# 14 Hannah and her Sister

I once heard someone comment that all Christians were exhorted to learn from the stories about Abraham in scripture, but only women were exhorted to learn from the stories about Sarah. The story of Hannah is one that captures something of the hurt and the joy there can be in being a woman before God, but also in being a man.

## A woman who suffers and who prays

Like the stories of Sarah and Hagar or Naomi and Ruth, Hannah’s story is lived the way almost any woman’s story has been lived throughout history, in the framework of the story of men. It starts by telling us about a man from Ramathaim, a village in northern Israel that is so obscure that the Hebrew text became corrupted in the first verse of 1 Samuel because the copyists seem not to have been familiar with its name. The man is called Elqanah, and we are told about his father, his grandfather, and so on, so that the story starts just like any man’s story; it is a surprise when it turns out to be a woman’s story.

This woman asks God for a baby, except that what she asks for is a son, because a daughter will not be the same. The middle of the story is about an interchange with another man called Eli, a pastor who sits in judgment over Hannah’s spirituality without knowing what he is doing and despite the fact that his own life is on the way to judgment. The story ends with the birth of her male child; when that has happened, a mere woman like Hannah can be allowed to disappear from the scene. She has fulfilled her function. Hannah’s story is lived in the framework of obscure, inadequate, and important men, like ours; but in that context she lives with God, all right.

She is Elqanah’s wife, but she cannot have children. For her, as for other women in the Old Testament story, it would likely be a matter of personal pain. The Israelite hearers of her story (like the modern Christian ones) would include other people in the same position, so that the story raises issues which are also painful for them, and maybe the storyteller prayed that somehow this piece of scripture could be a blessing rather than a curse for them. For Hannah, as for those others, the personal pain would be compounded by the attitude that society took to it. What use was a wife who could not have children? Once more patriarchal society takes its toll of Hannah. Matters are made worse when Elqanah takes a second wife and she can have children. It *can* be a man’s pain too: a British newspaper once reported the story of a man who could not beget children, whose wife committed adultery half‑wishing she would get pregnant, as she did, because she so wanted a baby.

Perhaps you can live with that hurt much of the time, in ordinary day‑to‑day life, but it will come to the surface of your mind when you are unable to sleep, or when you come to worship. Our hurt about my first wife Ann’s multiple sclerosis would lie dormant much of the time, but one of the occasions when it would come to the surface was “healing services” at which you prayed for other people to be healed (and sometimes hear how they are healed), when you are not.

The pain comes to the surface for Hannah when they go to Shiloh for the Harvest Festival. They go to the sanctuary where the all‑powerful redeemer God of Israel dwells, the God who had closed Hannah’s womb. They celebrate God’s relationship with them with great joy. It all brings the hurt to outward expression. Elqanah loves Hannah, does his best to make up for the pain he knows she bears, and wants her to believe that what they mean to each other ought to make being childless not matter so much. But what he says is counteracted by the way his other wife provokes Hannah, makes her jealous, keeps drawing attention to the fact that Hannah may have been Elqanah’s first love and may have his love now but it is Peninnah who has the children. Yahweh has not closed *her* womb.

Hannah and her sister are thus together in a moment of deep hurt which two women could share as a man and a woman could not. Except that they are not together. Perhaps Peninnah did not provoke Hannah deliberately. The provocation may have come from inside Hannah rather than from Peninnah taunting her. But the pain natural to a woman who cannot have children and the reinforcement of her sense of failure and inadequacy by a society that (we noted in connection with Sarai’s parallel experience) assumes that women should be barefoot, pregnant, and in the kitchen, serves to divide Hannah and Peninnah so that like Sarai and Hagar they cannot even stand together as sisters.

So it went on, each year they went to Shiloh for that great celebration of the power and love of God the giver, redeemer, and healer of Israel. Occasions like that are hard work for people whose experience does not match the theology. It all seems to go on at a distance, as if you were watching a film. It is not something you can quite take part in. Elqanah’s words are ones Hannah cannot quite hear or respond to. And perhaps to add to her aloneness there is a reproachfulness about Elqanah when he cannot get through to her. She feels rejected and bitter, so he feels rejected and bitter. His loving understanding is mixed with hurt of his own.

While she is a woman who suffers, whose womb Yahweh has closed, Hannah is also a woman who prays. She had nothing to say to Elqanah when he protested his love for her. The person she wants to talk to is this allegedly Almighty Yahweh. The context is a great festival and lots of people are high as kites and drunk as lords, which may be why Eli is sitting wearily at the sanctuary door to make sure nothing unseemly happens. Hannah does not care that everyone else is full of joy and celebration. She has another kind of business to do with God. If it is really true that Yahweh is redeemer, healer, and almighty, what about some action more appropriate than womb‑sealing? She has no words for Elqanah, but she has pain, bitterness, distress, and tears to bring to God, bitterness and pain reminiscent of Israel’s in Egypt.

We should not idealize Hannah. As in the case of Naomi, bitterness is not a pretty sight. There is a song, “O Lord, your tenderness melting all my bitterness… O Lord, your loveliness changing all my ugliness….” Hurt, loss, and pain do not leave you unchanged as a person. They either soften you or harden you. There are signs that they hardened Hannah—only signs, because this story is another that only hints at what is going on inside the person. We have to meditate on the hints; having to do so is part of the way scripture works on us as God’s effective word.

