

## TEACH US TO PRAY: HANNAH

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1 Samuel 1:4-20

Today's sermon is the first in a nine-part series that Michael and I will be bringing to you entitled *Teach Us To Pray*. From Genesis to Revelation, our holy scriptures are filled with the prayers that people through the ages have brought to God. Some of these prayers are long; some only a word or two. These prayers are lifted up in times of joy and sadness, of loss and grief, of fear and anxiety. There are prayers for life and prayers for death, prayers of celebration and prayers of deepest isolation. Prayers are our most intimate conversations with our Lord.

Despite the title, it is not my intention to "teach" you how to pray by providing you an instruction manual or a powerpoint filled with goals and objectives. What we will do is examine each particular prayer and seek to understand the circumstance of that prayer and the reason the person is praying. From this, we can learn how those people of great faith who populate our scripture have prayed. Having said that, let's get started.

One of the towering figures in the Old Testament is the prophet Samuel. Not only was he a powerful prophet, but he was also a gifted leader who guided Israel through a tumultuous time in her history. Samuel lived about 1000 years before Jesus. His story is told in the books known as First and Second Samuel. As God's prophet, Samuel led Israel through the transition from the period of the Judges to becoming a kingdom led by a monarch. It was Samuel, you will remember, who anointed David to be king.

The story of Samuel begins with his birth. That story is actually about his mother Hannah, and that is the story I want to look at today. Hannah is a person who has everything and yet has nothing. When she is introduced to us she is a woman devoid of hope. This hopeless emerges from the fact that she has no children.

I want to stop there and tell you that preaching about Hannah makes me uncomfortable. Hannah's story is the too common dilemma of a woman unable to conceive a child. It is a profound anguish best understood by women. Men can only guess at this pain. We can't fully comprehend it. As I delve into Hannah's story, I can only describe what is going on. It would be arrogant of me to claim more.

Hannah is married to Elkanah. Elkanah is a good man. He also appears to be faithful and wealthy and generous. Elkanah has two wives. There is Hannah, whom he loves dearly and regards as his first wife. Then, there is Peninnah, who is the scoundrel of this story. Peninnah is regarded as Elkanah's second wife. She is as fertile as a bunny. Peninnah has children, lots of them; and she keeps making more.

She uses this fact to torment Hannah incessantly taunting her that she cannot conceive because the Lord has *closed her womb*.

Each year, Elkanah would take his family and make the pilgrimage to the temple at Shiloh so that they may make their sacrifices to God. For her own sacrifice, to make up for her not have children, as well as because of his love for her, Elkanah would provide Hannah a double portion—more than he gave Peninnah with all of her sons and daughters. Each year, Peninnah would make the pilgrimage with her latest offspring, a perpetual reminder to Hannah of her inability.

These trips to Shiloh became increasingly unbearable, to the point that while on the pilgrimage, Hannah could not even eat. Elkanah would attempt to console her asking, *Why do you weep? Why do you not eat? Why is your heart sad?* It is clear that he does not understand the emptiness and shame she is feeling. And if there is any doubt, then his final question seals the deal when he asks, *Am I not more to you than ten sons?* As I said, Elkanah is a good man, but he's a bit clueless. The answer to his question is, "no." No, he is her husband, but he is not more to her than sons she can call her own.

Hannah's desire for a child is not simply a maternal instinct. It is a guarantee for her future. In that culture, a woman could not inherit money or property from her husband. Only a son could inherit from the father. Hannah is vulnerable. If Elkanah were to die before Hannah, and she had no sons, she would receive nothing. Everything would go to Peninnah and her brood. From what we have witnessed so far, it doesn't seem likely the second wife would share with the first.

On top of the financial aspect, a woman who could not bear children was viewed as being cursed by God. We see this in Peninnah's remarks about God *closing* Hannah's womb.

In our reading, Hannah's spirits are at their lowest. The family is at Shiloh on their annual pilgrimage enjoying the feast and no doubt Peninnah has been taunting Hannah as she always did. When she is able, Hannah slips away to visit the temple. In her great distress, at the temple she prays to God. She says, *O Lord of hosts, if only you will look on the misery of your servant, and remember me, and not forget your servant, but will give to your servant a male child, then I will set him before you as a nazirite until the day of his death.*

This is Hannah's prayer to God. This prayer can be broken down into five parts. The first part is a request that God simply acknowledge her grief. She asks, *Lord, if you will only look on the misery of your servant.* She desperately desires that God see how she feels.

