

# HANNAH'S SONG

1 Samuel 2:1-10

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Hannah prayed and said, "My heart exults in the LORD; my strength is exalted in the LORD. My mouth derides my enemies, because I rejoice in your salvation" (1 Sam. 2:1).

**O**n October 31, 2008, a crowd estimated as large as three million people lined a parade route in downtown Philadelphia. The city, known for its tough and sometimes surly attitude, was for once able to live up to its name: City of Brotherly Love. What caused so many people to join in this delirious celebration? The answer is that after a long generation of athletic futility, Philadelphia finally had a champion, as their Phillies captured baseball's World Series. On this occasion, everyone in the city, it seemed, just had to come to cheer and rejoice.

There are times when you just have to rejoice and sing. This attitude is fully endorsed by the Bible: "Sing praises to the LORD, O you his saints, and give thanks to his holy name" (Ps. 30:4); "Sing and rejoice, O daughter of Zion" (Zech. 2:10). One of Israel's singing daughters is Hannah, the once-barren wife of Elkanah, who received her son, Samuel, as God's answer to her prayer. Strictly speaking, the Bible says that Hannah prayed, not that she sang, but so beautiful is the poetry of Hannah's prayer and so strong is its connection to other victory songs in the Bible that it is referred to as Hannah's Song. "My heart exults in the LORD; my strength is exalted in the LORD," Hannah's spirit sang (1 Sam. 2:1). Bill Arnold comments: "Hannah had to sing! God had turned her barrenness into joy... And her song

reveals that she understood full well the significance of God's sovereign, gift-giving love."<sup>1</sup>

The importance of Hannah's song extends far beyond its personal and sentimental value. To Hannah is given "the privilege of providing the main theological introduction to the whole account of the history of the Israelite monarchy."<sup>2</sup> Hannah offered intelligent, theological, and biblically-informed praise to God at this great moment in her life. But just as would happen a thousand years later when the virgin Mary gave praise to God for the birth of her son – a prayer strikingly similar to Hannah's – the Holy Spirit made use of Hannah's tongue and, in the marvelous process of the inspiration of Holy Scripture, Hannah's song provides a forward-looking summary of what God was about to do in history.

We become especially aware of the importance of Hannah's Song when we see how perfectly it corresponds to David's song of praise in 2 Samuel 23:1-7. The songs of praise serve as a pair of bookends to wrap everything between them. The themes that Hannah saw anticipated in the birth of Samuel find their reprise as David looks back to see Hannah's hope marvelously fulfilled through his own reign. For both Hannah and David, the God of Israel is their "Rock." What Hannah foresees that God will do, David celebrates as accomplished in the faithfulness of God's will. Augustine therefore said of Hannah: "Through this woman... there speaks, by the spirit of prophecy, the Christian religion itself,... with which the humble are filled so that they rise up, which was in fact the chief theme that rang out in her hymn of praise."<sup>3</sup>

## EXALTED IN THE LORD

If baseball fans can be moved to tearful joy by a World Series victory, then it is no wonder that Hannah's triumph filled her with thanksgiving and praise. For years she had traveled to the tabernacle, facing the bitterness of her barren womb while suffering

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<sup>1</sup> Bill T. Arnold, *1 & 2 Samuel*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 76.

<sup>2</sup> Mary J. Evans, *The Message of Samuel* (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity, 2004), 30.

<sup>3</sup> John R. Franke, *Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1-2 Samuel*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, OT vol. IV (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity, 2005), 202.

the cruel mocking of her rival co-wife, Peninnah, who had succeeded in bearing children for Hannah's husband. Turning in faith to the Lord, Hannah had offered her son to lifelong service if only God would open her womb. Chapter 1 ends with this son, Samuel, delivered into the care of the high priest: "And he worshiped the LORD there" (1 Sam. 1:28). Hannah, too, worshiped the Lord, and her praise was filled with jubilation: "Hannah prayed and said, "My heart exults in the LORD; my strength is exalted in the LORD" (1 Sam. 2:1).

Hannah shows us what a difference it makes when we turn to God in time of need. The last time we saw her praying, her situation was very different. Hannah catalogs her transformation in terms of her heart, her horn, and her mouth. Earlier, her husband Elkanah asked her, "Why is your heart sad?" (1 Sam. 1:8). Hannah described herself as "a woman troubled in spirit" (1 Sam. 1:15). But now her heart "exults in the LORD."

