

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

For reply: Email: truthfortoday@aol.com

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Speaker: Mr. Gordon Kell

Lessons from the Lives of Old Testament Characters: Hannah

Behind every great man there is a great woman so it is claimed. Hannah is one of the great women of the Bible. She was the mother of Samuel, one of God's greatest prophets. His ministry began at the darkest hour of Israel's history and led to the dawn of its greatest era under King David and his son Solomon. To understand his spiritual roots, we have to look at the life of his remarkable mother. She teaches us lessons from events which took place thousands of years ago and yet are powerfully relevant today. We find her story in 1 Samuel 1. It is the story of one woman's spiritual experience with God. It is a story which affected her life, her marriage, her family and her nation. Her story teaches us about:

1. Suffering - can be allowed by God to bring about blessing
2. Solutions - trying to solve our own problems is futile
3. Silence - silent prayer can be powerful prayer
4. Spiritual behaviour - can often be misunderstood
5. Sacrifice - obedience is the greatest sacrifice and leads to worship
6. Supply - God supplies beyond our expectation

SUFFERING CAN BE ALLOWED BY GOD TO BRING ABOUT BLESSING

Hannah had a lot going for her. She lived in a godly home and she had a good husband, called Elkanah, who loved her. Marriage was different in Old Testament times to what it is in our society today in that a man could have more than one wife. In spite of this, Hannah's story reminds of some of the important ingredients of successful marriage and family life. First of all, the worship of God was central to the home (verse 3). Elkanah took responsibility for the spiritual and material welfare of his wives and children (verses 3-4). This balance is critical to Christian marriage.

The Bible clearly teaches about family life and its responsibilities in passages such as Ephesians 5:22-6:4. And in 1 Timothy 5:8, Paul explains that anyone who does not provide for his own is "worse than an infidel". The roles of the husband and wife are balanced but, as we shall see, the wife has pivotal responsibility in relation to the spiritual welfare of her children. In addition to this, the Christian home is a testimony to God's pattern of life in a world where marriage and the family are under constant threat.

The strength of love which Elkanah had for Hannah is underlined in verse 5. It was an unconditional love. Hannah had no children in a culture where motherhood was central and children regarded as a sign of blessing. Elkanah's love for his wife did not diminish in spite of this disappointment. Today, there is always the danger of marriage breakdown because husbands and wives do not meet up to each other's expectations. The pattern for the Christian is to conquer the difficulties which marriages often face with the kind of love which characterised the marriage of Elkanah and Hannah. Abraham and Sarah in the book of Genesis, and Joseph and Mary in the Gospels, are other outstanding examples of how love and faithfulness conquered in difficult circumstances.

However, the pain of Hannah's childlessness was real. But more than this, we are told twice in verses 5 and 6 that it was the Lord who had prevented her from having children. This is fundamental to the story of Hannah. Why did God deliberately prevent this godly woman from having the children she so much desired? As I pondered this question, and the general question of suffering in the lives of Christians, I was reminded of the story of the Children of Israel being led through the wilderness by Moses under the direction of the Lord. In Exodus 13:21, we read that "the Lord went before them by day in a pillar of cloud, to lead them the way; and by night in a pillar of fire, to give them light; to go by day and night." The Lord led His people by day and by night. In Exodus 15:23 we see He led them to the waters of Marah, or "bitter waters". Why did He do this? In verse 25, the Lord instructs Moses to throw a tree into the waters and they became sweet. At the end of verse 25, we are told it was at Marah that the Lord tested the people. He tested their faith through difficulties and proved His ability to change bitterness into blessing. Afterwards, the Lord led His people to Elim where there were 12 wells of water (one for each tribe) and 70 palm trees. A place of great blessing!

What Marah and the story of Hannah teach us is that God sometimes allows us to enter into difficult circumstances so that, in such circumstances, we can prove our faith in Him. Faith has to be tested to prove its reality. A German friend of mine, who was an engineer, once explained to me that bridges are tested well beyond the loads they are expected

to bear before being put into service. The testing is not to prove weakness in the structure but to prove strength. Equally, God allows us to face problems in our lives not to destroy our faith but to strengthen it.

