

# **Truth for Today**

*The Bible teaching radio programme*

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## **Bible Women: Hannah - Faithful in prayer**

About twenty years ago I, along with some other colleagues from the school where I was teaching, walked with some eight and nine year old children to a main road about a mile away. As it was a reasonable day, nobody really minded the walk, least of all the children, for whom it was a release from the routine of the classroom. The object of the exercise was to greet the Duke of Edinburgh as he passed along the road in the official limousine. The children had been informed of the reason for his visit, which was to open a museum in the immediate locality. Some, who did not know anything about him, had been told of his relationship to the Queen and shown some pictures of what he looked like in order that they might recognise him. We stood along the kerbside waiting excitedly for the police car that would signal his approach. When this was seen, all the children looked with eager anticipation at the Rolls-Royce motor car, bearing the royal standard, in order to get their first view of royalty. When the driver saw children assembled along the pavement, obviously waiting to greet his Royal Highness, he slowed the car down to a crawl so that the Duke could wave to them. Unfortunately we, the teachers, had omitted to tell our pupils that he would be sitting in the rear of the car! For the majority of the children it did not matter because they were able to recognise the person in the rear of the car as the Duke of Edinburgh due to our diligent preparation. For a few, however, the trip was wasted because they were looking at the driver and giving him the benefit of their vigorous flag waving! The reason for this is that their families did not possess a car and when they were given a ride in one they realised that the best place to sit was in the front. They just could not imagine anyone with power choosing to sit in the back. Further to that, the man in the front had a peaked cap and a uniform. He must therefore, have been the most important. All in all, they had misread the signs and come to a wrong conclusion.

Today's study from Scripture starts off with a man, who saw some signs and totally misread them, jumping to a conclusion that was unfair and devastatingly inaccurate. If we turned to the 1 Samuel 1 we could read there, in verses 9-14, that Hannah, a wife of Elkanah, was fervently praying in the Temple at Shiloh. The theme of her prayer was her great desire for a son. Unfortunately the priest, whose name was Eli, did not recognise that she was praying and criticised her because her lips were moving but no sound could be heard. As far as he was concerned, she was drunk, a condition that brought a strong rebuke from Eli. These verses introduce us to Hannah, the mother of Samuel, the great leader and kingmaker of the children of Israel. Our talk this morning centres on this lady and her faithfulness in prayer.

We first read about Hannah, as we have said, in 1 Samuel 1. Here we find that Hannah was one of two wives of Elkanah. The other wife had children, but Hannah had none, though it was her dearest wish to have a child. What I want us to notice from this passage of Scripture is the glaring fact of the departure from the biblical norm of one man, one wife, that we believe is the divine ordinance. The Bible treats the world as it is and makes statements regarding some of its major players showing them warts and all, to quote a saying attributed to Cromwell, but mention does not mean approval.

From the verses that follow, we can see something of the sorrow that this brought to Hannah. The scripture simply states that the rival wife provoked her, yet within those words we begin to get the taste of the bitterness of heart that such a status produced in Hannah. It would seem that some of the people of God, at this time, had adopted the customs of the surrounding nations, one of which was a departure from the practice of monogamy. We, at Truth for Today, along with the majority of Christians subscribe to the ordinance of Christian marriage and firmly believe in the sanctity of this state.

The context of the prayer that we shall read in a few moments is a yearly visit to the Tabernacle tent at Shiloh. We do well to note the custom of Elkanah of regularly visiting the Tabernacle on one of the great feast days. It was probably the Feast of Tabernacles, and in this case it would be a yearly visit, where sacrifices would be offered to the LORD. Christians, in twenty-first century England, have the opportunity to offer the sacrifice of praise at least once a week on the Lord's Day.

The writer to the Hebrews urges his fellow Christians not to forsake assembling themselves together. Personally, I am a great believer in being together for communal prayer. Obviously, there are many times when it is impossible for us to be with other Christians to pray. Paul and the other apostles make it plain that they prayed often when they were alone. The Lord Jesus, in His teaching in the Gospels, tells His disciples to close the door when they pray, so that

their Father in heaven, who sees them in secret, will reward them openly. Yet, despite these Scriptures, that give us guidance regarding prayer, there are also those Scriptures that suggest there are other times when prayer is something we can do when we gather together with our fellow believers. My point, in all of this, is to impress upon our hearts the serious need to be at the prayer meeting, whenever it is organised.

Hannah had an acute sense of what she wanted. She did not hesitate to make that request known to God. I am of the opinion that if we do not pray regularly with the Christians in our fellowships and congregations, then it's doubtful whether we pray at all. I want to read verses nine and ten of chapter one of first Samuel in order for us to see Hannah's attitude as she made her request known to God: 'So Hannah rose up early after they had eaten in Shiloh, and after they had drunk. Now Eli the priest sat upon a seat by a post of the temple of the LORD. And she was in bitterness of soul, and prayed unto the LORD, and wept sore.'

