

*1 Samuel 1, portions of verses 1–28 (The Message)*

Elkanah, a Zuphite, had two wives: Peninnah, who had children, and Hannah, who did not. Elkanah loved Hannah and gave her more than she was due, for she lived in shame over her childlessness. Indeed, Peninnah made Hannah's life over it. Hannah's misery and sadness went on for years, until one evening over dinner, Elkanah asked her why she wasn't eating, why she was sad all the time. Wasn't he enough for her? . . .

So Hannah ate. Then she pulled herself together, slipped away quietly, and entered the sanctuary. The priest Eli was on duty at the entrance to God's Temple in the customary seat. Crushed in soul, Hannah prayed to God and cried and cried—inconsolably. Then she made a vow: "Oh, God-of-the-Angel-Armies, if you'll take a good, hard look at my pain, if you'll quit neglecting me and go into action for me by giving me a son, I'll give him completely, unreservedly to you. I'll set him apart for a life of holy discipline."

It so happened that as she continued in prayer before God, Eli was watching her closely. Hannah was praying in her heart, silently. Her lips moved, but no sound was heard. Eli jumped to the conclusion that she was drunk. He approached her and said, "You're drunk! How long do you plan to keep this up? Sober up, woman!"

Hannah said, "Oh no, sir—please! I'm a woman hard used. I haven't been drinking. Not a drop of wine or beer. The only thing I've been pouring out is my heart, pouring it out to God. Don't for a minute think I'm a bad woman. It's because I'm so desperately unhappy and in such pain that I've stayed here so long."

Eli answered her, "Go in peace. And may the God of Israel give you what you have asked of him."

"Think well of me—and pray for me!" she said, and went her way. Then she ate heartily, her face radiant.

Up before dawn, they worshiped God and returned home to Ramah. Elkanah slept with Hannah his wife, and God began making the necessary arrangements in response to what she had asked.

Before the year was out, Hannah had conceived and given birth to a son. She named him Samuel, explaining, "I asked God for him."

*Matthew 7:7-11*

<sup>7</sup>"Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. <sup>8</sup>For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. <sup>9</sup>Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone? <sup>10</sup>Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake? <sup>11</sup>If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!

*We drive down Prayer Parkway this week. What ought we to be pray for?*

*The Promised Land seems to hold little promise*

It was more than a thousand years before Jesus, and darkness had fallen across the Promised Land. For nearly 200 years, the Israelites had conquered and settled Canaan. Though God had been their king,<sup>1</sup> the generations of Israelites had been caught in a descending spiral of godlessness and violence. Unwilling to embrace and live out the covenant they had made with the LORD God, "all the people did what was right in their own eyes" (Judges 21:25). In the midst of this darkness, an Israelite woman named

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<sup>1</sup>In contrast to all the peoples around them, the Israelites at this time had no earthly king. God was to be their king. During the two hundred years or so between their entry into Canaan and the birth of Samuel, the tribes of Israel were governed by warrior leaders called judges. Samuel would be the last of the judges.

Hannah wept bitterly because she could have no children. She prayed to God that she would conceive, promising to dedicate her child to the LORD's service if God would only grant her request. Hannah did conceive, bearing a son whom she named Samuel. True to her word, when the boy was still very young, Hannah took him to be raised in the house of the LORD at Shiloh, by Eli, the priest, and his sons. She "left him there for the Lord" (1 Samuel 1:28).<sup>2</sup> This boy, the answer to a prayer, went on to be the last of Israel's judges and the first in a long line of prophets. He would anoint as king both Saul and David.<sup>3</sup>

### *The child of a prayer and a promise*

It is a bit hard for us to really engage the story of Hannah because we live in a world where childlessness doesn't carry such heart-wrenching stigma. But in the ancient

#### Samuel Judge and Prophet

Samuel would go on to be a key transitional figure in the story of Israel. He was Israel's last judge and the first in a line of prophets who would anoint the kings of Israel and, later, Judah.

The Israelites wanted a human king like other people had. In 1 Samuel 8, the tribal elders gathered to demand that Samuel appoint a king. God reassured Samuel that the people were rejecting God and not the judgeship of Samuel. Samuel brought to the people God's words of warning: they would regret that they ever asked for a king, for kings are takers. But, in the end, God relented and told Samuel to anoint a young man named Saul as Israel's first king. When Saul proved to be a big disappointment, God told Samuel to anoint David as the second king of the united Israel, even while Saul was still king.

