

Hannah's Prayer

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 21 April 2024

Preacher: Martin Ayers

[0 : 0 0] The Bible reading this morning is in 1 Samuel, starting on chapter 1, verse 1, and it's on page 271 in the Church Bibles.

271. 1 Samuel 1. 1. There was a certain man from Ramathayim, a Zuffite from the hill country of Ephraim, whose name was Elkanah, son of Jeroam, the son of Elihu, the son of Tohu, the son of Zuff, an Ephraimite.

He had two wives. One was called Hannah, and the other Peninnah. Peninnah had children, but Hannah had none. Year after year, this man went up from his town to worship and sacrifice to the Lord Almighty at Shiloh, where Hophni and Phinehas, the two sons of Eli, were priests of the Lord.

Whenever the day came for Elkanah to sacrifice, he would give portions of the meat to his wife Peninnah and to all her sons and daughters. But to Hannah, he gave a double portion because he loved her, and the Lord had closed her womb.

Because the Lord had closed Hannah's womb, her rival kept provoking her in order to irritate her. This went on year after year.

[1 : 4 2] Whenever Hannah went up to the house of the Lord, her rival provoked her till she wept and would not eat. Her husband Elkanah would 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? Once, when they had finished eating and drinking in Shiloh, Hannah stood up.

Now Eli the priest was sitting on his chair by the doorpost of the Lord's house. In her deep anguish, Hannah prayed to the Lord, weeping bitterly.

And she made a vow, saying, Lord Almighty, if you will only look on your servant's misery and remember me, and not forget your servant to 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.

As she kept on praying to the Lord, Eli observed her mouth. Hannah was praying in her heart, and her lips were moving, but her voice was not heard.

[3 : 0 9] Eli thought she was drunk and said to her, Hannah, how long are you going to stay drunk? Put away your wine. Not so, my Lord, Hannah replied.

I am a woman who is deeply troubled. I have not been drinking wine or beer. I was pouring out my soul to the Lord.

Do not take your servant for a wicked woman. I have been praying here out of my great anguish and grief. Eli answered, Go in peace, and may the God of Israel grant you what you have asked of him.

She said, May your servant find favour in your eyes. Then she went her way and ate something, and her face was no longer downcast.

Early the next morning they arose and worshipped before the Lord, and then went back to their home at Ramah. Elkanah made love to his wife Hannah, and the Lord remembered her.

[4 : 26] So in the course of time, Hannah became pregnant, and gave birth to a son. She named him Samuel, saying, Because I asked the Lord for him.

And now we're going to continue at verse 25b on the next page, over the page 272. 1 Samuel 1 25b.

They brought Samuel to Eli. This is some years later. And she said to him, Pardon me, my Lord.

As surely as you live, I am the woman who stood here beside you, praying to the Lord. I prayed for this child, and the Lord has granted me what I asked of him.

So now I give him to the Lord. For his whole life he shall be given over to the Lord. And he worshipped the Lord there.

[5 : 32] 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. Do not keep talking so proudly, or let your mouth speak such arrogance.

For the Lord is a God who knows. And by him deeds are weighed. The bows of the warriors are broken, but those who stumbled are armed with strength.

Those who were full hire themselves out for food, but those who were hungry are hungry no more. She who was barren has born seven children, but she who has had many sons pines away.

The Lord brings death and makes alive. He brings down to the grave and raises up. The Lord sends poverty and wealth.

[6 : 57] He humbles and he exalts. He raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap.

He seats them with princes and makes them inherit a throne of honour. For the foundations of the earth are the lords.

On them he has set the world. He will guard the feet of his faithful servants, but the wicked will be silenced in the place of darkness.

It is not by strength that one prevails. Those who oppose the Lord will be broken. The Most High will thunder from heaven.

The Lord will judge the ends of the earth. He will give strength to his king and exalt the horn of his anointed. Then Elkanah went home to Ramah, but the boy ministered before the Lord under Eli the priest.

[8 : 05] This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Thanks, Michael, very much for reading.

