

Giving Thanks – 6 Hannah: He hears

The original reading set for today started from verse 9 of chapter one but I asked have the first eight verses also included, not because I have a particular vindictive streak and request that [our reader] have to tackle all those names, but because I wanted to give some important context to the story (of Hannah).

This is the last of a series on Giving Thanks as exemplified by character such as Miriam, David, Simeon ... and we return to the Old Testament for a story of suffering and anguish, of misunderstandings, of surrender and sacrifice, and, ultimately, of blessing and fulfilment.

We find a tale rooted in the culture and practices of the day, but one which I believe has just as many lessons for us today. For surely we see the Gospel in everything, just as we should try to tell it through everything.

An unpromising start

¹ There was a certain man from Ramathaim, a Zuphite from the hill country of Ephraim, whose name was Elkanah son of Jeroham, the son of Elihu, the son of Tohu, the son of Zuph, an Ephraimite. ² He had two wives; one was called Hannah and the other Peninnah. Peninnah had children, but Hannah had none. [NIV © 1978 New York International Bible Society]

So our story is a rather unpromising start to the great books of 1 and 2 Samuel (originally one book) which focus on the reigns of Saul and David. We find ourselves transported back to the time of the Judges. The twelve tribes are established in the Promised Land and in the land of Ephraim we hear of a family with problems. Elkanah is a bigamist, but with the acceptance of society. For at that time polygamy seemed common, think of Jacob and David and Solomon, perhaps it was a sign of wealth and prosperity. In this little *ménage-a-trois*, Elkanah has two wives: Hannah, who is clearly his favourite, and Peninnah. One is childless while the other has children. Perhaps Elkanah had taken a second wife when he realised that Hannah was not producing children.

Experiencing difficulty in conceiving children can be really hard for many couples today, but this was a time when not having children was regarded as a disgrace for a woman, pointing to failure and shame, and a source of embarrassment for her husband, who could, by rights, divorce her. Notice that how the author (writing sometime after Solomon's death) has gone out of his way to emphasise the lineage of Elkanah, tracing back his ancestry to his great-great grandfather. A line not to be continued through Hannah.

Let us continue with our story:

An annual pilgrimage

³ 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. ⁴ 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. ⁵ But to Hannah he gave a double portion because he loved her, and the Lord had closed her womb.

The Mosaic law required that men should go to the Tabernacle three times a year. And it seems that at least once a year Elkanah would take his family with him. Now they did not go to Jerusalem, because this is before David moved the Ark to his capital. In Joshua's time Shiloh was where the Tent of the Presence/Tent of Meeting/The Tabernacle was established, and which was the main site of Israelite worship. This was about 20 miles north of Jerusalem and right in the land occupied by the tribe of Ephraim.

I admit that I had always thought it was THE Temple where Samuel, as told in a later chapter, hears God calling to him. And although the NIV does use the word *temple* in our reading and elsewhere, the sanctuary was a more temporary affair.

Anyway back to our story – and we hear for the first time what was the reason for Hannah's childlessness –it was because "the Lord had closed her womb". This is the Lord's doing.

Hannah goaded

⁶ And because the Lord had closed her womb, her rival kept provoking her in order to irritate her. ⁷ This went on year after year. Whenever Hannah went up to the house of the Lord, her rival provoked her till she wept and would not eat. ⁸ Elkanah her husband 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?"

And to add to the public disgrace, Peninnah (I couldn't think what term you would use to describe your relationship to your husband's wife, possibly sister-wife?) behaves quite appallingly, upsetting her so much with snide remarks and so forth.

Elkanah is not much help. He tries to compensate by offering Hannah extra meat from the sacrifice, because she is clearly his favourite, which probably aggravates Peninnah. But he still doesn't quite understand when he says, why are you so upset, don't I mean more to you than having your own kids? I'm not the known for my emotional intelligence, but even I think that is not the most tactful thing to say! Worse still, he would say it each year!

Why has God put Hannah in this intolerable situation? As she despairs, alone in her grief, we ask ourselves, quite naturally, why does bad stuff happen to ordinary people, let alone to "good" people? But we can learn more of God's infinite wisdom and purpose as this story unfolds.

