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1 Samuel 1:8-28; 3:15-17

Sixth Message

Brian Morgan

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LIFE BEYOND THE WOMB

SERIES: THE CROSSING FATES

The book of Proverbs concludes with the words of King Lemuel (*lemuel* = “dedicated to God”) in praise of his mother. King Lemuel, who likely was a proselyte to Israel’s faith, honors his mother by recalling and immortalizing her teachings to him since the day she dedicated him to God. The best advice she gave him was identifying his greatest asset as king. The final lesson in Proverbs is an acrostic (i.e., from A to Z) on the infinite value of a “valiant wife.” She trained her son to look beyond physical beauty to something more precious and rare, a woman who “uses her strength, ability, wisdom and valor so totally and selflessly for others.”¹ Lemuel concludes his poem with these words:

**Her sons arise and pronounce her blessed;
her husband rises and praises her:
“Many daughters do valiantly,
but you surpass all of them.”
Charm is deceitful, and beauty is fleeting;
as for a woman who fears the LORD, she should be praised.
Extol her for the fruit of her hands,
and let her works praise her in the gates.
(Prov 31:29-31²)**

Motherhood is perhaps the most painstaking and demanding station in life, yet it is little praised by our culture. As it is Mother’s Day, and we are returning to our studies in 1 Samuel, I thought it would be appropriate for us to once again reflect on the life of Hannah, a woman who feared the Lord, and a mother whose works continue to bring her eternal praise in the city gate.

Hannah lived during one of the darkest periods in Israel’s history. For four centuries the nation had become completely leavened with compromise in their pursuit of other gods. Persistent apostasy led Israel into a downward spiral of sin and destructive behavior. This played out like a rerun of the moral anarchy and societal breakdown of the days of Noah, which led to the flood. Following that universal judgment, God displayed the beauty of his grace in a rainbow, a covenantal sign that he would never again destroy all human life in a flood (Gen 9:15).

As 1 Samuel opens, Israel is likewise on the verge of annihilation at the hands of the Philistines. What will be the instrument of God’s grace to save his people from destruction? The answer is found in the lives of two women, Ruth and Hannah. Their faith and character catapulted Israel out of the depths of depravity into the light of a new age. Both women are lauded in Scripture for how they responded to the pain that permeated their lives, and how their bold faith brought redemption to God’s people.

Andy Drake has expounded on the life of Ruth, a gentile woman from Moab who experienced the death of all the significant men in her life—her husband, brother-in-law, and father-in-law. But because of her deep-seated loyal-love for her mother-in-law, Ruth chose to leave her homeland and go with Naomi to carve out a new life among the people of Israel. Her dramatic words of loyalty have been treasured through the centuries as the gold standard of commitment:

“Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you. For where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die I will

die, and there will I be buried. May the LORD do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you” (Ruth 1:16 TNIV).

God rewarded Ruth’s faith with a new family, a new home, and a privileged place in Israel’s redemption story as the grandmother to King David and ancestor to Christ.

The second woman is Hannah, who became the mother of Samuel, the first prophet in Israel. Like Ruth, Hannah was also well acquainted with pain.

I. The Painful Context of Hannah’s Life

Hannah lived with her husband Elkanah in the hill country of Ephraim. This was a place laden with searing memories of mafia thugs, corrupt priests, mass rape, and a senseless civil war that ended in the wholesale abduction of virgin daughters to provide wives for the annihilated tribe of Benjamin. These sordid stories are graphically detailed in the appendices of Judges. There was little optimism in the air and no spiritual support left in the nation. The priesthood was so driven by financial extortion and sexual exploitation that all of Israel came to despise God’s altar. Hannah’s world was not one in which you would choose to raise your family.

Despite the darkest of times, Hannah and her husband Elkanah remained faithful to regular worship. They did not give up on God.

In addition to the painful memories and corrupt institutions, Hannah was assaulted with the psychological pain of barrenness. Because she could not have children, Elkanah took a second wife, Peninnah. Her name, meaning “ruby” or “pearl,” “suggests a beautiful exterior.”³ For Elkanah to marry a beauty queen whose fertile womb gave him all the children he wanted must have been extremely painful to Hannah, driving home her sense of worthlessness with every new birth.

