

## Hannah's Barrenness: Favored Yet Forgotten

**People of God, The Lord of Hosts does not despise the prayers of the barren who desire to be fruitful for the Lord.**

The book of First Samuel begins with the story of a woman named Hannah, whose name means "Favored," but she feels "Forgotten." Like the matriarchs of old—Sarah, Rebekah, and Rachel—Hannah is barren.

In ancient Israel, a woman's worth and favor were often measured by her ability to have children, particularly because of the promise given to Eve that a woman's offspring would ultimately defeat the serpent.

Without children, Hannah fears she will have no connection to the Messiah and no descendants to inherit in Israel, leading to the possibility that her name will be forgotten.

Hannah's husband, Elkanah, loves her dearly and favors her, yet he has taken a second wife, Peninah, likely due to Hannah's inability to conceive. Peninah provokes and torments Hannah over her barrenness, causing her great misery, especially since the Lord had closed Hannah's womb.

Notably, this torment from Peninah intensified when Hannah went to the house of God at Shiloh, where Hophni and Phinehas served as priests, during their annual pilgrimage.

## Faithful Worship in a Corrupt Context

Hannah's story is a miniature representation of Israel's journey. Faithful Israel is experiencing spiritual barrenness due to the oppression and provocations from her enemies within her own household.

Just as Favored Hannah is tormented by Peninah, faithful Israel is suffering at the hands of the corrupt Levites, Eli and his worthless sons, Hophni and Phinehas.

Eli's sons were called "Sons of Belial," a term that highlights their corruption and worthlessness. Although they served as priests, they did not know the Lord.

When people brought sacrifices, they would steal meat from the worshipers for their own benefit. They demanded raw meat, taken with the fat, before it was offered on the altar to the Lord. They despised the Lord's offerings, committing egregious sins against Him.

In contrast to the wicked house of Eli, there is the faithful and righteous house of Elkanah. He was a devoted man

who went to Shiloh each year to worship and sacrifice to the Lord of Hosts. Notably, the first reference to God is as the “Lord of Hosts,” which means “Lord of Armies.”

This is the first time the Bible uses this title, underscoring that God is the true Warrior-King who rules over both heavenly armies and earthly events, fighting on behalf of His people when they worship Him faithfully.

The sincere worship that Elkanah offers to the Lord of Hosts, as well as the faithful worship that Hannah will provide after the birth of Samuel, foreshadows the military victories and deliverance that God will grant His people through leaders like Samuel, Saul, and notably David.

**The Lord of Hosts does not despise the prayers of the barren who desire to be fruitful for the Lord.** The Lord of Hosts fights for His faithful and afflicted people. Additionally, this points forward to the ultimate fulfillment in the true Davidic King, Jesus Christ, who embodies the "Lord of Hosts" and came to save those persecuted for righteousness' sake.

### **Hannah's Prayer: Pouring Out Her Soul**

Hannah wept and cried because of her barrenness and the ongoing afflictions she received from Peninah. As a good husband, Elkanah tried to comfort her. He asked, “*Why do*

*you weep? Why do you not eat? Why is your heart grieved? Am I not better to you than ten sons?"*

This suggests that Elkanah loves Hannah more deeply than if she had ten sons. His love for her is unconditional and not based on her ability to have children.

But the reference to tens sons also reminds us of Jacob's love for Rachel during her own time of barrenness, despite Jacob having ten sons with Leah and her two maidservants, Bilhah and Zilpah.

If Hannah is akin to Rachel, then the son that God will give her is similar to a new Joseph, destined to be a deliverer for God's people. Elkanah is essentially expressing that his love for Hannah surpasses what ten sons could convey. However, despite Elkanah's deep affection, he cannot provide her with children, meaning that everything hinges on Hannah's prayers and God's response.

After dinner, Hannah rose and went to the temple of the Lord to pray. She was deeply distressed, weeping bitterly as she prayed. She vowed, "*O Lord of Hosts, if you will indeed look on the affliction of your servant, remember me, and not forget your servant, but give your servant a son, then I will give him to the Lord all the days of his life, and no razor shall come upon his head.*"

In this prayer, Hannah epitomizes the principle of seeking first the kingdom of God and His righteousness. While she would have been entirely justified in praying for a child for her own sake, her piety led her to pray for a son whom she would dedicate entirely to God's service, making him a Nazirite.

According to Numbers 6, a Nazirite is someone specially dedicated to the Lord. This dedication requires separation from drinking wine, eating grapes, cutting hair, or coming into contact with the dead. The details outlined in Numbers 6 show that Nazirites resembled priests. Like the High Priest, Nazirites could not touch the dead, or like ordinary priests he could not drink wine in the sanctuary.