If we've not met before, good morning, St. Silas. I'm Martin Ayers. I'm the lead pastor here. And it'd be a great help to me if you could have your Bibles open as we look at this section of 1 Samuel for our new sermon series.

Looking at these books, 1 and 2 Samuel. So it's page 271 in the church Bibles there. And you can find an outline inside the notice sheet if you find that helpful as you see where we're going as we look at this portion of God's word together.

Let's pray. Let's ask for God's help. Almighty God and loving Heavenly Father, we ask that by your Holy Spirit you will take up your word and speak to each of us now.

that you will open our ears to hear, that you will open our minds to understand, and open our hearts to respond rightly to you. For we ask in Jesus' name.

[9 : 07] Amen. Well, in 1 Samuel chapter 1, we meet God's people at a time when they could be asking, does God really care? And it's a question any of us could find ourselves asking because of a situation that we're in or something that's happened to us or to someone that we know.

Those in our church family who are from Hong Kong or from Ukraine could be asking that question as they've moved countries, in many cases, feeling compelled to do that, fleeing danger, and their lives have been turned completely upside down.

Does God really care? Someone might be asking it when they get the health news that they'd always feared they'd get, or they live with long-term mental health struggles or chronic pain or a sense of failure.

Others of us will ask it for very personal reasons like Hannah's, things in our own life that we are sad about, that we've pleaded with God to change, maybe things no one else knows about, and the change you longed for hasn't come, and you're left asking, does God really care about me?

Well, we enter 1 Samuel, and we're coming to the end of an era for God's people, which we could call the time of the judges. So we're after Abraham, and we're after Moses when God rescued his people, who he'd made into a nation, they were in slavery in Egypt, we're after Joshua, who'd led the people into the promised land, and they're living in the promised land under a succession of leaders called the judges.

[10 : 43] And it's a difficult time. Horrible things were happening among the people of God, and they're surrounded by a growing threat of enemies like the Philistines who want to take their land from them.

And we'll see in the opening chapters in the coming weeks that their religious life, their walk with God, is dysfunctional. God is not smiling on them because they are not, they're not being faithful to him.

And so several times at the end of the book, judges, we're told that one of the reasons, one of the causes of this difficult time is that we get this refrain, in those days, Israel had no king.

Everyone did what was right in their own eyes. And then we meet Hannah, who helps us with that question, does God really care? And our first point this morning is the places where God starts.

The book starts with a genealogy or a family tree, if you like. And usually when you see in the Bible a family tree like this, you're seeing the significance of someone who's coming because of the connections with people that we already know.

[11 : 53] That's what you're looking for in a family tree in the Bible. But the point for us here in the first two verses is that there is nothing much to note about this man.

Hannah's husband Elkanah is Mr. Nobody. In verse one, he's from somewhere obscure, a kind of country bumpkin. He's the son of a man we've never heard of.

And he's from a tribe that is nothing special. It reminded me of, if you know the Beatles, I know they were a long time ago now, but the Beatles had some songs about people like this. They had Eleanor Rigby who died and was buried along with her name.

And Father McKenzie is writing the words to a sermon that no one will hear. I often think of him. And they had a song about the nowhere man. He's a real nowhere man sitting in his nowhere land making all his nowhere plans for nobody, does not have a point of view, knows not where he's going to, isn't he a bit like you and me?

And this is the kind of what we're meant to think as we look at Elkanah. There is an encouragement here for any of us who might feel a bit like him ourselves, that when you look at our family tree, there's nothing much significant about us.

[13 : 05] Well, in his household, he's got two wives, Peninnah, who has loads of kids, and Hannah, and she can't have kids. Now, in today's world, being childless can be a heartbreaking thing.

We know that. I'm very sensitive to that as we look at Hannah's situation. But without taking anything away from the pain of that for people today, in principle today, a woman could decide not to have children as a lifestyle choice.

In the ancient Near East, for a wife not to have children was a crushing blow. In fact, at the 9.30 this morning, as we looked at this passage, I was talking to David and Heather afterwards, who lived in Tanzania, and they reminded me that still in parts of the world today like that, it is a much more significant thing for a woman to be childless.

