you, right where you are...**

Let's Pray: