

Insights From Hannah

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1 Samuel 1.1 - 28

Today is Mother's Day so it is fitting that we turn to one of the mothers in the Bible for our focus in God's Word. The mother I have chosen is Hannah. We are introduced to her in 1 Samuel. There are several insights we can glean from her and her circumstances. While some of those insights apply more to mothers, for the most part, they are applicable to everyone.

Overview

Hannah and her husband Elkanah lived in Ramah which was located about five miles north of Jerusalem. Hannah was one of two wives of Elkanah. His other wife was Peninnah who had children, while Hannah had none (1.2, 4). For those interested in placing this event on history's timeline, it happened around 1,100 BC. Each year Elkanah would take his family to offer sacrifices and worship the Lord at Shiloh which was 10 to 15 miles north of where they lived. While there Elkanah would provide food for his wife Peninnah and her sons and daughters, but to Hannah he gave a double portion because he loved her (1.5).

Because Hannah had no children, her rival wife, Peninnah, provoked Hannah. For a married woman to be childless in ancient cultures was seen as God's judgement upon her. Consequently, Hannah was made the object of scorn and ridicule by her husband's other wife.

1 Samuel 1:6–7 (ESV) ⁶And her rival used to provoke her grievously to irritate her, because the Lord had closed her womb. ⁷So it went on year by year. As often as she went up to the house of the Lord, she used to provoke her. Therefore Hannah wept and would not eat.

The torment Hannah faced went on for years and it seems the taunting was especially intense while they made their annual journey to Shiloh for worship. Despite desperately wanting a child, God gave her none. It is not clear which of the Feasts of Israel they went to Shiloh to celebrate; it may have been the *Feast of Tabernacles* which was a time of thanksgiving for God's provision. If so, it would have been an additional reminder to Hannah that she was childless. Apart from the cultural implications and Peninnah's taunts, Hannah desperately wanted to be a mother.

How Should We Act?

It is readily apparent that inevitable strife was caused by Elkanah's choice to have more than one wife. Predictable rivalry and favoritism resulted, and it was accentuated by Hannah not having children. The point I want to draw from this is the need to be sensitive and wise in the comments we make to others. Certainly, that is the case between husbands and wives where they need to foster a relationship of trust and support for each other. The trust relationship between husband and wife is a precious quality that is to be guarded and protected. Failure to do so undermines security and support for one another. Where trust is eroded it is very difficult to rebuild it.

Let me highlight the need for sensitivity in what we say in all the relationships we are a part of.

Proverbs 12:18 (NIV84) ¹⁸Reckless words pierce like a sword, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.

Paul, when writing to the believers in Ephesus, emphasized the need for them to live in a manner corresponding to their relationship with the Lord. Who we are, namely followers of Jesus Christ, ought to be apparent in what we say. First of all, what we say needs to be true (Eph 4.25) but additionally it needs to be helpful for the listener.

Ephesians 4:29 (NIV84) ²⁹Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.

We need to filter what we intend to say through the grid of, “Will it help or hinder my listener?” Had Peninnah first assessed what she said to Hannah through that grid, she would have been speechless. There are even true things that are better left unsaid because they would be unnecessarily destructive. We need to weigh our words carefully for they can undermine others. There is no place where that is occurring in our society more than on social media where harsh and caustic language seems to have no boundaries.

It is also likely that Elkanah’s disproportionate love for Hannah aggravated the discord. It is a reminder to parents and grandparents to try to regard their children and grandchildren as equally as possible. Choosing favorites and favoring one over the other fosters dissention. Many times the scars resulting from unwarranted favoritism are deep and long lasting.

There is another tidbit which we can glean from this account about weighting our words carefully. We are far removed from the culture of ancient Israel where it was expected that a married woman would have children and failure to do so was viewed as judgment from God. Among the women who are not mothers, some have no desire to be a mother; however, there remain a significant number of married women like Hannah who long to be a mom, but for whom that desire remains unfulfilled. Sometimes well-meaning individuals – friends, often relatives, and not uncommonly parents who want-to-be-grandparents, play the part of Hannah’s rival by asking questions like, “Isn’t it time to have a baby? When should we expect a grandbaby?” And there are some women who are a step further back in the process who are not married and wish they were and had a baby. When others ask them why they are not married, it does not help them at all. They too, wish they were. I raise these points because I have met those who were childless and wished they were not, and some went to extraordinary effort in the hopes of having a baby, but remained disappointed. And I have also met those who wished they were married, but it had not happened, and marriage was nowhere on the horizon. Let us be particularly astute and sensitive in our comments to those who could fall into these categories – they will be grateful for our perception and grace. This is a practical application of saying those things that are helpful and holding back on that which is not.

These are observations about how we should act which we can glean from this account. Let me turn our focus to another:

How Should We Handle Disappointment?

Hannah's disappointment with being childless went on for years; it is described as *year by year* in verses 3 and 7. During those years Peninnah had *all her sons and daughters* and intentionally provoked Hannah to irritate her (1.6-7). It intensified each year as they went to Shiloh and compounded Hannah's grief over being childless. Each year only added to her cumulative disappointment as she watched Peninnah's children develop and grow up. So intense was her sadness that Hannah wept and could not eat. Disappointment can become very debilitating and consuming, especially when it is long standing. People gloating over a person's hardship only amplifies the pain and deepens the anguish.

It is also easy to be so consumed by disappointment that it closes in on a person and they lose sight of reasons to remain thankful. Elkanah, Hannah's husband tried to encourage her, "Hannah, why do you weep? And why do you not eat? And why is your heart sad? Am I not more to you than ten sons?" (1 Samuel 1:8, ESV). Unfortunately, his well-meaning comments did not erase the longing in her heart to be a mother, nor did it ease the compounding pain inflicted upon her by Peninnah. As people journey through ongoing disappointment, and sometimes it is huge, it is necessary to guard against becoming totally consumed and enveloped by it.

Despite the unfathomable depth of disappointment some people face, they must determine to orient themselves in relationship to God. I marvel at so many people who when interviewed after losing their homes by a tornado, appear to genuinely thank God that they and their loved ones are alive. The same is true of so many interviewed in Ukraine who have lost everything, but who remain thankful to God for His care for them. It is so easy for disappointment to move into the unrelenting grip of bitterness where people's hearts grow cold and hard, and they become impervious to God and His offer of care for them.

Hebrews 12:15 (NIV84) ¹⁵See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many.

In the passage I referred to earlier in Ephesians 4, Paul also counsels people to put away bitterness, not only because it is out of place for a follower of Jesus Christ, but because of its potential destructiveness.

Ephesians 4:31 (NIV84) ³¹Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice.

God would not tell us in His Word to get rid of *bitterness* if it were not possible for us to succeed in His strength to do so. Victoriously succeeding is dependent on where people turn in their disappointment. Grieving over loss or hardship, as Hannah did, is understandable, but victory is dependent on turning to the Lord. There is no indication that despite the taunting Hannah faced

when she accompanied her husband to Shiloh, that she resisted going. She remained moored to the only One who could care for her in her despair which takes us to the next point.

Where Should We Turn With Disappointment?

Understandably Hannah was distressed, but she did not lose her bearings – she knew it was the Lord who would see her through. After many years of travelling to Shiloh, on one occasion she decided to make it a concentrated time of meeting with God. She gathered in the place set aside for worship to pray and seek God.

1 Samuel 1:10 (ESV) ¹⁰She was deeply distressed and prayed to the Lord and wept bitterly. She pleaded with the Lord for His intervention and made a vow to Him.

1 Samuel 1:11 (ESV) ¹¹And she vowed a vow and said, “O Lord of hosts, if you will indeed look on the affliction of your servant and remember me and not forget your servant, but will give to your servant a son, then I will give him to the Lord all the days of his life, and no razor shall touch his head.”