Some English translations obscure Hannah's second point of reference, substituting the word "strength" for the original word, "horn." "My horn is exalted in the Lord," she exults. Those who lived in Hannah's agricultural world knew that a beast holds its head and horns high as a symbol of victory and power. In this way, Hannah refers to the removal of her disgrace: now she can hold her head high because of what the Lord has done for her.

Thirdly, Hannah speaks of her mouth: "My mouth derides my enemies" (1 Sam. 2:1). The Hebrew states, "My mouth is opened wide." The idea seems to combine a devouring of one's foes, along with a gloating over defeated enemies. Given Hannah's refusal to complain about Peninnah or seek God's vengeance, it is unlikely that Hannah has suddenly turned bitter and hateful. Rather, thinking theologically, as she does all through this prayer, Hannah sees Peninnah as a type of the enemies of God and his people. She gloats to see the voice of unbelieving mockery silenced because of God's saving grace.

A question is raised by some commentators as to whether Hannah is overstating the significance of her own deliverance. The answer is that Hannah is set forth in these chapters to represent Israel in those barren and forlorn days; her salvation is designed to encourage all Israel to hope for a greater deliverance. William Blakie says:

“Looking on herself as representing the nation of Israel, she seems to have felt that what had happened to her on a small scale was to happen to the nation on a large; for God would draw nigh to Israel as He had to her, make him His friend and confidential servant, humble the proud and malignant nations around him, and exalt him.”<sup>4</sup>

It is of great importance that the source of Hannah’s joy and strength is the covenant God himself. She states: “I rejoice in your salvation.” Hannah rejoices not merely that she received something she had wanted. More significant in her eyes than the gift is the Giver: the Lord is her song and her salvation. Robert Bergen comments: “The object of Hannah’s delight is neither herself – that she has overcome the disgrace of barrenness – nor her son; instead it is the Lord, who is the source of both her son and her happy circumstance.”<sup>5</sup> Much as Hannah loved her son Samuel, he was not her Savior and he could not provide the salvation for God’s people that she sought. Salvation is always of the Lord, and our praise should be focused on the Lord himself rather than merely on the blessings he has provided. Hannah had not simply received a son – as if a baby would solve all her problems – but she had received gracious help from the Lord, and the Lord is the solution for everything Hannah and Israel needed.

## NONE LIKE OUR GOD

Several years ago, Philip Yancey wrote a book titled *Disappointment with God*.<sup>6</sup> The book relates the sentiments of numerous Christians who had written Yancey to complain. They had trusted the Lord but God seemed to have let them down. One had suffered by seeing his parents divorce despite praying a thousand times for their reconciliation. Another had lost a child. Yet another just wasn’t able to be happy, and God didn’t seem to care or be willing to help. In contrast to Hannah, who received the thing she prayed for and praised God, these people doubted God and were disappointed by the results of their faith.

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<sup>4</sup> William G. Blaikie, *Expository Lectures on the Book of First Samuel* (Birmingham, AL: Solid Ground, 1887, reprint 2005), 26.

<sup>5</sup> Robert D. Bergen, *I, 2 Samuel*, New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996), 75.

<sup>6</sup> Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988.

Yancey's response to these complaints was quite insightful. He pointed out, for instance, that many of these people were disappointed in God because they were demanding things that God had never promised to provide: most especially, God had never promised to spare his people from the pain and sorrow of this present life. Furthermore, Yancey pointed out that even when people receive what they sought from the Lord, they usually do not praise or thank him. At the heart of this disappointment with God, Yancey concluded, was the problem that so many Christians valued God only for what he could do for them. God himself, in the glory of his person, was lightly considered, so it is no wonder that people were disappointed in God when he did not do what they thought that he should do.

No such problem can be seen in the prayer life of Hannah. During the long years of bitter frustration, she had not lost hope in the Lord. Therefore, in the jubilation of her celebration, it is the Lord himself that she first considers. Just as Hannah was earlier a model of heartfelt prayer, so now she models godly praise, glorifying God first for who he is and then marveling at the salvation God has given.