So they said, in Tanzania, they met lots of women who were called Peninnah from this passage, even though Peninnah does not come across well in 1 Samuel chapter 1.

She's got kids. And Heather, when they lived in Tanzania, was called Naomi's mum. She was given the identity of who her children were. In the ancient Near East, children were important for you economically because it was more people to work the farm fields or work in the shop.

[14 : 32] They were significant for you in playing your part in the people of God because God had apportioned the promised land to families and so as you had children, they would inherit the land.

They were significant for your security because young boys who became young men could fight in the army and defend the land. So socially, we're meeting Hannah here and she is an insignificant woman, a powerless woman, in an obscure household.

And we feel compassion for Hannah's situation. Not only is she grieving, but in verse 6, she is mocked by Peninnah. Peninnah is called her rival and when you read the Old Testament, it teaches you that polygamy is wrong, not so much by repeated commands, but simply by how every time you get a guy who marries more than one woman, it's a complete disaster.

And here, we've got these two, they've got this rival in the home and she provokes Hannah. And you can imagine how that happened, you know, as the food allowances were distributed in the house, calling her children loudly and saying, make sure that Hannah gets the same as us for all her children.

And I'm saying, but mum, Hannah doesn't have kids. Oh yeah, sorry, I forgot about that. Hannah doesn't have any kids. Or, oh Hannah, I feel so tired because, you know, I'm pregnant again and I'm just so bored of the baby showers.

[15 : 58] Could you organize my baby shower this time? And in verse 7, we're told this went on year after year. So by the end of verse 7, we find Hannah weeping and she won't eat.

Such is her grief. Then she receives pretty useless comfort from her husband. He says 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? I don't know what you think about that, but I don't think that's the most helpful thing that a husband has ever said.

He's basically saying, you've got no reason to be sad, Hannah. You have me. I am a legend. And then, Hannah is even misunderstood by Eli the priest.

When she prays in verse 13, we'll get to that later, he thinks that she is drunk. So she's misunderstood and this guy who can't even rebuke his own sons, we'll see that later, rebukes her.

[17 : 00] So Hannah is in this rotten situation and, of course, would be asking, does God really care? Or could have asked that question? And more than that, Hannah's hopeless situation, more than that he cares, we're seeing that in her hopeless situation, this is exactly the kind of situation where God starts his extraordinary works of grace.

We see it here in 1 Samuel, as this is going to be a book about Samuel, we're ready for that, the title gave that away, but here we are starting with this obscure lady.

And this is a pattern we see again and again in the Bible, that this is the kind of situation where God delights to begin his work. In fact, by the time you get to 1 Samuel, hearing that a woman is childless puts you on the edge of your seat because we've been there before and God has done explosive things.

When you think about Abraham and Sarah, who he chooses and he gives his promises to, Sarah is childless. Next generation down, their daughter-in-law, Rebecca, marries their son Isaac, she's childless.

Then she's given children, then next generation down we have Jacob and his wife Rachel can't have children. In the time of the judges, Samson's mother was childless and given Samson, who God raised up to deliver his people.

[18 : 26] Why? Why does God do it like that? This pattern is because when God's people are most in a position of weakness and helplessness and even hopelessness, these are times so often when God delights to step in and act because at those moments he displays his compassion, he displays his grace, he displays his power to transform the fortunes of people.

In the book of Samuel, God is going to do something huge. He's going to solve Israel's leadership problem with a coming king and God's plan to keep his promises to Israel and save people from every nation will depend on that work that he's going to begin in 1 Samuel.

But it all starts nowhere near a palace but with an obscure, humble servant of God who is faithful enough to pray in her distress.

And that should be a real encouragement for us here this morning for each of us who realizes that humanly speaking we are weak, we're overlooked, we're insignificant.

These are often the places where God chooses to work, delights to work when people are faithful to him and they pray. So that's our first point, the places where God starts.

[19 : 50] And next, Hannah shows us what faithfulness looks like. Our second point, the prayer Hannah prays. Hannah does something so remarkable here, so precious because so often today we form our views about who God is and what God is like from our experience, from things that we feel, from experiences that we've had.

