

# PRAYER'S FRUITFULNESS

by Ray C. Stedman

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We have been looking at what the men and women of the Old Testament have to teach us about prayer:

We began with the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. There we learned that the very beginning of prayer was that of a simple conversation with God, an intimate, honest, informal opening of themselves to him. But the secret of prayer is that it begins with God; he initiates it. Adam and Eve simply carried it on in an informal, open way.

Then from the life of Abraham we learned that prayer draws its legitimacy from the character and the promises of God. Prayer is not magic; it is not a way of simply using God to get what you want. Prayer, rather, is based on what God has said and what he has promised; and prayer is the claiming of that promise. That is what Abraham taught us in his great prayer for Sodom and Gomorrah.

In the life of Jacob we then learned that prayer requires a consciousness on our part of our human helplessness. God broke Jacob down until he could do nothing but cling to him; then he answered his prayer. Prayer, therefore, depends upon God's either supplementing our activity or, in many cases, setting it aside entirely and doing the whole thing himself.

Then we learned from Moses that prayer is the reliance upon God's resources and not our own. We learned that even in times when we are pressured and harassed by the demands made upon us, and we bring them to God, he turns weaklings into warriors, the fearful into men and women of faith.

Our last study on Jabez taught us that prayer is for the daily, ordinary problems of our life. It offers hope to the hopeless and a way of escape to those who feel cheated, deprived, or put upon by their circumstances.

Now, this morning, in First Samuel we come to a woman whose prayer was used by God to bring into being the first -- and in some ways the greatest -- of the prophets of Israel, a man who would become the spiritual guide and mentor of the first two great kings of Israel. I am referring, of course, to the prayer of Hannah, the mother of Samuel, found in First Samuel 1 and 2. The story is told to us in four simple movements that center around, first, Hannah's pain; then her prayer; then her peace; and finally, her praise.

Let us look, first, at the problem Hannah faced and the pain that it gave to her. Reading from the first chapter of Samuel:

**There was a certain man of Ramathaim-zophim of the hill country of Ephraim, whose name was Elkanah the son of Jeroham, son of Elihu, son of Tohu, son of Zuph, an Ephraimite. He had two wives; the name of the one was Hannah, and the name of the other Peninnah. And Peninnah had children, but Hannah had no children.**

**Now this man used to go up year by year from his city to worship and to sacrifice to the Lord of hosts at Shiloh, where the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were priests of the Lord. On the day when Elkanah sacrificed, he would give portions to Peninnah his wife and to all her sons and daughters; and, although he loved Hannah, he would give Hannah only one portion, because the Lord had closed her womb. [Some of you have versions that read slightly different there. This is taken from the Septuagint, the Greek text.] And her rival used to provoke her surely, to irritate her, because the Lord had closed her womb. {1 Sam 1:1-5 RSV}**

There was Hannah's problem: she was a barren woman who longed to have a baby. Every woman in this congregation this morning understands something of what she felt. Even unmarried girls feel within them the dawning of the mystery of the capacity for motherhood. I have seen this desire grow so strong in women that

it reached the point where they longed for a baby more than anything else on earth. Now Hannah was married, and she naturally expected and hoped soon to feel the first signs of pregnancy, but as months and years went by her womb remained unfruitful. She felt the ache in her arms and in her heart as she longed to have a son.

What made it worse, naturally, was that the other wife, Peninnah, seemed to have a baby every time she turned around. Just as regularly as the seasons there came a new son or daughter to the family, so that the house was filled with children, but none of them were Hannah's. The ache in her heart deepened as time went by. The final wrench of agony, of course, was that Peninnah could not keep quiet about her fertility. She found a thousand and one ways to remind Hannah of her barrenness. She taunted her and mocked her because of it, and every word sank deeply into the spirit of Hannah. She grieved over her barren life and winced at what her rival was saying to her.

Just as an aside, I might point out that this agony, this taunting and mocking is part of the price that was paid because of a departure from God's original intention of one man and one woman in marriage.

Someone has well said that the penalty of bigamy is two mothers-in-law!

The presence of two women in a house is certain to bring conflict; this is always proved true where God's original intention has been ignored. Though the Bible records the polygamy of some of the patriarchs, nevertheless, it never endorses it. Here is an instance, therefore, of the price that sometimes has to be paid because man unwittingly fell in with the customs of the people around. This man, Elkanah, had taken two wives instead of one, which God had ordained.

