

Hannah and the Advent of Jesus

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[0 : 00] Almighty God and loving Father, may the words that I speak now be yours. May you graft them into our hearts and work in us so as to bring forth in us the fruit of good works.

And we pray this for the honour and praise of your name, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. Well, friends, I was born to medical missionary parents, and my earliest memories are those of an island in Papua New Guinea.

They are memories of skimming across turquoise seas with the family in an outrigger canoe, and visiting islands where there was white sand, coral, brilliantly coloured fish.

In my memory, Papua New Guinea was paradise, and I couldn't imagine a more idyllic place to grow up. Now, one of the main blessings of growing up in Papua New Guinea was one that I didn't realise until much, much later.

It was the total absence of television. You see, the absence of television meant that I was introduced to a world of reading. My mum loved, still loves books, and could never stay away from libraries.

[1 : 11] And so when we moved to Port Moresby, my childhood was spent going almost weekly to the Port Moresby Library, and weekly family expeditions were made, and the whole family would just plunder the shelves of the library for every new book that we could find.

Now, to tell the truth, I'm not sure where I came across my favourite novel. My suspicion is that it wasn't in Port Moresby. Perhaps it was one of those books that were required reading for secondary school.

However, one day I was introduced to a novel, and perhaps you were introduced to it as well, by Hemingway called *The Old Man and the Sea*. Now, when I read it, my childhood, my personality, my love of novels, all came together in this sort of wonderful synchronicity.

The storyline, if you've read it, is based on a reclusive old man who fishes alone in a small skiff. On this particular day, he catches a huge fish, the fish of his life.

And in a gruelling battle, he finally loses that magnificent fish to sharks as he tries to bring it home. Now, I need to tell you that this novel is wonderfully written and skillfully written.

[2 : 26] The skill of the author is so great that, to this day, all I have to do to renew the whole story is to pick up my battered copy from the shelf and read the very first sentence of the book.

And from there, flip to the last four or five pages of the book, and suddenly my memory is tapped into, and the story comes flooding back, and I'm drawn again into its pages.

And I do sort of tend to read it about once every 10 to 15 years or so. So, friends, the books of Samuel contain some of the most engaging of all stories in the Bible. But let me tell you, they're not just stories.

They are books of profound theological depth as well, and they contain an enormous wealth of reflection upon God, humanity, God's purposes amongst his people and in his world.

And I'm convinced that with the books of Samuel, you can do exactly the same as you do with the old man and the sea. What I mean is this. If you understand the first chapter or two of 1 and 2 Samuel, and if you understand the last four or so chapters, and if you have this sort of vague grasp of the story in between, you will have grasped the main point of these two books.

[3 : 37] What's more, you will have a great grasp of the theology of these books. However, even if you didn't have this, even if you just had the first chapter and a half of Samuel, then you would still have most of the fundamental books that undergird the whole book.

These ideas are so fundamental that they can be followed all the way through the Bible into the New Testament. They undergird much of Christian faith and practice, and they orient us toward Advent.

In other words, they so orient us to what God has done in and through the coming of his son into the world. They unlock some very deep secrets of the Christian life as well.

So, let me introduce you to our first woman in waiting for today. Last week, we looked at Sarah. This week, we look at Hannah. And I want you to open your Bibles with me and look at the chapters with me.

Now, the woman we're looking at today, her name is Hannah. Hannah is a married Jewish woman. Has someone got a page number for that? 1 Samuel? 268.

[4 : 40] Great. Hannah is a married Jewish woman. Her husband's name is Elkanah. And from what we can tell, Elkanah is a man with a very good Israelite pedigree.

He also seems to be a man of some financial substance. How do I know that? Well, he's able to afford two wives and a whole lot of children. That's probably one indication. We also know that Elkanah is a godly man and a devout worshipper.

You see, we know this because each year he fulfills the law of Moses. He makes a visit with his whole family to worship and sacrifice to the Lord Almighty at Shiloh. Shiloh is the place where at this point in Israelite history, the Ark of the Covenant is housed.

So, come with me as we travel one year with this family to Shiloh. And as we do, I want you to focus upon Hannah because that's where the story focuses. In verses 4 to 8, Hannah comes into sharp focus.

And as the focus comes in on her, we find a woman under very great distress. By the standards of Hebrew storytelling, the description of her emotional and mental state is very detailed.

[5 : 49] Look at it. Verse 8, we're told she's downhearted. Verse 10 tells us she's in deep anguish. Verse 11 says she's afflicted or in great misery. Verse 15 tells us that she is deeply troubled.