Hannah makes four statements about God in verses 2 and 3, all of which cause her to rejoice. Her first thought turns to the Lord's holiness: "There is none holy like the Lord" (1 Sam. 2:2). This is entirely appropriate, because it is God's holiness that comforts and encourages us in every situation. The holiness of God refers to his separation from all his creatures, but it especially carries the notion of God's moral perfection. Since God is holy, all his intentions for his people are holy intentions. It is not possible for God's motives to be perverse or callous or mean – even in judgment and especially towards his beloved people – for he is "of purer eyes than to see evil and cannot look at wrong" (Hab. 1:13). Blaikie observes, "To the wicked this attribute is no comfort, but only a terror... Yet to those who can appreciate it, how blessed a thing is the holiness of God! No darkness in Him, no corruption, no infirmity; absolutely pure, He governs all on the principles of absolute purity."<sup>7</sup> Since God is perfectly holy, what truly matters is not what circumstances befall us in life but our relationship with the Holy One.

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<sup>7</sup> Blaikie, *First Samuel*, 28.

Let me apply this to encourage those who are presently afflicted. It would be easy to complain that Hannah is spiritually cheerful because her desire has been granted. But this fails to account for the long years of her bitter disappointment. It is only now, when her prayer has been answered, that Hannah can discern God's holy purpose in her trials. But long before the prayer was answered, she could still know that God is holy and patiently await his holy resolution of her need. Knowing that God's purpose in your afflictions must be holy, pure, and good, let Hannah's example comfort you that the day of God's deliverance will come for you, and when it does you will have every reason to praise him as the holy God that he is.

Having praised God for his holiness, Hannah adds to this, "there is none besides you" (1 Sam. 2:2). Hebrew poetry often employs a parallelism in which one statement is followed by another that develops and expands the initial idea. Not only is the Lord holy, but God is so incomparable that there is no one else even in his class. The Lord of Israel is the only true God; alone among all those worshiped as divine, Hannah's Lord and he alone is truly God. Therefore there is none to thwart God's marvelous plans; the Lord's will is always established since there is "none besides you."

To this, Hannah adds a third statement that carries her thought to its culmination. Not only is God the holy and only true God, but "there is no rock like our God" (Heb. 2:2), Hannah prays. The image of God as a rock conveys his faithfulness to protect and establish his people. The Lord is the immovable rock on whom all our hopes are safe and secure. Gordon Keddie writes, "He is the Rock in which his people can always trust, because he cannot be overthrown."<sup>8</sup>

Hannah's God-centered prayer sets a vital example for us. If we place a higher glory on the blessings that God gives than on God himself we commit idolatry, esteeming the creature above the Creator, and we engage in a folly that will ultimately spoil everything. Hannah is right: there is none holy like the Lord, none besides him, no rock like our God. Therefore, like Hannah, let it always be our chief glory and hope that we know God and have been accepted into

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<sup>8</sup> Gordon J. Keddie, *Dawn of a Kingdom: The Message of I Samuel* (Hertfordshire, UK: Evangelical Press, 1988), 32.

his loving care through the atoning ministry of his Savior-Son, Jesus Christ.

Hannah adds a fourth statement about God, couched as a rebuke to scornful mockers: “Talk no more so very proudly, let not arrogance come from your mouth; for the LORD is a God of knowledge, and by him actions are weighed” (1 Sam. 2:3). The wicked and arrogant should realize that God sees and knows all things, and knows how to respond to them all. Blaikie comments: “His eye is on every plot hatched in the darkness. He knows His faithful servants, what they aim at, what they suffer, what a strain is often put on their fidelity.”<sup>9</sup> God has a response, calculated by infinite wisdom, for every situation; God acts and permits actions in accordance with his perfect knowledge of past, present, and future, always achieving his sovereign will for his own glory and the good of his people.

When we read these two verses, we suddenly can understand this remarkable woman, Hannah. What was the source of her humble steadfastness under a great trial? What enabled her to offer her treasured son for lifelong service to the Lord? And what caused her to praise God with such beauty and power? The answer is that Hannah was absorbed with the Lord. Her heart was filled with the knowledge of God, her faith anchored on the glorious perfections of his character and attributes. This was the source not only of Hannah’s hope and joy, but also of her greatness: as the prophet Jeremiah would later put it: “let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares the LORD” (Jer. 9:24).

