

1 Samuel 1:4-20
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South Plains

more to you than ten sons?" Fortunately, holy scripture does not record her answer.

How To Wait

Hannah's predicament, not being able to bear a child, is an old story. In biblical times, to be barren was a serious economic and social problem that was laid squarely at the feet of the wife. Today we know that's not always the case. Women and men will go to incredible lengths to have a child. The last time I checked the treatment for infertility could cost anywhere from \$50 a month just to buy the proper medication to \$70,000 to hire a surrogate mother. In addition to medical treatment, those who want to be parents will adopt, or take a foster child, or in extreme cases, kidnap a child in order to be a parent. Some developing countries have had to make out of country adoptions illegal because they have lost so many of their native children. The desire to rear a child can be overwhelming

Living some 3000 years ago, Hannah had no recourse for her barrenness except to pray for God's help. Her husband had another wife who bore him children, Peninnah; and Peninnah never lost an opportunity to show her disdain and scorn for Hannah. She was fortunate to have a husband who loved her even more than Peninnah, although a woman pointed out to me that his attempt to comfort his wife was a little self-centered. "Why is your heart sad?" he asks. "Am I not

Hannah retires to pray by herself outside the temple. It turns out that she is not completely alone. Sitting beside the door is the old priest Eli. He sees this woman lying on the ground, distressed and crying, moving her lips without a sound. He assumes that she has fallen into a drunken stupor. So with the awkward moral sensitivity that we pastors sometimes display, old Eli scolds Hannah. "How long will you make a drunken spectacle of yourself? Put away your wine."

Perhaps someone else would have taken that abuse and just slipped quietly away. Not Hannah. She corrects the priest and probably embarrasses him by describing the fervor of her prayer. She does not tell him what she is praying for. Shamefaced, he offers a standard blessing: "Go in peace; the God of Israel grant the petition you have made to him." This little exchange between an old priest and a desperate woman sets off a deep and lasting transformation in the history of the people of God. Because this transformation is both profound and personal, both historic and intimate, it can show us how God works in the life of this church and in the individual lives of believing people.

Let's step away for a moment from Hannah and Eli in order to look at the big picture for Israel at this time in her history. When the book of Samuel opens the nation is at the end of the period of the Judges. The people did

not know they were at the end of a period in history, but they must have felt like they were at the end of their rope. Under the leadership of Moses and later Joshua, a vast migration had taken place as Egyptian slaves had moved across the desert, escaping slavery and coalescing into the people of God. They successfully occupied the Promised Land, but they were no more secure in Palestine than the American army is secure in Afghanistan. Yes, some important battles had been won. Yes, some heroes such as Samson had risen to leadership. But, the people of Israel were not secure and their society was not stable.

The closing words at the end of the book of Judges pronounce an awful judgment on the country: "In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes (Judges 21:25)." When the people of God disregard the rule of law, they are in trouble, deep trouble. The people are waiting. For what? They don't know what they're waiting for, but they know they need help.

Hannah is also waiting. She knows what she wants, a son. One male child would shut up Peninnah for good. A son would prove her worth to the family and to the community. So Hannah makes a bargain with God. If God gives her a son, she will dedicate that son to the service of God. Well, be careful what you pray for. Hannah becomes pregnant. She gives birth to a son. And the boy is named Samuel. Hannah and her husband fulfill the promise she made in her prayer, and at a young

age, they give Samuel to the service of the Lord. This means that he lives in the temple with old Eli the priest.

It is Samuel who will become the last of Israel's judges, because Samuel will anoint the first of Israel's kings, King Saul. And, when Saul fails to do the job, Samuel is led by the Lord to anoint a second, greater king, the greatest king of Israel, King David. From the prayers of a despised, barren woman there comes the instrument of God's salvation for the nation of Israel.

Hannah teaches us how to wait. How to wait on the Lord. Notice several things about her waiting.