But the most difficult thing that Hannah faced is this word that is recorded twice for us in this account, and that is, because the Lord had closed her womb. Twice we are told that her problem came from the Lord. Now this is a clear recognition of one of the hardest lessons we have to learn in life -- the lesson that our congenital handicaps, whatever they may be, and even the current limitations of our life, difficult as they may be and no matter how much we struggle against them, are given to us by the Lord himself. It is God who is behind the circumstances of our lives. We do not like to believe that. We would rather believe this is all coming from the devil, but the book of Job reminds us that the devil can do nothing to us except what the Lord gives him permission to do. It was God who chose this woman to be barren. Now it was God who made her a woman. He gave her the capacity for motherhood. He put within her the hunger for a baby, the desire year after year to fulfill her ability as a woman to be a mother, but as this account tells us so plainly, it was also God who prevented her from having a baby.

Now that may seem strange to us and difficult to reconcile, but there are other accounts in Scripture that confirm it. I think of that story in the ninth chapter of the Gospel of John, where Jesus and the disciples come upon a man who was born blind -- coming from his mother as a tiny babe, his eyes were already closed. When Jesus and the disciples found him he was a grown man, sitting beside the road, begging. The disciples asked Jesus, "Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" {cf, John 9:2}. That question, of course, reflects a common misunderstanding of life that many people share even today, that all problems in life are caused by our sins, and that if anything goes wrong it is because we are being punished. But this account of Hannah, and many others in the Scripture, indicate that this is not the case. Certainly it was not in the case of the blind man, for Jesus replied to the disciples, "Neither did this man sin, nor his parents," but, as the New International Version puts it, "this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life," {John 9:3 NIV}. Having said those words, our Lord touched him and opened his eyes.

What Jesus meant was that God had created a condition so that when he relieved it, new insights, new glory would break forth for his own name; people would understand more of the mercy, the grace and the power of God than they ever could have otherwise. In that account a clue is given to us why these kinds of incidents occur in our lives. God does not give us these circumstances to torment us, or to lead us into bitterness or resentment. We often turn them into that, but that is not why they are given. Our God is not that kind of a God. He gives them to us in order that as we bring them back to him he leads us to a solution we never would have otherwise found, a greater answer than we ever could have dreamed of.

I have been thinking much recently about that wonderful film and story of the life of Joni, the girl who was

paralyzed by an accident. How beautifully this confirms what we are saying here. When she was suddenly paralyzed in her early teens she first received it with great resentment and bitterness of spirit, but as she worked her way through her problem and accepted it as a condition God had given her, God opened to her a door of ministry and testimony the like of which has hardly ever been equaled as a means of communication with those who are like her, paralyzed and living in wheelchairs. She has been given a wide open door of ministry that fulfills her as nothing else could ever have done. That is what this story of Hannah is telling us. God gave her the problem in order that she might bring it to him to find the solution he had in mind.

We see that as this account goes on to bring us to Hannah's prayer. We are told in Verse 7:

**So it went on year by year; as often as she went up to the house of the Lord, Peninnah used to provoke her. Therefore Hannah wept and would not eat. And Elkanah, her husband, said to her, "Hannah, why do you weep? And why do you not eat? And why is your heart sad? Am I not more to you than ten sons?" {1 Sam 1:7-8 RSV}**

These were the occasions of the offering of the annual tithes in Israel. It was the custom for men to sell their cattle or sheep and to bring the money to the tabernacle. There they would purchase an animal to offer as a sacrifice, pay the tithe to the priest, and then when the animal was sacrificed, they would gather around as a family and eat the animal in the presence of the Lord as his guests at his own table -- very much like the Lord's supper we have today. It was the custom to give every woman and her children a certain portion of meat, but, of course, Peninnah and her children received the greater part of the sacrifice, Hannah getting only one portion because she had no children. So it was a time when her barrenness came home to her more sharply than it ever had before. Her rival used to provoke her more severely on those occasions than any other time, taunting her and mocking her because of her condition.

Then the account goes on, Verse 9:

**After they had eaten and drunk in Shiloh, Hannah rose. Now Eli the priest was sitting on the seat beside the doorpost of the temple of the Lord. She was deeply distressed and prayed to the Lord, and wept bitterly. And she vowed a vow and said, "O Lord of hosts, if thou wilt indeed look on the affliction of thy maidservant, and remember me, and not forget thy maidservant, but wilt give to thy maidservant a son, then I will give him to the Lord all the days of his life, and no razor shall touch his head."**

**As she continued praying before the Lord, Eli observed her mouth. Hannah was speaking in her heart; only her lips moved, and her voice was not heard; therefore Eli took her to be a drunken woman. And Eli said to her, "How long will you be drunken? Put away your wine from you." But Hannah answered, "No, my lord, I am a woman surely troubled; I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink, but I have been pouring out my soul before the Lord. Do not regard your maidservant as a base woman, for all along I have been speaking out of my great anxiety and vexation." {1 Sam 1:9-16 RSV}**

