

Hannah: Learning *to Be* Someone



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *1 Samuel 1; 2:1–11, 21; Job 2:12, 13; Matt. 6:19, 20; Luke 12:16–21.*

Memory Text: “Then Hannah prayed and said: ‘My heart rejoices in the Lord; in the Lord my horn is lifted high. My mouth boasts over my enemies, for I delight in your deliverance. There is no one holy like the Lord; there is no one besides you; there is no Rock like our God’ ” (*1 Samuel 2:1, 2, NIV*).

One of the great struggles that many people face is the sense of their own self-worth. What are we worth in this world? What can one life mean amid teeming billions? We read about wars in which millions have perished, often without a trace. Every day thousands are born and thousands die. We sense massive forces over which we have no control, which can run over us and our dreams as quickly as a truck does a bug on the road. How, amid such overwhelming power, can we get a sense of our own meaning and purpose? Do we even have any?

The Bible, of course, teaches that we do, that we are beings created in the image of God. We're important because we are important to God. Who cares what others think of you, if the God who holds the whole world in His hands loves you? His love, above all, is what counts.

This week, by looking at the life of Hannah, a woman without any claim to political or religious greatness, we will catch a glimpse of a God who loves us intimately and personally and of a God who tells us that we are somebody, even though it's easy to get the message from the world that we are nobody.

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, October 16.*

What Am I Worth?

Read 1 Samuel 1:1–16. Why was Hannah so distraught over not having children, even though she knew that her husband loved her?

Hannah's feelings shouldn't be that hard to understand, especially in her culture, where to have no male child meant to have no security in one's old age. Having no child at all was understood as a divine curse. Both in the public and in the family sphere, a woman without a child had to live with a stigma of supposedly being cursed by God. Obviously, this affected her value in the eyes of society, her own self-esteem, and her relationship with God. Hannah must have wondered often what she had done to deserve this. Why was this happening to her?

To understand the depth of despair that barrenness brought to women in the world of the Old Testament, look at the actions and statements of Sarah (*Gen. 16:1, 2*) and Rachel (*Gen. 30:1*). How do they help us understand how strong that sentiment was back then?

Sarah's action is reasonable in the context of the social and cultural customs of her time. However, it also provides us with a glimpse of the despair she must have felt and the burden she must have carried. What woman would encourage her husband to have relations with another woman in order to have children? Meanwhile, Rachel's heartfelt cry to Jacob echoes a bit of Hannah's emotion and the turmoil of her feelings.

For Hannah, jealousy and the sense of "being nobody" created an explosive mix of emotions that finally blew up when she poured out her heart before the Lord. What made matters worse was that Hannah was not getting younger. Time was against her, and, apparently, so was God.

Remember also that in Hannah's time, a woman's role in society was associated primarily with child bearing and rearing. There were no other career possibilities. A woman could not just change careers and find fulfillment in another occupation. We have examples of woman judges and female prophetic leadership in the Old Testament, but these are indeed limited and depended on God's direct call. It was only through children that Hannah could count the worth of her life and leave a legacy. To her, without children her life had no real meaning.

A man had lost his child to leukemia. He told the pastor that he believed his son had died because he hadn't kept the commandments faithfully, especially the Sabbath, and so God punished him. What's wrong with that kind of thinking? How can we protect ourselves from getting caught up in that same kind of rationale?

With Friends Like These . . .

Living under the supposed curse of God and feeling that her life had no real value must have been hard enough for Hannah. What added problem did she have? *1 Sam. 1:6, 7.*

Those who are closest to us often know how to hurt us most. With Peninnah's constant provocations, it is not surprising that Hannah's life became bitter. The biblical text emphasizes the repeated nature of the provocations. Year in and year out, the same old story. It is interesting to note that the Hebrew word for the action of Hannah's rival ("provoked" [NKJV], "taunt" [NJB]) often is used in the Old Testament to describe grave sins that provoke a direct divine reaction (*see Deut. 9:18, 31:29*). This was not just a quick, sly remark. This seemed to have been a premeditated and conscious strategy by Peninnah to provoke Hannah into doing something stupid. After all, Hannah was her only rival for Elkanah's affections (*1 Sam. 1:5*).

Though Peninnah's taunts were meant to hurt, perhaps the worst hurts come from those who don't intend harm. Who, in the midst of terrible pain, hasn't been made to feel worse by well-meaning people who just happened to say or do the wrong thing?

Skim through the first five or six chapters of the book of Job. Job's friends were truly sorrowful for what he experienced (*see Job 2:12, 13*). Yet, how did they make the problem worse for him? Why was this exactly how someone shouldn't react to another's grief?

Loss of material possessions or of people close to us causes deep hurt. Illness or the circumstances of our lives may seem daunting and cause us to despair. Sometimes it is living with unfulfilled deep longings that drains our lives of any sense of hope. Things go from bad to worse when we have to face not only deep hurt or bad circumstances but also people who seem to specialize in making our life unbearable. This combination of unfulfilled dreams and constant tensions and provocation triggered Hannah's cry before the Lord. Sometimes we need to shout out our hurt and frustrations before God. When we hit rock bottom, we need to search for answers outside of ourselves.

