

*Heroes of the Faith Series*

**Seeing and Perceiving**

**Hannah**

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# Heroes of the Faith

## Hannah

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**E**VER FELT totally barren, and lacking in fruitfulness? If so, what do you do with those feelings? The amazing woman we are going to be looking at today determined to seek the Lord with all her heart. Equally as amazing, a priest, who should have known better, got hold of the wrong end of the stick entirely and thought she was drunk instead of praying! Once that wrong perception had been sorted out, Eli the priest blessed Hannah's intense prayerfulness – and the 'result' was the birth of one of Israel's greatest ever prophets, Samuel. Never underestimate the power of serious prayer!

Hannah's name means gracious. She was the wife of Elkanah, a Levite priest (1 Sam. 1:1–2:21), but because she was unable to bear children, she was obliged to endure extreme taunting from Elkanah's other wife, Peninnah, who flaunted the children that she had managed to bear her husband. Hannah vowed that if she were to give birth to a son, she would devote him to the Lord's service. The Lord answered her prayers, and she gave birth to the prophet Samuel: the last and the greatest of Israel's judges. (In Hebrew Samuel's name means "Heard by God"; cf 1 Sam. 1:20).

Faithful to her promise, Hannah made what must have been a heart-rending sacrifice: she took Samuel to the Temple after he was weaned, and left him there (1:24-28). God rewarded Hannah's faithfulness and she bore three more sons and two daughters. Hannah's beautiful prayer of thanksgiving (2:1-10) is similar in both style and content to the song that Mary sang when she learned she would be the mother of Jesus (Luke 1:46-55) Overview One: Hannah's predicament and her obedience

We are taking up the story just before King David came to the throne. So often the biggest events in history begin out of the public gaze. This is a reminder that when we are praying for leaders, what happens *off* the ball is important too. Like Jacob wrestling with the angel, that is so often when people make the choices and decisions that effect their public performance.

The action unfurls almost exactly three thousand years ago, and focuses on the pilgrimage the family would make from the hills north of Jerusalem to Shiloh, which was the national place of worship, and where Elkanah made his annual sacrifices. These were precisely the times when the pain of her childlessness hit Hannah the hardest – and when her rival's hostility reached its peak.

You may have noticed how it is when certain families go away on holiday that things that had been hidden by the usual hustle and bustle of life become exposed, and everything is left very raw. Divorce lawyers are often busy directly after the holiday season – and in a culture that permits polygamy the path lay still more wide open to domestic discord!

The thought of Elkanah and his two wives reminds us how easy it is for us to become distracted, and to lose our focus by allowing our hearts to go in two opposing directions at the same time. 'You cannot love both God and Mammon', Jesus warned, knowing full well that 'rivals' for our affection will always diminish our spiritual focus and lead us astray. What would the Lord say to you about this?

### **Overview Two: The favour of the Lord**

*Elkanah gave Hannah a double portion because he loved her, and the Lord had closed her womb. And because the Lord had closed her womb, her rival kept provoking her in order to irritate her. This went on year after year. Whenever Hannah went up to the house of the Lord, her rival provoked her till she wept and would not eat. Elkanah her husband*

*would say to her, "Hannah, why are you weeping? Why don't you eat? Why are you downhearted? Don't I mean more to you than ten sons?"*  
vv.5-8

Elkanah undoubtedly loved Hannah far more than Peninnah, and would no doubt have found ways to show her his favour, but Hannah was in agony as a result of being childless. The other wife, described as being her "rival", teased her arrogantly, not just once or twice but repeatedly. We can imagine the snide comments and the superior looks! Most of us find it immensely wearying to live with constant provocation.

At a confirmation service, Bishop Gavin Reid turned to a ten year old boy and asked him if he thought it was fair that he was in a wheelchair when all his friends were able to run around and play football. Without a second's thought the boy replied, "It's ok. God's got all eternity to make it up to me in!"