Hannah had done nothing wrong. We often think problems occur because of our failure or sin. Of course, this is sometimes true and we reap what we sow! For example, if a Christian steals something, he may repent of the wrongdoing but still have to face its consequences in a court of law. But there are times when God simply allows us to enter into difficult circumstances so that we have the opportunity to prove our faith in Him. This does not diminish the very real pain and distress which we can experience, but it does explain it. Hannah felt the bitterness of her situation and the cruelty of Peninnah, Elkanah's other wife (verse 6). One of the hardest of all Christian lessons is to display the features of Christ in painful and unjust circumstances. Yet it is precisely in those situations that the reality of the Christ in the believer is seen.

SOLUTIONS - TRYING TO SOLVE OUR OWN PROBLEMS IS FUTILE

Hannah was deeply distressed (verse 7). She portrays vividly the experience we go through before finding peace and strength in the Lord Jesus. It is at this point that we learn from her story another important lesson. In any difficulty, there is always the temptation to solve our own problems. In today's world, we are often taught to be independent and to stand on our own two feet - to be assertive and to fight our own battles - to look after ourselves. For the Christian these things are important. We need to be people who are able to meet our own responsibilities but to do this under the Lord's direction and with His help. The Lord Jesus was the most powerful man who ever walked on this earth but he never did anything without reference to His Father in heaven. He spent early mornings and late nights praying over the work He came to do. The Lord's pattern of life is vital to the Christian. When problems come, we take them to the Lord in prayer and in the light of His word. We do not try to solve them in our own strength. Peter tried this way and ended up denying the Lord Jesus. Hannah did not try to solve her own problems but Elkanah tried to do it for her. In verse 8, a loving husband makes the classic mistake of overestimating his own importance. "Am I not better to you than ten sons?" was his question to his distressed wife. Sometimes husbands, even good loving Christian husbands, can be over simplistic in their reactions to the needs of their wives. Elkanah was not listening to his wife and was insensitive to the deep need she had. Christian husbands should never overvalue themselves. We have to realise that our wives have needs and experiences which should not be oversimplified and certainly not addressed in terms of our own importance. A better response would have been for Elkanah to share the sorrow of His wife. In the words of Romans 12:15, to "weep with them that weep". He should have supported her spiritually by understanding the situation and his inability to solve it. In all relationships, it is important not to direct people to ourselves as solutions. This was Elkanah's mistake. We need to be sensitive to the needs of others and direct them to the Lord Jesus.

SILENCE - SILENT PRAYER CAN BE POWERFUL PRAYER

Hannah's distress led her not to despair but to action. Never allow distressing circumstances to drive you to despair but rather to the Throne of Grace. If Hannah's life teaches us anything, it is how to pray. She gives us a pattern for a powerful prayer life. James teaches that "the effective fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much" (James 5:16). Hannah was the female equivalent of this.

She prayed righteously.

This is important because we cannot expect God to answer our prayers if our lives are not righteous. Christians are to live lives which are characterised by righteousness -not self righteousness, but orderly obedient lives directed by the word of God.

She prayed effectively and fervently.

She felt deeply about what she was praying for. Do we? I have to confess that my prayers often lack this deep feeling and concern.

She prayed with tears.

Her emotions were affected, not in a sentimental way, but because she was praying for something which meant so much to her.

She prayed specifically.

She did not waste words. She asked for what was on her heart. In Matthew 6:7, the Lord Jesus reminds us not to be characterised by vain repetition and many words. It was said of Samuel, Hannah's son, that the Lord "let none of his words fall to the ground" (1 Samuel 3:19). Samuel was directed by the Lord before he spoke and when he spoke, he

spoke clearly and wisely. Today we live in the age of the “soundbite”. Often words are spoken without real meaning or sincerity. We should not speak to God or to each other in that way, but with true hearts.