The story does not present us with Hannah as a saintly ideal but as a hurt human being like us. She does not come to God on the basis of being a saint, which would be no encouragement to us sinners. All she contributes to what happens in this story is her need, her helplessness, her insistence that God hear her. I have referred to the page or two in an old book on *Prayer* by Otto Hallesby to which I find myself coming back when I feel that in some way I have reached a cul‑de‑sac in prayer, when I do not know how to pray and I feel spiritually dry and thus helpless. “As far as I can see,” Hallesby goes on to say there, “prayer has been ordained only for the helpless. It is the last resort of the helpless. We try everything before we finally resort to prayer. Prayer and helplessness are inseparable.” Only the person who is helpless can truly pray. If I feel sinful or abandoned, cold or depressed, doubting or dishonest, the feeling of helplessness this awareness induces is not my barrier but my way into prayer. “Prayer therefore simply consists in telling God day by day in what ways we feel we are helpless.” Hannah knew that truth.

Perhaps she reminds herself of Samson’s mother, another of those infertile women in Israel’s story, only a few pages earlier in scripture. Perhaps that is why she accompanies her prayer with a promise to give the child back to God as a Nazirite like Samson (not a very good Nazirite, admittedly) if God will only give her a son. Making promises to God is a standard part of Israelite prayer, as is the awareness that a key thing you have to achieve in prayer is somehow to get God’s attention, to get God to focus on you. Hannah might almost be the woman in Jesus’ parable who browbeats the judge till he gives in so as to get rid of her. But her prayer does make you wonder whether poor embittered Hannah thinks you can make deals with God, bribe God with the right promise. What kind of God does she think she is praying to?

Eli thinks there is something adrift with her praying, but for a quite different reason. All this emotion in church will not do. She is another drunk. Poor Eli beautifully anticipates Pentecost. He sees what is going on, except that he does not. It is not just his physical eyesight that is failing. But of course we must not sit in judgment on Eli any more than on Hannah, because it is only because of what the story has told us about Hannah that *we* know that he is in the wrong. If we had been put into the situation cold, maybe our pastoral judgment would have been no better. It is easy to give in to the temptation to tell someone not to go on at God the way they do.

Hannah stays appropriately deferential to Eli. After all, he is the pastor. “No sir, I’m not drunk, I’m praying. I’m depressed and hurt and the only person I thought I could really pour out my heart to is Yahweh.” Hannah has seen what prayer is about, that it is indeed ordained for the helpless. The Psalms illustrate the point. Prayer is ordained for people who are paralytic with fear or anxiety or anger or grief. When we are in that state, we are invited to bring those paralyzing turbulences to God.

*We* think there is something wrong with fear and anger. Believers do not get angry. The Psalms know that they do, and they invite us to bring our anger, anxiety, pain, and grief to God. They give us the prayers to express such feelings; a story like Hannah’s shows us how Israel used prayers like the Psalms. One of the reasons we may hide from our anger and our fear is that we are afraid that it may consume us if we let it out, and if we do so on our own, it might, but in Israel you did not pour yourself out to God on your own but in company, perhaps in your home village, perhaps at a sanctuary. People wept with weepers. Eli will have known that his ministry includes helping people to weep and thus to pray. It is a ministry which needs to be encouraged in the church. It involves learning to weep and to pray oneself, and then learning to help other people to weep and to pray.

I said “we” hide from our fear and our tears. Again it may be significant that it was a woman who did not. In Western culture, at least, fear and tears are not macho, and we are very macho. The gift of tears may be something else that men need to learn from women. What can happen instead is that women are also afraid to shed their tears, because they have learned to survive by coping the way that men do. So perhaps together we have to release each other into praying that can incorporate weeping. Hannah is a woman who suffers, and a woman who prays.

## A woman who believes and who surrenders

In due course Eli, who has been trying to remember what the principal told them at theological college about dealing with drunken women on the church doorstep, does get his pastoral act together. “Go in peace then, and the God of Israel give you what you have asked.” In the Psalms, there is often a change of mood before they come to an end. You began in fear and pain and anxiety, but you end in confidence and praise. How does the change come about? Sometimes passing the problem onto God did the trick. But the transition from lament to praise can be marked and sudden, and some Psalms give you a clue to what brought it about. There is a word from God quoted, which took the person who was praying from pain to praise (e.g., Ps 12). They knew their prayer was answered, because through someone like a priest or a prophet God answered it. They had not *seen* the answer yet, but they had been given the assurance that their prayer had been answered. They had heard the answer.

So the task of a prophet, priest, or Levite was not merely to sit alongside someone to enable them to express their hurt and their anger. It was also to sit alongside God and listen to what God had to say in response. They would not get it right every time, as Eli shows because he is not listening to God at all at first, but in the end he gets into prayer‑counseling mode. “Go in peace, and the God of Israel give you what you have asked.” Eli proves able to speak God’s word of acceptance and promise.

