

Lesson Six

1 SAMUEL 1:1–2:11

Hannah: Prayer, Surrender, and a Song That Echoes

She came to Shiloh year after year, the same long trip, the same tabernacle, the same festival, the same ache. She brought her offerings, listened to the songs, watched her husband cut the meat of the sacrifice and give double portions to her because he loved her, and then she went home empty-handed, still without a child, still listening to her rival Peninnah's barbed comments, still weeping over a cradle that had never held a baby of her own.

Hannah's story is for every woman who has ever prayed the same prayer for years and not yet heard yes. It is for every woman who has cried so hard at the assembly that a well-meaning leader misread her tears. It is for every woman who has wondered whether God is listening at all. And it is for every woman who has finally, exhausted and trusting, prayed the most dangerous prayer a person can pray: "Whatever you give me, Lord, it is yours."

Read 1 Samuel 1:1 to 2:11 carefully this week. Hannah's song in chapter 2 will, centuries later, become the model for Mary's song in Luke 1. The waiting woman of Shiloh is teaching the waiting woman of Nazareth how to praise. And both of them, together, are teaching you.

First impressions

The opening verses of 1 Samuel set the scene at Shiloh, the central place of Israel's worship before the temple was built in Jerusalem. The tabernacle was there, along with the high priest Eli and his two ungodly sons, Hophni and Phinehas. Spiritually, it was a low time in Israel: "The word of the LORD was rare in those days; there was no frequent vision" (1 Samuel 3:1). God was about to break that silence, not through a king or a prophet, but through the prayers and tears of a quiet woman.

1. a. Read 1 Samuel 1:1 to 2:11. What is your first impression of Hannah?
- b. Of Elkanah? Of Peninnah? Of Eli the priest?
- c. What surprises you most in the story?

A divided household (1:1–8)

Polygamy in the Old Testament is described, not prescribed. The law of Moses tolerated it but never commanded it, and Genesis 2:24 (one man and one woman, becoming one flesh) sets the creation pattern that Jesus reaffirms in Matthew 19:4 to 6. Almost every polygamous household in Scripture is a portrait of the same kind of pain we see in Elkanah's house: rivalry, jealousy, favoritism, and grief. God's silence about a particular sin in a particular text is not God's approval of it.

Study Skill, The Difference Between Description and Prescription: A common mistake in Bible study is to assume that everything the Bible describes the Bible also approves. The Bible describes Lot's drunkenness, David's adultery, Peter's denial, and Elkanah's polygamy. It approves none of them. When you read a narrative, ask: Is this passage telling me what someone did, or is it telling me what I should do? Description is history. Prescription is command. The two are not the same. Look for explicit commands, principles, and apostolic teaching to know what God positively requires of His people today.

2. In 1:2, we meet Elkanah's two wives, Peninnah, who has children, and Hannah, who has none. What is the situation in Elkanah's house?

3. a. In 1:6 to 7, what does Peninnah do, and why?

b. How does Hannah respond?

For Thought and Discussion: Cruelty is sometimes most painful when it comes from inside the family, from a sister, a sister-in-law, an in-law, or a stepfamily member. How does the Bible help us survive that particular kind of wound (see Romans 12:17 to 21; 1 Peter 2:21 to 23)?

4. a. Elkanah loves Hannah deeply. He gives her a double portion (1:5) and tries to comfort her (1:8). But his comfort is somewhat off-target: "Am I not more to you than ten sons?" What does this tell you about him?

b. What does it tell us about the limits of what a good husband (or any human being) can do for a wounded heart?

Hannah's prayer (1:9–18)

Notice that Hannah goes to the place of worship to pray. She does not stay home and sulk. She does not abandon the assembly because of Peninnah's cruelty. She goes to where the LORD has promised to meet His people, and she pours out her heart there. In a low season of Israel's worship, when the priest's sons were corrupt and the tabernacle was failing, Hannah still drew near. Her example quietly preaches what the writer of Hebrews will later say plainly: "Let us draw near" (Hebrews 10:22).

5. a. Read 1:10. How does the text describe Hannah's emotional state?

b. Where does she take her grief?

6. a. Read 1:11. What does Hannah promise God in her vow?

b. What is striking about her vow? What is she essentially asking for, and what is she essentially giving up in advance?

For Further Study: Hannah's vow makes Samuel a kind of lifelong Nazirite ("no razor will ever touch his head"). Compare Numbers 6:1 to 21, which lays out the Nazirite vow. Notice that Hannah is taking a vow on her son's behalf before he is even conceived. What does this tell us about the kind of mother she would have been?

7. a. In 1:12 to 16, Eli the priest sees Hannah's lips moving but no sound coming out, and assumes she is drunk. How does Hannah respond?

b. What do you learn from her about how to handle being misread by spiritual leaders?

