

Hannah: Heroine in the Faith

1 Samuel 1:1-20

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The lot of women has never been easy in this broken world. Circumstances change, civilizations come and go, handy technological advances like washing machines and cell phones and even drive-thru lanes in fast food eateries come onto the scene—but it seems never to be easy for women. It seems a woman just can't win.

Life was painful for Hannah. She lived in maybe the eleventh century before Christ; we just heard in nine different ways how she was “deeply distressed,” “deeply troubled,” sad of heart, weeping and miserable. In her culture it was considered a disgrace for a woman of child-bearing age not to bear children. She's married to a good man, Elkanah, who loves her for who she is. He doesn't seem to care that she isn't getting pregnant—he simply wants her to be happy.

That's not so easy for Hannah when Elkanah's other wife Penninah has no problem popping out babies, then keeps belittling Hannah about the obvious discrepancy. Every time Hannah would try to go off quietly to pray here are Penninah's children wanting her to play “hide and seek,” wanting to jump in her lap, crying, shouting. There's no place Hannah could go to escape her “provoking”—Penninah's constant trash talking about the sore point that Hannah has no kids.

Well, there was one place. The family kept making the trek to the temple at Shiloh for the annual time of worship. One year, when she could stand her grief and her predicament no longer, Hannah did something altogether different. In the temple she sat right down in one of the pews, totally bypassing the priest in charge, Eli, and she poured out her heart to the LORD. This unauthorized kind of prayer gets Eli's attention, alright—and he accuses her of being drunk. She begins to think she just can't win.

Times change; cultures and worldviews change. Few even a decade ago would have believed how the pendulum has swung in the West—where now in some circles, even for all the talk about “choice,”

women are scorned if they do choose to bear and then raise children. In 2006 Dutch MP (a member of the Parliament of the Netherlands) Sharon Dijksma proposed fining all educated women who chose to “waste” their education on raising their children instead of going out to compete and earn money. “A highly educated woman who chooses to stay at home and not to work—that is destruction of capital,” Dijksma wrote in “Forum” magazine. Mothers are derided for “wasting their brains” if they chose to invest their time and their lives in raising the next generation. (Apparently Dutch mothers were not consulted.) A suburban, well-educated woman relates the following:

“I found myself in our Town Hall. The Clerk was obviously a career woman, poised, efficient, and possessed of a high-sounding title like “Official Interrogator” or “Town Registrar.” “What is your occupation?” she probed. What made me say it, I do not know. The words simply popped out. “I'm a Research Associate in the field of Child Development and Human Relations.” The clerk paused, ball-point pen frozen in mid-air, and looked up as though she had not heard right. I repeated the title slowly, emphasizing the most significant words. Then I stared with wonder as my pompous pronouncement was written in bold, black ink on the official questionnaire.

“Might I ask,” said the clerk with new interest, “just what you do in your field?” Coolly, without any trace of fluster in my voice, I heard myself reply, “I have a continuing program of research (what mother doesn't) in the laboratory and in the field (normally I would have said indoors and outdoors). I'm working for my Masters (that would be the whole darn family) and already have four credits (all of them daughters.) Of course, the job is one of the most demanding in the humanities (would any mother care to disagree?) and I often work 14 hours a day (24 is more like it!) But the job is more challenging than most run-of-the-mill careers, and the rewards are in satisfaction rather than just money.”

There was an increasing note of respect in the clerk's voice as she completed the form, stood up, and personally ushered me to the door. As I drove into our driveway buoyed up by my glamorous new career, I was greeted by my lab assistants—ages 13, 7, and 3. And I could hear upstairs our new experimental model (6 months) in the child development program, testing out a new vocal pattern. I felt triumphant. I had scored one on the bureaucracy. And I had gone down on the official records as someone more distinguished and indispensable to mankind than “just another mother...”

Neither Hannah nor our own grandmothers would understand what was going on in that interchange at City Hall—that any woman would ever feel demeaned for being “just another mother.” Sometimes it seems women just can't win.

(Maybe you've heard of the teacher who taught her 2nd grade class, during science, about the magnet and its properties. Next day the quiz contained this question: “My name has six letters. The first letter is “M” and I pick things up. What am I?” The teacher had to laugh when half the class answered “Mother.” They were correct.)