1 Samuel 25 records Samuel's death. We are told that "all Israel assembled and mourned for him." However, in 1 Samuel 28, Saul calls Samuel's ghost back from the grave to help out in a battle against the Philistines! But Samuel reminds Saul that God has handed the kingdom to David for a reason.

world, in Hannah's world, the inability to bear a child was seen as a curse. God, or the gods, were understood to be the cause of all things, both rain and pregnancy. For example, the writer of 1 Samuel tells us, "the LORD had closed her womb" (1:6).

There are several important stories of childless women in Scripture. When God first comes to Abraham, he and his wife, Sarah, are childless and very old, far past child-bearing years. Yet God promises them descendants more numerous than the stars. They both laugh at the very idea. After a few detours, however, Sarah gets pregnant and gives birth to the beloved Isaac.

Luke begins his story of Jesus by telling us of Zechariah and Elizabeth, who are also very old and childless. While Zechariah is performing his priestly duties in the temple, an angel tells him that Elizabeth is going to give birth. Zechariah is dumbfounded and asks for proof, but is told he will, instead, be mute until the child is born. Elizabeth gives birth to a boy who will be named. His cousin? Jesus.

Hannah's story is different. God doesn't go to her. There is no angelic visit. Instead, out of desperate sadness, Hannah pours her heart out to God, telling God that she wants a boy. And she makes God a promise. If she bears this son, she will dedicate him to the LORD's service. She even promises to set him apart as a nazirite<sup>4</sup> and send him to be raised in the house of the LORD.

<sup>2</sup>I hope that you will take the time to read through the stories in the opening chapters of 1 Samuel. The stories are detailed and poignant. Imagine what it must have been like for Hannah to turn her beloved son over to Eli, knowing that she would see him only once a year – such commitment.

<sup>3</sup>On a timeline, the birth of Samuel is nearly 1100 years before Jesus.

<sup>4</sup>In Israel the nazirite was one who separated himself from others by consecration to Yahweh with a special vow. They didn't cut their hair, nor did they drink wine or even eat grapes. Typically, their period of dedication lasted for a set period though some were dedicated for life. See Numbers 6:1-21 for more.

What strikes me most about Hannah's prayer is that she straightforwardly comes to God and tell God what she wants. Her heart is broken yet she still pours it out to God. It would be a little (or a lot!) foolish to hold back, for God knows what is on our hearts even before we say it. Indeed, God probably knows better what is in our hearts than we do.

I'm also struck by her bargaining with God: if you, God, do  $x$ , then I promise to do  $y$ . I suspect that nearly all of us have made similar promises in the course of our lives. It is honest of the writer to tell the story in this way. What sets Hannah apart from too many of my own promises to God is that she actually follows through. She gives birth to a son, names him Samuel, and then she prepares to send him off to a life without her. When Samuel was off the breast, Hannah took him to Eli and the LORD's sanctuary. She told Eli, "For this child I prayed; and the LORD has granted me the petition that I made to him. Therefore I have lent him to the LORD; as long as he lives, he is given to the LORD." We're told, "She left him there for the LORD" (1 Sam. 1:27-28). How it must have pained her, yet she offered up a prayer that became one of Israel's national prayers of thanksgiving. You can read it in 1 Samuel 2.

### *My heart's desire*

Today's passage from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount in the gospel of Matthew reminds us that the heart of prayer is the request. Prayer begins with expressing our heart's desire to God. Plainly, simply, without any self-censoring.

Sometimes I find myself posturing before God. I know what is on my heart and mind, but I hesitate to voice it, sensing that my simple request is too mundane, even unchristian. Yet Jesus urges us toward a childlike trust in God, voicing to God our desires. Hungry? Ask for food. Thirsty? Ask for a drink. Anxious? Ask for peace. Ill? Ask for healing. God knows my heart's desire better than I do, so why hold back? There is simply no point in worrying that my prayers reveal my true heart.

But, you might ask, aren't we then giving in to our self-centeredness? If we always pray as children, then the answer is yes. Children are driven by self-focus. I've raised three boys and I learned that one of the biggest and most important challenges was helping them to outgrow their self-centeredness.

As we grow in Christian maturity, we still take our heart's desires to God, but we find that it is our hearts that are changing. It is as if our heart's desires become more closely aligned with the desires of God's heart. Our requests change. And for many, prayer becomes less a list of petitions and more a time of companionship.

### *Taking it all to God*

The book of psalms is a prayer book. In it we find "joys and concerns." We hear prayers of thanksgiving and praise. But by Eugene Peterson's count, two-thirds of the psalms are laments, prayers taken to God when it hurts.

A few years ago, I wrote about our family's joy when we learned that our daughter-in-law was pregnant. God heard lots from my happy heart on that day. But not long after, we learned that Courtney and Matt had lost the baby. God heard from me about that too. All my sorrow, concern, sadness, and even anger were heaped on God. Did you ever get angry and then take it out on the nearest loved one available? Sometimes I think that is how it is with God. All my bundled feelings and thoughts were directed at God. And God took them. God can take it all . . . and then came my beloved grandson, Nate.