There is a model here for pastoral ministry, a ministry that overlaps with counseling but has its own privilege and challenge. It starts as a matter of enabling someone to express their grief and pain, which is a privilege in itself. There is a movie called *Truly, Madly, Deeply,* that portrays a woman coping with bereavement when her lover dies (to demythologize it a little). There are some scenes where she is talking her feelings through with a psychotherapist, and Ann (who worked as a psychotherapist before her illness stopped her) was impressed with the way she confined herself to enabling the woman to express her feelings. She did not say anything herself. Listening and facilitating self-expression is important. In my own talking with a counselor about the issues Ann’s illness raised for me, I found myself sometimes frustrated by his refusal to say anything, but I know that it was this extraordinary self-denying restraint on his part (which I can find it difficult to exercise when the roles are reversed) that enabled me to articulate things myself.

But that is not all there is to ministering to someone. There comes a time when they have said what they need to say, and need to hear what God has to say back, need to hear what the gospel is for them. The spiritual gift we have to covet and seek is the one the prophets in the temple had, the grace of being able to hear what God has to say to this person or these people in response to their prayer. Sometimes it will be directly words from scripture, sometimes not. Sometimes it will be confrontational, as Eli was at first by mistake. Perhaps more often it will be a word of grace, love, and forgiveness. Either way, if one thing about prayer that Hannah’s story portrays is that prayer is ordained for the helpless, another is that prayer is not supposed to be a one‑way conversation.

Some years ago we changed the telephone system at our theological college, and for a while we had a recorded message to tell people about it. I happened to do the recorded message, and one or two of my friends told me how they had rung up, recognized my voice, and started talking to me, but of course got no answer; I simply carried on with the preset words. Such can be our subconscious image of prayer. All you ever get is a recorded message. It is not so in the Old Testament. There God answers prayer. And we listen to the answers for each other. It is what happened in the temple, what happened to Hannah.

And she said, “May your servant find grace in your eyes.” It would have been quite a prayer a few minutes ago when Eli was dismissing her as a drunk. But now Hannah goes her way, takes part in the festival meal, and her face is no longer sad. What a difference having your prayer answered can make! Not that she has actually seen anything yet, but she has heard the word of God. Faith comes by hearing. She has believed what she heard. She can be with people again. Her very face has changed. What a difference it makes to have someone bring God’s word to you. To be able to bring God’s word to someone, the word that turns this person from being one who can only look down to one who can lift up eyes to God and life, is indeed a spiritual gift worth coveting and worth seeking. Hannah is a woman who suffers, who prays, and who believes.

Next morning they all get up early, as Abraham did in Genesis 22, as people do in scripture when they have something important to do. The family worship for one last precious time here at the sanctuary. They set off for home. And Elqanah and Hannah make love. I do not know how it felt that time, I dare not even think about it. What the story tells us is that Yahweh remembered Hannah that night. God remembered. They are the words which were used in connection with Noah.

It was not exactly that God had forgotten her before. God had had her well enough in mind to seal her womb. Her infertility was not an oversight. It was deliberate. What was the reason? The narrator apparently did not know why Yahweh had acted that way, knew only why in terms of where the situation was going in due course, knew the special thing God was going to do when Hannah’s womb was unsealed.

I have referred more than once to a theologian’s sermon on Jesus’ saying about not even a sparrow falling to the ground without your Father’s will, a sermon preached only weeks after his wife had had a stillborn child. Hannah’s story makes me recall it once again. When the sparrow falls, when the baby is still-born, when the broken‑hearted childless woman pours out her grief to God, it does not happen without your Father remembering, taking notice, paying attention.

Yahweh remembered Hannah. So in due time Hannah conceived and bore a son and called him Samuel, because (she said) “I asked Yahweh for him.” There is something strange about Hannah’s Hebrew at this point. If you wanted to mark the fact that you had asked for your baby from God, the natural name to give him is Saul; Saul means “asked.” As in English, “Samuel” is like “Saul,” but not identical. What is going on?

There was a strange sense in which the person Hannah had asked for was indeed Saul. Samuel’s birth set under way a sequence of events that would lead to Saul being king. As far as Hannah was concerned, all she wanted was her own baby. What she got was much more. She gave her baby back to God’s service, as she had said she would, and he turned out to be a prophet, arguably the most important prophet Israel ever had. He was among other things (but most importantly) the one who would anoint Saul as Israel’s first king, and de-anoint him.

Perhaps that fact about Hannah’s baby suggests something else about prayer. When our answers come, often they are given not just for our sake. The design that God is weaving, the purpose God is pursuing through being there when the sparrow falls to the ground or a woman loses her baby or another grieves over never having been able to conceive one, the purpose is one that extends far beyond our little lives, even to a purpose for the whole creation.

Hannah is a woman who suffers, who prays, who believes, who surrenders. But this is all too human. Let us end with God. Hannah’s God, yours, and mine is one who closes wombs; that is a hard fact. But Hannah’s God is one who gives when we ask, who remembers us and acts, who formulates a purpose and even uses womb-closing to bring it to completion. No wonder Hannah said “My heart exults in Yahweh. There is no rock like our God.”