Or maybe you've read some of these questions purportedly asked of second graders about their mothers:

Q “Why did God give you your mom and not some other mom?”

A “We're related.”

A “God knew she likes me a lot more than other people's moms like me.”

Q “What does your mom do in her spare time?”

A “Mothers don't do spare time.”

A “To hear her tell it, she pays bills all day long.”

Q “What's the difference between moms and dads?”

A “Dads are taller and stronger, but moms have all the real power 'cause that's who you got to ask if you want to sleep over at your friend's.”

A “Moms have magic; they make you feel better without medicine.”

It's ironic that those women who choose to

bear and raise children are now looked down upon, with more or less subtlety, in the lands in which the Christian gospel has been understood. It is in Western Europe and in the United States where women and children have most benefited from the worldview of Jesus: “for those baptized into Christ, there is no longer male nor female, slave nor free, Jew nor Greek.” [Galatians 3:28] Progress has been, of course, too slow and uneven in coming—until 1922, women in the U.S. could not vote. Until the 1960's most professional women were limited to choices of being teachers, nurses, or secretaries. Each was and is a most honorable calling—but it's also nice when women are able to choose from among options.

Today there are more young women than young men qualified and admitted to almost every one of the colleges to which our children are now applying. The number of women in graduate school for law, medicine, and ministry, I read, now exceeds the number of men. A woman may choose to raise children and pursue a career, to marry or not marry, to marry and not have children, to have children and not marry. In large measure, women in the West where the gospel has taken root have achieved a kind of equality of opportunity and freedom still unavailable to women in other parts of the world. (A common frustration among many American moms today is feeling perpetually tired from not “having it all” but “having to do it all”—juggle a career and a family and still do most of the cleaning and shopping and driving and cooking.) Sometimes it seems women just can't win.

Worldviews about women and children and families matter—but some bear little fruit. You may be aware that Russia, in which the Christian faith was essentially outlawed for two recent generations, is now bearing the consequence of that worldview. Russia, the nation, is now losing 700,000 people per year; the equivalent of the population of Baltimore or San Francisco—vanishing every 12 months. Its population of 142 million today is expected to drop to 52 million by the year 2080 [that can't be good for housing prices.]

Their Government recognizes this demographic cataclysm in the making (How will they maintain their army, defend their borders to the south? How will they support their many elderly with so relatively few

productive workers?) So the Government is trying to “incentivize” people to have children, as some other Western European nations are also attempting—but trying to spend money will not solve the problem because the problem is a spiritual one. The problem is a loss of hope in the future. (Russia is not alone: every nation in Western Europe which shares the secular worldview downgrading the importance of families and mothers and children faces the same dilemma—below replacement level fertility. Germany, for example, will lose the equivalent of the entire population of East Germany between 2009 and mid-century, 2050. Some, of course, believing people are the earth’s biggest problem, are happy about this implosion. But many are also very concerned—those who recognize people as our most critical resource. Europe is running out. (Other worldviews and religions and continents, of course, are not—but that’s a discussion for another time.)

Any culture is in trouble when it devalues a strong commitment to family and to nurturing the next generation; of course mothers are at the center of this commitment. The issue, in the end, is not whether women choose to work outside the home or inside it—but how we all invest our labors and our lives in intimate and ongoing relationships; how we all turn over our emptiness and our sadness and our lack of hope in the future to the living God as Hannah did.

She made an inspired response back there near Shiloh just over 3000 years ago (!) as she coped with her own personal demographic crisis. She did not abandon hope in the future; she did not abandon hope in the living God. Yes, she felt miserable; at least one of her primary ongoing relationships was very hurtful to her. Clearly she was not getting what she had longed for; year after year, her life felt unfulfilled.

She just couldn’t win—until she decided to go up to the house of the Lord and pour out her heart before God. In spite of the rules against praying in such a vulnerable way; in spite of the fact that she would be bypassing the normal course of temple affairs. And she would call attention to herself—the last thing she wanted.

But Hannah got that desperate. What did she

have to lose? (Have you ever felt that desperate?) She prayed and prayed. Interesting: she did not ask to have a baby so she wouldn’t have to listen to Penninah’s yapping any more or so she could hold her head up when she went to the well each day to fetch the water with the other women standing around. She did not ask to feel better (though that would be understandable and theologically appropriate.)