If these words portray anything to us, they portray a lady in earnest. This was no trivial matter but something of great importance. Her whole being was involved in the prayer that she made to God. It seems to me that Hannah had reached the point when she was convinced that the only power available to alter her status, by giving her the gift of new life in the form of a baby, was God. We should not be surprised if there are many who do not understand, or even sympathise, with our desire to pray. Our world is increasingly concerned with material things and tends to regard those who pray as rather odd.

There are two historical details I wish to make at this point in our talk, the first of which is in verse 9 where it was written that Eli was sitting on a seat by a post in the temple. I only want us to notice that the Tabernacle had now found a more or less permanent resting-place in the land. We know that, on rare occasions, the tent, along with the furniture, would be removed to such places as Bethel, but its regular home was Shiloh. It was Joshua who pitched the sacred tent there, thus making it the religious centre of Israel during the period of the Judges. The fact that Eli was on a seat by a post would suggest that there was a building, probably of stone that surrounded the Tabernacle. It was to this embryonic temple that Elkanah brought his wives to offer sacrifices. It was here that Hannah demonstrated her fervent desire for the blessing of God.

The second point I wish to make regarding these early verses is in verse eleven. 'And she vowed a vow, and said, O LORD of hosts, if thou wilt indeed look on the affliction of thy handmaid, and remember me, and not forget thine handmaid, but wilt give unto thine handmaid a man child, then I will give him unto the LORD all the days of his life, and there shall no razor come upon his head.'

This is the second time in Scripture that God is addressed as the LORD of hosts, the first time being in verse 3 when Elkanah went up to Shiloh to sacrifice to the LORD Almighty, or LORD of hosts. In drawing attention to this, I simply want us to be aware of the great difference there is between the state of the people of God, at the beginning of the book of Samuel, compared to their state at the end. Samuel records how the nation was formed and established a new centre for worshipping God at Jerusalem. It also records how the great king David prepared gold, silver, precious stones and every other artefact that was needed to build a temple to worship God. As a further illustration, I would remind you that David went to battle against Goliath, not protected with armour plate, but simply in the name of the LORD of hosts. My point is that it was the LORD Almighty who did this.

The Bible would tell us that it is only when the almighty power of God is working in His people that great things are achieved. Hannah seems to be one of the first people to have grasped the truth of this new name. She certainly demonstrates this when she addresses God as the LORD of hosts and then asks for what seemed improbable in the natural realm. We, too, have had a revelation of the mighty power of God demonstrated to us in the resurrection of Jesus from amongst the dead. Do we act upon that in our prayers as Hannah did in hers? She was certain that God could help her if He so willed!

These early verses also point out another important truth that is exemplified in Hannah. We noticed that verse ten told us that she was in bitterness of soul. How important it is that such bitterness, or discontent, resulted in the positive action of prayer! It would have been easy for Hannah to blame God in her disappointment. That bitterness of soul could have eaten into her personality, turning her into a complaining grouch, constantly feeling sorry for herself. Instead she lays it before the living God, trusting that He would answer. So confident was she that God had the power that she began to bargain with Him. This is not to say that we should try to strike bargains with God, in the same manner that Hannah did, but it would be good if we, in the church in 2004, had the same confidence in the power of God to change things.

Speaking personally, weeping prayers are not part of my normal practice. It is a salient and sobering thought, however, to recall that the writer of Hebrews states that such were the Lord's prayers. We can find this in the fifth chapter of that letter and verse seven: 'Who in the days of his flesh, when he had offered up prayers and supplications with strong crying and tears unto him that was able to save him from death, and was heard in that he feared'.

I do not wish to probe the meaning of such a verse, only rather to notice the attitude of the Lord Jesus as He lived in this world. There was much in His attitude, as He prayed, that was similar to Hannah at Shiloh.

When it says in verse ten that she prayed unto the LORD, it literally means that she prayed in His presence. This is something that we all know in theory but it is something that we never ought to forget in actual practice. The confidence we have by addressing God in the name of the Lord Jesus should not remove the reverence due to Him. Neither should the reverence quench our understanding of His desire to answer our prayers. Sadly, for Hannah, Eli was not used to silent prayers which led him into the error of misreading her nearness to God as drunkenness. Again we can turn to the New Testament for an incident where others committed the same error as Eli. This time it is in the book of Acts when the disciples began to speak and preach after the Holy Spirit had descended upon them. The onlookers could not accept that God was active, blaming the manifestation of the power of God upon the effects of new wine. In Eli's case, there was less excuse for the misunderstanding. He was God's chief priest and should have been sensitive to the poor and weak of the flock. He had little excuse for not recognising the outpouring of an earnest heart. I can recall a sad incident when a man, young in the faith, and young in years, prayed audibly in a prayer meeting. It seems hardly credible now, but a leading member of the fellowship criticised the phrases of the young man's prayers. That action, to my mind, is worse than misreading the signs. Please let none of us be guilty of such error.

