

From Discouragement to Discernment

Infertility and the Wisdom of God

I Samuel 1 & 2

Introduction

If mankind was solely responsible for the Bible, it would have been polished before printing. I am convinced that certain events or struggles would never have made the final cut. Editors would have made sure Christians always came out on the winning team and looking their best.

Without a doubt, miracles would make it in the final script. However, any story of believers having to struggle through life with difficult relationships, unanswered prayer, or painful loss due to faithfulness to God would be left, as they say, on the floor before the script would move on to the printer's desk.

This is not the case with God. He includes triumph and tears. He records both the despair of His people and their deliverance.

Even the apostle Paul, the model of commitment to Christ, said in his closing years,

Not that I have already obtained it or have already become perfect [mature], but I press on . . . (Philippians 3:12a)

Keep in mind that this verse was written by Paul while he was in a jail cell.

I personally do not think the average Christian today would buy Paul's books. In fact, one look at Romans 7 would put him at the back of the book store, if even there.

Anyone who follows Christ for several decades should arrive at a point at which they can give their winning strategy: "How I Succeeded and You Can Too," or "How I Arrived at Happiness, Peace and Success and Why Everybody Loves Me". Instead, the Holy Spirit directed this apostle to deliver his soul and his struggle for all to read. And this is consistent throughout scripture.

When will we, as Christians, learn that God never intended for us to be impressed with each other? We are to be impressed with Christ. Our glory is Christ. The object of our admiration is our Lord.

In fact, Paul warned the church in Corinth when he wrote,

For we dare not . . . compare ourselves with some that commend themselves; for when they measure themselves by themselves, comparing themselves among themselves, they are not wise. (II Corinthians 10:12)

The truth is, no one has it all together and the Christian should be the first to admit it.

One article in *Newsweek* that I read was written by a woman who had been serving as an editor for a publisher that produced self-help books; books on positive thinking and strategies for personal, emotional success. She wrote:

You might expect that people who work in this industry would be terribly well-adjusted folks – in touch with their feelings, free from stress, phobias and anxieties. Think again. The management is even now, beginning construction on a second story for our building because the office manager and the head of typesetting can't stand working in the same room together. One of the executive staff routinely gets so upset during phone calls that he falls out of his chair. Two in-house authors of a book on stress management are on the verge of suing each other. And our publishing house's best-selling book on conquering phobias and fears still needs an author cover photo because the author, you guessed it, has a phobia about having his picture taken.

How different we should be from the world in our humility and admission that, like Paul, we have not arrived but are pressing on.

The Author of scripture allowed people to be seen and heard in the reality of their personal struggle, even when they struggled with God Himself. And on this Mother's Day, I want to point out a woman who moved from discouragement to discernment.

The book of I Samuel opens with the struggle of a barren woman named Hannah. As we rehearse her testimony, keep in mind that the son she finally has, she will give away.

In a larger context, Hannah becomes an illustration of a barren nation that had long since forfeited the fruitful walk of obedience and faith. I Samuel opens during the days of the judges. These were the days when everyone was doing what was right in their own eyes.

The history of Israel surrounding Hannah's testimony was bleak. The Israelites were worshipping at an insignificant shrine presided over by a compromising, undiscerning high priest named Eli. This priest had already put his hands over his eyes and mouth, allowing his morally corrupt sons to serve with him, while, at the same time, living openly immoral lives.

Militarily, Israel was being beaten into submission by the Philistines.

What Israel needed to do was cry out to God for forgiveness, for revival and a return to spiritual fruit and fellowship. This will be illustrated in the struggle and drama of Hannah's own life.

Hannah's Discouragement

We are told in verse 2 of I Samuel chapter 1 that Hannah was one of two wives married to Elkanah. The text reads,

He had two wives: the name of one was Hannah and the name of the other Peninnah; and Peninnah had children, but Hannah had no children.

This is a very discouraging scene. Because Hannah was barren, Elkanah had adopted the pagan practice of his polygamous culture and taken another wife. This was in order to ensure an heir – a male to carry on his name and estate. He took another wife, not out of love, but for his own legacy.

Notice verses 3-5.

Now this man would go up from his city yearly to worship and to sacrifice to the Lord of hosts in Shiloh. And the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were priests to the Lord there.

When the day came that Elkanah sacrificed, he would give portions to Peninnah his wife and to all her sons and her daughters;

but to Hannah he would give a double portion, for he loved Hannah, but the Lord had closed her womb.

Frankly, the Christian community at-large would have had a difficult time knowing exactly how to

encourage this woman who deeply desired a child, but for reasons known only to God, could not.

