

# THE GOD WHO HEARS

1 Samuel 1:9-20

Rev. Richard D. Phillips

Second Presbyterian Church, Greenville, SC, Nov. 9, 2008

---

And she vowed a vow and said, "O LORD of hosts, if you will indeed look on the affliction of your servant and remember me and not forget your servant, but will give to your servant a son, then I will give him to the LORD all the days of his life, and no razor shall touch his head." (1 Sam. 1:11).

One of the ways the Bible teaches about God is through the various names given to him in the Old Testament. The most basic name for God is *Elohim*, or *El* in its shortened form, which refers to God as the great Creator. Another name frequently used is *Yahweh*, the name God gave to Moses at the burning bush, meaning, "I AM THAT I AM" (Ex. 3:14). These names are then used in combination with other words to reveal specific things about God. When God looked with pity on Hagar, Sarah's slave girl and the mother of Abraham's son Ishmael, she named him *El-Roi*, the God who sees me (Gen. 16:13). After God provided a ram as an offering in the place of Isaac, Abraham named the place *Yahweh-Yireh*, meaning, God will provide (Gen. 22:14).

One of the most majestic names for God makes its first appearance in the story of Hannah and the birth of Samuel. We read in 1 Samuel 1:3 that Elkanah sacrificed to "the Lord of hosts." The Hebrew is *Yahweh Sabaoth*, often translated as the "Lord Almighty". This expression is used in 230 different Old Testament verses. "Lord of hosts" refers to God's command of armies, most especially the legions of heaven, and describes his omnipotent power. Hannah worshiped with the same faith as her husband, and given her dire predicament the Lord of hosts was precisely the kind of God she needed. When Hannah turned to God in prayer, her very first words were, "O Lord of hosts" (1 Sam. 1:11).

## HANNAH'S PRAYER

When we left Hannah in our last study, she was weeping in bitterness at the tabernacle because of her inability to bear a child and because of the vicious mocking of her rival co-wife, Peninnah. Her faithful husband, Elkanah, came to comfort her, using words that conveyed his sympathy and affection (1 Sam. 1:8). It seems that this ministry helped her enough that she could rejoin the family meal, because verse 9 tells us, “After they had eaten and drunk in Shiloh, Hannah rose.”

Hannah rose and went towards the tabernacle, where Eli was sitting on his high priestly chair. But Hannah was not seeking Eli; she was seeking the Lord in prayer. Her prayer is a model for us, starting with the simple fact that *she turned to the Lord in her need*. This may seem surprising given that it was the Lord who had closed her womb, as Hannah seems to have been somehow aware. Many people will turn away from God when feeling his hand of affliction, or simply resign themselves to their fate. Christians sometimes advise friends in such a situation just to move on and give thanks to God for the trial. We should be thankful to God for everything, even trials, but that does not mean we should be resigned to our situation. The apostle James gives better advice: “Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray” (Ja. 5:13). Of all the things Hannah might have done – becoming angry or bitter, fretting in tears, or reviling the Lord – she did the very best thing. She simply went to the Lord in prayer for her need.

Having turned to God in prayer, the second thing we should note was that Hannah prayed *knowing who God is*. “O Lord of hosts,” she began (1 Sam. 1:11). Hannah honored God by ascribing to him all the power she needed, the might of the Lord of the hosts of heaven. She then asked God to “look on the affliction of your servant and remember me and not forget your servant, but will give to your servant a son” (1 Sam. 1:11). This is not a random request, but rather one that mirrors what she had learned of God through the greatest of his saving deeds up to that time, the exodus. Whether or not she had access to the writings of Moses, she knew the story well enough. The Lord told Moses, “I have surely seen the affliction of my people who

are in Egypt and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters. I know their sufferings” (Ex. 3:7, cf. Ex. 4:31; Dt. 26:7). “Hannah begged God to do for her what he had done for Israel in the days of Moses. She was asking God to do what God had shown to be his characteristic behavior toward his people.”<sup>1</sup>

Thirdly, Hannah prayed *knowing who she was*. She refers to herself as God’s humble servant (1 Sam. 1:11). She did not demand of the Lord, nor is there any evidence that she complained about her special treatment. She came not with her rights but with her humble request. Moreover, she knew what kind of world she lived in. Gordon Keddie writes, “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.”<sup>2</sup> Notice, too, that Hannah did not ask for God to take vengeance on Peninnah. Hannah knew that she was coming to God for mercy, and it is poor practice to ask for God’s justice towards others while seeking mercy for ourselves. Hannah identified herself a servant of the Lord, and brought her requests humbly and in faith.

