



HANNAH: A MOTHER'S HEART

SERIES: SPIRITUALITY OF DAILY LIFE

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Eleventh Message

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What comes to mind when you hear the word mother? Most people would say they think about qualities like love, devotion and sacrifice. They think about a generic mother person with an infallible sense of humor, amazing patience and persistent good will, a selfless person who puts the needs of others before her own, sacrificially giving of her life, energy, time and sleep.

We tend to equate mothers with saints and to assume that, as one writer puts it, "immediately following birth, every new mother drags from her bed and awkwardly pulls herself up on the pedestal provided for her..." The dictionary, however, defines the word mother, despite all its added meaning, as "a female parent, especially one of the human race."

Erma Bombeck, that much beloved and much missed voice for all mothers, wrote: "Motherhood is the biggest on the job training program in existence today. Motherhood is not a one size fits all. It's not a mold that is all-encompassing and does not mean the same thing to all people. Some mothers have so much guilt they cannot eat a breath mint without sharing it. Other mothers feel nothing when they tell a kid his entire pillowcase of Halloween candy got ants in it, and eats it herself. Some mothers cry when their thirty-year-old daughters leave home and move to their apartments. Other mothers sell their twelve year old son's bed when he goes to a long scout meeting."

When I became a mother at the age of 23, I had a lot of good things in my mother heart. I had youth, energy, some very good role models for parenting, and a super amount of untested confidence. But I had no relationship with Jesus. Although I had been raised in a church, I didn't know what it meant to have an alive and vibrant relationship with the Creator of the Universe who loved me and was intimately involved in the mundane details of my life. I never had prayed for our sons. I never had called on God's unlimited grace for strength, wisdom or creativity. Instead, I depended on my own power, cleverness, insight and instincts and did what I thought was right in my own eyes.

My active, energetic godless life was a modern micro picture of what life was like in ancient Israel eleven hundred years before Christ. The nation was confident of its own ability to get things done. The phrase that is used to describe Israel (it is used numerous times in the book of Judges; indeed it's the very last word written in that history), is, "*In those days Israel had no king. Everyone did as he saw fit.*" They did what was right in their own eyes.

And I did what was right in my own eyes all through our two sons' pre-school and most of their grade school years: I relied on my own counsel and did what I thought was right in my own eyes. That continued until our sons, Doug and Scott, were 12 and 10. Then, thanks to God's unfailing mercy and the persistent prayers of a good friend who had prayed for our family for eight years, I asked God to take up residence in my heart. I asked Jesus to be my King, and I've never regretted it.

I have regretted, though, that I never rocked my babies and sang hymns of praise to them. I have regretted that I never read them stories from the Bible. I have regretted that I never modeled for them how a godly woman deals with stress, difficulty and irritation. I have regretted that when they were toddlers fresh out of the bath-tub and ready for bed, I never taught them to pray.

But, the wonderful good news is, God restores the years the locusts have eaten. After my husband and I came to know Jesus, other people came into our teen-aged sons' lives: camp counselors, church youth leaders, high school pastors, young life leaders, football coaches, all wonderful people who poured their lives into our sons.

One of my treasured possessions is a paper that Doug wrote in high school about a typical day in his life. He began, "It's early in the morning...I can hear my brother, Scott, taking a shower, soon it will be my time. I can hear my parents in the kitchen, getting breakfast and discussing scripture..." We never discussed scripture at that early morning hour. More likely we were shuffling around, talking about things like coffee and cereal. But Doug's perception was that we were in the kitchen, alertly and lovingly discussing scripture. Oh the grace of God, to give him that perception!

And God has given me another chance with our grandchildren. I've been blessed to do with them all the things I didn't do with our own young sons. My young mother heart and my older grandmother heart are very different, and what makes the difference is my relationship with Jesus: knowing that he is in control and I am not. Knowing that he is able, available and adequate. Knowing that he loves my children and my grandchildren even more than I do. Knowing how much I need him every minute of the day.