### **What effect does being put down have on you?**

The effect all this had on Hannah was so great that she was regularly in tears and suffered a loss of appetite. Elkanah did his best to cheer her up, but he had neither the maturity to see what was going on, or the family authority to shut Peninnah up.

All good stories start at a moment of crisis, and the book of Samuel is no exception. It opens with the nation at one of its lowest ever points, surrounded by powerful Philistine enemies, and with the future prophet's mother-to-be at her lowest ebb, feeling that her situation had become entirely untenable.

In her distress, Hannah did her best to turn away from the bitterness that was wracking her soul and to focus on the only person who could do anything about it: the Lord God Almighty. She trusted God to deal with Peninnah's cruelty, rather than lashing out and taking matters into her own hands. (see Deut. 32:35; and David's words in 2 Sam. 3:39.)

It would have been easy for Hannah to have become totally bitter as a result of her barrenness, but she channelled her distress into seeking the Lord. May the Lord help each one of us to do the same, and turn our difficult circumstances and emotional distress into fervent prayer that becomes a 'springboard' for faith. After all, we are in great danger otherwise of getting buried under them, and losing sight altogether of the sovereignty of God. We belong to the Lord, and our times are in His

hands. He has promised He will never fail us or forsake us, and that everything will work for good for those who love Him and who are called according to His purposes.

Bill Johnson recently spent six months meditating on just three verses. You might like to spend at least a few minutes with them too!

*Always be joyful. Never stop praying. Be thankful in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you who belong to Christ Jesus.*

*1 Thess. 5:16-18*

It is important to identify our own areas of wounding, as well as to be on the watch to help other people in their moments of vulnerability. The pain would have been at its rawest every year when she went up to Shiloh on her own with no children to accompany her – rather like single people often find Christmas difficult to handle – or the anniversary of a loved one's death. Even if we aren't consciously aware of these dates, our subconscious still remembers, sometimes causing us to have flash backs and to feel particularly vulnerable. It can be really important to pray into this.

A minister's wife came for counsel recently. She told us that for many years her 'day' effectively ended at 6 pm. For many years she has lost the ability to attend evening meetings that she really would have liked to attend, to make phone calls, or indeed to do almost anything. It turned out that her mother had died seven years before at six in the evening – and, to her distress, she had missed the moment of her passing.

We discerned that she had subconsciously made a "mausoleum" out of this, as if to make up to the mother, and to spend time with her. Effectively this was impacting her body and stopping her from getting on with the work of the Kingdom. When we prayed together, the pattern was completely broken. Within a week she rang (after six o'clock!) to tell us that she was brimming with energy in the evenings, and able to function freely. Praise the Lord who sets us free!

It took the Lord's direct intervention to deal with Hannah's pain. We cannot fix everything for ourselves or others, but He uses caring praying friends to bring our wounds into the love-light of God's healing presence. What a difference a well timed visit or phone call can make to a lonely person!

### Overview Three: A Serious Offer

*Hannah made a vow, saying, "O Lord Almighty, if you will only look upon your servant's misery and remember me, and not forget your servant but give her a son, then I will give him to the Lord for all the days of his life, and no razor will ever be used on his head." (v.11)*

You have to be careful what you say to God: He takes our vows seriously! Hannah offers any son she may bear immediately to the Lord to be as one set apart. There is no greater self denial that Hannah could have practiced than to offer up her first born son – but if we have got into the way of thinking that great results can be achieved for the Kingdom without such levels of self-denial and commitment we are seriously deluded.

On the face of it, Hannah lost a great deal by handing over her son. In reality God makes up to us for the things that we surrender to Him. He is no man's debtor!