Second, she asks that God *remember her*. This is more than just asking that God remember her name. It is asking God to remember her in his mercy.

In the third part of her prayer, Hannah asks that God affirm that she is God's servant. She prays, *and do not forget your servant*. This is important. Hannah is not someone just walking in off the street. She has long honored God; she has paid her dues and she seeks to be righteous in God's eyes; she considers herself part of God's people and she wants God to confirm this reality—*Do not forget your servant*.

Fourth, Hannah makes a request of God. She asks, *give to your servant (herself) a male child*. That is, after all, the heart of her grief—that she does not have a son. If God is the cause of her dilemma, then God can be the solution.

Lastly, Hannah offers God something in return. If God will give her this son, then, she will *set him before God as a nazirite* for his entire life. We read this and assume that she is saying that if God grants her a son, that she will give the child back to God. That is not correct. What she says is that she will teach the child the ways of the nazirites. To be a nazirite was to make a commitment to God to live a certain lifestyle. It was not unlike a monastic vow. Nazirites generally lived among the people and were considered holy. What Hannah is saying is that if God grants her a son then she will raise him to be a soldier in God's army. And she does.

In Hannah's day, when people prayed, they usually did so out loud so that all could hear. But Hannah, in her deep grief prays differently. She prays silently only moving her lips. I have no doubt that she was also animated in her prayer with God—waving her arms, walking about. The priest Eli, who oversaw this temple, witnesses Hannah praying silently and assumed that she was drunk. To him, that was the only explanation for her behavior. This assumption is not out of line given that a festival was underway.

Eli calls out to Hannah, *How long will you make a drunken spectacle of yourself? Put away your wine*. She assures the priest that she has not had anything to drink but instead she has been *pouring out her soul* to the Lord. She pleads to the priest, *Do not regard your servant as a worthless woman, for I have been speaking out of my great anxiety and vexation all this time*. Eli realizes that she is sincere and tells her, *Go in peace; the God of Israel grant the petition you have made to him*.

Feeling reassured, Hannah rejoins her family and resumes the festivities. The next day, she and Elkanah and the rest return home and in time Hannah conceives and gives birth to a son. Just as she had asked in her prayer, God remembered her. She names the boy Samuel which means *God has heard*. Hannah keeps her promise and raises Samuel in the ways of the nazirites. At an appropriate age, she takes him to Shiloh where he might live so that he might be trained by Eli. Just as Elkanah made his sacrifices at Shiloh, Hannah makes hers with Samuel.

This is a story that begins with the painful lament of a woman who dares approach God and *present herself* before the Lord. But why does she go to God? Is it simply to negotiate for a son? Is it because she wants something and if she asks God

for it then she will get it? I don't think so. There is much more going on. Hannah turns to God because there is no one else in her life that she can turn to. She tried talking to her husband, but he failed to understand her grief. She certainly couldn't talk to the other woman in her household, Peninnah, because that would only bring more torment. She tried reaching out to the clergy but the priest completely misjudged her actions. There was no one left. There was only God to whom she might pour out her soul. And she does so with this heartfelt prayer.

From Hannah's prayer we learn that it is okay to go to God with a request. But it may help to have previously built a relationship. Hannah came to God as God's servant. We also learn that we should be willing to offer something ourselves when we pray to God. It is our collateral; it shows that we are not just asking for something for nothing. Hannah asked for a son and promised to raise him as a nazirite. This was her sacrifice. When we pray to God, are we willing to offer something of ourselves?

Lord, teach us to pray, but may we never find ourselves in a position like Hannah so full of pain and anguish and desire for something and unable to obtain it and unable to find the solace that we need.

Hannah's prayer is based on the assumption that God hears and that God responds. That is the anchor of our faith, that God is not distant, that God cares for us. If Hannah didn't believe that God would hear her, then she would be utterly alone in the world. But because of our faith in God, like Hannah, we are free to approach God with boldness. As Jesus will teach, "Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you" (Matthew 7:7).