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A childless woman

Please read 1 Samuel 1:1–20

‘He settles the barren woman in her home as a happy mother of children’ (Psalm 113:9).

Everyone’s story begins with a mother. And the stories of remarkable children frequently have their genesis in extraordinary mothers. There are surely few more remarkable children in the annals of world history than the prophet Samuel. Indeed, so notable was his childhood, and especially his encounter with God in the tabernacle (3:4–14), that our first remembrance of him is not as the elder statesman of Israel, but as the child prophet of Shiloh. It is altogether appropriate and not at all surprising, therefore, that our first glimpse of this great servant of Yahweh and maker of kings should be through the window of his mother, Hannah, the wife of Elkanah.

They did not know it at the time, but the period when Israel was ruled by the ‘judges’ had begun to draw to a close. About the year 1100 BC, the hill country of Ephraim enjoyed a time of relative peace under the judgeship of Tola of Issachar (Judges 10:1). Not far to the south of Tola’s home in Shamir lay the town of Ramathaim Zuphim—better known to us, perhaps, as the Arimathea of the New Testament (Matthew 27:57).¹ A Levite named Elkanah lived there with his two wives: Hannah, who was childless, and Peninnah, who had many children. Elkanah was a good man who loved God and was a dutiful husband and father. He was a polygamist, of course, and that was something which, while an everyday fact in Israelite society in those days (Deuteronomy 21:15–17), was out of line with God’s revealed will (Genesis 2:24). This was a source of problems in Elkanah’s family. But it was also an indicator of the generally low spiritual condition of God’s covenant people as a whole. Compared with some of the priests, whose immorality was legendary (2:22), Elkanah was a man of practical godliness. He was, as each of us is more than we know, a child of his time. But in the context of that era, he exemplified what was best among God’s people. This should remind us just how easy it is for us to make concessions to the customs of our culture at the expense of the principles of God’s Word. We have a lot less excuse than Elkanah for doing so, because whereas he lived under the shadows of the law of Moses, we live in the noonday sun of the full revelation of a completed Scripture and a risen Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Clearly, the Lord had brought Elkanah to his situation ‘for such a time as this’ (compare Esther 4:12–14). The internal problems of his family, so closely related to the spiritual condition of the nation, had brought him and his wives, as we shall see, to the crossroads of history. The result was to be a decisive development in God’s plan of redemption for the

human race—the advent of the Davidic monarchy, with its intimations of the coming of the messianic King, the Lord Jesus Christ.

This glorious prospect was, however, very far from Hannah’s mind at the beginning of our story. Her circumstances were much more prosaic, and they were very painful, for every day in life she was reminded, if only by the patter of tiny feet, that she was childless, whereas Peninnah was not. It is with this problem and her prayer that God would give her a son that the account of a whole era in Israel’s history begins. And so, although the people involved were quite unaware of it at the time, the initial step towards the establishment of David’s royal throne was the childlessness of a Levite’s wife!

Hannah’s problem [1:1–8]

Childlessness and a jealous ‘sister-wife’² conspired to make Hannah’s life a misery. And never was that misery greater than at the time of the family’s annual visit to the tabernacle at Shiloh, when they went ‘*to worship and sacrifice to the Lord Almighty*’ (1:3). How sad that Hannah’s pain should be intensified, rather than alleviated, on the one occasion in the year when they worshipped in God’s house! But such was the perversity of Peninnah that she chose that moment to vent her spleen on Hannah. Peninnah saw herself as in competition with Hannah for the affections of Elkanah. Jealous because Elkanah attempted to compensate for Hannah’s childlessness with tokens of his love for her, Peninnah ‘*kept provoking her in order to irritate her*’ (1:6). The NIV translation of verse 5 suggests that Elkanah gave a ‘*double portion*’ of the meat of the sacrifice to Hannah and that this was the cause of Peninnah’s wrath. This is probably misleading. A better rendering may be that of the RSV: ‘*He would give Hannah only one portion, because the Lord*

had closed her womb. The contrast, then, would be between the many portions—one per person—given to Peninnah and her children, and the single portion given to the childless Hannah. But, for all that her single portion only served to underscore her childlessness, Elkanah made sure that Hannah knew that he loved her very much. It was this that irked Peninnah no end. In consequence, she was exceedingly spiteful towards Hannah year after year: *‘Whenever Hannah went up to the house of the Lord, her rival provoked her till she wept and would not eat’* (1:7).

Elkanah just could not cope with this situation, beyond attempting to comfort his grieving wife (1:8). It remained for Hannah herself to seek the Lord’s help to bring to her the oil of joy for mourning and a garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness.

