

Ask and it will be given

1 Samuel 1:4-20

For the past two weeks we have looked at the story of two women, Naomi and her daughter-in-law, Ruth. Today we will look at the story of another woman, Hannah. While there are many women mentioned in the Bible, most Bible stories center on men. In fact, this story about Hannah, begins with a genealogical history of her husband, Elkanah.

We learn from the first three verses of 1 Samuel Chapter 1, that Elkanah is a Levite, a religious leader among the Israelites. He has high standing in the community, commanding respect and admiration in society.

Because of his position as a Levite, the annual trip to Shiloh was one of great anticipation and joy. Here he would have the opportunity to worship at the temple, sit at the city gates, and receive accolades for his success in life.

One sign of his success was the gaggle of children he had fathered with his wife, Penninah. Children were seen as blessings from God, a sign of your good standing with the Almighty. It mattered little that Elkanah was not particularly in love with Penninah. What mattered was that his full house attested to his being blessed by God.

Elkanah had another wife, Hannah. She mattered to Elkanah, as we are told that he loved her even if she could not give him children. Here I'm reminded of the story of Jacob, Leah, and Rachel. The unloved wife,

Leah, gained status by birthing multiple children, while the much-loved wife, Rachel, was barren. Just as in the case of the barren Rachel, Hannah longed to be a mother, to have her worth as a woman, as a wife, confirmed for all to see. But we are told that “the LORD had closed her womb.” In society at large and, likely in her own mind, Hannah was seen as somehow less than Penninah.

So, we have this family traveling from their home to Shiloh to take part in the annual festival. There would be food, drink, and revelry as this was a joyous time of worship before God. Unfortunately for Hannah, her rival used this time of celebration to badger Hannah about her inability to bear children for their husband. The text said this happened year after year. Despite the celebratory atmosphere around her, poor Hannah could only grieve over her barrenness. Elkanah, aware of her unhappiness, clumsily attempted to console her, but his words fell short.

Unable to bear her sadness any longer, Hannah leaves the family table and goes to the only place she can think of to find relief. She heads to the Temple. So intent on her destination, it appears that she passes by Eli unaware that he is there at the doorway. Silently pouring out her heart before God, she is seen by Eli as a perverse woman who would dare to appear before God in a drunken state. Again, poor Hannah. Not only is she alone in her grief, but now she is being wrongly judged for her behavior.

After explaining her behavior to Eli, Hannah receives a somewhat rote response from the high priest. Yet, in that moment something changed, and she was able to return to her husband with a new attitude.

Her new attitude came from believing that God saw and heard her. Even if the old priest's words were somewhat weak, they gave her hope. Soon her hope would be rewarded with the birth of her son, Samuel. His name meaning, "Because I asked the LORD for him."

In the story of Hannah we see an early example of Jesus' admonition from Matthew 7:7:

"Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find;
knock and the door will be opened to you."

Hannah had suffered for years under the attacks of her sister wife. You might wonder, why did she wait so long to appeal to God? The text doesn't explain why it took her years to make her appeal. What it does tell us is that once Hannah's appeal before the Lord was made, it was answered.

We are currently in the month of November, the month when we celebrate Thanksgiving. Like Elkanah and his family, we are likely to gather with others for what is expected to be a time of food, drink, and revelry, as we recount our blessings. There are likely to be Hannah's among us, those feeling crushed under the weight of loss, doubt, or shame. Those who feel they have nothing to be thankful for this year. If

you are one of those Hannah's, take heart. The God of all blessings knows your hurt and wants to give you comfort.

How many of us bear burdens, trying to hold up under our own strength, only to slip further and further into despair when things don't change? Why is it that we wait until the eleventh hour of our despair to reach out to the One who can help us?

We are all encouraged to follow Hannah's lead and pour out our hearts before God. Even before Hannah found out that she had conceived, her attitude had changed. Just having the opportunity to stand before God and express her pain, was a turning point in her life. So, it can be with us, as well. Hannah spoke from her heart. She didn't use any canned prayers or lofty words. We don't have to, either.

Sometimes in our struggles we may not feel we have the words to pray. That's okay, because the Bible gives us words to use when we can't come up with our own. All different kinds of expression of emotion can be found in the psalms – there's joy, sadness, anger, despair, resignation, and victory. We also have the Holy Spirit, promised to us by Jesus to be our comforter, who will cry out on our behalf when the words we want to speak will not come.

We even have the words of Hannah herself from the second chapter of 1 Samuel, after her change in attitude, when she could see the blessings of

God in her life. This reading comes from Eugene Petersen's, *The Message*:

I'm bursting with GOD-news!

I'm walking on air.

I'm laughing at my rivals.

I'm dancing my salvation.

Nothing and no one is holy like GOD,

no rock mountain like our God.

Don't dare talk pretentiously—

not a word of boasting, ever!

For GOD knows what's going on.

He takes the measure of everything that happens.

The weapons of the strong are smashed to pieces,

while the weak are infused with fresh strength...

... the hungry are getting second helpings.

The barren woman has a houseful of children...

He puts poor people on their feet again;

he rekindles burned-out lives with fresh hope,

Restoring dignity and respect to their lives—

a place in the sun!

For the very structures of earth are GOD's;

he has laid out his operations on a firm foundation.

He protectively cares for his faithful friends, step by step...

GOD will set things right all over the earth...

Hannah cried out in desperation and was heard, and her prayer was answered. Even in desolate times, when we feel discouraged, afraid, and alone, we have this hope that God hears us and will answer us, too.

Now is as good a time as any for us to adopt a new attitude, an attitude of hope and gratitude for all that God has done and will do for us.

As we leave this place this morning, may our attitude of gratitude lead us to call out saying, "Thank you, Lord!" AMEN

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November 14, 2021 Hatfield Church of the Brethren