

October 4, 2020

"Altared-Living: Hannah"

[1 Samuel 1:1-2:11](#)

Even though you and I live far away from the hill country of Ephraim and the tabernacle in Shiloh; even though some of us are men and know nothing about carrying and giving birth to children; even though kids and young adults may struggle to enter the opening story from 1 Samuel at this stage of their lives . . . I think there will be a connecting point for all of us in this story about Hannah, her transformation, and the birth of Samuel.

Some of you can relate to the pain of childlessness, or the long, hard road to get past it. You may not have faced the taunting of 'other women' [Can we just say Penninah is a very bad person?], but I've observed and talked to people about how hard, awkward, frustrating, and even disappointing it can be to walk this childbearing journey with 'less-than-helpful' people surrounding us, and celebrating their kids. Sadly, I have added to this difficulty a time or two. Bringing kids into the world in our culture is not on par with childbearing as the primary identity for a woman in the Ancient Near East, but it's still a source of identity for many people at some level; which means it can also be a source of suffering and pain. It would do us well to be sensitive to that reality in the lives of those around us.

Now, if you don't resonate with the pain and suffering connected to various pregnancy or childbearing struggles, surely you had/have (or will have) another source of suffering and pain in your life. And it doesn't have to be something huge. It can be a persistent pain or source of suffering that doesn't go away. Like Penninah, your pain keeps showing up with great regularity to taunt you and wear you down – one layer at a time. Hannah is facing ongoing pain and suffering, and so are some of you.

This pandemic is taking its toll on us, but that's not the only source of pain and suffering in your life right now, is it?

How are today's difficulties affecting you?

How is it that suffering and pain change us?

How do they alter us and bring us to God at the altar?

Pain and suffering may lead to bitterness, resentment, or a total disconnect with God. But it can also drive us closer to God; and closer to becoming a person who is changing **"from one degree of glory to another."** Hannah is suffering, no doubt. But it seems to be driving her closer to God. Through her life and faith we see one of the mysterious yet consistent ways that God alters/altars our lives; it's in our pain and suffering, or the pain and suffering of others.

At some point in all this, on one of the many trips to Shiloh she had come to loathe because of Penninah, Hannah – who is being shaped in all of this suffering – is now desperate and prays a

desperate prayer at the altar of the tabernacle. And this is no "hands-folded-nicely" prayer. She is beside herself.

Apparently, Eli didn't take Pastoral Care 101. I'm also guessing he didn't pass his ordination exams because he doesn't demonstrate a hint of pastoral sensitivity in his responses. (We do know - by reading further - that his ministry and the ministry of his sons is a disaster.) He's clearly NOT at his best. And his attack on her furthers Hannah's despair and sadness. Eli simply doesn't recognize that she is praying in deep sadness, distress and desperation; or he's just too uncomfortable with it and makes an assumption about the source of her demeanor; or he doesn't know you CAN pray like this – in church or anywhere else.

How exactly is Hannah praying?

The scriptures tell us she arrives at church "Deeply distressed . . . [weeping] bitterly." (1:10) After Eli accuses her of being drunk she doesn't cave in with shame, but speaks up – clarifying her emotional state. She says she is "deeply troubled . . . pouring out her soul before the Lord . . . speaking out of [her] great anxiety and vexation." (1:15-16) She's not just 'praying' but doing what the Bible calls "Lamenting," which is a subset of prayer.

Laments are messy, raw, and unvarnished. So many of the Psalms follow the pattern of lament. We love to recite Psalm 23, but ignore so many other Psalms all around it; including Psalm 22, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but You do not answer; and by night but find no rest." (Psalm 22:1-2) You're allowed to pray like that in church, but we seldom do, or know how to respond to people who do. We must learn to Lament.

This is so important for those of us in the United States who follow Christ and grow up hearing people say, "Quit your whining!" But lament is not the same as whining. Culturally, we have a hard time offering/receiving hard, honest words that make our frustration and disappointment clear to another person. To many of us, it seems disrespectful to be so honest and blunt to those in authority, or those who have worked so hard in the past to make our nation a great place to live. But lament isn't complaining to others; lamenting is about bringing your frustrations and questions, confusion and consternation to God – asking Him questions and deepening your intimacy with Him in the process.

This lament of Hannah's – prayed honestly and without any pretense – helps alter/altar her life **"from one degree of glory to another."**

I want us to think about our own lives and prayers (even our laments). Have you ever been in a moment of lament like Hannah? Prayed a desperate prayer? Raw prayer? Do you think it might help transform your life and faith? Even one or two (little) degrees?

Beyond lament, have you ever, in your desperate and raw prayers, made a deal with God?

"O God, if only You would \_\_\_\_\_, then I will \_\_\_\_\_."

[Examples: a moral failure and a plea that God would get us out of the mess with a promise that we won't go down that road again; a financial struggle with a promise to start tithing; a health crisis with a promise to take better care of our bodies.]