Let me apply this now by way of reproof to those who are little interested with God. Do you come to church primarily to meet with God among his people? Is your primary concern in a sermon its teaching about God, rather than its supposed practical value for yourself? If not, if you are little interested in God himself but only in what you can get from God, then your spiritual condition must be weak at best and perilous at worst. If we desire a faith that burns even in dark places, and a character that honors God at all times, then

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<sup>9</sup> Blaikie, *First Samuel*, 28.

let our faith be focused on the Lord himself, seeking first the kingdom of God, whom to know is eternal life. “Now this is eternal life,” Jesus declared, “that they may know you, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent” (Jn. 17:5).

## THE LORD’S SALVATION

This is not to say that Hannah did not rejoice in God’s wonderful actions on her behalf. We, too, should know and understand God’s saving works in order to love and praise him as we should. Hannah praises God for what he has done in two groups of statements. In the first section, verses 4-5, Hannah reflects on what God has done for her, seeing a general pattern in God’s salvation. Then, in verses 6-8, she praises God for his actions towards the godly and the ungodly respectively.

The key to Hannah’s first string of praises is at the end of verse 5: “The barren has borne seven, but she who has many children is forlorn.” This, of course, relates directly to Hannah’s personal situation. She who was barren is exalted, while her haughty opponent is cast down by Hannah’s blessing.

Some scholars puzzle over the statement that “the barren has borne seven,” since this was Hannah’s first child and the total number of children she would go on to bear is six (see 1 Sam. 2:21). The point, poetically expressed, is that God has thoroughly blessed the one who was barren, seven being a symbolic number for fullness of blessing (cf. Ruth 4:15). God is to be praised because he lifts up the lowly and casts down the arrogant and ungodly. Seeing this point typified in her answered prayer, Hannah joins it with other typical examples: “The bows of the mighty are broken, but the feeble bind on strength. Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread, but those who were hungry have ceased to hunger” (1 Sam. 2:4-5).

According to Hannah, God’s salvation involves a reversal of fortune in which the proud and violent are humbled and the poor and meek are exalted. This was the very message taught by Jesus: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven... Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth” (Mt. 5:3-5). God is to be praised, because in a world where it seems that the rich keep getting



richer and the poor get poorer, the Lord takes up the cause of the downcast and gives salvation to the weak.

In verses 6-8, Hannah expands her thought to God's salvation as it pertains to the ultimate issues of life and death: "The Lord kills and brings to life; he brings down to Sheol and raises up. The Lord makes poor and makes rich; he brings low and he exalts. He raises up the poor from the dust; he lifts the needy from the ash heap to make them sit with princes and inherit a seat of honor." In a world like ours, in which everyone is finally brought to death – a world where any of us can become suddenly poor, sick, needy, and lowly – how wonderful is God, who lifts his people from death and destruction.

This was the God Hannah needed in her barren desperation: the Savior of the broken, crushed, condemned, and weak, who humble themselves in faith. John Calvin wrote to his friend William Farel with a similar idea of God, when suffering grief over the death of his wife, Idelette: "May the Lord Jesus... support me... under this heavy affliction, which would certainly have overcome me, had not He, who raises up the prostrate, strengthens the weak, and refreshes the weary, stretched forth His hand from heaven to me."<sup>10</sup> Likewise, when Hannah was downcast, God lifted her head; when she was barren, he brought life to her womb; when she was disgraced, he gave her an honored place. The Lord will do the same for all who humble themselves in faith and look to him to be their God and Savior.

These reflections lead Hannah to a grand object lesson: "For the pillars of the earth are the LORD's, and on them he has set the world. He will guard the feet of his faithful ones, but the wicked shall be cut off in darkness, for not by might shall a man prevail. The adversaries of the LORD shall be broken to pieces; against them he will thunder in heaven. The LORD will judge the ends of the earth" (1 Sam. 2:8-10). God is the sovereign over all things, having created all that is and ruling over all with divine power. Those who walk before him in faithfulness find that God "will guard their feet." This is the same point as made by Psalm 121: "My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth. He will not let your foot be moved... The LORD will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life" (Ps. 121:2-3,

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<sup>10</sup> Quoted in Dale Ralph Davis, *I Samuel: Looking on the Heart* (Ross-shire, UK: Christian Focus, 2000), 19.

7). But, on the other hand, “the wicked shall be cut off in darkness,” and the Lord’s adversaries “shall be broken to pieces” as the Lord judges “the ends of the earth” (1 Sam. 2:9-10).