Nazirites were to live their entire lives as if the whole world were God's sanctuary. Their holy service often took the form of Holy War outside the sanctuary, paralleling the priests' work inside the sanctuary.

There are three notable Nazirites in the Bible: Samson, Samuel, and John the Baptist, each born to a barren woman. Samuel, in particular, typifies the ministry of John the Baptist. Just as Samuel prepared the people for the reign of David, John turned the hearts of the fathers to

their children and vice versa, preparing the way for the Greater Davidic King, Jesus.<sup>1</sup>

## Eli's House

Contrast Hannah's holiness and piety, along with her vow to dedicate her son as a Nazirite, with the actions of Eli and his worthless sons. While Hannah is praying silently in her heart and moving her lips, Eli mistakenly thinks she is drunk. He asks her, "How long will you be drunk? Put your wine away from you!"

Eli's spiritual perception is so lacking that he cannot even recognize when someone is praying. This is further highlighted by the nature of his sons, Hophni and Phineas, who are described as worthless, or "sons of Belial." They are corrupt and view the practice of religion as a means to satisfy their own appetites and lusts. The atmosphere and culture created by the Eli priesthood around the tabernacle have become so depraved that Eli fails to discern a sincere prayer offered to the Lord of Hosts.

Just as Hannah is barren, Israel, under bad leadership, is also fruitless. Priests are responsible for distinguishing between what is holy and what is common; this is why they cannot drink alcohol while on duty. Eli's inability to

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Leithart, *A Son to Me*, 42,43.

differentiate between a woman praying and someone who is drunk suggests that he himself might have been intoxicated. He is incapable of making important distinctions. Observing Eli's inability to recognize true devotion, Hannah vows that her son will be a Nazirite, one who abstains from alcohol.

Hannah responds to Eli, *"No, my lord, I am a woman of sorrowful spirit. I have drunk neither wine nor intoxicating drink, but have poured out my soul before the Lord. Do not consider your maidservant to be a wicked woman—a daughter of Belial—because out of the abundance of my complaint and grief, I have spoken until now."*

Eli is only familiar with and recognizes the behavior of his worthless sons, but Hannah is not like one of them. She does not pour out drinks; instead, she pours out her soul to the Lord. Her prayer is for a son who will be a Nazirite, someone who does not even drink.

Eli then answers, *"Go in peace, and may the God of Israel grant your petition that you have asked of Him."*

Hannah replies, *"Let your maidservant find favor in your sight."* After this interaction, she goes on her way, eats, and her face is no longer sad.

Eli's initial accusation transforms into a blessing when he finally understands Hannah. This change signifies that the affliction and provocation that Israel has endured under Eli's leadership will eventually turn into blessings with the birth of her son. **The Lord of Hosts does not despise the prayers of the barren who desire to be fruitful for the Lord.**

*Early in the morning, they rose and worshiped before the Lord, then returned to their house at Ramah. Elkanah knew his wife Hannah, and the Lord remembered her. In time, Hannah conceived and bore a son, naming him Samuel, saying, “Because I have asked for him from the Lord.”*

It is very encouraging to realize that whenever God initiates a new period in history—a time of awakening—it often follows a period of great darkness and coincides with the faithful prayers of the righteous, and the barren giving birth. This is true for Israel, as Samuel's birth marks the beginning of a new era. Similarly, the miraculous births of John the Baptist and Jesus signify the advent of the New Creation.

## The Adoption of Samuel

To further illustrate the contrast between Elkanah's household and Eli's household, we see how precise

Hannah was in her worship of the Lord of Hosts, adhering strictly to the requirements of the law. She fulfilled her vow to the Lord by dedicating her son to Him, meaning that Samuel would grow up in the house of God. The passage also highlights how Elkanah, her husband, upheld his duty to support his wife's vow, as instructed in Numbers 30.

*<sup>21</sup> Now the man Elkanah and all his house went up to offer to the Lord the yearly sacrifice and his vow. <sup>22</sup> But Hannah did not go up, for she said to her husband, “Not until the child is weaned; then I will take him, that he may appear before the Lord and remain there forever.”*

*<sup>23</sup> So Elkanah her husband said to her, “Do what seems best to you; wait until you have weaned him. Only let the Lord establish His word.” Then the woman stayed and nursed her son until she had weaned him.*

*<sup>24</sup> Now when she had weaned him, she took him up with her, with three bulls, one ephah of flour, and a skin of wine, and brought him to the house of the Lord in Shiloh. And the child was young. <sup>25</sup> Then they slaughtered a bull, and brought the child to Eli.*

Samuel's parents brought him to Shiloh after he was weaned. Weaning was celebrated in the ancient world as it

marked the transition of a child from the mother's care to the father's care. Hannah brought three bulls, an ephah of flour (which was three times the amount required for a cereal offering for one bull), and a skin of wine as an offering to the Lord upon Samuel's weaning. This extravagant offering was intended to compensate for the three years that Samuel was not dedicated to the Lord.