On four occasions in the Old Testament, a vow made to the Lord is identified with a freewill or voluntary offering. (Lev. 7:16, 22:21, Num. 15:3, Deut. 12:17). What had happened in Hannah's heart was that she had come to the place where she was willing to give up to God the one thing that had become most important to her in life: a son. Hannah's prayer was not so much an act of bargaining as an act of surrender. In surrendering her heart's desire to God, Hannah found her heart filled, not emptied. In surrendering our heart's desire to God, we discover joy; in truth, only God can satisfy our deepest needs. (Sue and Larry Richards, *Every Woman in the Bible*, p. 109)

### Overview Four: How to misread a situation in one easy lesson

*As she kept on praying to the Lord, Eli observed her mouth. Hannah was praying in her heart, and her lips were moving but her voice was not heard. Eli thought she was drunk and said to her, "How long will you keep on getting drunk? Get rid of your wine."*

*1 Sam. 1:12-13*

Formerly in Israel, when a man went to enquire of God, he would say, "Come, let us go to the seer" (1 Samuel 9:9; "for he who is now called a prophet was formerly called a see-er." The more usual Hebrew word for a prophet is nabi' – a spokesman, but the word used here is ro'eh – one who sees visions, a prophet. The word also means to mean to perceive, or to discern.

Eli the priest watched Hannah wrestling intensely in prayer, and came to entirely the wrong conclusion. He thought she was drunk! Because the Lord wants us to be able to see truly (and to turn sight into spiritual insight) I have called this session ‘Seeing and Perceiving.’

It is quite possible to see something, but not to fully perceive its meaning – or even to perceive one meaning but not to understand other aspects of the situation. You can probably think of situations when you have observed an intense emotion and come up with just the wrong diagnosis! For example, you see someone with their head buried in their hands kneeling in church. And you come up to them and pray for them to be set free from depression – but they may just have been taking a rest!

Pastors often seen things in a different light from prophets, so it entirely understandable that Eli has no idea that he was witnessing a spiritual transaction that would have a major effect on Israel’s destiny. Thinking that he was merely dealing with a tipsy woman, and deeply concerned to uphold God’s law and honour, he wades in and rebukes her sternly.

How do you cope when you are misunderstood by people in authority positions?

### Overview Five: Perceiving as opposed to just seeing

*"Not so, my lord," Hannah replied, "I am a woman who is deeply troubled. I have not been drinking wine or beer; I was pouring out my soul to the LORD. Do not take your servant for a wicked woman; I have been praying here out of my great anguish and grief." Eli answered, "Go in peace, and may the God of Israel grant you what you have asked of him."*

*1 Sam 1:15-16*

When we discover things are rather different from how we had imagined them to be, all of us need to make adjustments. It is rather like a cricketer who was wanting to play an aggressive shot but finds the ball coming at him too fast for such heroics. All he can do is hastily change his shot and simply play the ball defensively. Eli recognises his mistake and duly acknowledges that so far from being a wicked woman, Hannah is actually pouring out her heart to the Lord.

At this point he utters something that to us sounds midway between a genuine blessing on her and an institutional platitude. "Go in peace, and the God of Israel grant your petition which you have asked of Him" (v.17) It was sufficient, however, for people considered the high priest's blessing to be prophetic, and Hannah took heart that things would turn out as she had prayed. May the Lord grant such an effect through our own prayers!

Ei is typical of someone who really does serve the Lord, but who has grown used to judging by what they see with their eyes rather than what the Lord is doing in a given situation. He would eventually pay a heavy price for what effectively amounted to compromise in his life. May we learn to consult the Lord before acting!

### **Overview Six: Blessings out of disappointment**

*The entire family got up early the next morning and went to worship the Lord once more. Then they returned home to Ramah. When Elkanah slept with Hannah, the Lord remembered her request and in due time she gave birth to a son. She named him Samuel, for she said, "I asked the Lord for him."*

*1 Sam. 1:19-20*

If Hannah had not poured out her hurt and disappointment to the Lord in prayer, none of the amazing events we read about in the book of Samuel would ever have come to pass. If Hannah had just simply become hysterical, or just resigned herself to her lot, (or worse still turned to occult practices to try to break the curse of barrenness), God's purposes would have been completely missed. He alone knew how to "harness" this particular disappointment she was feeling and lead to what He most needed: the birth of a baby who would be fully "handed over" for His own purposes.