And if you do that, if you go through life with what you could call an experience-based theology, a kind of a, an understanding of who God is based on your life situation, then when you're in the wilderness, when you're in the valley, when you're miserable, what are you going to think about God?

You will think God is not powerful or you'll think he's not good enough to care. Hannah has every reason from her life experience to think that God is not powerful or he doesn't care.

But instead, look at what she does. She doesn't let her circumstances inform her view of God. Instead, she applies what she knows about God from his word to her situation.

She resolves to view her life through the lens of what she knows to be true about God from his word. And we see that in her prayer. So it's a heartfelt prayer.

[21 : 15] There are tears and Psalm 6 verse 8 tells us that God hears the sound of our weeping. Sometimes even tears are a prayer. She finds a freedom in the presence of God to simply pour out her heart to God.

And it's an informed prayer. So look at verse 10 as we see Hannah replying what she knows about God to her situation. Verse 10. In her deep anguish, Hannah prayed to the Lord, weeping bitterly, and she made a vow saying, Lord Almighty, if you will only look on your servant's misery and remember me.

So she addresses him as Lord Almighty. In other words, the God who is in control of all things, all powerful. She knows her God. In verse 6, we're told it was the Lord who had closed Hannah's womb.

Just as in our suffering, we don't have to let God off the hook by somehow saying he's not in control. Or when you're helping a friend who's going through suffering, we're not to excuse God by saying, well, God didn't mean for that to happen.

Or maybe the devil got in and God couldn't help it. We were reminded, actually, just at the wedding on Friday, Catherine and David's wedding, Jonathan reminded us as he was preaching about how God's sovereign control, his absolute control of all things, is the pillow on which Christians can sleep at night.

[22 : 47] He is all powerful and we need to hold on to that. She prays to him as Lord Almighty. And next, the key words that she uses, literally, are see and affliction.

We have it here as look on your servant's misery. But literally, it's see your servant's affliction. And those are key words for us to understand what's going on with Hannah.

Because she's got that language from Exodus. When Israel were in slavery in Egypt, God rose up to act and he says, I have seen the affliction of my people.

And later, they look back and they say, the Lord saw our affliction. And they praise God, saying, Lord, you saw our affliction. And Hannah is praying in that reality about God.

Then she says, remember me. Do not forget me. And again, that Exodus language where we were told that God remembered his covenant promises when he saw his people in distress.

[23 : 52] So it's not that God forgets. He never forgets. Rather, when we see that language in the Bible of God remembering, it's that he is about to act. Notice, too, Hannah's humility in verse 11.

He is the Lord Almighty and she says, she is his servant. Look on your servant's misery. It's a heartfelt prayer. It's an informed prayer.

It's a humble prayer. And then she makes her request known to God in verse 11. She asks for a son. When we apply what we know about God to the situation we're in, it doesn't give us all the answers.

We can still be left wondering why things weren't done a different way. So I know God is all-powerful. He could have changed that situation. I don't know why he didn't do that.

But I'm not going to allow that to change my view of God, that experience. Rather, I will view what's happening to me through the lens of what I know to be true about God because he's revealed it in his word.

[24 : 55] So the Christian preacher and writer John Newton said, everything is necessary that God sends our way. nothing can be necessary that he withholds from us. And we know this is good for us because of our next point, the peace that God grants to Hannah, the peace that God grants.

So in Hannah's case, as we've had read, we've seen, her prayer is answered by her being given the child that she asked for. But the writer here wants us to see that Hannah's life is changed not by the prayer, sorry, not by the baby, but by the prayer.

Her life is changed not by the baby arriving but by the prayer. So just look at the order of things. In verse 9, she's been given the provocation from Peninnah.

She's been given the hopeless comfort from Elkanah. And then in verse 9, we read that she stood up. There's this decisive moment. She goes into the presence of God in verses 10 and 11.

Eli then thinks that she's drunk. Now just think, we'll look at this again next week, but just think what a desperate situation Israel is in here. Eli is the spiritual leader of the people of God.