Hannah’s prayer [1:9–16]

Hannah accepted that her childlessness was bound up with the Lord’s providential ordering of her personal life (1:6). But she did not see that as a reason for any gratitude for her condition. It was, and remains, an affliction to be childless and it was her heart’s desire to have a family of her own. Some Christians today will tell us that our response to such a disability should be to ‘praise the Lord anyway’. They seem to think that a simple and final act of acceptance of the trouble as God’s will enables us to put it behind us and get on with serving the Lord in other ways. It is as if such acceptance exhausts the meaning and application of the affliction for our lives. It is doubtful if Hannah’s agony of soul could have been assuaged by such a deceptively attractive solution. That the Lord had, in his providence, closed her womb was something she accepted—and without reproaching him. But that fact did not suggest to her mere resignation to her fate. On the contrary, it cast her on the Lord as the only one who had

the power to open her womb and give her a child! It suggested that here was an opportunity for the Lord to be gracious and to demonstrate his love and power towards one of his suffering children. There is a fragrant normality about Hannah's turning to the Lord for his help to overcome her problems. These are to be regarded, quite properly, as the tests of life in the midst of a fallen world. They call forth from us a prayerful dependence upon the Lord and even the most importunate prayer for the deepest desire of our heart. 'Is any one of you in trouble?' asked James, 'He should pray' (James 5:13). Hannah did not glibly 'praise the Lord anyway'. She knew whom she believed. She therefore prayed her heart out, knowing that the Lord could give her deliverance from her troubles. She prayed for a son.

In the very brief account of her prayer, two features command our attention and, indeed, can only encourage us in our own personal devotion to the Lord.

1. Hannah's exemplary godliness

This was already evident in the way in which she had borne the taunts of Peninnah. She was crushed by the unjust treatment she received, but nowhere is there evidence of a vengeful spirit. She took it patiently. And when she sought the Lord, it was not for justice or the punishment of her tormentor that she called, but simply for the healing of her infertility (cf. 1:6–7). She had a very humble spirit in the face of provocation.

When she turned to prayer, that quiet confiding spirit was again to the fore: she poured out her soul to the Lord. Although she was '*deeply troubled*' and '*in bitterness of soul*' (1:10, 15), there was no bitterness against God. She felt the deepest grief but she did not blame anyone for it, least of all the Lord. This is ever one of the great tests of a believing attitude to the Lord. How often our prayers can be mere vents for recrimination: 'Lord,

why did you let this happen to me?’ We so easily protest against the Lord’s providence. It is as if we were sure we deserved better treatment and the Lord should have known better than to let bad things come into our lives! But Hannah, like all who truly love the Lord, knew her God and knew her own heart. She knew that this world is not heaven, but a fallen sin-sick place in which all of its inhabitants have a personal share in its imperfections and afflictions. As a believer, she knew that the Lord’s purpose for her was one of blessing—even in and through her woes. She therefore waited upon the Lord with the sure conviction that her sorrows could not be charged to him, but that they could be brought to his throne of grace for help and healing. ‘Personal suffering,’ says John White, ‘is never meaningless for the child of God. You may not know why you suffer, and your suffering may seem to you too painful to bear. Under such circumstances you must always bring your suffering to him and ask him to take it away.’³ Hannah cried to the Lord in her trouble and, as we shall see, he delivered her from her distress (Psalm 107:6).

An interesting sidelight on Hannah’s humility of mind is afforded by her exchange with Eli, the priest at Shiloh. Eli had very poor sight (4:15). As he observed Hannah praying, he saw her lips moving but heard no words: ‘*Hannah was praying in her heart ...*’ (1:13). He then jumped to the conclusion that she was drunk and rebuked her in no uncertain terms: ‘*How long will you keep on getting drunk? Get rid of your wine*’ (1:14). Her gentle reply disabuses Eli of his uncharitable judgement and calls forth from him a formal priestly blessing—the only instance in Scripture of a priest blessing an individual (1:15–17).⁴

2. Hannah’s whole-hearted commitment

We see this in her promise to dedicate her son to the service of God’s house: ‘*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^m (1:11–12).

John Calvin calls this vow a 'vow of thanksgiving' and likens it to Jacob's vow recorded in Genesis 28:18–22. In that case, Jacob promises God a house and a tithe; here Hannah promises the son that God would give. The question that imposes itself on our assessment of the vow is, of course, 'Is this a model for us to imitate and if we do this, how do we avoid the charge that we are bribing God?'