Hannah is making a deal with God. Pretty bold! Then she sets Eli straight. Also bold! All of this shows her depth of faith and strength of character. We see Eli adjusting to this previously unperceived reality, then blessing/reassuring Hannah that God will act on her behalf. (I'd like to think he also apologized and signed up for a Pastoral Care refresher course.) And then, after all this pain and suffering, praying and lamenting, we're told Hannah is altered even more; **A few more degrees of glory.** "Then the woman went to her quarters, ate and drank with her husband, and her countenance was sad no longer." (1 Samuel 1:18b) Hannah is changing right before our eyes – even BEFORE her prayer is answered.

And THEN . . . Hannah's prayer IS answered! The question now is, will she make good on her promise to God? Before we talk about Hannah, let's talk about you and me. When we make deals with God, and He comes through for us, do we follow through on our promises? Will we?

Hannah does. She leaves the son she's been longing for all these years in the hands of God. What an act of faith! She gives Samuel to the Lord so that he can fill whatever purpose God has for him. And God's purpose is always transformation and change that leads to blessing. His purpose is always that His people would be altered/altared **"from one degree of glory to another."** If you know the rest of the story about Samuel, God uses Samuel as a prophet: to turn the people's hearts back to God and God's plan; to speak truth to power (King Saul); and to anoint another king who, himself, is just a young boy when Samuel anoints him in front of Jesse and his brothers – the future King David. Because Hannah is changed by God, Samuel becomes a change agent.

The last thing to mention and connect with in this story, is Hannah's song/prayer (1 Samuel 2:1-10). It's a song declaring what she can barely see but believes for the future; a song that declares everything will be turned upside-down and made new; a song that declares God is King and all who are under Him should humble themselves; a song that reminds us God can give and take away.

Where did this song come from?

Many believe it was part of her worshipping life, and the worshipping life of her people; that she would have grown up singing this song; that, because of Elkanah's faithfulness – going up to worship regularly and faithfully with his family – this song would have continued to stick with her, and inside her. And some of you know what that's like, don't you? Over the years, hymns and songs get stuck in your head. Or a hymn or song that you sing in church on Sunday comes back to mind when you need it most on Wednesday. There is a lot I could say about the

importance of corporate worship, private worship, and singing. Singing the scriptures. Singing truth. Singing hope. Singing our prayers. You never know when you'll need a song . . . but you will.

One commentator connects Hannah's song to our lives like this: "Singing. Sometimes you just have to sing! Hannah had to sing! God had turned her barrenness into joy. By using one of Israel's national hymns, she was bidding the nation to sing along with her. Her song reveals that she understood full well the significance of God's sovereign, gift-giving love . . . Our hymns and songs of worship are second only to the reading and exposition of the biblical text. Whether it is the Scripture choruses many of us use in our modern churches or the great classic hymns of the Christian faith, such singing of theology helps shape our thinking and prepares us for the day when we just cannot help ourselves, and we too have to sing." (from Bill Arnold in *1 & 2 Samuel*)

Hannah is altared. Through the pain and suffering she faces; through the honest and raw prayers she prays; through the reassurance of someone in the church that God has heard her prayers; through the actual answering of her prayer and her act of commitment back to God; and while she sings. All of that alters/altars her life **from one degree of glory to another.**

She goes from being boxed into the very small world of childbearing competitions with all its cruelty and snarkiness – maybe even thinking that her identity was found in what she could produce – [she goes from that little world] to being caught up in God's large, sweeping, transformative, upside-down Kingdom, where she sees herself as a giver of gifts she could never have produced on her own. What a story of transformation. She is altar-ed for good.

This is one of a handful of birth narratives throughout The Bible. We already looked at Isaac. We skipped past Moses in this series but remember his mother giving him up in a basket along the banks of a stream, hoping that someone in Pharaoh's palace would take him in. Then we have this birth narrative of Samuel. During Advent we'll look at the birth accounts of John the Baptist and Jesus. In all of them, there is a sort of "giving away" of the child to God. In some of them, there is a song. Mary also sings a song, which we call The Magnificat. Most are convinced she borrows much of Hannah's song, which shows she knows the scriptures and songs of her people too!

Do you have a song of transformation to sing? If so, will you sing it – for yourself and those who can't yet sing it for themselves? And if you don't have a song yet, would you like one? Would you be willing to ask and wait for God to give you one?

**Questions for Personal Reflection and Small Group Discussion**

1. How has pain, difficulty and suffering impacted your faith? Has it brought you closer to God or driven a wedge between you?
2. Have you been taught or encouraged to pray prayers of lament? If you grew up in the Church was there a culture of keeping things "positive and upbeat" and a dismissal of tension, honesty, and anger? Have you been made to feel bad for expressing your raw and honest emotions by someone in the Church?
3. Have you ever made a 'deal' with God in prayer? What was going on in your life at the time? Were you in a desperate panic?
4. What song or hymn has been stuck inside you and come out at 'just the right time'?
5. Of all the ways that spur on Hannah's growth (pain and suffering, honest prayer, the encouragement from another person that God hears you, an answer to prayer, your act of obedience, and worship) which one or two do you identify with most?
6. What does this passage have to say about being "Rooted in Jesus, Growing in His Love, [and] Branching Out to Serve Others"?