This tension at Shiloh is not new, it has been happening year in, year out. The same routine, and no doubt with each passing year Peninnah has a new nursing infant to gloat over. Then at last, on this particular occasion, Hannah is so filled with anguish that she disregards all around her, and bares her soul, praying from the very bottom of heart. She doesn't retaliate or ask for judgement on others, she simply recognises her helplessness. But she also recognises who could rescue her from it.

The promise made

⁹ 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 temple. ¹⁰ In bitterness of soul Hannah wept much and prayed to the Lord. ¹¹ 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

Hannah stands up – the normal posture for prayer – but no words come out as she voices her plight from within, tears pouring from her eyes, voiceless words pouring out from her heart, grief pouring out to Heaven. Like Job and like the Psalmist, she turns to the God who is ultimately behind her situation, knowing that He understands the depth of her distress and can bring the solution. As the writer of Psalm 102 puts it "He will respond to the prayer of the destitute; he will not despise their plea (Ps 102:17)

And yet, note how she prays "if you will only look upon your servant's misery and remember me" and "give [me] a son". A very humble attitude, as though she considers that God in his busy-ness has overlooked her.

And then she drops the bombshell - she adds a promise that if she brings forth a son then she will give him back to God, dedicate him to life-long service. Not when he's grown up, and goes off to study theology. No, as the story later unfolds, she lets go of him when he is a young child. Hannah wants to have a child for the glory of God. Now that's gratitude, and generosity, no I think we need to call it sacrifice. And he will be a Nazirite, that is, unshaven as a sign of consecration to the Lord's service. Like Samson before him and probably also in years to come, John the Baptist, both of whose mothers, interestingly, were also childless until God stepped in.

Now, you may think this is bargaining with God, but it is actually a vow which we see often in the Old Testament. Even Paul is reported to make and exercise one regarding his hair. It reminds me of a line in computer code, **IF** such and such a condition is met as the computer program runs, **THEN DO** something else. A conditional statement.

But I wonder, if we ever bargain with God for something we want – promising him something in return? Shouldn't we rather be asking God that we may want only what he wants, which is of course his best for us? It's not easy.

The deal that Hannah seems to be talking about is a poor deal for her, if it comes to fulfilment then she will have just a fleeting moment as a mother before handing her son away.

A false accusation

¹² As she kept on praying to the Lord, Eli observed her mouth. ¹³ Hannah was praying in her heart, and her lips were moving but her voice was not heard. Eli thought she

was drunk¹⁴ and said to her, "How long will you keep on getting drunk? Get rid of your wine."

So cue Eli the priest, who may have been essentially the Judge of Israel at this time, certainly an important leader serving at the sanctuary at Shiloh. He comes in (well, he sits there) and puts his foot in it. He accuses Hannah of insobriety. Now, granted Jewish prayer would normally be spoken out loud, and here Hannah was animated but inaudible. But he certainly seems to pass judgment without knowing all the facts. And of course we can never be accused of that can we? [Yes, we can!] So let's not cast stones at poor Eli, so to speak. He's got enough trouble with those two sons of his!

Hannah's defence

¹⁵ "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. ¹⁶ Do not take your servant for a wicked woman; I have been praying here out of my great anguish and grief."

But whatever his initial shortcomings of understanding the situation, Eli, after he has listened to her, gives Hannah these comforting – perhaps prophetic – words:

Assurance

¹⁷ Eli answered, "Go in peace, and may the God of Israel grant you what you have asked of him."

¹⁸ 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.

And Hannah is so polite back! You now there is something about Hannah which is so endearing. She is polite and humble.

Anyway, we have a turning point in these words of Eli: they helped to transform Hannah - her appetite was back and "her face was no longer downcast" NLT = she was no longer sad. Contemporary English version = she felt much better. I can't help thinking these are understatements.

Now hope is in her heart. She has unburdened her soul and now heard the good news, and is transformed. Just as the Good News of the Gospel transforms. It gives us hope in our hearts!