First, Hannah is waiting for the Lord. You might say she does not have any other choice. But, that's not entirely true. She could have pushed the blame off on circumstances. She could have given in to despair and depression. The inability to produce a child was widely regarded as a curse from God. She could have sought blind comfort in drinking too much wine. Maybe old Eli recognized Hannah as the woman who couldn't have a child. Maybe he expected that she would lose herself in drunkenness.

Hannah chose to avoid the unhealthy behaviors that so many of us resort to when we are frustrated by our role or our circumstances in the world. Instead she waits on the Lord. Or, more precisely, she lays her problem in God's lap. There are some things we can't change. But, God can. There's great wisdom in turning

some problems over to the Lord. It relieves us of the burden. And, I suspect it relieved Hannah of some of the bitterness she felt when old Eli added his blessing to her prayers.

Second, Hannah's method of turning her problem over to the Lord is to pray. She does not pretend to be stoic and unconcerned about her barrenness. Her husband knows how she feels. Her prayer honestly acknowledges her misery before God. And, it does more. She reminds God three times that she is God's servant. She begs God to "remember me, and not forget your servant."

Hannah is not just going through the motions of piety. Her words are intensely personal, so much so that she forgets herself. She is beside herself with distress and bitterness. That's why Eli thinks she is drunk. Many of the psalms describe various troubles that threaten both the life and the faith of God's people. The turning point in the psalm is when we cry to the Lord. Hannah's prayer is a cry to the Lord for help.

And, a good cry seems to help. The third thing to notice about Hannah's waiting is that the scripture says, "Her countenance was sad no longer." She and her husband ate and drank and worshiped before the Lord and went home. "And the Lord remembered her."

There is no magic formula for prayer. I do not believe God bargains with us. I am even hesitant to

repeat the cliché that "prayer works." God answers prayer according to God's inscrutable will. The way prayer works is to work on us. I do believe, however, that we can put ourselves in a posture to receive grace and mercy. That's what Hannah has done. She lays her difficulty squarely in God's lap. She comes before the Lord in the posture of humility and prayer, honestly presenting her helplessness and misery. Then, having cried to the Lord, she goes about the everyday business of living and being a wife. If we believe that we live by grace, this story, Hannah's posture is an affirmation of grace.

At the heart of this model is prayer. Hannah and her husband come to the temple to worship where she makes her request to God. Her words place her at God's mercy. Even her bargain places her at an incredible disadvantage. As soon as the child Samuel is weaned, she keeps her promise and turns the toddler over to the Lord's keeping. This is a genuinely pious woman. No wonder Hannah's song of exultation becomes the model for the Magnificat of the Virgin Mary. We can all learn from these women.

There's one thing more I would point out about this model for waiting. It's not so much about Hannah as about the way the Lord works when we wait on him. The reward for this waiting is open-ended. The sky's the limit. The ultimate answer to Hannah's prayer is not only that her barrenness is relieved by the birth of a son. Israel will have a new direction in Samuel's anointing of David

to become king. From the prayer of a distressed woman prostrate outside the temple will come the instrument of God's salvation, first for the nation and finally for all humankind.

Last week the world celebrated the fall of the Berlin Wall twenty years ago. Pressure on the wall had been building for years. The trigger, however, was not a war or an act of congress or the decision of a great leader. It was an East German bureaucrat who mumbled words so poorly at a press conference that reporters misunderstood him to say that the wall was opening. So many thousands of Germans began gathering at the wall that by the time the communists realized their mistake, it was too late. The tide of history had turned.

Hannah's mumbled prayer was not misunderstood by the Lord. That simple prayer triggered a chain of events in Israel that united the people under a great king. And, the line of David leads straight to Jesus of Nazareth. We can never impose a ceiling on our prayers.

When we pray for the life of a single soldier in Afghanistan, we are praying for world peace. When we pray for understanding between Arabs and Jews, we are praying for the kingdom of God. When we remember the hungry, the sick, and all who do not receive adequate healthcare, we are praying for the day when God will wipe away every tear and death and crying will be no more.

God will use us and our worship somewhere in God's plan for the salvation of humankind. Our part is to adopt the posture of Hannah in bringing our desires, our deepest before the Lord.