Certainly the Israelite culture would have been unforgiving simply because faithful believers expected to participate in the Old Testament Abrahamic covenant blessing of fertility. A barren woman in the Old Testament would have assumed she was abandoned by God for some fault of her own and she would be viewed by those around her as bearing the reproach and disapproval of God.

This is the reason Rachel would say after conceiving and then bearing a son, in Genesis 30:23,

... ***“God has taken away my reproach.”***

For those under the Old Testament covenant promises, if they obeyed God, then the skies sent rain, their crops flourished, and they had plenty of children. These were the unique blessings promised to Israel if they kept their responsibilities before the Lord.

Barrenness was made even more devastating to an Israelite woman by the fact that the nation was anticipating the coming of the Messiah. Faithful Jewish women longed to be a participant in the delivery of their Redeemer. In fact, many of them named their sons Joshua, or “Yeshua,” the Hebrew counterpart for Jesus, which meant “deliverer”.

Barrenness then, carried triple pain:

- the inability to have a child;
- the consideration of being out of fellowship with God;
- the loss of the opportunity to play a role in the redemption of Israel.

I find it fascinating that throughout the Bible, time and time again, a woman unable to have a child becomes the individual that God chooses to use in the drama of redemption with a child He later allows her to have – usually late in life. For example:

- **Isaac**, the promised seed of Abraham, was delivered through Sarah after decades of waiting;
- **Jacob**, the father of the twelve tribes of Israel, was born to Rebekah after she waited twenty years for a child;
- **Joseph & Samson**, defenders of Israel, were born to women who struggled with the pain of childlessness;
- **John the Baptizer** was born to a childless couple when his mother was well past childbearing years.

God's tendency is to make our total inability His starting point. Our utter incapacity is often the prop He delights to use in the next dramatic scene in redemptive history.ⁱ

Now, every year Hannah's family traveled for the sacrificial meal near the tabernacle. The Bible informs us that her personal pain was aggravated by the mocking and irritation of her rival, Peninnah. Notice verse 6.

Her rival, however, would provoke her bitterly to irritate her, because the Lord had closed her womb.

It is one thing to not have someone who will try to understand the agony of wanting a child, but it is another thing to have someone drive the knife even deeper into the heart.

Notice verse 7.

It happened year after year [!], as often as she went up to the house of the Lord, she would provoke her; so she wept and would not eat.

In other words, this was the perfect time to remind Hannah that she was out of fellowship with God; that God did not care.

Maybe this is what Mother's day is for you. It is a reminder of the child you do not have and this is the perfect opportunity for the rival of Christ – the enemy of your soul – to irritate your spirit and whisper the lie that God does not care.

Maybe for you, Mother's day is reopening the wound of the child you lost, while the enemy whispers that God was not in control.

Maybe Mother's Day is a reminder of the child you aborted rather than delivered and now, as a growing Christian, you understand why you should not have done so. And this day is the perfect opportunity for the enemy to whisper the lie that God does not forgive.

These are all lies. Satan is a liar and so is our fallen flesh.

God does care. God is in control over every life. And God does forgive every sin.

All Hannah could do was go to the tabernacle entrance and weep, as we read in verse 10.

David said in Psalm 6:8 (paraphrased),

... the Lord hears the sound of your weeping.

Evidently tears themselves constitute prayer.

This was the annual feast, taken to Shiloh, where the ark of the covenant was located and peace

offerings were given. This was supposed to be a time of celebration.

This was not so for Hannah, however. It was the worst day of her year and I am sure she dreaded it more than anything.

This is like a husband or wife arriving at the date of their spouse's birthday after they have just passed away – and the heartache begins all over again.

This is like the family reunion for a single person in which all the brothers and sisters arrive with their spouses and children – and loneliness begins to creep in.

This is like the mom driving behind a school bus that her child used to ride to school before dying suddenly and unexplainably – and the tears begin to flow all over again.

Imagine, however, what it would be like to drive behind this bus and have in the passenger's seat, another mother waving at her three children and then looking at you and saying, "God obviously loves me more than you."

This is Hannah's situation.

Hannah's Discernment

The wonderful thing about Hannah's testimony is that she ran toward God and not away from Him.

This year, it has reached unbearable levels and Hannah makes a vow. Notice verses 10-11.

She, greatly distressed, prayed to the Lord and wept bitterly.

She made a vow and said, "O Lord of hosts, if You will indeed look on the affliction of Your maidservant and remember me, and not forget Your maidservant, but will give Your maidservant a son, then I will give him to the Lord all the days of his life, and a razor shall never come on his head."

