



Faith amidst Prevalent Spiritual Corruption

Hannah was a pious woman whose faith and sense of honour stood out as “a ray of light” in the midst of a dark and corrupt spiritual culture descending upon the land of Israel. Her prayerfulness, self-sacrifice and devotion were not typical of her times, which belonged to a spiritually degenerate and self-indulgent generation. But she would be quick to acknowledge that it was all by God’s grace; there was nothing good in and of herself. In fact, she kept referring

to herself as “thine handmaid”, when addressing God and the high priest (cf. 1 Samuel 1:11, 16, 18). She realised she was highly dependent on God’s favour. Well, her name in Hebrew reflects just that – “*Channah*”, which comes from the root word (*chen*) meaning “favour” or “grace”.

Hannah’s Deteriorating Times

Hannah’s story, like Ruth’s, was set in the time of Israel’s Judges period – to be specific, towards the tail end of the

Judges period. This we know because Samuel (Hannah's firstborn), who would shortly come onto the scene, would be the last major judge (cf. 1 Samuel 7:15-17) before ushering in (albeit reluctantly) Israel's monarchy. Now, the Judges period was a most turbulent and troubled period in the political and religious scene of the nation, where "every man did that which was right in his own eyes" (Judges 21:25b). Because the people repeatedly transgressed God's covenant in their open idolatry and apostasy, "the anger of the LORD was hot against Israel, and he delivered them into the hands of spoilers that spoiled them, and he sold them into the hands of their enemies round about, so that they could not any longer stand before their enemies ... and they were greatly distressed" (Judges 2:14-15). Not only was it a time of political oppression from without, it was also pervaded with religious decay from within.

Scripture reveals that during Hannah's time, the tabernacle (which represented God's presence among His people in those pre-temple days) in Shiloh had fallen under the charge of corrupt and wicked hands, for "the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, the priests of the LORD, were there" (1 Samuel 1:3b). And associated with these two "sons of Belial" were atrocious religious malpractices in the offering of sacrifices to the LORD [in direct contravention of the Mosaic Law concerning the Levitical system of animal sacrifices (cf. Leviticus 3:3-5, 16)], coupled with blatant display of gangsterism and bullying tactics (cf. 1 Samuel 2:13-16). So much so that "men

abhorred the offering of the LORD" (1 Samuel 2:17), and thus hated to come to Shiloh to worship God.

What was most appalling was the lack of decisive response from Eli, the high priest. Eli had "heard all that his sons did unto all Israel; and how they lay with the women that assembled at the door of the tabernacle of the congregation" (1 Samuel 2:22). What he should have done was that after "it be told thee, and thou hast heard of it, and enquired diligently, and ... (ascertained) that such abomination is wrought in Israel: Then shalt thou bring forth that man or that woman, which have committed that wicked thing ... and shalt stone them with stones, till they die" (Deuteronomy 17:4-5). Instead, he merely issued a mild rebuke, which was impudently ignored by the two sons (cf. 1 Samuel 2:23-25)!

Though "there was no king in Israel" (Judges 21:25a), i.e. no central ruling body, in those days, the civil government appointed by God to hear difficult cases of controversy was supposed to be composed of priests and a specially appointed supreme judge (cf. Deuteronomy 17:8-9). Apparently, no such judicial structure was observed to function during those times; even if it existed, those sitting on the so-called "council of judgment", namely the priests, were either corrupt and abhorrent themselves or incompetent and unwilling to pass righteous judgment. With religious decay leading to judicial perversion, what hope was there for justice in the land? In such dark times for Israel, God was about to raise up His "man of the hour". Into this spiritually

tumultuous historical setting was to be born God's prophet to judge His disorganised, demoralised people, who had been utterly disappointed in inept judges and unfaithful priests. But first, behind a great man is often a woman of faith. Every godly man mightily used of God comes out of godly nurture and admonition of a godly family. And invariably, the early influence of a godly mother is involved (as in the case of Moses, John the Baptist, Timothy, etc.). Here's where Hannah came into the picture ...