I want now to move on to chapter two to examine the prayer of Hannah when she realises that her requests had been answered by God. I will read these verses in a few moments, but before doing so, let us notice the fact that Hannah thanked God for answered prayer. I trust that, likewise, we are just as quick to give thanks for all the Lord has done for us, especially if it is the result of a specific request. It is easy to be a forgetful people when we have been blessed in some particular way - to be caught up with the blessing only to forget the One who blesses. The last verse of the fortieth chapter of Genesis illustrates just what I mean: 'Yet did not the chief butler remember Joseph, but forgot him.' This was after Joseph interpreted the butler's dream and asked him to try to get his case heard before Pharaoh. Unfortunately, this did not happen, due to the butler's forgetfulness. When Hannah had her prayer answered she gave to God the praise of a grateful heart.

This prayer of homage and thanksgiving is found in the first ten verses of the second chapter of the first book of Samuel, though I am only quoting verses one to three at this time: 'And Hannah prayed, and said, My heart rejoiceth in the LORD, mine horn is exalted in the LORD: my mouth is enlarged over mine enemies; because I rejoice in thy salvation. There is none holy as the LORD: for there is none beside thee: neither is there any rock like unto our God. Talk no more so exceeding proudly; let not arrogancy come out of your mouth: for the LORD is a God of knowledge, and by him actions are weighed.'

These verses tell us that Hannah had been brought to appreciate something of the character of God, and it is upon this knowledge gained by her that I want to dwell for the next few minutes.

The verses we have quoted, from the second chapter of Samuel, are often referred to as the 'Song of Hannah'. This is perhaps an aspect of prayer that we seldom experience. She poured out, from her heart, a torrent of praise that forms a wonderful recitation of her understanding of God. Far too often my prayers are a list of requests regarding persons and their needs or of the work of the Lord's servants. I am not saying that that is wrong for we ought to be concerned with the God's people and their needs in this world. We ought, also, to be concerned with the sorrowful and with those who are suffering. There ought to be time, though, to concentrate on the greatness of God in the way that Hannah did. In the first two verses, her expression of grateful praise encompasses her mind, mouth and strength. It is easy to slide into repetition in our prayers, even if they are extemporaneous. Hannah uses all that she knows of God to give Him thanks for answered prayer. Notice in verse two how she is now persuaded that God is beyond compare and peerless in holiness and strength. Her faithfulness in prayer is a product of her understanding of the Lord's intrinsic greatness.

As her prayer continues to move onward, and upward, we are allowed to glimpse a little of Hannah's comprehension of the capability of God to bring untold blessing into her life. Her great delight, however, is expressed in the first lines of her song. 'My heart rejoiceth in the LORD' is the height and depth of human experience of God. Through all time God has revealed Himself to those who, through grace, have eyes to see. Christians believe that in Christ we have the most perfect expression of the Father's love and that love was shown to us in all its fullness at the cross. When we hear His call to faith and discipleship, we do not follow Him for what we can get out of it. Rather do we, like Hannah, follow Him because our heart rejoices in the Lord! To encounter God in daily life is the most majestic and sublime experience that mortal man can ever know.

Before we finish our time together this morning, I want to point to another verse of Hannah's song, where what she says is in one sense prophetic. The verse in mind is number eight. 'He raiseth up the poor out of the dust, and lifteth up the beggar from the dunghill, to set them among princes, and to make them inherit the throne of glory: for the pillars of the earth are the LORD'S, and he hath set the world upon them.'

The complete fulfilment of these verses needed the victory of the Lord Jesus. We know that He has promised to take us to the place where He now is. That is the perfect accomplishment of setting the beggar amongst princes.

There are two lessons that we can learn from Hannah, both of which concern prayer. Whatever our needs, we can tell them to God for, as the apostle Peter tells us, He careth for us. We must, however, distinguish between our needs and our wants. Secondly, whether He answers us directly, as He did for Hannah, or whether we have to wait, we can still glory in thanksgiving and praise for the fact that we know Him. We ought also to express our thanks with the same high language and thoughts as used by Hannah.

So there we have it. The song and prayers of this spiritual lady are there on the pages of Scripture to help us grasp the fact that God will act in sovereign power. Hannah shines like a bright star in the darkness of a winter sky. In a time of spiritual declension, she demonstrates that the most humble of people can be granted a view of God that is imposing and impressive. She articulates that view in language that has stood the test of time and the changing fashions of man. For her faithfulness in prayer alone, she can be numbered with those who claim the honourable title of a true mother in Israel. May we all seek, like her, to be faithful in prayer!

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