Hannah is promising to dedicate her son to a lifelong service to the Lord.ⁱⁱ

Is she praying a self-centered prayer? There is no doubt that Hannah wanted to cradle a baby in her arms. There is no doubt Hannah wanted to be a mother. These are good and godly desires that God may or may not fulfill in the working of His will.

However, Hannah wanted a son not just for herself. She wanted a son for Israel. She wanted a man to lead in the service of God.

These are the days of the judges. Where are the godly men? They are few and far between.

“Lord,” Hannah was praying, “give me a godly young man for the sake of Israel, Your beloved!”

One godly man, who lived nearby in Bethlehem, was named Boaz. If he was still alive, he was an old man by now. His wife, Ruth, would finally have a child. In fact, they would become the great, great grandparents of David – the king who would be anointed by Hannah’s son, Samuel. Both of these women longed for the promised seed – the Messiah – and they both will play a critical role in the drama of redemption.

About this time, verse 12 informs us that Eli comes along. Assuming Hannah is drunk, he chastises her. Then, realizing her grief, he blesses her.

Hannah eventually returns home and soon bears a son. She names him Samuel, in verse 20, a name that means, “heard of God,” or more woodenly, “God heard”.ⁱⁱⁱ

What a perfect name for Hannah’s son. There was no doubt in this Israelite heart anymore – God had heard!

Then, true to her promise, after three years, Hannah returns with her family to fulfill her vow and give Samuel to the work of the tabernacle. Notice the powerful words she delivers in verse 28.

***“So I have also dedicated him to the Lord; as long as he lives he is dedicated to the Lord.”
And he worshiped the Lord there.***

Look at chapter 2, verses 18-19, and picture what this scene involved.

Now Samuel was ministering before the Lord, as a boy wearing a linen ephod.

And his mother would make him a little robe and bring it to him from year to year when she would come up with her husband to offer the yearly sacrifice.

Some might wonder how Eli would be able to raise a three year old – especially moms who have three year olds.

We know from the Old Testament that there were permanent female attendants at the tabernacle who assisted in a number of duties.^{iv}

What a delight it must have been to them to raise Samuel – the little prophet of God.

Do not think for a moment that this solved everything and there were never any more tears for Hannah. The truth is that some gifts are hard to give to God without wanting to take them back.

However, Hannah was committed to giving her son to God. Then, guess what? God accepted her gift. Samuel would serve God his entire life.

Verse 21 informs us that Hannah was given five more children by the Lord. This is an obvious illustration to Israel that if they would be faithful to God, God would fulfill the Old Testament covenant promises to them.

However, do not ever think that Samuel’s dedication to the service of the Lord dried all of Hannah’s tears. It was a different ache in her heart, but there was still a longing.

I imagine Hannah lingering all year making this little robe for Samuel. Each year he would need a new one because he quickly outgrew the old one.

Imagine watching your child grow up through school yearbook pictures. Once a year, you get another snapshot. Do you know how much children change from year to year? Hannah would have to become reacquainted with her son every time she saw him. She watched Samuel grow up.

However, as Samuel grew, so did Hannah. Instead of growing bitter and resentful over her promise to the Lord that she would dedicate her son to His service, her prayer in chapter 2 is a classic declaration of personal surrender, submission, and satisfaction. In fact, even though she effectively loses Samuel to distance and annual visits, she has moved from discouragement to discernment.

Four Lessons from Hannah’s Discernment

Let me make four observations from Hannah’s prayer in chapter 2. Her spiritual depth and discernment is an incredibly powerful encouragement to us, no matter what we might be struggling with today.

1. First, Hannah reveals in her prayer that life’s deepest joy is being satisfied with God.

We will always ache for something; we will always long for something. We can become transfixed on this longing or we can take it to our Heavenly Father and ask Him to deepen our longing for Him.

This is the testimony of Hannah.

Notice verse 1 of chapter 2 when she prays, “My heart exults in my son Samuel.”

This is not what Hannah says. She says,

... *“My heart exults in the Lord . . . because I rejoice in . . .”*

“... the fact that God gave me what I longed for?” No,

“... *Your salvation.*”

Samuel did not satisfy Hannah’s grief. In fact, he only created a new and unique form of longing. He was one more thing for her to miss.

However, Hannah was learning that God alone was sufficient. She was learning that her greatest gift in life was her salvation and God was glorified by her discernment and depth.