[26 : 07] He is spiritually blind. He sees somebody praying piously, devoutly, and his assumption is she must be drunk. And this is in Israel.

You wonder, what must be going on at their religious festivals in Shiloh that when you see someone praying fervently under their breath, your assumption is, well, she must have drunk too much. But godly Hannah is the faithful one in the midst of that chaos saying in verse 15 to Eli, I was pouring out my heart to the Lord.

And in verse 17, Eli says, go in peace and may the God of Israel grant you what you've asked of him. Then, verse 18, we're told before she gets pregnant, she went away, she ate something, and her face was no longer downcast.

In other words, her spirit has been transformed by this process that she has gone through of understanding her grief through the lens of God's goodness and praying to him, remembering that God is a seizer of the affliction of his people, God.

She's a model of what we're all told to do in 1 Peter chapter 5 where it says, humble yourself before God's mighty hand that he may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.

[27 : 28] Or in Philippians chapter 4, we're told when we're anxious to present our requests to God by prayer and petition with thanksgiving, and the peace of God which transcends all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

And you see that transformation in Hannah from the vow she makes even before, even as she asks for the child. So before, she's asking for a child to solve these issues in her life at home.

She needs to be respected at home. She feels lost without a child. But now she says to God, if you will give your servant 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. That's a picture of him being devoted to serving the Lord. So this is remarkable because it means if God gives her what she's asking for, she will still be at home with no child.

It's as though Hannah is saying to God, now that I am clearer about your character, now that I'm casting the burden of my distress upon your shoulders, I know that you are enough.

[28 : 46] and God is supremely glorified when his people in their weakness, in their emptiness, are able to say to him like Hannah, you are enough for me.

Hannah is now more concerned with the bigger thing that God is going to do for his people than she is for her personal situation. Before she was praying to God, give me a child for me.

Now she's saying to God, give me a child for you. For you to use, for your purposes, which I know will be what I as one of your people need.

And this is a key moment for the history of God's people. God is going to do something, not just for Hannah, for all of Israel, and through them for the world. Her barrenness, her helplessness, is a picture of Israel's barrenness and helplessness at this moment.

They've got a leader who's spiritually blind in chapter 1, they've got priests who are corrupt in chapter 2, the word of God, there's a famine of the word of God in chapter 3, and God's mighty saving work for his people starts here with this obscure woman, Hannah, shifting her gaze, moving her concern from her situation, her grief, to look to the bigger picture of God's plan.

[30 : 08] And if we'd been there in that moment when Hannah prayed that prayer, we would not even have noticed her. We'd have had no clue how significant this moment was as she handed the baby she prays for to God in her heart.

So she rises, no longer downcast. That's the peace that God grants. Prayer in the presence of God has changed her. And next we see Hannah's prophetic grasp of that bigger plan of God with this child in our fourth point as we turn to the psalm Hannah sings.

So let me just pick up the story in verse 20. Hannah gets pregnant, she gives birth to Samuel. The name Samuel sounds like the Hebrew asked for so that whenever people see this child and meet this child and think of his name, they'll remember this is the child Hannah asked for and God gave her what she asked.

And in verse 27, she's faithful to what she promised. Verse 27, I prayed for this child and the Lord has granted me what I asked of him so now I give him to the Lord for his whole life he shall be given over to the Lord.

It's extraordinary, isn't it, what Hannah does and to the extent she's a model for us in her faithfulness and her prayer, what about that for a model? That you would work out the thing you've most longed for in your whole life, the thing that you most thought, if I could get that, that's what would make me happy and you ask God for it and when you get it from him, you offer it all back to him because you realise, you've learnt through that process that knowing him is enough, trusting him and his provision is enough, that you could give everything back to him.

[31 : 58] And then we get her song, this psalm, in the first ten verses of chapter two and it's a remarkable song, it unlocks the whole book, what the whole book is about so we'll come back to it again next week but it starts with praise at the start of verse one.

Hannah prayed and said, my heart rejoices in the Lord, in the Lord my horn is lifted high, that's her strength, her horn, if you think about rams kind of jostling and fighting with their horns, the horn is a picture of strength, so she's saying, God has lifted me, he's strengthened me in this difficult situation I was in.