With this in mind, Hannah comes to the moral of her prayer, which is also the grand lesson of First and Second Samuel as a whole: “for not by might shall a man prevail,” but by the Lord. This was the lesson enshrined in Moses’ and Miriam’s song at the Red Sea crossing: “Sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously; the horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea” (Ex. 15:21). It is the lesson young David would later teach to the giant Goliath: “You come to me with a sword and with a spear and with a javelin, but I come to you in the name of the LORD of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel” (1 Sam. 17:45).

“Not by might shall a man prevail,” but by the Lord! Have you learned this lesson? Have you learned that God is the one who ultimately matters, to whom you must ultimately give account, and by whose grace alone you can hope to be saved? Have you realized that even if you succeed in climbing to the top of life’s ladder, unless you are righteous before God all must ultimately be lost, if not sooner, then in the final judgment? Have you learned that all who humble themselves and come to the Lord in faith receive from him the saving care they need, so that they may prevail in the end “not by might” but by the Lord, who shows mercy and gives grace.

## GOD’S KING AND MESSIAH

Perhaps it is because Hannah’s thought has turned to God’s judgment, in which every one of us is rightly condemned as a sinner, that she concludes her prayer with a remarkable reference to God’s king and his promised Messiah: “he will give strength to his king and exalt the power of his anointed” (1 Sam. 2:10).

This concluding mention of a king provided by God, along with God’s Messiah, which is the Hebrew word for “anointed”, highlights the importance of Hannah’s song as an introduction to the books of Samuel. Whether through some insight from the Scriptures or through the prophetic inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Hannah foresees that God intends to meet Israel’s need by providing “his king.” God

will provide a king to rule on God's behalf in true faith. The chapters that follow tell the story of the fulfillment of what Hannah prophesies here. The story of King David is that of a man who is strengthened by God as he humbly leads God's people in faith.

But the story of God's king does not stop with First and Second Samuel. For God did not intend merely to provide a godly king to rule over Israel. He further intended to "exalt the power of his anointed," that is, the Messiah. For even David, in all his glory and might, was but a picture of the true king, the true anointed one, the Messiah Jesus who would come to save God's people and rule forever in righteousness and peace.

Hannah's Song is the first direct reference in the Old Testament to God's promised *Messiah*, which in New Testament Greek is rendered as *Christ*. And how appropriate that this promise should come from Hannah's lips! Who better to foretell God's gift of his own Son to be the Savior of sinful mankind, than the woman who freely gave her firstborn son to serve the Lord and minister in God's name. Blaikie comments that here at the end of her prayer, Hannah's "son seems to give place to a higher Son, through whom the land would be blessed as no one else could have blessed it, and all hungry and thirsty souls would be guided to that living bread and living water of which whosoever ate and drank should never hunger or thirst again."<sup>11</sup>

How appropriate, as well, that Hannah's Song would find its New Testament counterpart in the song of a godly young woman so much like her, the maiden Mary, when the angel had come to foretell the birth of the promised Savior through her virgin womb. Moved by the Holy Spirit, Mary picked up Hannah's themes to glorify God in her own exaltation: "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,... for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name... He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts... and exalted those of humble estate" (Lk. 1:46-52). Hannah believed that the birth of her son portended a new day of hope for God's people. Mary realized that through her son would come the hope for all the world. For while Samuel would be great as a prophet and judge for Israel,

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<sup>11</sup> Blaikie, *First Samuel*, 35.

Jesus Christ would be exalted in power by God through his death on the cross for the forgiveness of our sins.

How else, after all, can God lift up the poor and save the condemned, except that his own Son became poor for us, and he who knew no sin was made sin “so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor. 5:21). What Hannah saw from far away has come near to us all through the coming of Jesus, the promised Messiah. It is now in his name alone that “the feeble bind on strength” (1 Sam. 2:4) through the spiritual power that Jesus gives. It is now through Jesus that “those who were hungry have ceased to hunger” (1 Sam. 2:5), since as Jesus said, “The bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world... I am the bread of life” (Jn. 6:33, 35). Therefore, whoever believes on Jesus Christ, as God’s king and Messiah, our Savior through his blood of the cross, will be made, as Hannah foresaw, to “sit with princes and inherit a seat of honor” (1 Sam. 2:8). For as Jesus taught, “whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life” (Jn. 5:24).