She prayed sacrificially.

Someone wisely said, “Pray as though nothing depended on you and work as though everything depended on you”. Hannah counted the cost. She knew only God could answer her prayer but she was prepared to sacrifice what would be her greatest joy. If we expect God to answer our prayers, we should be willing to yield all we have to Him in sacrificial service.

She prayed silently.

Audible prayer is not necessarily powerful prayer. God looks on our hearts. Many years later, the Lord sent Samuel to the house of Jesse to anoint a king to replace Saul. Jesse was David’s father. Jesse lined up his sons. David was absent and looking after his father’s sheep. He was not considered important enough to be present. When Samuel saw Jesse’s sons, all powerful, attractive men, he thought, “Surely God would choose one of them to be king of Israel” - just as Israel choose Saul, a man head and shoulders above any one else in the land. God spoke to His old servant and reminded him that God does not look on the outward appearance but upon the heart (1 Samuel 16:7). He taught him a lesson in old age which his mother had learned before Samuel was born - a lesson we easily forget. We, too, are tricked into thinking that what is seen and heard is the most important. Hannah spoke in her heart and her voice was not heard. We would be heard more in heaven if we spoke from our hearts, rather than by the eloquence of our voices.

SPIRITUAL BEHAVIOUR CAN OFTEN BE MISUNDERSTOOD

Eli was the High Priest when Hannah lived. He was not a very good priest and his sons were corrupt. Paul reminds us in 1 Timothy 3:4-5, that anyone who did not rule his own house well should not have responsibility in the house of God. Eli was judged by God for his failure as a father and a priest (1 Samuel 3:13). Although he held the highest spiritual office in the kingdom, he totally lacked spiritual discernment. He completely misinterpreted the behaviour of Hannah. This added to the distress which she had to bear. Spiritual behaviour is often misunderstood even by those who are in a position to know better. It was the Chief Priests and Scribes who led the way in judging and ultimately crucifying the Lord of Glory. We should not be surprised that, if in being faithful to the Lord Jesus, criticism and even persecution follow. Hannah defended her behaviour in a very touching way, explaining that she had “poured out” her soul before the Lord in verse 15. In 1 Peter 5:6-7 we read, “Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you in due time, casting all your care upon Him; for He cares for you.” Hannah was to learn how true this was, and so can we. We are encouraged in the words of Hebrews 4:16 to “come boldly unto the throne of grace that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.” God responds to those who approach Him in simple faith, bringing their needs to the One who not only can meet them, but wants to.

To be fair to Eli, once he understood the real situation, he sent Hannah away in peace. It is important to see that Hannah, at the end of her prayer, returned home, ate and was no longer sad (verse 18). In Philippians 4:6 and 7, Paul writes “Be anxious for nothing: but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known unto God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.” Real prayer leads to peace. There is a time to stop praying and leave things in faith with the Lord. I remember reading of two incidents in the life of George Muller, who was a remarkable man of prayer. He prayed for the conversion of ten of his friends after he came to know the Lord. During the course of his life, eight were converted. Just before he died the ninth came to the Lord after George Muller had prayed for him over forty years. Shortly after George Muller’s death, the final one of the ten friends trusted Christ as his Saviour. What a testimony to persistent and faithful prayer!

In the other incident George Muller was travelling to America. His boat was delayed by fog in the harbour. He went to see the captain in his cabin about the expected time of arrival because he needed to be on shore for a meeting. The captain, who was a Christian himself, knew the harbour conditions very well and explained there was no chance the fog would lift. George Müller knelt down and prayed that God would lift the fog. When he finished, the captain started to pray but Muller stopped him. He explained why the captain should not pray.

1. The captain did not believe the fog would be lifted.
2. There was no need to pray because God had already removed the fog. He went with the captain onto the deck of the ship and the fog had disappeared!

This second incident shows us, as Hannah learned, there are times to stop praying and leave things with the Lord, trusting him to answer. Only God can help us to distinguish when each course of action is right.