The taint of bribery must, of course, be rejected at the outset. When Jesus was tempted (i.e., bribed) by Satan in the desert, he was promised all sorts of things which Satan had no right to offer and no power to deliver. Quoting Deuteronomy 6:16—'Do not test the Lord your God'—Jesus roundly rebuked the devil. The bribery was so obvious. In Hannah's vow, however, there is no such chicanery—she only promises to give to the Lord what he will give to her, should he choose to answer her prayer with a 'Yes'. At every point she had proved herself submissive to his will, whether in years of childlessness or, as now, in asking for a son. The whole climate is one of holy motives, hallowed desires and humble submission. The notion that a vow such as Hannah's is by its very nature bargaining with God is simply unfounded.

It must be admitted, however, that there are dangers in making vows rashly—an example not to follow would be that of Jephthah (Judges 11:30–40)⁵—and it will repay us to look a little more closely at Hannah's vow before we set ourselves to follow her example.

There is, for instance, a unique significance in Scripture history to Hannah's vow, a fact which implies great care in applying its lessons to our own practice. Here was a point in redemptive history, no less, in which God was doing something vital to the next phase of his unfolding plan of redemption for his people. Samuel would be a link in the chain of salvation. Perhaps, too, his birth to the hitherto childless Hannah would recall Sarah and Isaac (Genesis 17:15-19; 21:1-7) and remind them of the covenant promises of God. Here, then, was a special manifestation of the power of God directed to the redemption of his people as a whole.

We might also notice that, as a son of a Levite, any child of Elkanah and Hannah was already devoted to the service of the tabernacle in the terms of the law of Moses. Hannah's vow was not remarkable for that particular point. Her son would inevitably serve as a Levite in God's house. What was distinctive about the vow was the promise that her son would serve in the tabernacle *from the earliest years* and that he would be a Nazirite *from the beginning*, even as a child. The Nazirite vow was an act of piety, normally for a set time of limited duration, for the purpose of deepened commitment and piety (Numbers 6:1-21; Acts 21:23-26). A life-long Nazirite vow was the mark of an extraordinary servant of the Lord. Samuel, like Samson before him, was to be committed to 'no razor ever be[ing] used on his head' (1:11).

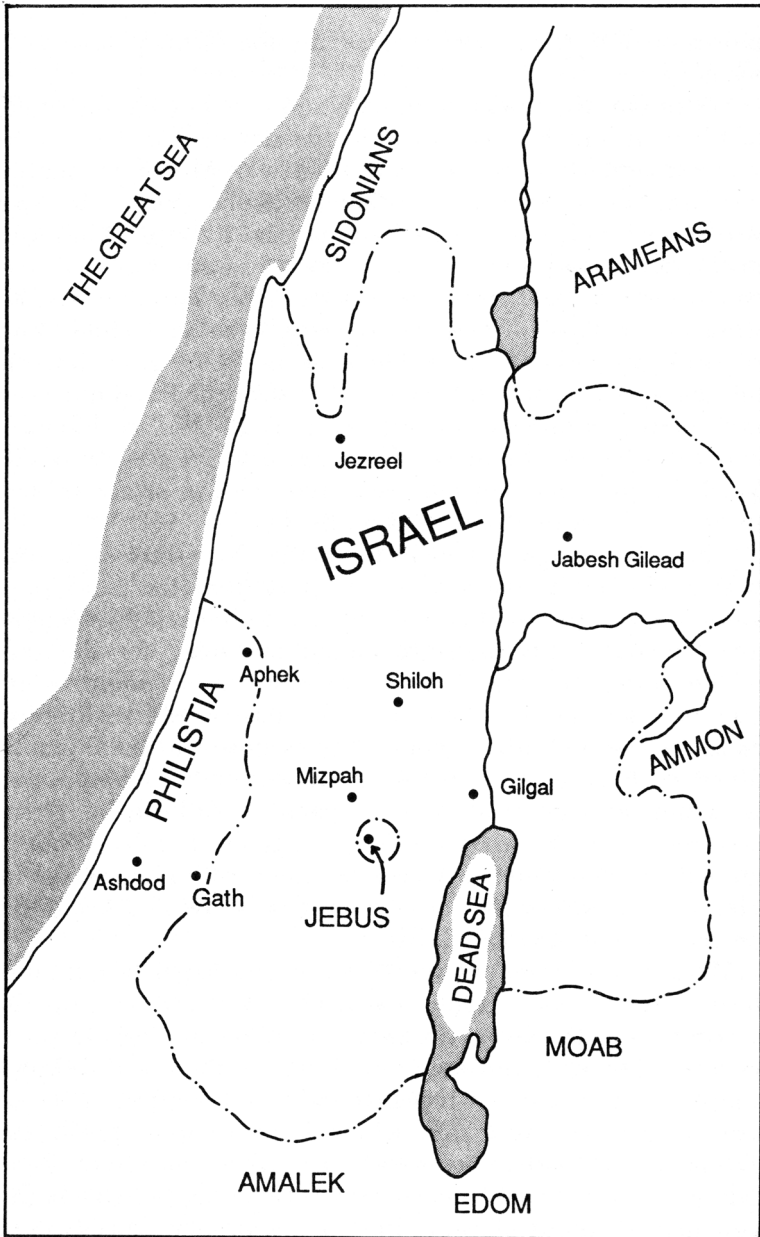
This was a singular vow to be taking. Nevertheless, it was within Hannah's power to keep, given that the Lord provided a son. She could deliver her son to the priest at Shiloh and she could let his hair grow uncut and deny him the fruit of the grape. Of course, her son would have a mind of his own one day, but by then Hannah's part would be fulfilled as far as she