Optional Application: Sometimes we cannot speak our prayers aloud, the grief is too much, or the setting is wrong. Take fifteen minutes this week to pray silently in a way Hannah would recognize: just God and you, no words, only the ache of your heart. Trust Him to read it (Romans 8:26).

8. a. Read 1:17 to 18. Eli, having heard her explanation, blesses her. Verse 18 says, "So the woman went her way and ate, and her face was no longer sad." What had changed in her circumstances?

- b. What had changed in her? What does that tell us about the nature of true prayer?

God remembers (1:19–28)

- 9.
 - a. Read 1:19 to 20. What does the text emphasize about Hannah's pregnancy?
 - b. Samuel's name means "asked of God" or "heard by God." Why is the name important to Hannah?
- 10.
 - a. Read 1:21 to 28. Hannah keeps her vow. What does it cost her?
 - b. She nurses Samuel until he is weaned (likely three or four years old) and then brings him to Shiloh to live there, permanently, with the priest who once thought she was drunk. What kind of love and trust does that require?

For Thought and Discussion: Hannah gives back the very thing she asked for. Many of us are happy to ask God for gifts, but reluctant to keep our hands open once He gives them. What in your life have you asked God for that you may be quietly clutching too tightly?

Hannah's song (2:1–11)

Hannah's song in 1 Samuel 2:1 to 10 is the first song of praise in the historical books of the Old Testament. It is a carefully crafted poem with the same kind of parallelism, imagery, and theological depth we find in the Psalms. Notice that it begins very personally ("My heart exults in the LORD") and quickly widens to take in God's dealings with the whole world: the rich and the poor, the proud and the humble, the barren and the fertile, the dead and the living. Hannah has just walked away from her only child, and her response is not bitterness but theology in song.

Study Skill, Reading Hebrew Poetry: Hebrew poetry, found throughout the Psalms, Proverbs, and songs scattered through the rest of the Old Testament, works by parallelism rather than by rhyme. The most common kind is synonymous parallelism: a second line restates the first in different words (Hannah's "my horn is exalted in the LORD; my mouth derides my enemies," 2:1, is a fair example). When you read poetry, slow down. Read each line and then the next, and ask, How is the second line repeating, sharpening, or contrasting the first? Poetry will not yield to the impatient reader, but it will reward the slow one.

11.
 - a. Read 2:1 to 10 slowly, ideally aloud. This is the prayer of a woman who has just walked away from her only child. How is it not what you would expect?
 - b. What does Hannah celebrate about God?
12.
 - a. Hannah's song moves outward from her own story to God's larger work in the world. Look at 2:4 to 8. What is God doing for the kinds of people Hannah names?
 - b. Why might a woman who has just surrendered her son sing about a God who lifts up the lowly and brings down the proud?

For Further Study: Read Mary's song in Luke 1:46 to 55 right after Hannah's song. How many themes do you see repeated? How does the young woman of Nazareth lean on the older woman of Shiloh?

13. Look closely at 2:10. Hannah ends her song with a reference to "his king" and "his anointed," even though Israel has no king yet, and her son Samuel will be the prophet who eventually anoints the first two. What is Hannah seeing here that even she may not fully understand?

The Hebrew word for "anointed" in 2:10 is *mashiach*, from which we get the English word Messiah. Hannah's song closes with a prophecy of God's anointed King. From her infertility, God has not only brought a prophet (Samuel) and the line that produces a king (David); He has stirred the song that Mary will echo when she carries Israel's true King in her womb. Acts 2:30 to 36 will eventually identify that anointed King decisively as the risen Christ, seated at the right hand of God. Hannah's quiet song points all the way there.

Your response

14.
 - a. Hannah teaches us how to pray honestly when we are in pain. What would it look like for you to pour out your heart to God this week the way she did?
 - b. Is there a grief or longing you have been trying to manage politely before God, when He is inviting you to bring it raw?

15. Hannah also teaches us to keep our hands open when God answers. Is there something in your life right now that God seems to be asking you to hand back to Him?

16. Write one sentence summarizing what you most want to take away from Hannah's story, and one concrete step you will take in light of it this week.

For the group

Warm-up. Begin by asking each woman to share about a prayer she has prayed for a long time, answered or unanswered. Keep it brief; this is a warm-up, not the main discussion.

Discussion. Hannah's story will be tender for some of the women in your group, particularly those who have lived through infertility, the loss of a child, or estrangement. Move gently. Pay particular attention to questions 5 and 6 (her honest prayer and vow), 8 (the change in her before circumstances changed), 10 (the cost of keeping her vow), and 14 and 15 (your response).

Wrap-up. Close by praying for one another out loud, by name. As Hannah modeled, do not be afraid of tears in this group. They are part of how God hears.