At no time was her pain as acute as at the yearly festival in Shiloh. At the end of the festival the family would line up to receive their individual portions of the sacrifice. Elkanah would follow the prescribed order, giving to Peninnah and her children each their due. But when it was time to give Hannah her portion, knowing how painful it was for her, Elkanah gave her “a double portion” in an attempt to bring her some comfort in her barrenness. But this only heightened her pain by making her barrenness all the more public. Worse yet, this special attention paid by Elkanah to Hannah provoked Peninnah’s feelings of inferiority. It rubbed her nose in the fact that no matter how many children she bore for Elkanah she was never good enough to earn his love. After she witnessed Elkanah’s display of affection for Hannah she would vent all the putrid puss and vile hatred upon Hannah. This yearly assault left Hannah so depressed she was unable to eat.

You can imagine how Hannah hated the holidays.

One day, Elkanah had enough of Hannah’s depressive silence and refusal to eat, which cast a dark cloud over all the festivities. In typical male fashion, he decided it was time to fix the situation. Seeking to break through her depression, he fires four rhetorical questions at Hannah in rapid succession:

“Hannah, why do you weep?
 Why do you not eat?
 Why is your heart sad?
 Am I not better to you than ten sons?” (1 Sam 1:8 NASB)

Sadly, Elkanah knew the “why” of each question. Rather than bringing consolation, his blast of insensitivity only drove Hannah’s pain deeper. The fourth and final question, “Am I not better to you than ten sons?” pushes her pain past the breaking point. Now she knows that Elkanah’s concern was not about her grief, but his own need for affirmation. It was not about her but about him. Hannah could have shot back the same question: “Wasn’t I good enough to satisfy you as a wife without giving you sons? Apparently not; you took another wife!”

Though Elkanah loves Hannah his love has no backbone. Unlike Isaac, he does not intercede in prayer for her, nor does he intervene to shield her from Peninnah’s abuse. Elkanah’s life centers on taking care of his own needs. Rather than having the honesty to admit that he is powerless to change the situation, he makes Hannah responsible for his distress.

Barrenness is a deep wound for any woman, but Hannah’s cut so deep it bled out into all of her relationships. What she does with her pain is remarkable.

II. How Hannah Became a Mother

Then Hannah rose after eating and drinking in Shiloh. Now Eli the priest was sitting on the seat by the doorpost of the temple of the LORD. She, greatly distressed, prayed to the LORD and wept bitterly. She made a vow and said, “O LORD of hosts, if You will indeed look on the affliction of Your maidservant and remember me, and not forget Your maidservant, but will give Your maidservant a son, then I will give him to the LORD all the days of his life, and a razor shall never come on his head.” (1 Sam 9-11)

After enduring Elkanah’s massive self-pity and intrusive accusations, Hannah does not respond; she simply walks away from it all. She leaves her tormentors and takes all her grief and bitterness and makes it liquid in tears, pouring it all out (1:15) before the Lord.

While everyone was eating and drinking, Hannah gives drink to the Lord by offering him her sacred tears. What is even more amazing is how she transforms the sorrow that had robbed her ability to eat and drink and turns it into something positive. She offers her future son back to God to serve as a lifetime Nazirite (Num 6:1-5) who will not drink wine. At the apex of her pain she casts her life totally on God, and in response to her faith God brings redemption.

This is how Hannah became a mother. Scripture lauds her, because the process by which she gave birth—barrenness, which leads to complete trust in God and a creative miracle—would become typical of how we become the children of God in the Messianic age, “who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God” (John 1:13).

Isaiah’s promise to the barren in the Messianic age applies to each one of us. It is in the area of our deepest pain that God will bring forth spiritual fertility at a greater level than we could have imagined.