God fulfils His part

¹⁹ Early the next morning they arose and worshipped before the Lord and then went back to their home at Ramah. Elkanah lay with Hannah his wife, and the Lord remembered her. ²⁰ So in the course of time Hannah conceived and gave birth to a son. She named him Samuel, saying, "Because I asked the Lord for him."

They complete their pilgrimage, fittingly, with an act of worship(ping) and then set off for home. Before long Hannah becomes pregnant and gives birth to Samuel and the meaning of his name is "heard of God". Thus we return to our title: "He Hears".

Now that is as far as we read earlier, and I would like you to please allow me to go on a little further into the story, when Samuel is handed over to be trained by Eli to serve the Lord.

The handover

²⁴ After he was weaned, she took the boy with her, young as he was, along with a three-year-old bull, an ephah of flour [that's a lot of flour!] and a skin of wine, and brought him to the house of the Lord at Shiloh. ²⁵ When they had slaughtered the bull, they brought the boy to Eli,

²⁶ and she said to him, "As surely as you live, my lord, I am the woman who stood here beside you praying to the Lord. [So polite of her again, in case he's too old to remember] ²⁷ I prayed for this child, and the Lord has granted me what I asked of him. ²⁸ So now I give him to the Lord. For his whole life he shall be given over to the Lord."

I would just like to mention that this leads straight into chapter 2 and "Hannah's Prayer". Or really it should be her second prayer! It is one of the famous longer prayers of the Bible, and Hannah portrays a God of action: who reverses fortunes, who lifts up the poor and who restores to life what is dead. It is often still taken as a model for Hebrew Prayer. It also has parallels with Mary's song recorded in Luke's gospel, the Magnificat. As part of your optional homework, take a look at Hannah's second prayer later, maybe both of them. You won't be assessed, well not by me.

So what does Hannah teach us from her life story nestled between those of Ruth and of Saul? I've already mentioned some points, but here are some more to challenge us...

What can we learn from Hannah?

- *be honest to God*

She challenges us to tell God how we really feel and to leave our problems with him. She prayed fervently - I am reminded of Jesus in Gethsemane who "being in anguish, he prayed more earnestly" (Luke 22:44).

And then - she let go and let God – she found that prayer opens the way for God to work, and she left her burden with him.

Maybe there is a situation you are dealing with right now, whatever it is, don't be afraid to bring it to the Lord. Pray earnestly and with persistence, and trust him with the outcome. Jesus said "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you." (Matt. 7:8) "You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it (John 14:14).

[There will be a prayer team waiting here after the service to pray with you in total confidence.]

Perhaps we should remember those words we often sing:

O what peace we often forfeit!

O what needless pain we bear!

All because we do not carry

Everything to God in prayer.

- *keep your promises*

Hannah ultimately does not have regrets or attempts to renege on her promise. We have much to learn – our own good intentions too often fail. Recall Simon-Peter saying rashly "Even if all fall away, I will not" and you know what happens next.

Hanna challenges us that if we make promises to God then we will follow them through. God is faithful and keeps his promises, and expects us to keep ours!

- *God's timing is perfect*

God knew all about Hannah, but what would have been natural for her – becoming pregnant – was put on hold, until the right time. We can conjecture if she had had a child earlier, then she would not have offered him for service at the tabernacle at Shiloh and he would never have grown up to be a man of God and one of Israel's greatest figures – priest, prophet and leader.

As one commentator puts it "God harnessed Hannah's maternal instincts to bring about his will and change the course of the nation of Israel"

And in due course Hannah had many other children.

We have a lot to understand about God's perfect timing. Jane and I have learned a lot about that over the past couple years. The fellowship at here and at Sandwich have too.

- *give back to God*

Finally, giving thanks... Not only did Hannah release her will to God, but she ultimately released her son to Him too. We should think hard about what and how we give to God – is it an offering of sacrifice or is it just a "comfortable tithe"?

Whether it is time or money or talent, do we give only a token or do we give wholeheartedly?

You can see the headlines in the press of the day:

"Mum gives up miracle baby to the temple!"

"Gift from God returned to sender."

"Sam has Hannah-mazing mother! "

Remember that greatest gift of all - "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.(NIV)

And finally:

Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. (Philippians 4:6)

6 May 2018