This leads to a fourth item of note in Hannah’s prayer: *she knew what she wanted* and was not afraid to ask it of the Lord. It is true that our prayers should consist of more than just list of things we desire to receive from God. We need to worship God in prayer, to give thanks for our blessings, and to confess to him our sins, seeking cleansing. But we must also realize that God invites us to make requests of him, and that it honors the Lord when we do. Therefore, we should come to God knowing what we are asking for and then asking for it humbly and clearly. James 4:2 states a rule that sadly explains so much of our spiritual poverty, “You do not have, because you do not ask” (Ja. 4:2).

Notice that Hannah’s prayer did not rely on any ritual formula of words or any other technique of prayer. She simply knew the Lord, believed his promise to care for his people, and she prayed to him for what she needed. This is the benefit of knowing God, including his

---

<sup>1</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>2</sup> Gordon J. Keddie, *Dawn of a Kingdom: The Message of I Samuel* (Hertfordshire, UK: Evangelical Press, 1988), 21.

attributes, his promises, and his saving deeds. Hannah was able to pray confidently because she knew the God to whom she prayed.

But she was also confident because she knew that her motives in prayer were right. James chides us not only for not asking in prayer, but also for wrong motives when we do ask: “You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions” (Ja. 4:2). With this in mind, *Hannah prayed with an eye to God’s will.*

We see this especially in the vow that plays such an important part in Hannah’s prayer: “O LORD of hosts, if you will indeed look on the affliction of your servant and remember me and not forget your servant, but will give to your servant a son, then I will give him to the LORD all the days of his life, and no razor shall touch his head” (1 Sam. 1:11). Hannah refers to the rites of a Nazirite, as described in Numbers 6, someone who has vowed total separation to the service of the Lord. Normally, Nazirite status was limited to a defined period of time, during which the person separated to God’s work would drink no alcohol, avoid touching a dead body, and allow his hair to go uncut, which was the sign of a Nazirite (see Num. 6:2-8). The most famous Nazirite was Samson, the mighty warrior who slew so many Philistines and was the last judge of Israel prior to Samuel. Samson was born to the barren wife of Manoah, and according to an angel’s instructions he was to be separated as a Nazirite all the days of his life (Jud. 13:5). Hannah was likely born and raised during the time of Samson’s judgeship, so the Nazirite status would have prominently shaped her idea of consecration to the Lord. She may also have identified with Manoah’s childless wife. Now she vows that a son that God gives her will be similarly devoted to Israel’s cause in this desperate time of need.

Was this an attempt to bargain with God? “God, you give me this and I will give you that?” If so, then Hannah prayed wrongly; it is the pagans who approach their gods seeking to appease them with offers and bribes. Hannah’s vow was nothing of the sort. William Blaikie writes: “No doubt she wished the child, and asked the child in fulfillment of her own vehement desire. But beyond and above that desire there arose in her soul the sense of God’s claim and God’s glory, and to these high considerations she desired to subordinate every feeling of her own. If God should give her the child, he would

not be hers, but God's."<sup>3</sup> Gordon Keddie says, "The whole climate is one of holy motives, hallowed desires, and humble submission."<sup>4</sup>

We should consider the sacrifice involved in Hannah's vow: she was offering to forego the joys of parenting the child she longed to bear. Her prayer was not a bargain in which she offered something to God to get what she wanted. Rather, what she wanted was a child to offer to the Lord. She wanted to play her role in God's plan of salvation, and she was zealous to play a most meaningful role: to bear a life-long Nazarite who would wholeheartedly serve the Lord. John Chrysostom comments: "She had not yet received the child and was already forming a prophet."<sup>5</sup> In this, Hannah sets an example for Christian parents in that our chief desire for our children should be that they would be fully committed to the Lord and useful to his kingdom.

