

1 Samuel 1:1-28; 2:11

'Help of the Helpless'

An introduction to Hannah

Biographical data

I want to start today's talk without a normal talk introduction.

I just want to get straight into introducing you to Hannah.

First, let me give you some biographical data about her.

1 Samuel tells us that she is a married woman.

She is married to a man called Elkanah, who is a man with a very good Israelite pedigree.

As the story goes on it appears as though he is a man of some financial substance.

He is able to afford two wives and a number of children.

Also, the sacrifices he presents during the course of 1 Samuel 1 were quite expensive ones.

Reading between the lines of 1 Samuel 1, I suspect that Hannah was Elkanah's first wife.

He greatly loved Hannah.

However, she is barren.

And I suspect that it because of this that Elkanah married again.

So, there we have the details about this family.

A woman under stress

Now in the course of this chapter, we are told that Hannah is a woman under great stress.

The evidence is piled up in a number of places.

In fact, by the standards of Hebrew storytelling, the description of her emotional/mental state is very detailed.

For example,

Verse 8 tells us that she is 'downhearted'.

The Hebrew says that her heart is bad.

Verse 10 tells us that she is bitter in soul or spirit.

In other words, she is suffering great grief of mind.

Verse 11 says that she is in misery or afflicted.

In verse 15 Hannah tells us that she is deeply troubled.

Again, the Hebrew here is particularly intense.

It literally means that her spirit is hard or severe or fierce.

And then verse 16 tells us that she is in great anguish and grief.

The picture is overwhelming.

Here is a woman at the end of her tether.

She is in desperate straights.

And the feelings she has have been going on for some long period of time.

She is a woman at rock bottom.

A woman under great stress.

The source of her stress

- Her social context

And the critical source of her stress is probably her social context.

You see, in the society in which Hannah lived, the role of a woman was to bear and raise children.

It was a great shame if you could not bear children for your husband.

It was something people talked about in the village.

It aroused looks of pity and talk behind your back.

And it made you feel worthless and unfulfilled.

- God

So, here is a woman under stress because of social pressure.

But the pressure doesn't only come from the society she lives in.

The pressure also comes from God.

Take a look at verse 6.

And because the LORD had closed her womb, her rival kept provoking her in order to irritate her.

This statement is quite unusual in the Bible.

When other women are barren in the Old Testament, they are just called 'barren'.

You just get the impression that they are the unfortunate victim of circumstances.

God is said to 'open the womb' of some of these other women.

But Hannah is somewhat unique.

God is the source of her stress.

He has closed her womb.

- Her rival

And then verse 7 tells us that the other wife of Elkanah would use God's affliction of her to persecute her.

The Hebrew word has the sense of humiliation.

Peninnah humiliated Hannah because of her barrenness.

Here is Hannah, under pressure to produce children.

She is known to be barren.

She is surrounded by a woman who can produce children at the drop of a hat.

And that woman rubs Hannah's nose in the fact.

- Her husband

And then there is her husband.

Let's have a look at how he reacts to her and how he adds to her stress.

Let's read verse 8.

We are told that Elkanah's response would be to say to her:

"Hannah, why are you weeping? Why don't you eat? Why are you downhearted? Don't I mean more to you than ten sons?"

Elkanah's words consist of four questions.

However, each of the first three questions have an accusative feel to them.

Each of them refers to 'you'.

And then the fourth questions refers to 'I' and 'you'.

All his questions are rhetorical.

I suspect that they express reproach or indignation or impatience.

You can't avoid the impression that he has seen his wife's brooding and wants her to move on.

Perhaps he has had enough.

It is clear that Elkanah is passionately in love with Hannah.

But these words ring with frustration.

It seems as though she does not reciprocate.

In other words, she seems to be fixated on the issue of children where he would be happy for her to be fixated/passionate about him.

I think that this is what is going on when he compares the 10 sons and himself in verse 8.

So, there we have it.

Hannah is a woman under great stress.

And that stress comes to a head each annual visit to the temple.