What are ways that we can encourage and uplift those who are going through trial and calamity right now? What would you like people to do for you if you were going through something terrible? Whatever that would be, why not do it for someone else?

Pouring Your Heart Out

Human nature can take only so much. Eventually action must be taken. For some, this action can be irrational and even dangerous.

How did Hannah handle her pain? Read 1 Samuel 1:9–16 and describe the steps that Hannah took to deal with her pain.

This prayer was no formal petition or general “please help me” kind of prayer. The biblical author describes Hannah’s prayer as “pouring out [her] soul to the Lord” (1 Sam. 1:15, NIV). The term *pouring out* normally is associated with the pouring of liquids, particularly blood and water in connection with sacrifices (cf. Lev. 4:7, 12, 18, 25, etc.). It often is used to refer to God’s actions. God can pour out judgment or blessings (Pss. 69:24, 79:6, Isa. 42:25, etc.). It has connotations of abundance and fullness. In some Old Testament passages, the term is used in connection with prayer (Pss. 42:4, 5; 62:8, 9; Lam. 2:19). This pouring-out prayer is perhaps the most intimate kind of prayer. It involves being absolutely honest with God, expressing our deepest pain and fears. Hannah was so absorbed in her prayer that she became oblivious to those around her and to what they might think of her. She was, in fact, clinging to God the way Jacob clung to his nocturnal assailant (Gen. 32:26, 27).

Describe the immediate results of Hannah’s prayer. 1 Sam. 1:17, 18.

While God does not always answer our prayers immediately, when we pour out our hearts before Him we can be assured that He hears and will answer us (Ps. 37:4) in His own time and way. This can give us hope and confidence as we wait to see God’s leading in our future.

In 1 Samuel 1:11, Hannah makes a big promise. Should God hear and answer her prayer and give her a son, she would give him back to God. In the Old Testament we find many people making vows to the Lord. As a matter of fact, vows often are seen in the context of worship and seem to belong to the same category as prayer and adoration.

Hannah’s vow is huge. The hoped-for son was to be given up. What would happen to her position as the wife of Elkanah? What would be her standing in the larger context of the family?

How often do you pour out yourself to God in prayer? Why is that so important for your spiritual walk? What keeps you from doing this as often as you need? Why not do it now? Surely you have painful and pressing needs. Who doesn’t?

Singing His Praises

Are you someone who sings when you are happy? The Bible often records people bursting into song at key moments in their lives. Miriam and the women of Israel sing at the shores of the Red Sea after having witnessed God's mighty salvation (*Exod. 15:20, 21*). In wonderful poetic language, Deborah and Barak extol God's power over human kings and armies (*Judg. 5:1–31*). When Mary visits her relative Elizabeth, she breaks out into a song of praise about God and His incredible plan of salvation (*Luke 1:46–55*). All of these songs share one common denominator, even though they appear in different historical contexts and under distinct circumstances: they all describe what happens when God intervenes in human history and responds to the pleas of His children.

Read 1 Samuel 2:1–11. What is the main theme of Hannah's song?

Hannah now knows beyond a shadow of a doubt that God is fully able to control the circumstances of history, as well as her own personal experience. She sees her life from a totally new perspective. Things that others strive for and take as an absolute are in reality very flimsy and could be gone tomorrow. In her song, Hannah makes surprising contrasts to underline the fact that life's circumstances are not always as they appear. The arrow of the mighty warrior breaks, while the feeble are "girded with strength" (*1 Sam. 2:4*). Things we give value to are often not as permanent as they appear.

Hannah has found that true security depends not on circumstances but on knowing our God, who does not change. He is the One who tells us that we each are special. He is the One who gives us value.

Some struggle with verse 6 in Hannah's song. How do we understand that? Is God arbitrary in His goodness or His judgments? In order to understand these verses, we need to remember the basic Old Testament premise about life. This is so different from the modern worldview: God is the Creator of life, and as Creator He has the right to do whatever He wants with His creation. In other words, nothing on this planet is beyond His control. This means that in the biblical worldview, even negative things are subject to God's control. Often the biblical authors describe this perspective in a way that could suggest God's active involvement in the design of bad things happening to humanity. In other words, what God allows, God "does."

What can you sing about? Write a list of things that you would like to praise God for. The more you praise God, the more thankful you will become for what He has done for you. That's why praise is so important.

God's Investment Plan

Even though Hannah leaves the tabernacle singing, she also leaves behind little Samuel. She no longer has the stigma of barrenness, but she still goes home to an empty house. With her son dedicated to God and working for Him, who will look after her in her old age? She has, in simple faith and trust, given her most precious possession to God. In this sense, Hannah reminds us of Abraham, another hero who was prepared to offer his son to God. As we already noted, the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham and Sarah also involved a long period of barrenness. However, God "tests" Abraham's faith when the boy is already older, while Hannah has decided herself to give her son, should she have one, to God's service, even before the child is born. After the boy is weaned, he is brought to Shiloh. Can you imagine the feelings that his mother must have felt when she waved him good-bye, especially considering the fact that things were not going that well in the household of Eli, who would now function as the mentor and guide of young Samuel?