The Hebrew says that her spirit is hard or severe or fierce. Verse 16 describes her as one in great anxiety and grief and vexation.

Now, the picture is overwhelming. Here is a woman at the end of her tether. She's in desperate straits. So desperate is her situation that verse 10 says she's driven to uncontrollable and bitter weeping.

Friends, Hannah is a woman to feel for. She is psychologically at rock bottom. So, let's dig deeper and see if we can find out the source of her distress. First, we need to understand Hannah's social world.

You see, verse 2 has told us that she's barren. And in the society in which she lived, the role of a woman was to bear and raise children. It was a great shame, you see, if you couldn't do this for your husband.

[6 : 55] Something that probably was gossiped about in the village. You know, you can imagine Hannah walking down the road. And people would sort of say, oh, that's Hannah. She can't bear children for her husband.

And people would have looked down on her with pity. And that would have made her feel worthless and unfulfilled. But the pressure doesn't only come from the society in which she lives.

It comes also from her God. Look at the end of verse 5 and the beginning of verse 6. Twice, twice we're told that the Lord had closed Hannah's womb.

That's a very unusual statement in the Bible. Often we're told that people are simply barren or women are simply barren. But no. Here we're told the source of the barrenness is God himself. The Lord has closed her womb. But have another look at verses 6 and 7. You see, it's not just society and God that are the source of her grief. These verses tell us that there's another wife to Elkanah who used God's affliction of Hannah to persecute Hannah.

[7 : 59] The word provoke here has the sense of humiliation. Peninnah humiliates Hannah because of her barrenness. So here's Hannah, you see. She's under pressure to produce children.

She knows she's barren. She's surrounded by a woman who can produce children at the drop of a hat. And that woman is rubbing her nose in it. Mocking her, provoking her, humiliating her.

And then there's her husband. Now, let's have a look at how he reacts and how he adds to her stress. And I'm going to emphasize some words, some pronouns and so on as I do.

Let's read verse 8. We're told that Elkanah's response would be to say to her, Hannah, why are you weeping? Why don't you eat?

Why are you downtrodden? Don't I mean more to you than ten sons? Can you hear the slightly accusative tone to all of this? It's one of reproach and impatience.

[9 : 00] You see, the impression is that he has seen his wife's brooding and wants her to move on. We know that Elkanah loves his wife, Hannah. We're told that within the passage. But these words, I think, ring with frustration.

She seems to be fixated on the issue of her own problems. And he would be happy if he was a little more fixated on him, perhaps. So there we have it. There is a woman under enormous stress. The stress comes to a head every annual visit to the temple. Because, you see, in the ancient world, temple visits were normally times of great joy, of feasting, of partying, of rejoicing in God's forgiveness, that sacrifices were offered.

But not for Hannah. For Hannah, the temple serves to remind her of God. Perhaps she senses that he's part of the problem. The partying, the attempts by her husband to compensate, they only exacerbate things for her.

And they provide an opportunity for more bullying by Penanah. And so everything comes to a head. Verse 7 says, These occasions cause so much stress that she cannot even eat.

[10 : 08] And then something snaps. This year there's a breakthrough in Hannah's life. Look at verse 9. Up until this point, you see, Hannah has been the victim. She's been the object of the actions of everyone else.

But not now. For now she acts for herself. She rises. We're told she stands up. And what does she do? Does she sink into depression? Feel increasingly sorry for herself?

Cave in to Elkanah? Retaliate to Penanah? No. Does she come bitter with God? No. Rather, she makes a beeline to the source of her troubles. She rises.

And she goes to the one responsible for shutting her womb. And she lays it all out before him. And look at the prayer and the vow in verse 11. And she says to God, Lord Almighty, if only you will look on 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. Now, there's a number of things just to notice here. First, she asked God to remember. Now, in Hebrew, to remember doesn't mean sort of, oh, I left my keys behind and I remember them.

[11 : 19] I go back and get them. No, it means much more than that. When you remember something in the Old Testament, you do something. When God remembers, he does something. And what she's saying is, do what you did to Noah, because while the ark was floating above the surface of the water, you remembered and caused the water to go down.

And when your people Israel were in great grief in Egypt, you remembered and acted and delivered them. Now, there's another word that Hannah uses.

Did you notice it there? Our version has the word give twice in verse 11. Can you see it there? Then she asked God to give her a son. And in return, she says that she will set that son before the Lord. Literally, she says that she will give that son to the Lord for lifelong service. And that word sums up the whole of the rest of the story. From now on, we have to keep watch, you see, and ask ourselves, will God answer her prayer and give her a son?