I can identify with the mother's prayer that a friend shared with me: "Dear Lord, I've had a good day so far and all on my own. I haven't said an unkind word, or thought a jealous thought or ignored the needs of those around me. I haven't coveted anything my neighbor has or felt one ounce of envy. I haven't barked at my children or snapped at my husband or used your name in vain. But Lord, it's 6 a.m. now and in a few minutes my alarm is about to go off and I'll need you to get out of bed. Would you please be with me the rest of the day?"

This grandmother heart has learned and continues to learn, sometimes painfully, what it means to have utter dependence on the Lord.

This morning we're going to look at a mother heart from the opening chapter of the book of First Samuel. Hannah, a mother who had utter dependence on God, lived about eleven hundred years before Christ. She has words of wisdom for our contemporary world.

The time is the end of the period of the Judges, when everyone did what was right in his own eyes. God was looking for a person to lead his people in the corrupt conditions of the day. Externally, Israel was dominated by the Philistines; inter-

nally, they were polluted by moral degeneracy. The high priest was Eli, and his sons, Phineas and Hophni, were the acting priests. The sons were flagrantly degenerate. They committed adultery, exploited and denigrated the sacrifices presented to God and taught the people to dishonor the Lord. In 1 Samuel 2:12 they are described as, “wicked men who had no regard for the LORD...”

God needed a person he could trust, but no such person existed in Israel. Therefore, God set about preparing a mother. He chose Hannah, a woman of faith and prayer. Today, we would prepare such a woman by making sure she knew all about nutrition and exercise. We'd enroll her in a Lamaze class, have her study the latest books on child rearing and child psychology, get the baby on the waiting list for preschool and set up a trust fund for college education. That's not the way God did it, though. God prepared Hannah through suffering.

Hannah, whose name means “grace,” probably was the first wife of Elkanah, a responsible and righteous man. But Hannah was barren. Childlessness was a sign of reproach, a symbol of condescension and heartbreak. In the practice of the time, if the wife was barren, the husband was permitted a second wife, and so enters Peninnah.

Envy entered the home. Division entered the home. Misunderstanding entered the home. The passage says Hannah was loved more than Peninnah by her husband, but Peninnah had children and status, and she used this to mock, provoke and irritate Hannah.

Hannah's barrenness was a painful disappointment. Her greatest desire was to have a child, to be a mother. Disappointments make some people hard and embittered. But not Hannah. She knew God and believed in him. Her solution to heartbreak was prayer. And God prepared her through her disappointments. He disciplined her through her unfulfilled desire, and taught her patience and faith through perhaps twenty years of longing. God prepared Hannah to be the mother of a son whom he could use.

Hannah's solution to her unhappy situation was to pray, to put her trust in God.

The setting in chapter one of First Samuel is Shiloh. There Elkanah's family is worshipping and offering sacrifices at the permanent tabernacle. Despite the auspicious “religious” occasion, there still was tension, discomfort, deep disappointment and subtle digs among the family. Following the worship celebration and feast, Hannah excuses herself. Outside the temple, all alone, weeping and praying in bitterness of soul, she vows:

“O LORD Almighty, if you will only look upon your servant's misery and remember me, and not forget your servant but give her a son, then I will give him to the LORD for all the days of his life and no razor will ever be used on his head” [a sign of dedication and service to the Lord]. (1 Sam. 1:11, NIV).

Eli, the high priest, seeing Hannah praying so fervently, her lips moving but no sound issuing forth, her body swaying in intensity, assumes that she is drunk. What a sad commentary on the spiritual state of the time! Eli thought Hannah was one of the women who lounged about the tabernacle with his sons. So he asks her,

“How long will you keep on getting drunk? Get rid of your wine.” “Not so, my lord,” replied Hannah. “I am a woman who is deeply troubled. I have not been drinking wine or beer. I was pouring out my soul to the LORD. Do not take your servant for a wicked woman; I have been

praying here out of my great anguish and grief” (1:14-16).

Eli had been critical of Hannah, but here he softens. There is a sweetness in his answer in verse 17:

“Go in peace, and may the God of Israel grant you what you have asked of him” (1:17).