How does God honor Hannah's expression of faith and love? *1 Sam. 2:21.*

Hannah could have refused to give her boy to the Lord and selfishly clung to him as her only security. However, by giving him to God, she not only received five more children, but her giving Samuel to the Lord also had a profound influence on Samuel himself. In time, he became God's special mouthpiece and one of the greatest educators and leaders of Israel.

What dangers do we face when we hoard? *Matt. 6:19, 20; Luke 12:16–21.*

God is in the business of taking whatever we give to Him, multiplying it, and giving it completely new dimensions that we never would have dreamed of. Hannah learned that the greatest treasures are really secure only when given to God. That which we hoard for ourselves here can, in an instant, be gone.

Hannah knew who she was in God's eyes. This sense of her own worth gave her the freedom to give.

We must remember that everything we have, all that we are, and all that we own, are ours only because of God's grace and goodness to us. How should that thought help us be more willing to give back to the Lord rather than hoard for ourselves? What does hoarding tell us about ourselves, our character, and our lack of trust in God?

Further Study: “Parents, give your children to the Lord, and ever keep before their minds that they belong to Him, that they are the lambs of Christ’s flock, watched over by the True Shepherd. Hannah dedicated Samuel to the Lord; and it is said of him, ‘Samuel grew, and the Lord was with him, and did let none of his words [the Lord’s words through Samuel] fall to the ground.’ 1 Samuel 3:19. In the case of this prophet and judge in Israel are presented the possibilities that are placed before the child whose parents co-operate with God, doing their appointed work.”—Ellen G. White, *Counsels to Parents, Teachers, and Students*, p. 143.

“What a reward was Hannah’s! and what an encouragement to faithfulness is her example! There are opportunities of inestimable worth, interests infinitely precious, committed to every mother. The humble round of duties which women have come to regard as a wearisome task should be looked upon as a grand and noble work. It is the mother’s privilege to bless the world by her influence, and in doing this she will bring joy to her own heart. She may make straight paths for the feet of her children, through sunshine and shadow, to the glorious heights above. But it is only when she seeks, in her own life, to follow the teachings of Christ that the mother can hope to form the character of her children after the divine pattern. The world teems with corrupting influences. Fashion and custom exert a strong power over the young. If the mother fails in her duty to instruct, guide, and restrain, her children will naturally accept the evil, and turn from the good. Let every mother go often to her Saviour with the prayer, ‘Teach us, how shall we order the child, and what shall we do unto him?’ Let her heed the instruction which God has given in His word, and wisdom will be given her as she shall have need.”—Ellen G. White, *Conflict and Courage*, p. 138.

Discussion Questions:

- 1** Who in your church is experiencing difficult circumstances at home or in their personal lives? How can you as a group and individually help to support these people? How much of yourself are you willing to sacrifice in order to help?
- 2** What are some cultural stigmas that abound in your society; that is, what are things that are deemed terrible by your culture? Ask yourself, Are these things that God Himself also sees as bad? Are we, as a people, in danger of stigmatizing, because of culture, things that God doesn’t? What are some examples where we might have done that? How can we know the difference between what is cultural and what is biblical?

Long Search for Hope

by GALINA STOYKOVA

I grew up in a mining town in Siberia. Everything was dusted with black soot. Even the leaves on the trees turned black. Nearly everyone in town was sick; most, including my father, had cancer.

My husband and I moved to southwestern Russia, where the air was better. Soon after we arrived, however, I began having health problems. I went to a doctor who told me that I had late-stage cancer and would likely die. They offered no treatment, so I decided to fight the disease myself.

I searched for treatments, and people brought me news clippings about various treatments and “cures,” including some very unconventional ones such as psychic healing, which is popular in Russia.

I didn’t know about God at this time, so I didn’t know where to begin looking for a cure. In the dead of winter there is a holiday called “baptism day.” On this day people believe that rivers become holy and that if people drink some water or dip into a river and whisper their wish, they can be healed. It was worth a try—anything was worth a try. So on that day I went to the river to dip in and make my wish for health. I stepped into the icy water and prayed, “God, if You exist, please heal me.” After that I had no further symptoms. I know now that it was the prayer, not the water, that healed me.

My husband and I were separated, and I was searching for meaning in life. I met a man who told me, “Go home and read the Bible.” I didn’t own a Bible, so he brought me one. I began reading it. Then he invited me to attend the Seventh-day Adventist Church. I hadn’t heard of this church, but I went. As I listened to the lesson study, I realized that this was where God lived. I continued attending and learned that Jesus is my Savior. I asked to be baptized.

I needed to make peace with my husband, so I went to him and asked his forgiveness. He accepted me so easily that it seemed that we had never argued. I told him that I had become a member of the Adventist Church, and to my amazement he said he also was attending an Adventist church and listening to a radio program called *Voice of Hope*. Three months later my husband was baptized.

It has been a long and painful journey, but we’ve found God and His truth. I’m grateful that today my husband and I worship God together in His church. Thank you for supporting missions, which helped us find God and reconciliation and hope for the future.

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