“Sing, O barren one, who did not bear;
 break forth into singing and cry aloud,
 you who have not been in labor!
 For the children of the desolate one will be more
 than the children of her who is married,” says the LORD. (Isa 54:1
 ESV)

This promise is exemplified in a lonely and desperate Samaritan woman who met Jesus by a well when she came to draw water. One touch of the Savior and she “gave birth” to a city overnight (John 4:35-42).

How then is Hannah praised as a mother?

III. Hannah Praised as a Mother

A. In the naming of her son

Then they arose early in the morning and worshiped before the LORD, and returned again to their house in Ramah. And Elkanah had relations with Hannah his wife, and the LORD remembered her. It came about in due time, after Hannah had conceived, that she gave birth to a son; and she named him Samuel, saying, “Because I have asked him of the LORD.” (1 Sam 1:19-20)

Names are significant. After Gideon had led Israel in a great victory over the Midianites, he was asked by the people to become king. He humbly replied, “I will not rule over you, nor will my son rule over you. The LORD will rule over you” (Judg 8:23). Yet after he refused to serve as king, he names his son Abimelek, meaning, “my father is king.” So much for humility.

By contrast, when the Lord remembered Hannah with a son, the name she chose to celebrate his birth gives all the glory to God. The name Samuel (*shemuel*) is an ingenious combination of *sh’al* (“to ask”) with *me’el* (“from God”) which when read in sequence becomes “asked of God.” Every mention of Samuel’s name would be a reminder of the miraculous power of God to transform our lives from barrenness, strife, and sorrow to fullness, peace, and praise if we will but “ask.”

B. In her commitment to nurture her son

Then the man Elkanah went up with all his household to offer to the LORD the yearly sacrifice and pay his vow. But Hannah did not go up, for she said to her husband, “I will not go up until the child is weaned; then I will bring him, that he may appear before the LORD and stay there forever.” (1 Sam 1:21-22)

Nursing creates the deepest of bonds between a mother and child as the child is fed in the most intimate of ways by the very life of the mother. And during feeding times both mother and child are consumed solely by the gaze of the other.

Most of us have no idea how crucial and formative the first years of a child’s life are until we begin to address the complex issues that arise from neglected and abused children. Commenting on how formative his mother was in shaping his faith, David wrote,

**Yet you are the one who brought me out of the womb;
 the one who caused me to trust at my mother’s breast.** (Ps 22:9)

The Hebrew word trust (*batach*) means that one feels so safe and secure that they are able to fully abandon themselves into the care of another. It is like a newborn infant that lays limp in its mother’s arms, giving the mother their full weight while nursing (Isa 26:3). This is the time when David says he began to learn how to fully trust, for behind the face of his mother he saw God.

Like Moses’ mother, Hannah knew she had precious little time to bond with her son before someone else would adopt him, so she was determined to take advantage of this opportunity. She made it clear to her husband that Samuel’s dedication was not going to be determined by the religious calendar, but by when Samuel was weaned. Nurturing her son took priority over religious obligations, and Hannah treasured every moment.

In the New Testament we find Paul giving this same kind of devotion to newborns in the faith who required similar care and nurture:

But we proved to be gentle among you, as a nursing mother tenderly cares for her own children. Having so fond an affection for you, we were well-pleased to impart to you not only the gospel of God but also our own lives, because you had become very dear to us. (1 Thess 2:7-8)

C. In her dedication of her son

Now when she had weaned him, she took him up with her, with a three-year-old bull and one ephah of flour and a jug of wine, and brought him to the house of the LORD in Shiloh, although the child was young. Then they slaughtered the bull, and brought the boy to Eli. She said, "Oh, my lord! As your soul lives, my lord, I am the woman who stood here beside you, praying to the LORD. For this boy I prayed, and the LORD has given me my petition which I asked of Him. So I have also dedicated him to the LORD; as long as he lives he is dedicated to the LORD." (1 Sam 1:24-28)

Once the time of weaning is complete, Hannah fulfills her vow with words of thanks, a feast of praise, and finally, the relinquishing of a son who will be dedicated (*sha'ul*) to the Lord "as long as he lives." This act of unequivocal giving, much like Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac, is done with unwavering determination and extreme generosity, with a feast fit for a king.