She petitioned God to give her something she could then offer right back to God. She offered to God the life of any male baby God might grant her. She promised to raise a boy as a “nazirite”—to be especially raised as a servant of God. In fact, if she should be granted a baby, no sooner would she nurse and begin to wean him than she would give him away forever—to be raised by the priests at this temple at Shiloh.

Hannah understood something of both the joy and the anguish of being a mother: to give herself up and sacrifice something costly for her child—for the next generation—for the common good—only to have the child leave her again somehow empty and bereft. (Whether the child is three or twenty-three—the time goes so very quickly.) We know she was granted a boy baby; she named him “Samuel,” “the one named after God,” and “the one asked for of God.” You may know Samuel became the most prominent priest of Israel; in fact it was Samuel whom God granted the authority to anoint the first king of Israel, Saul, and then King David. Hannah’s prayer and sacrifice changed human history.

I love the fact that Hannah trusted in God and felt a deep peace before she could know her prayer was answered at all. In the midst of her despond, remember, she prayed her desperate “unauthorized” prayer in that sanctuary and earned the reproach of Eli the priest. Her trust in God to answer her prayer translated into an unbelievable boldness to speak sharply even to Eli: “Do not regard your servant as a worthless woman, sir; I have been speaking out of the depths of my grief and my misery all this time.” [v 16b, REB] Her daring earns his respect, and he readily blesses her: “Go in peace; may the God of Israel answer your prayer.” [v 17]

Nothing has changed for Hannah, at least on the outside, yet she herself is totally changed. She

still has the sniping of Penninah and her children to look forward to every day; she is not pregnant and has no human reason to expect to get pregnant; she still has to face the other women at the well every morning—but after the blessing of Eli and some supper with her husband, “her countenance was no longer sad.” [v 18] She feels totally different on the inside although nothing at all has yet changed on the outside. (Chapter 2 of 1 Samuel records the song of her rejoicing heart.)

Hannah may have something to teach a lot of American women. Some of us have read, and all of us been impacted by, Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique*. (By 1970, 5 million copies had been sold.) Her anecdotal research uncovered a widespread emptiness felt by millions of American women in the 1950’s and 60’s—but many of whom were mothers. Friedan identified “the problem that has no name”—a sense of many well-educated women who felt bored and depressed for a reason they couldn’t specify.

The author identified the syndrome: many of these graduates of Smith College and others did not have any larger purpose to their lives. Alcoholism had become a problem to many. Doctors prescribed tranquilizers to sedate the ennui of housewives. Even then, many pursued more “things,” glamour, affairs. A lot of bridge got played. Some had babies to somehow feel useful when all else failed. One theme recurred: “When do I get to be me?”

[According to historian James Hitchcock and others] This malaise coincided with the sense of “self-actualization” following World War II. If “self-actualization” requires social, external validation, it’s easy to understand how the value of the daily duties of being a mom could be reduced to the drudgery of the tasks alone. One expert of the time helpfully observed, “most housework can be capably handled by an eight-year-old child.” (Believe me, I’m no fan of unnecessary housework—nor, sometimes, of necessary housework—and I don’t doubt it could be stultifying, brain-numbing to do year in and year out. But let’s face it: most people who hang drywall year after year, or change your oil, or who work at the gym cleaning all those towels, or for that matter who read all the small print at the end of business

contracts for their clients or travel to China back and forth for business do not think the actual tasks they perform are all that exciting. Many if not most do this work for the sake of their families.)

If *The Feminine Mystique* identified the problem—lives which feel unfulfilling—I think it prescribed a mistaken solution. Hannah knew better. Betty Friedan’s answer was that women must use their education and intelligence outside the home in order to have worthwhile and fulfilling lives, which meant working primarily in careers. Family commitments were seen as add-ons.