At first glance it would appear that this is a kind of bargaining prayer of Hannah's -- that she is offering to give the boy back to the Lord only if the Lord will give him to her first so she can enjoy him. It is possible to read this account that way, but, if we look closely at it, we can see what is really happening here, for I am sure this is not the first time that Hannah has prayed at Shiloh for a son. All along she dreamed of having a son of her own, a little boy to love and cuddle, to teach him to walk, to read stories to, to watch him grow to manhood to become a strong, clean, fine young man, the pride of her life. She wanted him for herself, and she prayed often for that, but her prayer was not answered.

On this occasion, however, her prayer was different. Having worked through years of barrenness and having thought deeply about the problems, she realized for the first time something she had never known before. She realized that children are not just for parents -- they are for the Lord. They are given to parents, loaned for a while, but the reason they are given is for the Lord to use. There is a verse in Paul's letter to the Corinthians, Chapter 6, in which, speaking in a different context, he says, "The body is not for fornication but for the Lord," {1 Cor 6:13 KJV}. That is what our bodies are for, that we might be used of God. Certainly this account indicates that fact, as this little boy who was ultimately born, Samuel, was God's man to meet the need

of a nation. Undoubtedly God had taught Hannah deeply through these hours of struggle over her barrenness, so in great distress and with intense earnestness she prays that God would have what he wanted, a man for his glory and his purposes, and that he would let her be the instrument of that blessing.

Now immediately we read of a quite remarkable change in Hannah's heart, for the account says, Verse 17:

**Then Eli answered, "Go in peace, and the God of Israel grant your petition which you have made to him." And she said, "Let your maidservant find favor in your eyes." Then the woman went her way and ate, and her countenance was no longer sad. {1 Sam 1:17-18 RSV}**

Immediately, "The peace which passes all understanding" {cf, Phil 4:7} had begun to guard her heart and spirit. Now, the birth of the baby did not occur until months later, but when the baby was born she named him *Samuel*, which means, "Asked of God." God had granted her request, but there was peace in Hannah's heart right from that very moment of her prayer. This is a beautiful commentary on that well known passage in Philippians 4 where the Apostle Paul tells us:

**Have no anxiety about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. {Phil 4:6 RSV}**

You would expect to read, "and your prayers will be answered," but what it goes on to say is,

**And the peace of God which passes all understanding [which cannot be explained] will guard your hearts and minds [guard your emotions] in Christ Jesus. {Phil 4:7 RSV}**

That is what Hannah experienced here.

When Patrick Cunningham and I were in Scotland a few weeks ago, we were being entertained one night in a beautiful home north of Glasgow. Sitting in the living room with a group of friends, I asked our host and hostess if the great Scottish cities had been bombed very heavily during World War II. The woman of the family, a very delightful person, spoke up and said, "Indeed, yes, they had been heavily bombed, especially the Clydebank," where the great Scottish shipyards were located, which happened to be just over the hill from where they lived. She said she remembered clearly how she and her son (who was only about 6 years old at the time) were in the house alone one night when they heard the German bombers coming over. "We knew we were in for trouble," she said, "so we put out all the lights and huddled together in the darkness. We listened to the bombs falling on the shipyards, and there was tremendous, deafening noise. These explosions were just a few miles away, and we knew there was a possibility that one of the bombers might miss the mark and drop bombs right on our house. As I gathered my little boy to me he looked up at me and said, 'Mum, sing something.'" "Well," she said, "I didn't feel like singing, but he wanted me to sing, so I said, 'What do you want me to sing?' He said, 'Sing, "God Is Still On The Phone.'" (Actually, the words are, "God Is Still On The Throne," but that is the way he heard it.) So she sang,

"God is still on the phone,  
He never forsakes his own.  
His promise is true,  
He will not forget you,  
God is still on the phone."

When they had finished singing the little boy said, "Now let's pray that God will take all the bangs away." So they prayed that God would stop the explosions. As she was praying, the little boy fell asleep, and he slept all through the night. Though the explosions went on all night long, he never heard one of them. In the morning when he woke, he said, "Oh, Mum, isn't it wonderful? God is on the phone, isn't he? He took all the bangs away. I never heard any more." They rejoiced together that God was still on the phone.

I came away with that story ringing in my heart as a reminder of the presence, the marvel, and the mystery of prayer that is available to us to speak peace of our hearts when we are troubled by the circumstances of our lives. It is indeed wonderful to remember that, "God is still on the phone."