And Hannah, having bared her heart before the Lord, experiences peace. She is able to eat, and her countenance is changed. Her face is no longer downcast. She leaves in gladness, even though her situation has not changed. There is no guarantee that things would ever change, yet she has given her problem to the Lord. She has laid her hurt and disappointment and grief, as well as her frustration, irritation, and heart's desire, right into the hand of God and left it with him.

Next, we learn that her prayer was heard. Verse 20:

So in the course of time Hannah conceived and gave birth to a son. She named him Samuel, saying, “Because I asked the LORD for him” (1:20).

God does indeed give her the desire of her heart, a son. She names him Samuel, which means “name of God, God hears.”

Is God preparing you through suffering, disappointment and unfulfilled desires? Perhaps, like Hannah, your greatest desire is to have a child but that has been denied. Then you know and understand Hannah's heartbreak, anguish and grief. Perhaps your desire is for a husband or a wife, a companion to share your likes and your love, and your love for Jesus. Perhaps your greatest desire is for your spouse, a child or loved one to know the Lord, to trust and to obey him.

Each one of us has a great desire that has remained unfulfilled. Do you desire peace in an unhappy home situation? Maybe you understand only too well the disharmony and bitterness that Hannah experienced and you too long for peace and resolution. Perhaps your heart's desire is for balance and harmony in a demanding work environment. Is it wisdom from God? For self control in destructive habits? What is your heart's desire?

Has suffering and disappointment made you soft and tender and patient before the Lord or has it embittered you and made you hard? Are you willing, like Hannah, to pour out your heart in prayer before the Lord, to take your problem and your heart's desire and put it into the outstretched hand of God and leave it there with him? James 5:16b says, “the fervent prayer of a righteous man [or woman or parent, female or otherwise] availeth much.”

How often in our deepest pit we realize our deepest need and turn and seek after the Lord! Don't despise those desperate times when God gets your attention.

I take much comfort in the story of Hannah. She didn't have a perfect home. It was a respectable, God-fearing home, but not a happy one. There was strife, disharmony and irritation in that place. And what could be worse than irritation? It's those little gritty things that get us down. Someone said, “It isn't the mountains ahead that wear us out; it's the grain of sand in our shoe.”

Verse 6 of chapter 1 tells how Hannah's rival, her husband's other wife, provoked her to irritation, “because the LORD had closed her womb.” When I read that, I thought, “If she was provoked to irritation before she had children, just wait until she has them.” Parents well know the inherent, persistent power of little ones to provoke to irritation.

Hannah believed in God. She knew he was the source of all her blessings. She worshipped him in her home and in the

tabernacle. But, in spite of all her commitment and faith, Hannah experienced trouble in her home.

Don't look around you and assume that everyone but you has got it together. We all struggle. We all have at least one thing, and probably more, that wrenches our hearts. People like to put on a spiritual mask, but don't buy it. We all have our deep hurts, needs and disappointments. What we need to learn is not how to hide them, but what to do with them. Hannah shows us: take them to God in prayer. Pour your heart out to him. Trust him with your pain, your heartbreak, your desire. And then trust him with his timing. Perhaps he is preparing you. It may not be the thing you desire, it may be something better. It may be what he most desires for you.

Hannah didn't come from a perfect home situation, and she didn't send her son into a perfect situation, either. True to her word to God, she gave him back to the Lord. Hannah models for us what we know to be true but don't always want to admit: our children are just on loan. Henry Ward Beecher wrote, "When a child is born into the world, God draws His hand near his heart, lends something of Himself to the parent, and says, 'Keep it till I come.'" We are just God's in-house representatives.

But there is comfort in knowing that God loves our children even more than we do. In Isaiah 49:15, God says, "Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget." The psalmist says, "Though my father and mother forsake me, the LORD will receive me" (Psalm 27:10). God knows the depth of our imperfect hearts, our inadequacies. But his love, his heart, is infinitely deep, wide, high and long. He loves our children even more than we do—and he loves them perfectly. Our job is to cling to the Vine. We are the branches, desperately in need of his life-giving power.