The real solution, however, to women “leading lives of quiet desperation” will not be found in the corporate office any more than in the nursery. As long as we expect our satisfaction to come from chasing our own self-fulfillment apart from the will of God, there can only be disappointment. (In 1950 34% of women were in the workforce; by 2000 more than 60% were working outside the home and many had delayed marriage and decided not to have children. Are they so much happier than those who “stayed home” in the 50’s?) Recent data suggests many professional women who can afford to do so are today choosing to return home to invest themselves in their families—but I’m afraid their homes will not necessarily prove any more fulfilling for them than the corporate office did. Any woman who lives only for and through her children or husband is living in a house bound to fall down around her.

But this is not just a woman’s problem, or a problem of motherhood. This is a problem which has existed since the sad story in the Garden of Eden: we all live in a broken world, and as long as we remain separated from God and each other, we will not experience the fulfillment for which we yearn. We will not experience the wholeness for which God created us.

We just can’t win—none of us can—when we try to live unto ourselves for our own pleasures and convenience, try to fill our own needs—without reference to God. Neither home nor career nor even kids will ever fill the emptiness inside; “our souls are restless until they find their rest in Thee, O God.”

We just can’t win? Hannah shows us otherwise.

Some of you remember the story of Sir Christopher

Wren, the architect who designed London's magnificent St Paul's Cathedral. Inspecting the construction site, he asked an accomplished stone mason what he was working on. "I am chiseling gargoyles," the mason responded with irritation. Wren asked a skilled glazier what he was doing. "I am making the finest stained glass windows," he answered with arrogance. Sir Christopher Wren then asked a young lad sweeping the ground what he was doing. "I, sir, am working on a great cathedral which will bring glory to God for generations to come."

How much more those of you who are raising, or have raised children of your own or others in whom the Holy Spirit can abide—living temples to bring glory to God.

Blessed are you who offer yourselves, one to another, in covenant bonds.

Blessed are you who bear and raise children, investing yourselves in the long process of cultivating the Church's most valued resource.

Blessed are you who recognize that every task or job or career to which God calls you may be undertaken to the glory of God.

Blessed are you who wait in hope, calling out to the God who hears your prayers.

1 Samuel 1:1-20

There was a certain man of Ramathaim... whose name was Elkanah son of Jeroham son of Elihu son of Tohu son of Zuph, an Ephraimite. He had two wives; the name of the one was Hannah, and the name of the other Peninnah. Peninnah had children, but Hannah had no children.

Now this man used to go up year by year from his town to worship and to sacrifice to the LORD of hosts at Shiloh, where the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were priests of the LORD. On the day when Elkanah sacrificed, he would give portions to his wife Peninnah and to all her sons and daughters; but to Hannah he gave a double portion, because he loved her, though the LORD had closed her womb.

Her rival used to provoke her severely, to irritate her, because the LORD had closed her womb.

So it went on year by year; as often as she went up to the house of the LORD, she used to provoke her. Therefore Hannah wept and would not eat. Her husband Elkanah said to her, "Hannah, why do you weep? Why do you not eat? Why is your heart sad? Am I not more to you than ten sons?"

After they had eaten and drunk at Shiloh, Hannah rose and presented herself before the LORD. Now Eli the priest was sitting on the seat beside the doorpost of the temple of the LORD. She was deeply distressed and prayed to the LORD, and wept bitterly. She made this vow: "O LORD of hosts, if only you will look on the misery of your servant, and remember me, and not forget your servant, but will give to your servant a male child, then I will set him before you as a nazirite until the day of his death. He shall drink neither wine nor intoxicants, and no razor shall touch his head."

As she continued praying before the LORD, Eli observed her mouth. Hannah was praying silently; only her lips moved, but her voice was not heard; therefore Eli thought she was drunk. So Eli said to her, "How long will you make a drunken spectacle of yourself? Put away your wine." But Hannah answered, "No, my lord, I am a woman deeply troubled; 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 I have been speaking out of my great anxiety and vexation all this time." Then Eli answered, "Go in peace; the God of Israel grant the petition you have made to him." And she said, "Let your servant find favor in your sight." Then the woman went to her quarters, ate and drank with her husband, and her countenance was sad no longer.

They rose early in the morning and worshiped before the LORD; then they went back to their house at Ramah. Elkanah knew his wife Hannah, and the LORD remembered her. In due time Hannah conceived and bore a son. She named him Samuel, for she said, "I have asked him of the LORD."

May 10, 2009 (Mother's Day)