SACRIFICE - OBEDIENCE IS THE GREATEST SACRIFICE AND LEADS TO WORSHIP

Hannah's prayer was answered. God remembered Hannah (verse 19) and she bore a son whom she called Samuel (verse 20). Names in the Bible are very instructive, although we should be careful not to add more meaning than God intended. Samuel means "Heard by God" - a simple testimony to what God had done. It is interesting that Hannah, like Elisabeth the mother of John the Baptist in Luke 1:60, took the lead in giving the child his name. Both Hannah and Elisabeth had key roles in the spiritual development of their children. Paul reminds Timothy of the spiritual influence of Timothy's grandmother Lois and his mother Eunice (2 Timothy 1:5). The central role of a godly mother to the spiritual welfare of her children cannot be over emphasised. Nor should it be allowed to be minimised by the pressures of living in today's world. This part of story is very precious to my wife and me. We got to a point in our marriage where we did not think we would have children. We, like many other couples had thought we would have children without any difficulty. Happily, in God's grace and time, He gave us a daughter. We called her Anna Sarah, and because our surname began with a "K" her initials were "ASK". She is a constant reminder to us of God's ability to meet our deepest desires if it is His will.

But Hannah did have to sacrifice. The time came when she would have to give up her child to God as she promised. It is wonderful to see the way in which Elkanah supports her in what must have been a most difficult period in her life. There must have been the temptation to keep Samuel and to spiritualise the vow she made. And it is Elkanah who supported his wife. He recognised the need for the child to be nursed at such an early age but also gently reminds Hannah, "Only [let] the LORD establish His word". Like Hannah, Elkanah had learned from the experiences God had taken them through. He was no longer insensitive to his wife's needs yet, at the same time, he supported her in the sacrifice she was about to make. It is as a family they return to the house of God. They sacrifice as a family (verse 25) and bring the child to Eli. This act of utter faith in God is very powerful. Samuel was to be left in the care of Eli, a man who had failed God so seriously. Yet Hannah trusts God to keep and to bless her son. Christian parents need the same kind of faith when the time comes for their children to face a world where there so many spiritual, moral and physical dangers. This is the time when, out of our immediate care, we need to pray and act constantly for the good of our children. Parents never cease to have a responsibility for the welfare of their children.

The very last verse of our chapter ends in worship and continues with Hannah's prayer in chapter 2. Hannah's experience with God led her, Elkanah, and Eli, to worship God. They had learned, through the deep distress allowed by God that He was sovereign. He had led them to the bitter waters of Marah and changed them into sweet waters. They would never have know the richness of God's blessing without knowing what it was to walk with Him thorough all the pain and distress of the experiences He had allowed. In the same way, in the bitter experiences which we have as believers, our Marahs if you like, are transformed when Christ's love and grace are applied to such circumstances. Remember, Moses threw a tree into the waters to make them sweet. A picture of how when we apply the Christ of Calvary to our circumstances, they are transformed into times of blessing and worship.

SUPPLY - GOD SUPPLIES BEYOND OUR EXPECTATION

Hannah's care for her son did not diminish because of their separation. We read touchingly in 2:19 of her yearly visits and the coats she made for her child. I do not believe Samuel was ever out of her thoughts or prayers. The influence of this godly woman affected the life of the husband, of Eli, of her son Samuel, and ultimately, through Samuel, resulted in the blessing of the nation of Israel. Her distress, her faith, and her sacrifice led not only to the blessing of a family but of a nation. Never let us underestimate the value of one person's experience of God nor fail to see how God can use bitter experiences to lead to marvellous blessing! Hannah did not only have the experience of Marah but also of Elim, a place of great blessing. In 2:21 we read that Gods blesses Hannah with three sons and two daughters. Hannah, whom we first met as a childless woman, had asked God for one baby son. But God's supply was greater than her expectation and she becomes the mother of many children. Paul wrote from a prison cell to the Philippians, "My God shall supply all your need according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:19). Our God has not changed!

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