It is difficult to comprehend the magnitude of Hannah's surrender. What was it that allowed her to completely relinquish everything she was hoping for and give it back to God? How does a mother give away a son? The reason is found in her profound connection with God. The fact that God truly saw her gaping wounds, took note of her and vindicated her, became the ground of her life, rather than the gift of a son. Being a surrogate mother for God's servant who will bring redemption to Israel was the supreme privilege of her life. To Hannah, serving God as a daughter who intimately knows the love of God in her heart is more important than being a mother (Mark 5:34).

Hannah's act of dedicating Samuel becomes an example to parents that all children are gifts of God's grace; that our time to nurture and train them is but short and temporary; and that the goal of parenting is to set them free to serve the Lord in his kingdom. In the New Testament children were presented to Jesus, who is the new temple and our high priest:

And they were bringing children to Him so that He might touch them; but the disciples rebuked them. But when Jesus saw this, He was indignant and said to them, "Permit the children to come to Me; do not hinder them; for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Truly I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child will not enter it at all." And He took them in His arms and began blessing them, laying His hands on them. (Mark 10:13-16)

The same is true with discipleship. Like parenting, it is a supreme privilege to lead people to Christ and to nurture them in the faith. But our role, though critical, is always temporary. We are commanded to make disciples of Christ, not of ourselves.

IV. Hannah is Lauded as a Theologian (1 Sam 2:1-10)

Besides her role as a model mother, Hannah is lauded in Scripture as a truly great theologian. Now there are two types of theologians: those who learn intellectual truths about the nature of God from academia, and those who intimately come to know the grace of our sovereign Lord through life experience. The former acquire degrees, the latter burn with passion and are inflamed with love. After three years of reflection on what God did in her barren womb, Hannah understood that the grace which God poured out on her was not some random act, but was deeply rooted in God's unchanging and eternal character. The result is a skillfully crafted psalm of praise in which she raves about God's holiness as both creator and sovereign ruler in history. Such praise is theology on fire, designed to be sung into the bone and marrow of Israel's faithful.

If anyone might question how good Hannah was as a theologian, the answer spans the ages. Here are my top seven reasons why Hannah ranks among the very best.

Her method of learning equipped David to grasp eternal truths about the character of God by meditating on how the Creator did his best work in the deep darkness of his mother's womb (Psalm 139:11-18).

Her praise is the key to the theology of 1 and 2 Samuel, and is reaffirmed by David's three poems at the seams of the book (2 Sam 1:17-27; 22:1-51; 23:1-7).

Her theology set the standard for how Israel's kings were to be judged in terms of their "trust" in God (Psa 2:12; 3:3-4; 4:5; 9:10; 13:5; 20:7; 25:1, 2; 52: 8 etc.), and the care they were required to give to the poor and the humble.

The transformation of her prayers from silent despair → to articulate lament and petition → to joyous thanksgiving → to bold praise, became the pattern for the prayers of Israel's kings, which gave shape to the Psalter (1 Chron 16:4).

Her praise is recapitulated at the birth of Christ on the lips of Mary (Luke 1:46-53).

Her praise is made incarnate in the character of Jesus.

**Who, being in very nature God
did not consider equality with God
something to be used to his own advantage;
rather, he made himself nothing
by taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.
And being found in appearance as a human being,
he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death—
even death on a cross!
Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name that is above every name,
that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father. (Phil 2:5-11)**

Her praise becomes the standard for all Christian behavior in the epistles.

**Humble yourselves before the Lord,
and he will lift you up. (Jas 4:10)
All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, be-
cause,
"God opposes the proud
but shows favor to the humble and oppressed."
Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand,
that he may lift you up in due time. (1 Pet 5:5b-6)**

Was Hannah any good as a theologian? Her song wrote history!