Hannah waited until Samuel was weaned. For three to five influential years she cared for him, taught him and rooted him in her love and God's love. And then, in what must have been heart-wrenching obedience, we learn, in verse 24,

She took the boy with her, along with a three-year-old bull, an ephah of flour and a skin of wine and brought him to the house of the LORD at Shiloh. When they had slaughtered the bull, they brought the boy to Eli, and she said to him, "As surely as you live, my lord, I am the woman who stood here beside you praying to the LORD. I prayed for this child, and the LORD has granted me what I asked of him. So now I give him to the LORD. For his whole life he will be given over to the LORD" (1:24-28).

What an unselfish act! She gave her beloved firstborn to the Lord. And what a rotten environment! Not a great situation by any stretch of the imagination. Eli, old and obese, had raised two sons, wicked men who were presently the acting priests. Would you leave your precious firstborn child, or any child, with men with that kind of reputation?

Did Hannah not know the condition of Israel at that time? The immorality in the temple? The transgressing of the law of the Lord by Eli's own sons? She could have argued with the Lord that bringing this tender child into such a corrupt environment was a huge mistake. But instead, she trusted God. She put her faith in God and his promise and left Samuel in the center of corruption, believing that God would reveal himself to him.

And we know that God did exactly that.

Samuel was probably a young teenager when God called him to be his prophet. It was just before dawn. The flame of the golden lampstand was growing dim. Samuel was sleeping

in a cubicle near the holy place, where the ark of the covenant was kept in the temple. And the Lord called, "Samuel." Samuel woke up and thought he'd heard Eli.

You know the story.

"...here I am," he called. "I didn't call you. Go back and lie down." And the third time, instead of being provoked to irritation, Eli finally realizes what is happening. He tells Samuel, "Go and lie down, and if he calls you, say, 'Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening'" (3:9).

And God does speak directly to Samuel. A phenomenal thing! The sound of God's voice had been rare during the three hundred years of Judges. God had spoken to Moses and Joshua, but that was three centuries earlier. During Eli's time, there were no prophets speaking God's message to Israel. There was only silence from God, so corrupt had the system become.

God needed someone to be his man, so he prepared a mother.

And Samuel, although raised from the time he was three or four in an imperfect situation, separated from his mother except for yearly visits, had a mother who prayed, who had a relationship with the living God. And because of that relationship, there was a love and a power that reached beyond the reality of the imperfect situation and impacted Samuel's life, and the history of Israel, for eternity.

As mothers we want to set all things right. We want to make it all good. We want our children cared for in the very best way. In short, we want to control. The challenge of any parent is to draw these lines of protection around their children and then enlarge the boundary as they grow up and learn how to assume responsibility and become mature, independent adults.

The healthy process of progressively giving up control is the ongoing challenge of the mother heart. Do it right and it will strengthen family relationships. Fail to give up control and it will cause great pain. It's an inherent mother tendency. We want to intervene, arrange all situations, pull all the strings, cover all bases and make our children's world as perfect as we can. It's the prerogative of a mother: we want to be in control.

I can identify with the mother who tried hard to make sure her college-bound son would be living in the very best environment. She decided to write the college president in an effort to exert control and make everything safe. She wrote, "Dear Sir, my son has been accepted for admission to your college and soon he will be leaving me. I am writing to ask that you give your personal attention to the selection of his roommate. I want to be sure that his roommate is not the kind of person who uses foul language or tells off-colored jokes, smokes, drinks, or chases after girls. I hope you will understand why I am appealing to you directly. You see, this is the first time my son will be away from home, except for his three years in the Marine Corps."

Mothers, we can't make it perfect. We can only put our faith in our perfect God.

In *The Message*, Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of the New Testament, Jesus is speaking in John 8:23, "You're tied down to the mundane, I'm in touch with what is beyond the horizon." As mothers, so much of life is tied to the mundane. What could be more mundane than everyday existence, dealing with all the details and the demands of parenting?

Hannah had to deal with the mundane details of school clothes. Once a year she brought Samuel an ephod, a little

garment just like the one the big priests wore, made with her own hands, as a way to care for him. A mother's life is tied to the mundane. Yet there is no greater investment of time and energy, for the daily mundane is poured into the making of the life of a child and to his or her future.