Although Samuel was placed in the care of Eli, he was ultimately being entrusted to the Lord. As chapter 3 indicates, he slept in the tent of the Lord, symbolizing that Samuel was, in a very real sense, a son of God, adopted in the Lord's House, one who must be about His Father's business.

*Hannah stated to Eli, “O my lord! As your soul lives, my lord, I am the woman who stood here praying to the Lord. For this child, I prayed, and the Lord has granted me my petition which I asked of Him. Therefore, I have lent him to the Lord; as long as he lives, he shall be lent to the Lord.” So they worshiped the Lord there.*

So the book of Samuel opens up with a Problem – Hannah, like Israel, is barren and is not bearing any fruit. She is being oppressed by a member of her own house, just as Israel is being oppressed by the priests at the house of God.

Hannah's response to the Problem is to pray. And God's solution to the problem is to answer her prayer, and give her a son. Hannah then responds to God's answered prayer by giving her son to Him to serve in the service of priests, to correct this travesty.

**The Lord of Hosts does not despise the prayers of the barren who desire to be fruitful for the Lord.**

When God's righteous people feel troubled and anxious by the prosperity and persecution of those who do wrong, let them pour out their souls to the Lord of Hosts. In doing so, they will find favor in God's sight and receive answers to their prayers, as long as their desire is to be fruitful for the Lord.

## **Monica's Prayers**

God utilizes the fervent prayers of ordinary people to accomplish extraordinary purposes. One such person was Hannah, an ordinary wife in Israel, who felt forgotten but was chosen by God to give birth to Samuel, who would become a key figure in Israel's history.

Throughout church history, many devoted women have played significant roles in advancing God's purposes through their prayers. One prominent example is Monica, the mother of St. Augustine. Monica was married to a

pagan man named Patrick who had a violent temper. Despite the challenges in her marriage, she maintained a deep faith in Christ and prayed fervently for the conversion of her family.

Initially, Patrick opposed her Christian beliefs, even refusing to allow Augustine to be baptized. But over time, he was influenced by Monica's virtues and unwavering prayers. This ultimately led to his conversion and baptism around 370 AD. He died just a year later.

Their son, Augustine, went to Carthage to study rhetoric, where he became captivated by the teachings of the Manichaean religion. He disregarded his mother's warnings about this false religion and the sinful lifestyle it promoted. Eventually, he fathered a child with a woman who was not his wife. After declaring his commitment to Manichaeism, Monica, out of love, felt compelled to expel him from their home.

Augustine later moved to Rome to open a school, but when Monica followed him there, he had already relocated to Milan. So he followed him there too. For years, she prayed tirelessly for his conversion. Augustine, always drawn to intellectuals, came into contact with Bishop Ambrose of Milan. At the age of 33, Augustine converted to Christianity and was baptized.

Monica and Augustine planned to return home together, but she fell ill and died in Ostia. Augustine later became one of the most influential theologians in the Church and a leading philosophers in the world.

Monica endured a difficult life, but she persevered through her trials and devoted herself to prayer and virtuous living. Her prayers and virtues not only won over her husband and mother-in-law, but also inspired all three of her children.

While Saint Augustine is the most well-known of her children, Monica made a significant difference in the lives of her entire family. They were saved through her Christian prayers. **The Lord of Hosts did not despise Monica's prayers because she desired for her son to be fruitful for the Lord.**

We have seen an examples in our own church of a mother whose fervent prayers for their children have resulted in their salvation.

So, let us never give up on prayer. Mothers, pray for your children. Fathers, pray for your children. Pray for their salvation and dedication to the Lord. Pray that God would use them and their gifts mightily for the Church, the nation, and God's kingdom.

## A Word to Women

Ladies who are struggling to have children, pray. Pray that God would open your womb. The text explicitly states that God closed Hannah's womb, and it is the Lord who can open it. He heard her prayers, cries, and tears, and He listened. Do not underestimate the immense power you possess in prayer. Through your devout faith and prayers, you can move the heart of God to do anything for you, even that which seems impossible.

For those of you who are young and not yet married, you too can and should even now pray for your future children. Pray for the children whom the Lord has not yet given to you. Ask that God would make your future children mighty in the Lord.