Hannah's Divided Household

Apparently, it seems that Hannah was (true to her name) well-favoured early in life. She married a God-honouring, devout man (Elkanah), who faithfully kept up the regular observance of feasts of worship at the tabernacle and the offering of sacrifice unto the LORD (1 Samuel 1:3a; cf. 1:21). With Elkanah evidently doting on her (cf. 1 Samuel 1:5), she was looking forward to a happy family life. One could say the loving couple were eagerly awaiting their first "arrow in the quiver", to use the biblical analogy of Psalm 127:4-5. But alas, as the months turned into years, their eagerness turned into anxiety, and anxiety gave way to disappointment when the expected "fruit of the womb" was withheld, for Scripture says that "the LORD had shut up (Hannah's) womb" (1 Samuel 1:5b). Instead of engaging in heartfelt prayer before the LORD, like Isaac of old [who "intreated the LORD for his wife, because she was barren ... and Rebekah his wife conceived" (Genesis 25:21)], Elkanah too easily resigned

himself to his wife's barren condition. He took matters into his own hands and followed the corrupt custom of his decadent day by taking a second wife (Peninnah), that she might bear children unto his name, which she did (cf. 1 Samuel 1:2b). But that was the start of his domestic woes and Hannah's "bitterness of soul".

In having to vie for her husband's divided affections as Elkanah favoured Hannah more (cf. 1 Samuel 1:4-5), Peninnah's jealousy was aroused. She viewed Hannah as her rival and hence acted as "her adversary", who "provoked her sore" (i.e. vexed her exceedingly through taunting remarks), in order "to make her fret" (literally "cause to eat away at her innermost being") on account of her barren condition (1 Samuel 1:6). In other words, she would not hesitate to exploit every occasion to remind her of her barrenness. Such constant adversarial stance was tantamount to harassment and psychological bullying! So malicious was her attitude that she deliberately chose the most conspicuous moment to "provoke" her – the family feast at the yearly sacrifice in Shiloh (1 Samuel 1:7). Whether by her snide, sarcastic comments or by her loud chatter and exaggerated fussing over her children surrounding her, Peninnah would exact maximum misery upon Hannah in publicly highlighting Hannah's childlessness. Needless to say, Hannah would be reduced to tears and would lose all appetite to eat her portion.

What was most pathetic was Elkanah's futile and unhelpful attempts to comfort her: "Hannah,

why weepest thou? and why eatest thou not? and why is thy heart grieved? am not I better to thee than ten sons?" (1 Samuel 1:8). Not only was his last comment insensitive, it was also a case of "too little, too late!" Truly, when God's ordained blueprint (of "one man-one woman") for marriage (Genesis 2:24) is flouted, domestic disaster will inevitably follow. Elkanah's sin of bigamy, which stemmed from his failure to exercise biblical leadership in family issues and crises in the first place, had brought needless pain and anguish to his now divided household.

Hannah's Dedicated Petition

Admittedly, it was not easy for Hannah to endure her adversary's relentless taunts. She exhibited faith by "pray(ing) unto the LORD" in the midst of her "bitterness of soul" (1 Samuel 1:10); she wept sore and abandoned herself totally to the LORD, who is her "secret (or hiding) place", where she could "abide under the shadow (or defence) of the Almighty" (Psalm 91:1). Despite her adversary's aim "to make her fret", she was to "Fret not thyself because of evildoers", but rather "Delight thyself also in the LORD; and he shall give thee the desires of thine heart" (Psalm 37:1, 4), including the desire to have children. Indeed, she would have remembered Moses' words unto the children of Israel that "if ye hearken to these judgments, and keep, and do them, ... he (the LORD) will love thee, and bless thee, and multiply thee: he will also bless the fruit of thy womb, and the fruit of thy land ... there shall not be male or female barren among you,

or among your cattle" (Deuteronomy 7:12-14). Hannah recognised that the cause (and removal) of infertility is in the LORD Himself! Hence her strong, passionate supplication: "O LORD of hosts, if thou wilt indeed look on the affliction of thine handmaid, and remember me, and not forget thine handmaid ..." (1 Samuel 1:11a).

This clearly reflects her intense yearning to be relieved of the stigma of barrenness, which she viewed as an "affliction" or misery seen as a sign of God's disfavour. Hers, however, was not a presumptuous whining like that of Rachel's complaint to Jacob: "Give me children, or else I die" (Genesis 30:1b). Hannah's specific request for a son was not for her selfish end. Her self-sacrifice was manifested by her preparedness to dedicate that son for lifelong service to God in the tabernacle, as reflected in her accompanying vow that if God "wilt give unto thine handmaid a man child, then I will give him unto the LORD all the days of his life" (1 Samuel 1:11b). In effect, her whole appeal centred around God's glory. Oh, what a noble, honourable petition, sealed with an earnest vow!