What a relief and what an exercise, to put all the mundane and all the imperfections of life into the hands of the One who is in touch with what is beyond the horizon.

When we bring the mundane to Christ, he is able to make a difference. A relationship with him can imbue the mundane with the transforming power of God and make the mundane marvelous. Because as mundane and thankless as it is to be a mother at times, it is the most important job you will ever have. You are dealing with eternal things. What you do has eternal value.

Once in a while, in the midst of the marvelous mundane, God opens our eyes and we get a glimpse of the glory that is beyond the horizon, a glimpse of the things of eternity. It doesn't happen often. It is a treasured gift to be protected and valued. And though it can happen in many unexpected and wonderful ways, it almost always occurs at the moment of the indescribable miracle of birth, when that new life finally appears and nothing is ever the same again. You experience God in a new depth and wonder and you never want to forget it. You want to hold it close and remember.

Earlier this year I was a part of that most amazing new gift of life, and I caught a glimpse of glory. I was privileged to go to Vietnam with our son, Doug, who is a college pastor in Berkeley, his wife Laurie and their four-year-old son Zachary. We went to Hanoi to claim a gift, a precious gift of life. Doug and Laurie were adopting a baby girl and I got to go along as the nanny/granny for Zachary, because they didn't want him to miss out on this big brother opportunity.

We arrived in Hanoi on February 16th. Doug and Laurie had already spent 18 grueling months accumulating paper work. There had been devastating delays, but finally the day had arrived; it was "all systems go." We had only a few photographs to assure us this nine-month-old baby girl existed, yet this baby Zoe had long been a reality in our hearts.

Laurie and I had hung a pair of delicate baby shoes in a prominent place in our homes. We called them our prayer shoes—a tangible reminder to pray without ceasing for our Zoe. And finally, though the baby had long outgrown the shoes, finally, we were going to hold her in our arms.

Hanoi was like nothing we had ever experienced, yet it seemed like every movie we had ever seen of bustling South East Asia. We expected it would be a few days before they would bring the baby to us. But on the first night we arrived,

the proprietor of our little hotel, Mrs. Twee, who was the liaison with the adoption agency, announced that our baby would be there in just 30 minutes.

Jet-lagged and breathlessly excited, we gathered in the tiny front area and stared through the plate glass window out into the street. Myriads of bikes, scooters, and cyclos (the Vietnamese version of pedi cabs), and a few cars and taxis flowed by in ceaseless activity through the narrow, crowded Hanoi street.

I watched in dazed wonder as a man and woman come by on a motor scooter. They pulled up to the curb and started to unroll a blanket that was wrapped around a bundle balanced between them. A little head appeared from out of the blanket, and in shock, I realized that it was a baby! They had a baby on that motor scooter. Then it hit me. I grabbed Laurie and shouted, "It's Zoe!"

As the foster mother and father started in through the crowd milling around the streets, we could see that this was the precious little face that had stared up at us in the photos we had cherished all those waiting months. They entered and, without ceremony, came up to Doug and Laurie. Laurie rested her hands gently on the baby's little body so as not to frighten her, and then lifted her up and held her close. And that was it. Zoe was delivered.

We took a few quick pictures, but since we didn't speak each other's language, there was no communication except the language of love. Then the kind foster parents kissed the baby good-bye, got on the motor scooter and were gone. It wasn't until weeks later that Laurie's mother, who was looking at the pictures, realized that the foster mother was wearing a cross.

In the northern province of Vietnam there are two young women to whom I will be forever grateful. One is this lovely foster mother whom we were privileged to meet for that brief, transcendent moment; the other is Zoe's birth mother who kept this little baby girl for the first two weeks of her life and then gave her up to be adopted.

All we know of her is what she wrote on the form: "born out of the marriage lines. I can't afford to feed her." But because of her gift, there is a lively little girl who now lives in Berkeley, wonderfully enveloped in a family who adore her. The first Bunnell girl for three generations! Every time I look at her, I think my grandmother heart will burst.

On Doug and Laurie's kitchen wall hangs a plate that I painted for them soon after we returned. It simply says what they believe: "*For this child we prayed for as long as she lives, she shall be lent to the Lord.*"

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