John Piper put it this way, “God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in Him.”^v

For years I have signed my letters and correspondence with the salutation, “Satisfied in Christ”. For me, this is a daily challenge – am I really satisfied in Christ?!

There are days when I ought to write, “Not nearly satisfied in Christ,” or “Not even close to being satisfied in Christ.” Wouldn’t that look good on my pastoral letterhead?!

Hannah prays in verse 2,

“... *there is no one besides You . . .*”

This is another way of saying, “Satisfied in Christ.”

Life’s deepest joy is satisfaction with God.

2. **Secondly, Hannah declares that life’s greatest security is in the wisdom of God.**

Hannah prays with new experience in the latter part of verse 3.

“... *for the Lord is God of knowledge, and with Him actions are weighed.*”

That word “weighed” has the idea of being balanced. “His ways are equal and just.”^{vi}

This is another way of saying, “God knows what He’s doing.”

3. **Hannah’s third declaration of discernment is that life’s noblest surrender is to the sovereignty of God.**

Notice verses 7-8.

The Lord makes poor and rich; He brings low, He also exalts.

He raises the poor from the dust, He lifts the needy from the ash heap to make them sit with nobles, and inherit a seat of honor; for

the pillars of the earth are the Lord’s, and He set the world on them.

In other words, God does what God will do – and He may not provide an explanation.

This was the lesson through grief and loss that William Carey experienced as he heard the news that his warehouse had burned to the ground. He lost dozens of manuscripts; entire translations of several Bibles that were in production; the type setting characters used in the presses were melted together in large clumps of steel. It was the devastating loss of decades of his hard work.

What could the work of God possibly get out of this? Why would God so strengthen His servants and answer prayers for translators and give them money for paper, print, and ink and then allow it to go up in smoke?

It was a devastating loss. William Carey would preach the following Sunday from the text, “Be still and know that I am God,” and then proceed to preach that, first, God has the right to dispose as He pleases and secondly, our duty is to acquiesce to His will.^{vii}

This did not mean it was easy. Carey would write to a family member, “This is a heavy blow . . . the providence of God is dark.” But this was his text, “Be still and know that I am God.”^{viii}

What noble surrender to his sovereign Lord.

4. **Finally, life’s matchless prospect is the kingdom of God.**

Hannah ends her prayer by saying in verse 10,

“Those who contend with the Lord will be shattered; against them He will thunder in the heavens, the Lord will judge the ends of the earth; . . .”

Now notice that which amounts to nothing less than Hannah’s greatest desire, in the latter part of verse 10.

“... *and He will give strength to His king, and will exalt the horn [strength] of His anointed.*”

Many commentators deny that this was spoken by Hannah simply because there had not yet been a king in Israel.^{ix}

The implication of Hannah’s prayer for God’s anointed One is Messianic. “Anointed One” is the meaning of the name Christ.^x

Hannah obviously cannot really be talking about the coming Kingdom of Christ the King because that would be, well, prophetic.

I believe it was. There is no reason in the text not to believe she said it. The Spirit of God delivered through her just one more verification that even though Israel had never had a king, they would.

Hannah's son Samuel will anoint the king. But beyond this, the Messiah would come, who would be the final King – the King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

Hannah ultimately yearned, not for children and more children; not for a better or easier life, but for the coming reign of the sovereign King.

To this day, this should be our matchless prospect – not something we can get from God, but the coming of God through Christ. Our greatest desire should be to advance the gospel of Christ. And our passionate prayer should be, “Thy Kingdom come!”

Some of the wisest truths we can teach our children; the greatest influence we can have on others, whether we are single or married, have children or grandchildren, or none of the above, are found in the discerning prayer of a woman who suffered.

- Life's deepest joy is satisfaction with God;
- Life's greatest security is the wisdom of God;
- Life's noblest surrender is to the sovereignty of God;
- Life's matchless prospect is the coming kingdom of God.

ⁱ Dale Ralph Davis, Expositor's Guide to the Historical Books: Looking on the Heart, Expositions of 1 Samuel (Baker, 1994), p. 16.

ⁱⁱ C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, Commentary on the Old Testament: Volume 2 (Eerdmans, 1991 ed.), p. 24.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid., p. 25.

^{iv} William G. Bellshaw, First Samuel: Better than Sacrifice (Regular Baptist Press, 1976), p. 6.

^v <http://www.desiringgod.org>.

^{vi} Keil and Delitzsch, p. 31.

^{vii} S. Pearce Carey, William Carey (The Wakeman Trust, 1923), p. 291.

^{viii} Ibid., p. 288.

^{ix} Davis, p. 24.

^x Bellshaw, p. 10.