Hannah understood clearly that "children are an heritage of the LORD: and the fruit of the womb is his reward" (Psalm 127:3). In other words, God is the One who controls the conception of children – not modern medicine and science, or modern fertility treatments. Our day and age can neither appreciate nor grasp this divine aspect. Modern man has become so enamoured with modern science and technological advances

that he looks to these for answers to all ailments and physiological problems. Increasingly, many childless couples are turning to IVF or in vitro fertilisation (widely known as “test-tube baby” method) to circumvent their problem of infertility. To the biblically instructed, IVF crosses the line beyond which man has no mandate or authority. The conception of a child is a wonderful mystery and is one of those “secret things” which belong exclusively to the LORD (cf. Deuteronomy 29:29a). We are “fearfully and wonderfully (conceived and) made” (Psalm 139:14a) – the language here signifies that we are amazingly brought into existence not by a human agent, but by God our Creator! Granted, we do not know the motives of those gynaecological pioneers in IVF. Some might have genuinely wanted to help barren couples, but many would have hidden motives and agenda. One compelling biblical reason why this is not God-sanctioned is that God does not need our help – He is the One who “shuts up” the womb and causes the womb to “open”. Moreover, because of this so-called advanced technology, many unethical practices are spawned – surrogate mothers, donor eggs, having two fathers (one biological, the other legal), possibility of having children without a spouse, gay “couples” having children, ... and the list goes shamefully on! Christian couples should not be stained and associated with this questionable practice with all its related evil applications. Rather, be like Hannah who, in her ardent petition to the LORD, exhibited a far more superior grasp of theology than the majority of modern Christians!

Hannah’s Determined Fulfilment of Her Vow

That Hannah did conceive shortly after her return from her yearly pilgrimage to Shiloh was proof that the LORD did “remember” (or take notice of) her and heard her heartfelt, dedicated petition (1 Samuel 1:19-20a). Hence the name “Samuel” for her son – made up of two words, “*shama*” (meaning “to hear”) and “*El*” (which is the Hebrew short form for “God”). Literally, the name means “heard of God”, which is corroborated by the reason Hannah gave: “Because I have asked him of the LORD” (1 Samuel 1:20b). Hannah felt vindicated that God had heard what she had asked of Him, and had not “forgotten” her. Neither would she forget her vow, for each time she called her son’s name, she would be reminded that God did “remember” her on account of her vow (cf. 1 Samuel 1:11).

Scripture further reveals her determination to fulfil her vow in her commitment to see to the weaning process of her son. “I will not go up until the child be weaned, and then I will bring him, that he may ... there abide for ever” (1 Samuel 1:22). Day after day, month after month, she tenderly cared for her baby, and “gave her son suck until she weaned him” (1 Samuel 1:23b). She treasured the time she had with her lovely boy as she taught him God’s Word from the Mosaic Law. When Samuel was big and independent enough to feed himself and take care of his basic physiological functions, Hannah was ready to take him to the tabernacle, for we read that “when she had weaned him, she took him up ... unto the house of the

LORD in Shiloh" (1 Samuel 1:24). Truly, "When thou vowest a vow unto God, defer not to pay it, ... pay that which thou hast vowed" (Ecclesiastes 5:4).

Never for a moment did Hannah forget her precious promise to give (and that entails some form of training) her son for the LORD's use. Her words of dedication to Eli the high priest were most instructive. She almost waxed poetic when she engaged in a word play on the root word (*sha-al*) meaning "ask" or "enquire", which is translated as "lent" twice in 1 Samuel 1:28. The first occurrence is in the Hiphil (or causative) form – it literally means "caused to enquire". The second occurrence takes the form of a passive participle, which expresses a state caused by an external act, literally meaning "be made to enquire". The whole sentence can be literally translated thus: "Therefore also I have 'caused him to enquire' unto the LORD; as long as he liveth he shall 'be made to enquire' unto the LORD" (1 Samuel 1:28a) This indicates that Hannah had taken upon herself to teach and train

young Samuel to seek the LORD, and had determined that his life's purpose was to "enquire in his temple" all the days of his life (cf. Psalm 27:4b), which would include the receiving of God's revelations (cf. 1 Samuel 3:19-21). What a striking picture of Hannah's commitment to see to the fulfilment of her vow to the LORD!

Hannah's devotion and vow-honouring faith in the midst of prevalent spiritual corruption of her day show us what God can do through one woman's single-minded dedication to honour God and His Word. This should inspire us Christians living in no less degenerate times, "in the midst of a crooked and perverse nation, among whom ye shine as lights in the world" (Philippians 2:15b). Like Hannah, we are to stand on God's Word and swim against the tide of this godless world and the ungodly philosophies and lifestyles that it espouses. May God grant us more "Hannahs", and in turn raise up more "Samuels", to make an impact in this decadent, self-indulgent generation! Amen.

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