A sixth and last thing to note about Hannah's prayer is that *she fervently opened her heart to the Lord*. As she explains to Eli, "I have been pouring out my soul before the LORD" (1 Sam. 1:15). If we ever think that Old Testament believers were denied the privilege of personal communion with the Lord, we should remember Hannah's prayer. She came not with a formula to manipulate God or an offer to bribe God, but she prayed with a mind that knew God and a heart that poured out in pain and godly desire. Matthew Henry writes, "The prayer came from her heart, as the tears from her eyes."<sup>6</sup>

On the one hand, we need to realize that emotional passion does not make our prayers any better or more effective, as if we have to push our hearts onto the Lord. Jesus taught, "When you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words" (Mt. 6:7). But on the other hand, the passions that are in our hearts – our frustration, our grief, even our anger and doubt – may be brought to God in prayer. Ralph Davis advises: "Many Christians need to realize that Yahweh our God

---

<sup>3</sup> William G. Blaikie, *Expository Lectures on the Book of First Samuel* (Birmingham, AL: Solid Ground, 1887, reprint 2005), 10.

<sup>4</sup> Keddie, *Dawn of a Kingdom*, 22.

<sup>5</sup> John R. Franke, *Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1-2 Samuel*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, OT vol. IV (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity, 2005), 197.

<sup>6</sup> Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 6 vols. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1992), 2:218.

allows us to do this – to pour our griefs and sobs and perplexities at his feet. Our Lord can handle our tears; it won't make him nervous or ill at ease if you unload your distress at his feet.”<sup>7</sup> With such anguish in her heart, Hannah prayed long and hard for God's help. As David said of his prayers, “I pour out my complaint before him; I tell my trouble before him” (Ps. 142:2).

## THE HIGH PRIEST'S BLESSING

All the while that Hannah prayed, the high priest of Israel sat in his chair watching. Eli presents quite a contrast to Hannah, a contrast that will be all the more telling when revealed in their respective sons. Here is the kind of ironic role-reversal so common in Scripture. We would expect Eli, a man in the highest spiritual position of God's holy nation, to be the upholder of true spirituality and the one who would break through to God's grace. Yet he is practically the one farthest from these things. Meanwhile, the humble wife of a country Levite, one who is treated by others as accursed of God because of her barren womb, a woman as socially and religiously disempowered as could be imagined in that day, is the one whose heart is closest to God. Hannah, not the high priest, is the spiritual figure who really matters in that hour of distress. This is, in fact, in keeping with the great Scriptural principle: “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble” (1 Pet. 5:5).

Eli displays his lack of spiritual discernment in his rebuke to praying Hannah. He saw her lips moving but heard no sound coming forth, for “Hannah was speaking in her heart” (1 Sam. 1:13). “Therefore Eli took her to be a drunken woman. And Eli said to her, ‘How long will you go on being drunk? Put away your wine from you’” (1 Sam. 1:13-14). Eli's reaction was no doubt conditioned by past sordid experiences at the tabernacle. But John Woodhouse is surely right to complain: “If Israel had a leader who could not tell the difference between a godly woman's heartfelt prayer and drunken rambling, no wonder Israel had a leadership crisis!”<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> Dale Ralph Davis, *I Samuel: Looking on the Heart* (Ross-shire, UK: Christian Focus, 2000), 16.

<sup>8</sup> Woodhouse, *I Samuel*, 32.

Hannah defended herself: “No, my lord, I am a woman troubled in spirit. I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink, but I have been pouring out my soul before the LORD. Do not regard your servant as a worthless woman, for all along I have been speaking out of my great anxiety and vexation” (1 Sam. 1:15-16). In addition to explaining Hannah’s intense, emotional behavior, her words make clear that there were other women who deserved the high priest’s rebuke. Her statement that she is not “a worthless woman” is, literally, “a daughter of Belial,” that is, a woman of destructiveness. Instead, her apparent murmuring was a prayer of great intensity born of a provoked soul. The other kind of woman may foolishly drown her sorrows with strong drink, but Hannah had bathed hers in prayerful tears. At this, Eli spoke to her a priestly benediction, “Go in peace, and the God of Israel grant your petition that you have made to him” (1 Sam. 1:17). Hannah was contented with this answer, humbly replying, “Let your servant find favor in your eyes.” With this, “the woman went her way and ate, and her face was no longer sad” (1 Sam. 1:18).

#### HANNAH’S PRAYER “REMEMBERED” BY GOD

**I**t is evident that Hannah took Eli’s words as a response from the Lord, which is understandable since Eli was Israel’s high priest.