And will Hannah keep her vow and give the son back to God? Two gives to look out for. Now, let's see how things go. Verses 11 to 19.

[12 : 28] Eli, the priest, he's been watching in the background somewhere. And at first he thinks she's drunk because she's probably mumbling, you know, and he sees her lips moving and he wonders, you know, this woman's been drinking too much.

But then she explains and he acknowledges it and pronounces a blessing. And look at verse 17. Our versions use the word grant, but the Hebrew uses the word give.

And this is what Hannah would have heard. Listen to it. Go in peace. And the God of Israel, give you the petition you made of him. Can you imagine how Hannah, having used the word give twice, would have heard the word give now?

She would have thought, on the lips of a priest, the priest of the temple, she would have heard. It's going to happen. I asked God to give.

He's going to give. I think that's probably how she would have read or heard. Eli. Look at verse 18. She returns to her family.

[13 : 31] Now, before going to God, she couldn't eat, but now she can. Now she can worship God with her family. Now her countenance is no longer sad. I think because she knows what's going to happen.

And in verse 19, heaps verb upon verb. There's action after action. The family arise. They worship. They go back to Ramah. Elkanah makes love to Hannah. God remembers her. She becomes pregnant.

She gives birth. They name the boy Samuel. These verbs piled upon each other tell us that God's done it really quickly. It has been done with speed. Now, God has given Hannah a child.

Now the initiative comes back with her. Will she give back to God? Will she keep her side? Will she give this long-for child back to God? And immediately we strike a problem.

Look at verse 21. Elkanah goes up to Shiloh. He goes with all his family. But then we find out actually not all his family because verse 22 tells us one's missing.

[14:33] Hannah has taken the initiative again. She's not gone up to Shiloh. Her promise to give seems to have a little shadow over it. And Elkanah appears to recognize this.

Look at verse 23. He tells Hannah to stay. And then he says, May the Lord make good his word. I think what he means is, don't stand in the way of God's word being fulfilled.

And your promise. Anyway, verse 23. Hannah is on her own. Now, just to give you some background. Weaning, we know from history, normally takes two to three years in the ancient world. And so it's entirely likely that Hannah, and the readers would have heard this, that Hannah did not go to Shiloh for two to three years. And so we begin to wonder, God's given, but is she really going to give?

But then all doubt's blown away. Look at verse 24. She acts, and she goes up to Shiloh, and she takes with her a substantial offering. The sacrifice is slaughtered.

[15:34] The boy's presented to Eli. And in verse 27, she uses the word give again. Now, our versions use the word grant, but in the original, the word's the same as the ones we've seen before.

It's the word forgive. She asked God, give me a son. She said, I'll give him back to him. And the Lord has now answered her prayer. She's fulfilled her promise. She has given. Out of her grief, you see, God has been at work.

Now, the whole chapter that we've read began in worship, and now it ends in worship. But the story's not quite finished. Look at chapter 2, verse 11. She and Elkanah go home to Ramah. She has her desire a son. But in his mercy, God has used her to fulfill his desire. Because you know what? This toddler will grow into being a prophet who will bring the word of God to all Israel. And not only that, he will oversee the introduction of kingship in Israel. He will anoint Saul first. He will anoint David, from whom the Lord Jesus will come.

[16:39] So, there's the story. Now, let's see if we can just stand back for a moment. And see what we can make of it. What do you think's going on here? What does God want us to learn from this story?

Well, the first thing to say is that Hannah herself tells us what we can learn. She says a prayer in chapter 2, verse 1, which we read in our Bible reading. In it, she does some extended theological reflection on these events.

I don't want to focus on those today. That's for another time. But I want to focus on something else. I want to focus on the fact that God has acted sovereignly to use this woman's distress to put Samuel in place as a solution for problems that Israel doesn't even realise they have.

That God's been at work. Today, I want to focus even more on what we learn about God from Hannah and her situation.

Friends, as we face this Christmas, we look on a world, and these last weeks have shown us a world that loves power and looks to the powerful.

[17:52] And Hannah is not among such people, is she? No, she's not among the powerful. Her situation here looks desperate. It is helpless.

But Hannah's story tells us that these sorts of situations bring delight to God. You see, the very nature of helplessness is this, that you cannot rely on human resourcefulness, isn't it?

You can't rely on your own resourcefulness. You can't manipulate events or people. Friends, any of you who have felt helpless like this know this to be true. You're exactly that, aren't you?

Helpless. And let me tell you, God thrives on helplessness. For when people are without resources, they can do what God designed them to do, to turn to Him and to depend upon Him.