These were normally times of great feasting and partying.

But Hannah can't join in.

The fact that she is at the temple reminds her of God and his affliction of her.

The partying and attempts by her husband to compensate only exacerbate things and provide opportunities for more bullying and humiliation by Peninnah.

And then Elkanah berates her from not loving him.

The end result is that Hannah is so stressed that she can't even eat.

Choices

It is clear from the passage that the stress weighs heavily upon Hannah.

Year after year she endures it.

But on this particular year she decides that a choice has to be made.

So, what does she do?

Does she sink into depression?

Does she feel increasingly sorry for herself?

Does she cave in to Elkanah?

Does she retaliate to Peninnah?

Does she sink into desperation?

Or does she become bitter with God.

Verse 9 gives the clear answer.

Once when they had finished eating and drinking in Shiloh, Hannah stood up.

The way the verse is structured indicates that a clear decision has been made.

All the way through the passage she has been the object and the victim.

Not any more.

Now she will make a choice.

She will act.

And her action is to make a beeline for the source of her troubles.

She goes off to the house of the Lord, to the one responsible for shutting her womb.

- In the Lord's house

So, let's see what happens in the Lord's house.

The key things to note are how this section starts and how it ends.

We begin with Hannah so stressed that she cannot eat.

Then she prays with great weeping.

Let's look at her prayer in verse 11:

And she made a vow, saying, "O LORD Almighty, if you will only look upon 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."

Listen to her repetition:

- Look upon your servant's misery.

- Remember me.
- Don't forget.
- Give a son.
- Then I will give.
- And it will be a lifelong, dedicated gift.

There are two critical elements here:

First, there is her request is that God remember her.

In the Old Testament, asking God to remember is asking God to act.

Second, there is her promise contained in the two references to giving.

If God gives, she will give.

Once she has prayed there is an interlude involving Eli the Priest.

But Eli doesn't understand what is going on.

The end result is that we get the impression that no one is left on the side of Hannah.

Her husband doesn't understand.

God's representative doesn't understand.

And we begin to wonder if God himself understands.

But the passage makes clear that as far as Hannah is concerned she and God have met and the issue has been tabled.

You can see this in verse 18.

We are told that Hannah is now able to eat.

And then in verse 19 God responds with his own action.

He 'remembers' Hannah and she conceives.

And for the first time in the passage she is called the wife of Elkanah.

Then, in the course of time Samuel is given birth to and named.

- Giving the child back

Let's now turn to verses 21-28.

These verses tell the story of the process of giving the child back to God.

There are a few things to notice.

First, Hannah doesn't go up for the annual pilgrimage until she has finished breast feeding Samuel.

This was probably 2 to 3 years.

Second, verse 23 seems to imply that Elkanah is a bit worried that Hannah is not going to fulfil her vow and is simply procrastinating.

Third, Elkanah seems to have taken on Hannah's vow for himself.

In verse 21 it is called 'his vow'.

Also, 1 Samuel 2:1 indicates that he was with Hannah when she goes up with Samuel.

Fourth, there is some sort of legal transaction that goes on here.

This is signified by the oath in verse 26.

Fifth, Eli seems to have taken all this on board as well.

In verse 28 he worships God in response.

So, the issues that began our story are now resolved.

God has opened Hannah's womb.

Elkanah and Eli are back on side.

Hannah no longer has the stigma of being barren.

What's going on here?

The God who is sovereign

So, there is the story.

Now it is time for us to stand back from it a bit and to see what we can make of it.

What exactly is going on here?

What does God want us to learn from this story?

Well, the first thing to say is the Hannah herself tells us what we can learn.

She does some extended theological reflection upon these events in her song in 2 Samuel 2:1-10.

And since we are going to have a look at her song in some detail next week, I don't won't steal her thunder now.

However, I do want to make just a few observations that she doesn't make.

The first observation is that her story here is a bit different from some of the similar stories that occur in other parts of the Bible.

Think about the birth of Moses as an example.

When Moses is born, Israel is in deep trouble in Egypt.