VI. Lauded for Her Continued Influence on Her Son

Given the desperate need for good theology in Israel, one might have thought that Hannah would take her "concert of praise" on a national tour. She could have left her home temporarily to put on national workshops promoting her poem and the power of praise on Oprah. She could have, but she didn't. Hannah was a theologian, but she was first and foremost a wife and a mother. No one could replace that role in her family's life. While her song would write history, her energies remained devoted to her husband and children. The narrator paints a beautiful picture of Hannah's continued nurture and protective care that preserves and sanctifies her son in the midst of an evil environment.

But Samuel was ministering before the LORD—a boy wearing a linen ephod. Each year his mother made him a little robe and took it to him when she went up with her husband to offer the annual sacrifice. Eli would bless Elkanah and his wife, saying, “May the LORD give you children by this woman to take the place of the one she prayed for and gave to the LORD.” Then they would go home. And the LORD visited Hannah; she gave birth to three sons and two daughters. Meanwhile, the boy Samuel grew up in the presence of the LORD. (1 Sam 2:18-21)

Samuel is pictured wearing a linen ephod, symbolic of purity and being set apart as God’s property. To complement this priestly apron, Hannah brings him a new little robe that grows with Samuel each year. Fokkelman observes that though she was separated from her son geographically, she is able to maintain a constant “touch” of maternal warmth to protect him in the cruel moral and “mountain climate of Ephraim.”⁴ While Eli’s sons were robbing God and sexually exploiting the young girls, Hannah continued to make contributions to God and to protect the sanctity of God’s servant. That robe would accompany Samuel everywhere he went, even into his adult years, serving as a constant reminder of his calling as a prophet and kingmaker.

Rowland Bell, the father of our pastor Bernard Bell, died last year in Edinburgh. Rowland and his wife Kathie served as missionaries in Thailand for thirty-seven years. One of the costs often faced by missionaries ministering in remote areas is the necessity to send their children to boarding school. To get his education Bernard was sent away to boarding school at five years old. But like Hannah, Rowland and Kathie not only prayed for their son, they also sent him tangible reminders of their love. Every week for the next forty years Bernard received a letter in the mail from his parents. These letters were constant reminders of a mother’s love, a father’s passion for the Scriptures, and their devotion to God. Bernard probably knew his father and mother better than most sons who grow up in close proximity with their parents.

VII. Lauded by Her Son’s New Home

Samuel judged Israel all the days of his life.

And he went on a circuit year by year to Bethel, Gilgal, and Mizpah.

And he judged Israel in all these places.

Then he would return to Ramah (haramata- the longest form of the name),

for there was his home,

and there also he judged Israel.

And he built there an altar to the LORD. (1 Sam 3:15-17)

Perhaps the sweetest praise of Hannah comes from the son himself. Prophets don’t normally wear their emotions on their sleeve. They don’t write poems of sentimentality about their mothers on Mother’s Day. But sometimes actions speak louder than words, providing a profound window into the soul. In 1 Samuel 7:15-16 we are given the circuit of Samuel’s travels year-by-year, city-by-city. Bethel, Gilgal, and Mizpah were all historic cities richly laden with memories of the patriarchs Joshua and Judges. These places would be equivalent to Washington D.C., New York City, and Philadelphia. But what is so remarkable is that none of these cities have much pull on the prophet. In the next verse we find where his true loyalty lies—in Ramah! Lest there be any doubt we hear the emphatic “there...there...there!” Samuel has transformed his little hometown into both the civic and religious center of the nation. It is there he judged Israel and there he built a new altar to the Lord. By building an altar there, Ramah replaces the corrupt Shiloh as the spiritual center of the nation. We never hear of Shiloh again. Hannah need not make her yearly travels there anymore, for her son has brought the “new Shiloh” to her.

Could there be any greater praise for a mother by her son?

¹ Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs* (2 vols.; NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004-05), 2:521.

² Waltke’s translation. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs*, 2: 514.

³ I have been greatly helped by Jan Fokkelman’s masterful work for my insights on the life of Hannah. J. P. Fokkelman, *Vow and Desire, Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel: A Full Interpretation Based on Stylistic and Structural Analysis* (4 vols.; Assen: Van Corcum, 1993), 17.

⁴ Fokkelman, *Vow and Desire*, 124.