My mouth boasts over my enemies for I delight in your deliverance. Then she praises God from that experience to, she praises his holiness and his onliness.

There is no one holy like the Lord, there is no one besides you, there is no rock like our God. She was right to stand on him and his revelation of his character character.

And then she moves on to see a pattern and a person. The pattern comes first, it's that she sees that the way God has dealt with her as a humble servant lifted up by God when she entrusted herself to him, this is the way God works, this is God's righteous way of dealing with the world, that he is a God who ultimately brings his justice when he takes down the proud who are self-dependent and he lifts up the lowly who depend on him.

[33 : 32] So we see that in verse 7, she says, God humbles and he exalts and in verse 9, he will guard the feet of his faithful servants but the wicked will be silenced in the place of darkness.

That's the pattern, it's the ultimate justice that we'll see on judgment day from God when he has the final word on us all. But then Hannah's prayer turns into the most extraordinary prophecy as she sees a person at the end of verse 10.

She says, he will give strength to his king and exalt the horn of his anointed, literally of his Messiah, of his Christ. Now for Hannah to pray that here is astonishing.

Israel doesn't yet have a king. Hannah sees that God will turn the world upside down as he brings his justice. He'll restore the fortunes of his people through a coming king, the Messiah.

And we'll see strides towards that coming king in the rest of the book as God raises Samuel, her child, to anoint his chosen king, Christ David, an unlikely king, a humble king.

[34 : 45] But to see God fully come to the place where he will exalt the humble and take down the proud we have to look forward to another baby born generations later to a different woman in obscurity who, like Hannah, calls herself a humble servant of the Lord.

When Mary found that she was pregnant with Jesus, Luke records for us in Luke chapter 1 her song that she sings. We call it the Magnificat and she praises God with a cover version of Hannah's song here.

She says that through her child God will pull down the mighty from their seat and exalt the humble and meek. That he has shown strength with his arm, he has regarded the lowliness of Mary, his humble servant, and he will scatter the proud.

And then we find in Jesus, great David's greater song, the fulfillment of this pattern of God delivering humble people who trust him, not through the strength of an army or political power, but through weakness, through a saviour who humbled himself to depend on the Lord.

And if we'd been there on that Good Friday and seen Jesus, a frail, lonely man, hung on the cross, we'd have seen people passing by and soldiers casting lots for his clothes.

[36 : 15] Such was the irrelevance of this man with no sense of the significance of what was happening right next to them. So that Jesus promises that in his kingdom, blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. And God has followed that pattern with Jesus, that he, like Hannah, was humble before his father and God has exalted him to his right hand so that now everyone who comes to him in dependence finds forgiveness and eternal life.

Hannah's story does not give us a promise that God will give us what we ask for. There were many other childless women in Israel at that time. But she demonstrates that whatever we're going through, God really does care.

Let's remember the places where God often starts are the hidden places through the overlooked people in unlikely places praying ordinary prayers of dependence.

Let's be people like Hannah who apply what we know about God from his word to whatever we go through. That he is the God who is almighty, who holds all things in his hand.

[37 : 39] He's a sovereign king and he really does see the affliction of his people. He remembers us and he has a bigger plan. And Hannah reminds us to look for God's care for us ultimately in his saving work through his Messiah who is coming back one day and when he appears he will bring something so wonderful to pass that all suffering will be healed and made up for and even justified.

Let's pray together. Just a moment of quiet to reflect on God's word and then I'll lead us in a prayer.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Almighty God and Heavenly Father we praise you because there is no God like you no one holy like you no other rock on which we can build our lives and take our stand.

[38 : 51] We praise you for your unfolding gospel plan through your messianic king to save people from every nation. thank you that you see our situation our affliction you know our struggles you have a bigger plan at work that will one day bring healing deliverance restoration and even glory to everyone whose hope is in you.

So may we by your spirit strength like Hannah be steadfast in our faith and faithful in our prayers and expectant as we watch for your work in our lives for Jesus name's sake
Amen.