The details of Hannah’s prayer provide us with some additional insight. While she prayed, Eli the priest, observed her and saw that her lips moved but her voice was not heard, and he concluded she was drunk (1.12-14). That of course was not the case, but rather it was an example of Hannah silently voicing her prayers to God.

1 Samuel 1:15–16 (ESV) ¹⁵But Hannah answered, “No, my lord, I am a woman troubled in spirit. I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink, but I have been pouring out my soul before the Lord. ¹⁶Do not regard your servant as a worthless woman, for all along I have been speaking out of my great anxiety and vexation.”

While bystanders like Eli did not hear her prayers, God did. The description of Hannah praying in that fashion reminds me of several devout women in the Church I was raised in who mirrored Hannah’s example in prayer. They were fervent in prayer – while their lips moved, they were silent to all but God. Hannah prayed with great intensity, exhausting her words of petition for God’s intervention, and God assured her of His response. We are fortunate that when we have exhausted our words and fail to understand how to pray, as is sometimes the case when we are overwhelmed with the circumstances, that God comes alongside to intercede for us.

Romans 8:26–27 (ESV) ²⁶Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. ²⁷And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

It is apparent, that while Hannah prayed, God made it clear to her that He had heard her and would respond to her prayer. It is summed up this way, “And she said [to Eli], ‘Let your servant find favor in your eyes.’ Then the woman went her way and ate, and her face was no longer sad.” (1 Sam 1:18, ESV). Hannah was given the assurance God had heard her prayer, though it is not clear that He conveyed to her He would answer as she wished.

1 Samuel 1:19–20 (ESV) ¹⁹They rose early in the morning and worshiped before the Lord; then they went back to their house at Ramah. And Elkanah knew Hannah his wife, and the Lord remembered her. ²⁰And in due time Hannah conceived and bore a son, and she called his name Samuel, for she said, “I have asked for him from the Lord.”

Hannah had vowed that if the Lord would give her a son, she would give her son to Him for His service. When Samuel was around three years old, she returned to Shiloh with him and left him with Eli to serve the Lord. Samuel would go on to become a godly leader among God’s people. 1 Samuel 2 consists of Hannah’s praise to the Lord Who heard her prayer.

Hannah is an example of a Godly mother who, amid her darkest hours kept her mind focused on the Lord. She felt the pain of Peninnah’s taunts and the intense anguish during the years she longed for a son, but throughout the darkness of her disappointment, she also saw the beacon of light from God. She kept her eyes focused on Him.

We do not know how many years Hannah waited until she had a son, but we do know it does not always turn out the way it did for Hannah. As I said earlier, I know couples who longed for a child, couples who loved the Lord and walked with Him, but God never answered their prayers by giving them a child. They remained disappointed. We are all, also aware of people who face the excruciating pain of disappointment, often the disappointment of the loss of someone they deeply loved. In the last several weeks Beverley and I know of two families who buried daughters – one nineteen years old and another twenty-one, a young woman who was anticipating her marriage. If we consider the carnage in Ukraine, we know there are thousands of mothers who have lost their children, wives who have lost their husbands, and children who have lost a parent. Some people are called upon to face unbearable loss. With the passage of time, their grief will subside, but it will never vanish for their lives will be forever affected.

Over the decades I have come alongside of dozens of people as they dealt with disappointments – sometimes, the disappointment of an unfulfilled dream, while in other cases the loss of a loved one. There is only one path to victoriously navigate through loss and disappointment and its centerpiece is the God of this universe Who sent His Son Jesus Christ to bring redemption to the lost. It is He Who said: “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” (Matthew 11:28, ESV). He is the One who provides rest for souls overcome with the pain and anguish of an unfulfilled dream or a heart broken by loss. He is the Source of hope!

Most moms will experience well-deserved joy from God on this Mother’s Day. However, some moms on this Mother’s Day, and some women who wish they were moms, will find refuge in the arms of the Savior who will give them peace in the midst of their disappointment. For those for whom Mother’s Day is a reminder of loss or disappointment, the following song is particularly for you:

He Will Hold Me Fast (Live) Selah

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=unLkmJJPEk>