

Hannah, A Praying Mother

I Samuel 1:1-20

On this Mothers Day, open the Bible. Very near the beginning, you find the story of Hannah. She is the model I want you to know and to copy. Hannah is the mother of Samuel, the first and the noblest of all Hebrew prophets.

Without question Hannah inspired another mother twelve hundred years later. When Mary discovered she was to bear a remarkable son, Jesus, she sang her great Magnificat: “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my savior!” Mary was repeating almost verbatim Hannah’s Song of Triumph in the temple of Shiloh during the early days of history: “My heart rejoices in the Lord, and my strength is exalted in God!” The two anthems parallel each other to the end. Mary was remembering Hannah, the praying mother in Israel.

Hannah loved her husband Elkanah, but she had to share him with another woman, Peninah. Peninah bore several children, but Hannah was barren. The Bible assures us that of the two women Hannah enjoyed the larger share of devotion from her husband. We think of it as a good thing, but it had a bad side. It made Peninah jealous. As a result Peninah did everything in her power to make life unpleasant for Hannah. Every day she heard these words from her rival: “You are childless, Hannah, therefore you’re worthless.”

To her credit, we have no hint that Hannah retaliated. She was beautiful, inside and out. As the story unfolds we clearly realize this heroine’s face was radiant with spiritual alertness. We can assume she dressed tastefully because her hands were skillful with needle and thread and loom.

Each year the family traveled from their home in Ramah to the temple at Shiloh. It was a festive occasion. They saddled the animals and ventured forth into the colors of autumn. They left their valley far below and breathed the bracing air of the uplands. But as years passed, Hannah began to feel isolated at Shiloh. She watched other parents celebrating with their children. She had to stand aside while Elkanah offered the sacrifices and distributed gifts to his children and to their mother Peninah. Poor Hannah grieved silently.

One year the emotional burden was simply too much to bear. Hannah began to weep uncontrollably at the Shiloh temple. She could not eat. She sank into a state of severe depression. Elkanah, like any good husband, tried to console and comfort her. The Bible records his words: “Why get so upset over having no children? You have me, and that’s better than having ten sons!” Oh boy. Here is where the Bible starts to meddle, because I identify with Elkanah. I want my mate to be happy, for two reasons. A happy person is more fun to live with, and even more important, her happiness means I am a good mate. Good try, Elkanah. You may be a great husband, but Hannah is still depressed. She wants a son of her own.

We do not know how Hannah answered her husband, but we know what she did. She put on her best dress and went to the sacred temple. There she poured out her anguish. Her earnest prayer was specific: "God, let me have a son, and I will give him unto you as your own servant". Hannah was the fourth great woman in Jewish history who grieved because she was childless. Of the four she was the most prayerful. Sarah laughed when the messenger told her she would have a child in her old age. She responded: "Right. And when he comes, I will name him Isaac, or Big Joke!" She kept her word. Rebecca endured her own childlessness with apathy and indifference. Rachel, irritated by her own long wait for a child, exclaimed in frustration, "Give me children or give me death!"

In contrast, Hannah sought the power of God. She was willing to become a handmaid, a servant. She would dedicate her little boy to the Lord. As she wept and prayed she caught the attention of High Priest Eli, who assumed she was drunk. He rebuked her in public, in front of the holy altar. Hannah's eloquent defense is as remarkable as her prayer. It shows her integrity even in the hour of great trial and unjustified criticism. She responded, "No, your honor, I am a woman in deep sorrow. I have had no strong drink. I am here pouring out my soul before the Lord". Eli immediately understood. He joined in her earnest prayer.

Sweet Hannah was instantly transformed. With happy assurance, she thanked the priest and rejoined her husband for a hearty supper. Faith in God restored her cheerful countenance. She did not stop praying. Early next morning she brought Elkanah to the temple and they worshipped together, this time without tears and sadness. Less than a year later Hannah bore her first child, a son. She named him Samuel, which means "I begged the Lord." Interestingly, in the whole Bible, that son is the only person with the name Samuel.

As only a mother can do, Hannah turned the house into a home. With total delight she nursed and trained and loved little Samuel until he was seven years old. She remembered her vow, and kept it. Elkanah and Hannah took Samuel to Shiloh. She said to old Eli, "Sir, I am the woman who prayed in your presence. For this boy I prayed, and God answered. Therefore I will lend him to the Lord as long as he lives." The priest agreed, and Samuel was left at the temple. The Bible sums it up with these pointed words: "Samuel grew up in the presence of the Lord."

Hannah had six more children, but her heart never wavered from Samuel the firstborn. Every year the loving mother, with her own capable hands, made a new gown for him just like the garment worn by the priests. She spun the wool and the linen. Then she wove it into a seamless robe and took it to her son. Our own Susan Meister in this room can show you the unrelenting labor required in such an effort, from animal hair to finished clothing. When I was a child, my mother made clothing for me and my sisters. No, she was not required to weave the material. She cut and sewed cotton cloth into shirts and shorts and dresses and bedsheets. Quite often the material came from feed sacks, plain and printed. Some of you are old

enough to remember. Mother's love provided, very much like Hannah. And as the Bible says, "her children rise up and call her blessed".

Hannah prayed in good times and bad. After her petition was answered, she did not become indifferent to the Creator. She continued to pray and to worship. Here was a woman able to see clearly what she needed and she asked God to fill that specific need. But she was also able to appreciate the many gifts she had not even thought to ask for, and to be thankful. What a role model for our time! I encourage you to take a cue from Hannah. Make two lists: the things you need from God, and the things God has already given. You'll be surprised.

Mother Hannah's love for her son bore fruit. The Bible says, "Samuel grew, and the Lord was with him. None of Samuel's wise words fell to the ground unheeded". What a tribute! It's the only one of its kind in the entire Bible.

Hannah, dear, we salute you this Mothers Day. You caused wonderful things to happen. Thank you for showing us how to do the same. Thank you Hannah for touching our hearts.

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