In other words, He was looking for Hannah's active participation. It is a great mistake when we write ourselves out of the script – 'leaving it all to God' – when what He is really looking for is partnership. I love the phrase, 'God remembered her'. He answered Hannah's prayer because all the conditions were now right for God to bring into the world one who would be a true spiritual leader at this crisis time for the nation.

### **Overview Seven: Supportive husbands and wives**

*Why are you downhearted, Hannah? Don't I mean more to you than ten sons?" (v. 8)*



Sue and Larry Richards put it nicely when they wrote, ‘Elkanah may not have been the most understanding of men, but he was willing to give Hannah the freedom to follow her own heart – even though that freedom cost him a son.’ (*Every Woman in the Bible*. Nelson). Our spiritual decisions do affect others. Eli suddenly found himself ‘saddled’ with looking after a very young child. To his credit, he rose to the challenge, and became the spiritual parent for the future spiritual leader of the nation.

Loving though he was, Elkanah probably had no mechanism for understanding just how intense Hannah’s longing to have a child was. Men rarely do! Even though he tried to be as supportive as he knew how to be, the depths of her despair eluded him.

Under the terms of Numbers 30:6-8 Elkanah would have been within his rights to claim that Hannah’s vow had been made at a time of emotional intensity, and he could therefore have undone it. It was greatly to his credit that he did not invoke his husband’s right in this respect.

In many marriages either by their character or their ministry one partner stands out and ‘shines’ more than the other does. This could potentially be the cause of jarring. Why does s/he always get all the attention? What about me – don’t I count? Or you can do all you can to nurture, protect and prosper your partner. This is a high and humble calling. Full marks to Elkanah, who put no obstacle in the way of Hannah taking her small child up to the temple at Shiloh as soon as he was weaned.

As Hannah moved on to have other children, she would doubtless have continued to pray for Samuel, who already, as a very young child, had begun to prophesy. ‘And all Israel from Dan to Beersheba knew that Samuel had been established as a prophet of the Lord.’ (3:20). Equally as important, for our sakes today, Samuel took good care to ‘let no word of the Lord fall to the ground.’ It is so important that we store, in a place where we can easily find them again, the things that God says and shows us.

When the Lord called Rees and Elizabeth Howells to the mission field, they had to give up their son to friends for them to bring him up. This child too was called Samuel, and the result of their sacrifice was that thousands came to a living faith. As you can imagine, Rees and Elizabeth found handing Samuel over in this way immensely painful. Samuel came

back into their lives many years later, however, and in due time succeeded his father as Principal of the Bible College of Wales.

By contrast to the excruciating pain Rees Howells and his wife experienced when they handed their son over, Hannah's fervent declaration, 'My heart rejoices in the Lord' (2:1) appears to indicate that she actually felt great joy at this extreme surrender. Nevertheless, we can imagine the tug there must have been on her maternal emotions – just as there is for us when the Lord asks us to embark on something costly for Himself.

In verse 27 Hannah declares, "For this child I prayed and the Lord has granted my petition, therefore I have lent him to the Lord; as long as he lives he shall be lent to the Lord." I love the idea of lending to the Lord. It is very different from an irresponsible parent's desire to be rid of heavy parental responsibility. It is a very generous giving.

The last verse of chapter 1 says, 'So they worshipped the Lord there.' This hints at something which runs through the whole theme of the Bible, that worship contains an element of sacrifice as well as joy. There was joy in Hannah's heart but there was also the yielding up, an action that causes us to recall the terrible moment when Abraham offered up Isaac in obedience to the Lord. In both cases there was fruit from the sacrifice, even though the specific situations turned out very differently.

Samuel grew up to become the last of the judges, an outstanding and gifted prophet, and one who would anoint the first two kings of Israel. Samuel was the pivotal spiritual leader who turned the nation toward Yahweh. His mother Hannah played her part in this spiritual awakening as she trusted God, leaving for all posterity an example of determined devotion in her motherhood.