## Hannah's Virtue

Besides prayer, let us also consider Hannah's virtuous example of godliness. In almost every sentence of hers, the name of the Lord is on her tongue. Although she was continually provoked by Peninnah, she displayed meekness by crying, fasting, and taking her grievances directly to the Lord in prayer. She did not gossip about Peninnah's sins to other women disguised as prayer requests. She took her concerns and petitions straight to God.

When Hannah finally spoke, she explained to Eli that she was not drunk but was praying to *the Lord*. After she conceived her son, she named him Samuel, saying, "For I asked him *from the Lord*." Once the child was born, she told her husband that it was her intention to dedicate her son *to the Lord* forever. When she returned to Eli three years later, she recounted her prayers and explained how *the Lord* had answered her. In her final sentence, she mentioned the Lord four times.

Faithful, God-honoring women are those whose mouths are filled with the name of the Lord, whose speech is full of prayers. Faithful women do not retaliate against others, do not talk back, and do not seek vengeance. They do not provoke or mock others' misfortunes. Women who have the power to change the world are those whose words are filled with prayer and the name of the Lord. Are you that kind of woman?

Or are you more like Peninnah, quick to provoke your rival? Imagine how different the story could have been if Peninnah had come alongside Hannah and prayed with her. Women can be naturally competitive, often comparing themselves to one another. And taking pleasure in how they are better than another woman.

I also know some of you may feel an unspoken expectation that, because certain families have many children, you too are expected to have a lot of kids. But you are not expected or required by anyone to have any children if the Lord doesn't bless you with them. Whether God gives you one, twelve, or none, that is a matter between you and the Lord.

And no other woman should judge you or consider you less of a woman if you haven't had children, or if you only have a few. And if any of you are judging other women, then shame on those of you who do so.

Instead, if you know a woman in our church who is struggling to conceive and who desperately wants more children, come alongside her and pray with her. The effectual, fervent prayers of a righteous woman avail much; how much more powerful are the prayers of two women? But if you see someone here with only one, two, or none, that is ok too, so long as we are all seeking to bear fruit for the Lord of Hosts.

So, strive to be like Hannah, who wore her name well and lived as one favored by the Lord through her exemplification of graciousness, patience, and prayer.

## Elkanah's Righteousness

Men, strive to be like Elkanah. He was a righteous man who took his family to church and participated in the annual festivals of the Lord. If he were alive today, he would be at church whenever the doors were open. He prioritized bringing his family to worship and led them in his obedience to the Lord.

Likewise, men, lead your families in worship and model obedience to the Lord. A husband who makes church an important part of his family's life is a man whose family remains intact. The family that prays together stays together.

Read the Bible with them, teach them the Scriptures, and learn some theology to better answer their questions. As St. Paul teaches, if a wife has a question, she should go home and ask her husband. This encourages husbands to cultivate spiritual leadership in their homes.

Elkanah, as a husband, encouraged Hannah in her decision to offer Samuel to the Lord and affirmed her vow. This was possible because Hannah was an excellent wife, and her husband's heart trusted in her (Proverbs 31:11a).

Men, while you have responsibility over your homes and authority over your wives' decisions, a wise husband will trust the decisions his wife makes and avoid micro-

managing every detail. He will encourage her in her duties and assist with her responsibilities, providing what she needs to accomplish her tasks.

However, this does not give husbands a blank check to co-sign everything their wives want to do simply to escape responsibility. A "happy wife, happy life" approach where you give your wife whatever she desires is not the answer. Husbands need to take responsibility for their wives by affirming them in their God-given duties, gifts, and talents.

Wives, you need to be wise and seek the Lord's will above all things. If you are concerned about how to honor God in your family life and decisions, then your godly husband will notice this, encourage you, trust you, and love you.

But husbands, do not emulate Elkanah by taking multiple wives. Just trust me on this—don't do it.

## Conclusion

Hannah's story of barrenness and answered prayer points us directly to the season of Advent, a time of waiting and expectation for the coming of our Savior, Jesus Christ. Just as Samuel's birth marked a new beginning for Israel, the miraculous births of John the Baptist and Jesus ushered in the dawn of the Kingdom of God. Advent reminds us that God hears the prayers of His people and moves in

extraordinary ways through ordinary, faithful people who desire above all things to be fruitful for the Lord.

This Advent, let us commit ourselves to prayer as Hannah did—fervent, faithful, and God-centered prayer. Let us pray like we have never prayed before. Pray for personal renewal, for the salvation of loved ones, and for God’s kingdom to advance in our nation and the world.

The same “Lord of Hosts” who fought for Israel and opened Hannah’s womb is ready to answer the prayers of His faithful people. Let this season inspire you to pour out your soul before God, knowing that **the Lord of Hosts does not despise the prayers of the barren who desire to be fruitful for the Lord. Amen.**