That's why it is the poor who are often so rich in faith, as James says. You see, in weakness, what can you do? You can throw yourself upon God and depend upon Him and time and time again, we see people doing this in the Bible.

[18:57] Israel and Egypt, they groan. Period of the judges, when people call out to God because of the oppression they're suffering. We see it when Israel's in exile, suffering as a result of their own sinfulness.

We see it when persecution reaches a pinnacle in the chapters of Daniel. We see it in the world of the New Testament. You see, Israelites are overwhelmed by the power of the Romans. They're looking for a powerful Messiah who will come and rescue them and overthrow the Romans. But what does God do? He sends not a powerful Messiah, but a baby. I mean, who would do, who would think of answering the distress of Israel in this way?

A child who will grow and defeat more powerful enemies than the Romans and do it not with a sword, but with his own life, with a cross.

Friends, if we are Christians, we've seen this God at work even in our own personal lives, haven't we? For those of us here who have become Christians have at some time in our existence been aware of the distance that sin forges between us and God.

[20:10] At some time, we've become aware that we're sinners and that God is justly angry with our sin. We've realised there's no way we can bring ourselves to God.

We're helpless before him. And into that situation comes the good news of Jesus. In Romans 5, Paul tells us that while we were still powerless and helpless, Christ died for us and reconciled us to God.

You see, we Christians know the God of the powerless. We know the helper of the helpless. We've been where Hannah has been. We've experienced his mercy and because of Jesus, we know we can confidently approach his throne of grace.

And we know that when we do, what will we receive? We'll receive grace to help in time of need.

Friends, that's the truth I want us to take home today as we remember Christmas.

The God we celebrate at Christmas is this God. He's the God of the helpless. The God who comes in the form of an infant suckling at his mother's breast.

[21:20] The God who comes to be crucified in order to save us. The God who exalts in weakness because then his strength can be magnified.

With that in mind, I wanted us to do some self-reflection. I want to ask us all today why it is that though we know these things to be true, that we often don't go to God as Hannah does.

Friends, I know many of us here today for one reason or another have at times or even today feel out of control. Many of us feel overwhelmed by life and circumstances, don't we?

Many of us are embittered by what life has brought us. Well, if that's you, then I want to urge you not to refuse to sit in bitterness and anguish.

It's time to choose to do as Hannah did. That is, it's time to refuse to be a victim and to make a beeline for the one who oversees our lives. And let's call upon God to remember to do what he did with Noah, with Israel, with Hannah.

[22:23] Let's plead with him to listen and to act. Now, please hear me correctly. I'm not promising God will do what he did with Hannah, but I am promising that he will listen and I am promising that it is in his nature to remember the trouble of his people.

It is in his nature to meet helplessness with help and powerlessness with rescue. Now, in four days' time, we're going to celebrate together at Christmas. We're going to celebrate God's nature to help the helpless.

And the books of Samuel will tell us this story time and time again. You see, the high moments in Samuel are characterized by people relying simply and plainly on God who is sovereign. There are times when people do exactly what Hannah does here.

There are times when God does exactly what he does with Hannah here. Can you see why Samuel begins with this story? It begins with this story because that's what God wants us to know about him.

He is the hope of the hopeless. He is the helper of the helpless. And it begins with this story because it demonstrates what God wants his people to be like.

[23:33] He wants us to be like Hannah, to run to him because we know that's who he is. He wants us to be dependent like Hannah, like Mary, like Jesus. And with that in mind, I want to close today's Bible talk by reading a hymn to you.

Now, it's a hymn that is often sung at funerals. It's a hymn that can be sung in the midst, though, of life's great hurdles as well. It's written in the 19th century by Henry Francis Light and many of you

will know it as you go increasingly to funerals, probably, and unfortunately.

But it goes like this. Abide with me. Fast falls the even tide. 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.

[24 : 44] 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.

Let's pray. O Father, we thank you that in the Lord Jesus Christ you do abide with us.

Father, we pray for those among us this Christmas for whom darkness deepens, for whom helpers fall, for whom comforts have fled, and who feel helpless.

Father, we pray for those of us here who feel this way. And we thank you for the glory that we remember in Christmas of Emmanuel, God, with us. So, Father, we pray that you will abide with us.

[26 : 04] That you would hold forward your cross before our eyes. That you'd shine through the gloom and point us to the skies. Father, we pray that in life, in death, in whatever life, whatever situation we are in, we'll be comforted by Emmanuel, God, with us.

please abide with us, we pray, in Jesus' name. Amen.