Into the defiled worship center she placed her very young, impressionable son. Although humanly it seemed to border on foolishness, this was an act of saintly sacrifice. Her commitment was to God; her gift was pre-arranged with Him. With prophetic insight she planted the next generation just as promised.

There is always a danger, when we set our hearts in some particular direction, that we will not fully appreciate all the good things that the Lord has given us. For many years, the pain of her childlessness had caused Hannah to feel discontent with her lot in life. At the same time, her example reminds us that when our motivation is right, God is more

than pleased to answer our petitions. Her single minded desire for a child shows that quality of perseverance that is the very essence of fervent intercession.

This is where we need discernment. Are we called to “let go” or to “persevere?” The kingdom of God is the only place in the world where we ‘win’ by letting go and seeming, on the face of it, to ‘lose.’ Is there anything you need to ‘hand over’ to the Lord?\*

### **Overview eight: Place is important too**

Hannah presented Samuel to Eli in Shiloh, which at that time was one of the earliest and most sacred of the Hebrew sanctuaries. Although God is everywhere and can work everywhere, certain places are significant. It is good to get into the habit of sanctifying our homes for the Lord – and having special spots (trusting places!) where we regularly meet with the Lord. God is into places and anniversaries!

Incidentally, the most likely meaning of Shiloh is may be expressed by the English phrases: “to whom dominion belongs,” “whose is the kingdom,” “he whose right it is to reign.”

### **For Further Study: the Background to Nazarite vows**

Some people really do have a special call on their life!

*No razor will ever be used on his head. (v. 11)*

This verse indicates that Samuel was raised a Nazarite. In other words, he was called to be holy, set apart and consecrated – but not completely withdrawn from society like a hermit. Nazarites and Levites usually served for a period of time but Hannah dedicated him to God for the whole of his life. God sometimes does ask certain things of certain people that He does not of everyone else. Have you any experience of that? (It may be something as simple as something that is alright for one Christian to do not being acceptable for someone else).

A Nazarite is someone who took a vow to separate themselves from certain worldly things, and to consecrate themselves to God (See Numbers chapter 6). Among the Hebrew people anyone could take this vow; there were no tribal restrictions as in the case of becoming a priest. Rich or poor, man or woman, master or slave – all were free to become Nazarites. Neither did Nazarites withdraw from society and live as hermits – but they did agree to follow certain regulations for a specified

period of time: usually 30, 60 or even 90 days. Samson (Judges 13:7), Samuel, and John the Baptist are the only “Nazarites for life” recorded in the Bible. Before they were born, their vows were taken for them by their parents.

There were many Nazarites during the time of the prophet Amos. Their presence was considered a sign of God’s blessings on Israel. Once a person decided to make himself “holy to the Lord” (Num. 6:8) for some special service, he abstained from wine, and even from grape juice. Perhaps this was to guard the Nazarite from being controlled by any spirit other than God’s (Prov. 20:1; Eph. 5:17–18)

The Nazarite vow was a part of the old law, and is not imposed on modern Christians. Because it was personal and voluntary, however, we do have much to learn from this Old Testament practice. God does want us to abstain not only from certain “things of the world,” but also from those passions that war against the life of the Spirit (1 Peter 2:11) What does this mean in your experience?

### **Final thoughts**

Hannah visited Samuel faithfully every year, bringing him a new robe. This shows real dedication and inner strength – and her husband Elkanah continued to show himself as supportive in these emotionally demanding visits as he had been in every other way.

Ponder too the wonderful words of Hannah’s song of thanksgiving in chapter two. It is the forerunner of Mary’s Magnificat. Mary knew that her heart would be “pierced” in relation to her Son – and Hannah’s heart must have been similarly pierced when she handed over her precious child to God. In 1 Samuel 1:28 she declares, “I have lent him to the Lord; as long as he lives he shall be lent to the Lord.” (Believers Study Bible)