Well, there is another note struck at the end of this account, found in Chapter 2, where we read of the praise that Hannah uttered. I will not read all the rest of Chapter 1, but the account tells us that when the time had come, Hannah gave birth to a boy whom she named Samuel. For several years she did not go up to the temple to worship at the time of the offering. She waited until the boy was weaned, which in the Hebrew economy was when he was about five or six years of age. Then she came back to the temple with her husband, and the last verse of Chapter 1 says:

**And they worshiped the Lord there. {1 Sam 1:28b RSV}**

Then Chapter 2 begins with these words,

**Hannah also prayed and said,  
"My heart exults in the Lord;  
my strength is exalted in the Lord.  
My mouth derides my enemies,  
because I rejoice in thy salvation.**

**"There is none holy like the Lord,  
there is none besides thee;  
there is no rock like our God.  
Talk no more so very proudly [You know who that is addressed to],  
let not arrogance come from your mouth;  
for the Lord is a God of knowledge,  
and by him actions are weighed.  
The bows of the mighty are broken,  
but the feeble gird on strength.  
Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread,  
but those who were hungry have ceased to hunger.  
The barren has borne seven,  
but she who has many children is forlorn.  
The Lord kills and brings to life;  
he brings down to Sheol and raises up.  
The Lord makes poor and makes rich;  
he brings low, he also exalts. {1 Sam 2:1-7 RSV}**

Notice how she is recognizing God's hand in everything -- not only the deliverances, but in the problems as well. She recognizes that God had closed her womb in order that he might bring her to a fuller answer than she would otherwise have found.

She goes on:

**"He raises up the poor from the dust;  
he lifts the needy from the ash heap,  
to make them sit with princes  
and inherit a seat of honor.  
For the pillars of the earth are the Lord's,  
and on them he has set the world.**

**"He will guard the feet of his faithful ones;  
but the wicked shall be cut off in darkness;  
for not by might shall a man prevail.  
The adversaries of the Lord shall be broken to pieces;  
against them he will thunder in heaven.  
The Lord will judge the ends of the earth;  
he will give strength to his king,  
and exalt the power of his anointed."**

**Then Elkanah went home to Ramah. And the boy ministered to the Lord, in the presence**

of Eli the priest. {1 Sam 2:8-11 RSV}

Many centuries later, the angel Gabriel was sent to Mary of Nazareth to tell her that she was to have a son, though she had never known a man. When she felt the stirrings of life within her, Mary paid a visit to her cousin Elizabeth (who also was great with child, the boy who was to become John the Baptist), and she broke into a song on that occasion. All Bible scholars agree that if you compare that song very carefully with this song of Hannah's, you will find that Mary borrowed her theme, and even certain phrases, directly from Hannah. Now it is very fitting that this would happen, because Samuel was God's answer to the needs of the nation at the moment of a low ebbing of faith, when, at the end of the period of the Judges, the nation was on the very verge of disruption and dissolution.

Likewise when Jesus came, the nation had again fallen into a place of barrenness and despair. The whole world, in fact, had fallen into a condition of darkness. For four hundred silent years Israel, the womb of the world, had borne no man of God to speak to the nations in healing, in strength and life. The boastful taunts of pagan philosophies seemed to mock the claims of Israel to be the nation through whom redemption would come to a dying world. But at the blackest hour, the darkest moment, the angel Gabriel was sent to Mary to tell her that when the fullness of time was come, God would send forth his Son, born of a woman, made under the law, to redeem us who were under the law. When that occasion came, as we remember so well these Christmas days, the angels broke into song over the plains of Bethlehem, crying, "Unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior which is Christ the Lord," {Luke 2:11 KJV}.

I do not think there is anything more beautiful in all the Bible than this reminder that

- Our problems are given to us of the Lord;
- Our circumstances come from his hand;
- Our difficulties are of his making.

He gives them to us, not that we might be angry, resentful, bitter and despairing, but that we might bring them back to him as Hannah did, put them in his hands and let him lead us through to the greater solution that he has had in mind all along, so that we too will join at last in a great song of praise, a Magnificat, "My soul doth magnify the Lord" {Luke 1:46b KJV}, because he has shown mercy to us in the time of our despair.

Some of you may be wrestling with great problems today. We are wrestling with many in our own family, but I want you to know that this story of Hannah has been a great blessing to my own heart. I hope it is to yours too, as we learn from her to bring our problems to the Lord in prayer. Let the peace of God which passes all understanding keep us until the hour of his solution, and there will be born into our lives God's program, God's plan and God's answer.

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