had any responsibility or power to do anything about it. This reminds us that promises made to God are to be within realistic reach of our capacity to fulfil them. There is a realism to the strongest faith—a biblical realism that is guided by the canons of God’s revealed will. This we see in Hannah’s vow: she had her eye on God’s law and her mind on the leading of God’s Spirit.

We are encouraged by the Word of God to ask him for our heart’s desire (e.g., Philippians 4:6). We are to pray in accordance with the Lord’s known will. We are, on our part, never required to promise anything to the Lord beyond simple obedience to his revealed will in the Scriptures. If we are inclined to take a vow with respect to some particular action in the future, we should be asking ourselves some questions to be certain that what we are doing is right. Is the vow helpful to our spiritual life? Is it a proper expression of true godliness? Is it agreeable to the principles of the Scriptures? Is it an expression of gratitude to the Lord, or is it an attempt to bargain with him, as if he can be bribed into blessing us? Can I reasonably expect, with the Lord’s help, to fulfil the vow? Can I expect God’s help to do so? When we pray, we stand on holy ground. Our prayer requests must be for what is pleasing to God. And our commitments likewise must breathe the righteousness of God. Hannah was full of grace when she prayed and promised. So must we be, when we come to God’s throne of grace.

Hannah’s peace and joy [1:17–20]

‘Prayer is heart’s-ease to a gracious soul,’ said Matthew Henry three centuries ago. The blessing from Eli (1:17) signalled the coming of the peace of God into Hannah’s soul. Peace always attends God’s answers to prayer, because when God answers—whether ‘yes’ or ‘no’—he speaks peace to us. He solves the problem and blesses us with the certainty of his good purpose



Map 1—Israel at the birth of Samuel, c. 1100 BC

for our lives. It is significant that it is in stillness that we can truly enjoy the knowledge of God (Psalm 46:10). Restlessness is an effect of sin (Isaiah 57:20). Hannah's response shows that her burden had been lifted. '*May your servant find favour in your eyes*' is a formal expression which, however, has a play on Hannah's name in it—the word 'favour' is the Hebrew *chen*—which highlights the role of the grace of God in her life. The proof of her restored spirits was that she '*ate something and her face was no longer downcast*' (1:18). Her son had not yet been conceived, far less born! But God had answered her prayer with an assurance of his love towards her. That is the fruit of all believing prayer. And because of this, God's people ought to be the most visibly joyous people in the world.

Hannah's life was changed for ever. The family returned home and in due course Hannah gave birth to her son, naming him '*Samuel, saying, "Because I asked the Lord for him"*' (1:19–20). Whatever the meaning of Samuel's name—and scholars have wrangled over this for years—the focus of it is the Lord himself. 'Samuel' most likely means 'heard of God' or 'name of God'. In any event, it is the Lord who is honoured as the giver of new life. God had taken a childless woman and made her a happy mother! (Psalm 113:9). In our day, children are too often seen as a burden rather than a joy, as a financial drain rather than a family's and a nation's true wealth. Hannah challenges the callous self-centredness that aborts millions of unborn babies every year. Hannah points us to the truth that children are God's heritage and a reward from the Lord (Psalm 127:3).

The Lord '*remembered*' Hannah and Hannah forgot the sorrow that had blighted her earlier life. At the personal level, this enshrines the liberating truth that the Lord never forgets his believing people. Do you feel bereft of the nearness of the Lord?

Is there a burden or disability—perhaps childlessness, perhaps something else—that casts such a shadow across your life that the light of Christ seems remote and his blessing but a dream? Then, with Hannah, ‘Cast your cares on the Lord and he will sustain you; he will never let the righteous fall’ (Psalm 55:22).

Remember, also, that the appearance of Samuel brought the advent of the Lord Jesus Christ a step nearer. All the cares of all God’s people were cast on him. He bore them in his own body. He suffered and died in the place of sinners so that healing and salvation might come to them. He still calls us to come to him that we might have rest, to believe on his name that we might have eternal life.