Even a quick trip through the psalms reveal that the psalmists took it all to God. If they were angry with God, they told him so. If they were thankful, the same. They poured out their joys to God, as well as their pain. God knows your heart better than you do. Pray out your whole heart. Hold nothing back.

## Samuel's call to ministry – and our own

1 Samuel 3 tells the wonderful and very detailed story of God calling the young Samuel to his prophetic ministry. Hannah had promised to dedicate Samuel to the service of the LORD . . . and the LORD accepted. Here's a brief retelling.

One evening, the boy is sleeping in the tent sanctuary<sup>1</sup> near the ark of the covenant when he is awakened by a voice. Thinking that he has been called by Eli, Samuel hops up and runs to Eli's room. But Eli, probably thinking that the boy has been dreaming, tells Samuel to go to bed. It happens a second time and, again, Eli sends the boy back to bed (if you are a parent, you can picture this). Samuel is awakened yet a third time and this time, Eli seems to realize that something big is going on. Eli tells Samuel to go back and say to the LORD, "Here I am, for you called me" (3:8).

And so God calls the boy Samuel to a life of ministry, saying, "See, I am about to do something that will make both ears of anyone who hears it tingle," for God would let none of Samuel's words "fall to the ground" unheard. The young boy would grow to be the one who would lead Israel from the darkness of the judges to the seeming hopefulness of the first kings.

What a wonderful story of God's call. Of course, we need to realize that God's call is not restricted to a voice in the night. Sometimes, we might think that God's call is restricted to those who are called to the ministry of the ordained. The truth is that we are all called to ministry and we are all called to grow in our ministry. This does not mean that we are called to be ordained, or work for a church, but it does mean that we must all examine our priorities and ask ourselves what we are doing every day to advance the kingdom of God.

<sup>1</sup>At this time, the Ark was still kept inside a tent sanctuary. The permanent temple in Jerusalem would not be built until the reign of Solomon, well on the other side of the transition led by Samuel.

## Questions for Discussion and Reflection

Nearly all of us have at least some experience with prayer. How many of us have not, at one time or another, like Hannah, attempted some sort of bargain with God? . . . *Dear God, if you'll only do this one thing for me, then I promise that I will [insert empty promise of choice]. . .*

Hannah's prayer, her petition, is answered as she expected and hoped it would be answered. Yet we can all attest to the fact that this is not the case all the time. How many of us have not been disappointed by seemingly unanswered prayers? . . . *the job does not materialize; our loved one does not recover.*

A young woman in one of my classes once said to me, "Of all the things we Christians claim, the hardest one for me to believe is that the creator of the universe listens to me . . . to me." Truly, it does seem almost incomprehensible. Too quickly, we conclude that our prayers are "unanswered" because God isn't really listening . . . *surely, he has larger matters at hand . . .* or because our faith is inadequate . . . *if I were only a better Christian, God would answer.* God *does* listen. God *does* answer.

What can we take away from this story of Hannah that will inform and shape our own prayer lives? You might discuss times when you've poured out your heart to God, specifically. Were your prayers answered as you hoped they would be? Discuss your own experiences with "unanswered" prayer. It won't be easy, but try to recall specific occasions when you felt that your prayers were to no avail. How can we come to trust God much as we would a loving parent, who is eager to listen and sure to answer? How can we come to handle the idea that we often pray from our own will, not God's will? How can we go about better conforming our own will to God's? How can we become better at accepting the idea that we don't always know what is best for us, much less for others? Prayer is a relationship with God that, together, we develop over time. As our relationship with God grows, as our trust deepens, we find that more and more we want what God wants for us. We come to understand that God always listens, always cares, and God always answers!

## *Daily Bible Readings*

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p><b>Monday, 1 Samuel 2:1-10</b> Hannah's prayer of thanksgiving</p>	<p><b>Tuesday, Psalm 66</b> "But truly God has listened; he has given heed to the words of my prayer" (v.19)</p>
<p><b>Wednesday, 2 Corinthians 1:3-11</b> The blessings of God. In v. 11, Paul refers to the answering of prayers offered up by many.</p>	<p><b>Thursday, 1 John 3:18-24</b> We can be bold in our prayers because we are obedient. Obedience to God (loving God and others!) is much more a part of the Christian life than we sometimes imagine!</p>
<p><b>Friday, 1 Samuel 3:1-4:1a</b> God calls Samuel. This is too good a story to pass up!</p>	<p><b>Prayers of Joy and Concern</b></p>