The birth story of Moses is God's response to Israel's call for help.

The thing about this passage is that there is no apparent desperate national crisis.

There are no indications that God's people are in trouble and that the birth of Samuel is God's response to this crisis.

However, let me say that I think there are hints within this passage that God is aware of impending disasters.

These disasters will unfold as the books of Samuel progress.

The first disaster is apparent as soon as 1 Samuel 3:1 where we are told that the word of the Lord has become rare.

The second disaster begins in 1 Samuel 8 where the nation wants to introduce a king into their political system.

The first king is a man called Saul and he is something of a disaster.

And as the story of Samuel unfolds, it becomes apparent that Samuel is God's solution for both of these problems.

He is the way in which God's word will come to all Israel.

And he is the one who will oversee the introduction of kingship to Israel.

Can you see what I am saying?

I am saying that God is sovereign.

He knows Israel's needs.

He is aware of their impending crisis.

And he is already acting before their appeal to him and without their appeal.

He is acting by intervening in Hannah's life.

In closing her womb...

In forcing her into a desperate situation...

In placing her in a situation where she will call out to God for help.

And through these events he will fulfil his purposes for his nation.

His nation will have his word.

They will have a king of his choice.

The Helper of the helpless

But Hannah's situation also teaches us something else, doesn't it?

Her situation is desperate.

It is helpless.

And it is in such situations that God takes great delight.

You see, the very nature of helplessness is that you cannot rely on human ability.

You cannot rely on your own resourcefulness.

You cannot manipulate events or people.

You are exactly that – helpless!

But the story of the Bible is that God delights in helplessness.
For when people are without resources they can finally do what they were designed to do – they can turn away from depending upon themselves to depending upon him.
They can turn to the helper of the helpless.
Time and time again we see this in the Bible.
We see it with Israel in Egypt.
We see it during the period of the Judges.
We see it when Israel is suffering in exile.
And we see it when persecution reaches a pinnacle in latter chapters of the book of Daniel.
But all of us who are Christians have seen it.
For those of us who have become Christians have at some time in our existence been aware of the distance that sin forges between God and us.
At some time we have become aware that we are sinners and that God is justly angry with our sin.
We have realised that we cannot bring ourselves to God and that we are helpless.
And into such a situation, God sent his Son.
While we were still powerless and helpless, Christ died for us and reconciled us to God.
Yes, we know the God of the powerless.
We know the helper of the helpless.
We have been where Hannah has been.
We know that we can confidently draw near to God's throne of grace.
We know that when we do we will receive grace to help in time of need.

Responding to this God

With this in mind, I want to ask us all tonight why it is that we don't go to him more often.
For some of us the time has come for us to refuse to sit in bitterness and anguish.
We need to make a stand like Hannah did.
We need to call upon God to listen and to act.
Now I'm not promising that God will do what he did with Hannah.
But I am promising that he will listen.
And I am promising that his nature is to meet helplessness with help and powerlessness with rescue.
I am telling you that his nature is to help the helpless.
I am telling you that he delights to have us do what Hannah did.
Let me close tonight by reading a hymn to you.
It is a hymn that is often sung at funerals.
But it is a hymn that can also be sung in the midst of all of life's great hurdles.
It was written in the 19th Century by Henry Francis Lyte.

*Abide with me; fast falls the eventide;
The darkness deepens; Lord with me abide!
When other helpers fall, and comforts flee,
Help of the helpless, O abide with me.*

*I need thy presence every passing hour;
What but thy grace can foil the tempter's power?
Who like thyself my guide and stay can be?
Through cloud and sunshine, O abide with me.*

*I fear no foe, with Thee at hand to bless;
Ills have no weight, and tears no bitterness;
Where is death's sting? Where, grave, thy victory?
I triumph still, if thou abide with me.*

*Hold thou thy cross, before my closing eyes;
Shine through the gloom, and point me to the skies;
Heaven's morning breaks, and earth's vain shadows flee;
In life, in death, O Lord, abide with me!*