We will be seeing more of Eli, and it will be clear that he was no spiritual giant; in fact, the child born to Hannah would be sent by the Lord to replace the corrupt priesthood of Eli’s family.

Nevertheless, Eli was the high priest, and whether or not he was speaking on God’s behalf Hannah was right to take his words in this way. “May the Lord grant your petition,” was more than well-wishes when spoken by the man in this divinely ordained office. We might rightly state that Hannah believed Eli as she was trusting in Jesus Christ to speak to represent her before God. Eli occupied one of three anointed offices in the Old Testament – the prophets, priests, and kings – and since there were neither prophets nor kings at that time, Eli was the sole anointed mediator with God. The Hebrew word for “anointed one” is *Messiah*, which translated into Greek is *Christ*. We might say that Eli was temporarily holding the place in God’s economy that would ultimately be filled by Jesus.

What Eli represented, however poorly, was the reality that came with Christ. When Christians pray “in Christ’s name,” we are saying that we come to God through the priestly ministry of Jesus Christ. And when Jesus speaks words of comfort and assurance to us through the Scriptures, we should follow Hannah’s example by taking them to heart. And Jesus speaks wonderful words of peace and hope as he mediates for us with the Lord of hosts. “Do not be anxious about your life,” he tells us, for your heavenly Father knows what you need and cares for you (Mt. 6:25-32). To those who are burdened and weary, he promises, “I will give you rest” (Mt. 11:28). Jesus restores us to God, saying, “my peace I give to you” (Jn. 14:27). He promises to lead us through this world and to lay down his own life to free us from the penalty of our sins: “I am the good shepherd,” he says, “I lay down my life for the sheep” (Jn. 10:14-15). And Jesus promises never to leave or forsake us, but to lead us safely through this life to the glory of heaven, and if we listen with the faith of Hannah we will respond with the words of Hebrews 13:5-6: “For he has said, ‘I will never leave you nor forsake you.’ So we can confidently say, ‘The Lord is my helper, I will not fear.’”

Hannah’s experience shows us that two things happen when God’s people pray to him in faith. The first is that *prayer changes us*. We see this in her dramatic change of demeanor. Hannah entered into prayer shattered and depressed. But as she rose from prayer, she “went her way and ate, and her face was no longer sad” (1 Sam. 1:18). She experienced the blessing of renewed faith, which the writer of Hebrews says is “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Heb. 11:1). However God would answer Hannah’s prayer, the time spent with him was rewarding, as it always is. To focus our hearts on God is to remember that the Lord who reigns is also the God of grace who invites us into his presence. He blesses those who trust him according to his wise, holy, good, and sovereign will. It is for this reason that those who neglect prayer, or who pray without faith, deprive themselves of this world’s chief resource for peace and joy. This is why the apostle Peter’s counsel is essential for a strong spiritual life: “[cast] all your anxieties on [God], because he cares for you” (1 Pet. 5:7).



If prayer only changed us it would be most worthwhile. But the second thing that happened was that God answered Hannah's prayer. For prayer not only changes us, but *prayer changes things*. The reason for this is that God is pleased to act in response to our prayers. Some people react to the knowledge of God's sovereignty by thinking that prayer therefore does not matter, since God has decided everything in advance. But Hannah did not reason this way, but understood that God's sovereign will is achieved through the acts of men and women, and especially our prayers. John Woodhouse comments that her turning to the Lord "will turn out to change not only her life but the life of the nation, and, indeed..., the history of the world." He adds, "Faith in God, therefore, leads us in our troubles to pray to the God who is sovereign over all things."<sup>9</sup>

The language of verse 19 is noteworthy: "They rose early in the morning and worshiped before the LORD; then they went back to their house at Ramah. And Elkanah knew Hannah his wife, and the LORD remembered her." Hannah not only believed God's answer to her prayer but she acted on the belief, going about her duties in worship and in married life. And in the course of time, we find that "the LORD remembered her." This does not suggest that God had previously forgotten Hannah or that he was too busy running the universe to pay attention to her needs before she pointed them out. It means that God was mindful of her prayer and ordered events to work in blessing for Hannah. The same verb is used in Genesis 8:1, when after the great flood "the LORD remembered Noah," that is, the Lord kept his covenant promise and made sure to save Noah. Bill Arnold comments, "Such language emphasizes [God's] faithfulness when confronted with the earnest need and prayer of his people."<sup>10</sup>

Some will wonder what it means, then, when God does not seem to answer our prayers as he did for Hannah. Many a woman will pray in equally earnest tears for a dying child, an unbelieving husband, or that she might be enabled to bear a child. Yet the child does not live, the husband does not believe, or the child is not born. So she looks at Hannah and agonizes that her prayer was just as fervent and

---

<sup>9</sup> John Woodhouse, *I Samuel: Looking for a Leader* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008), 29-30.

<sup>10</sup> Bill T. Arnold, *1 & 2 Samuel*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 56.

believing, yet the prayer was not answered. Does this mean that God did not remember such a woman or that God was less faithful to her?

William Blaikie responds to this: “In spite of all such objections and difficulties, we maintain that God is the hearer of prayer. Every sincere prayer offered in the name of Christ is heard, and dealt with by God in such way as seems good to Him.”<sup>11</sup> It is true that some prayers are not answered because they are offered in a wrong spirit or with selfish motives. Others are not answered because God knows that to do so would be harmful. I have no doubt that many of those taken from us by death early in life are being spared by God from agonizing sorrows or threats to their salvation. Yet there is no way for us to know this at the time when the prayer seems to have failed. In other cases, prayer is denied or delayed because God knows that we need the discipline of learning to wait on him trustingly, walking by faith and not by sight (2 Cor. 5:7). Blaikie therefore urges us:

Whatever be the reasons for the apparent silence of God, we may rest assured that hearing prayer is the law of His kingdom. Old Testament and New alike bear witness to this. Every verse of the Psalms proclaims it. Alike by precept and example our Lord constantly enforced it. Every Apostle takes up the theme, and urges the duty and the privilege... And what true Christian is there who cannot add testimonies from his own history to the same effect? If the answer to some of your prayers be delayed, has it not come to many of them?... And if there be prayers that have not yet been answered, or in reference to which you have no knowledge of an answer, can you not afford to wait till God gives the explanation? And when the explanation comes, have you not much cause to believe that it will redound to the praise of God, and that many things, in reference to which you could at the time see nothing but what was dark and terrible, may turn out when fully explained to furnish new and overwhelming testimony that “God is love?”<sup>12</sup>

## THE GOD WHO HEARS

**W**e know that Hannah reasoned in this manner, because she did not wait until her prayer was answered to regain a joyful attitude. Her example urges us similarly to find our peace in waiting on the Lord, knowing his mercy and grace.

---

<sup>11</sup> Blaikie, *The First Book of Samuel*, 16.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 17-18.

The key to Hannah's prayer is that she knew the Lord. She began her prayer by naming him the "Lord of hosts," the Almighty God who is able to overcome every difficulty in answering prayer. But her experience in casting her burden on God in prayer and then trusting God caused her to know God even better. For just as Hagar called the name *El-Roi* when she realized that God saw her, and as Abraham named the place *Yahweh-Jireh* when he saw that God would provide the lamb as the sacrifice for our sins, Hannah also commemorated God's grace to her with a name: "in due time Hannah conceived and bore a son, and she called his name Samuel, for she said, 'I have asked for him from the LORD'" (1 Sam. 1:20).

Scholars debate the precise meaning of the name Samuel. Since the form of the name employs letters that could be taken a number of ways, different solutions are provided. But given Hannah's own explanation, *Samuel* is best seen as sounding like a combination *El*, God, with the Hebrew verb *shamah*, which means "to hear". God has heard me, Hannah exulted when her son was born. She knew that he had heard her as soon as she prayed, because she knew God. But with the child's birth she wanted to commemorate God's faithfulness so as to bring him praise.

Wherever he went and whatever he did, Samuel's name testified to a great and important truth about God. He is the God who hears, the God who answers prayers with power and with mercy and grace. He calls us to know this, to know him, and therefore to cast our burdens on him, believing that God hears. If we believe this, however God chooses to remember us, we can be sure that our prayers will not only change our own hearts but that in God's faithful hands they will make a vital difference in the world. Hannah's prayer brought the coming of Jesus Christ one step closer in history. Our prayers, offered with the same faith as Hannah's, will bring the blessings of Christ's kingdom in ways small and large, and all in ways that will touch God's heart and bring him praise.