

A GODLY MOTHER

I Samuel 1

The book of Samuel opens upon a polygamous family living in the village of Ramah in Samaria about twelve miles from Shiloh, the seat of the tabernacle. The man of the house, Elkanah, was a member of the tribe of Levi. He was an honorable and devout man. However, his home life was not all that it should have been, for he had married two women, Hannah and Peninnah, and no home was ever made for two wives at the same time.

At the proper season each year this God-fearing man went to Shiloh, where for decades the tabernacle was located, to worship God and to offer the prescribed sacrifices. The women were not required to make this journey and to attend these services, but the pious ones, who were free from the cares of a family, often did so, and especially those whose husbands were Levites. The regularity with which Elkanah attended these services gave evidence that he and his family were not mere formal and occasional worshippers. There they found something that strengthened and satisfied them, and far more than compensated them for their effort in making the trip. Even though they lived in a day when spirituality was at a low ebb in Israel, they did not allow that to deter them. They refused to permit the looseness and laxity of their neighbors to influence them.

When Elkanah and his household went to Shiloh to worship and to offer their sacrifices unto the Lord, he gave to Peninnah and their children proper portions, but to Hannah he gave a double portion as a special token of his great love for her. Such a situation and procedure would naturally produce unhappiness, discord and strife.

I. Hannah's Problem.

Although Hannah was the wife of such an estimable man as Elkanah, she was very unhappy. She spoke of herself as "a woman of a sorrowful spirit," and her grief was not without a cause, for she was childless. Deeply imbued with the desire for motherhood, her heart was burdened and her soul was vexed because she could not have any children.

Among no people is the love of children stronger than among the Hebrews. They believed that to be childless was a sign of divine displeasure and the greatest "reproach among women." Regarding a family as a sign of God's favor and blessing, they considered it a shame and disgrace not to have one. Believing that "children are a heritage of the Lord," Hannah was grieved because she had been deprived of this heritage. But, her barrenness was providential, for the Word says, "the Lord had shut up her womb." The Lord had done this in order that He might manifest His grace to Israel by the display of His miraculous power. It was God's purpose to raise up a son from her who was barren.

II. Hannah's Provocation.

As a normal woman, Hannah loved children and yearned to have at least one of her own. Because she was barren she sorrowed much. The mother instinct is native to a normal woman. Of course, there are many cases where the sin of selfishness, a love for luxury and ease, and a craving for social leadership has deadened this normal desire.

Because of Elkanah's superior affection and open preference for Hannah, Peninnah was very jealous of her. She gave expression to her haughty and insolent attitude toward Hannah by repeatedly taunting her on account of her childlessness. She did

so on numerous occasions, but especially at these annual feasts, and thereby made life miserable for her. It is always a heart-searching and a deeply humbling experience for anybody to have the finger of derision and ridicule pointed at them by another. This is especially true when it is done by one who does not love the Lord as he should and yet seems to enjoy more of His favor than does the other. Because Peninnah repeatedly provoked her, Hannah was broken-hearted and wept bitterly.

III. Hannah's Piety.

On the occasion of the family's annual pilgrimage to Shiloh, Hannah was so greatly burdened on account of her childlessness and the taunts of her insolent rival that in bitterness of spirit she gave way to her feelings, which were expressed in the loss of appetite and in tears, woman's sure refuge. Elkanah sought to comfort Hannah, but she refused to be comforted.

In her provocation Hannah did not indulge in resentment or go to her neighbors for sympathy. Neither did she retaliate by censuring Peninnah for her cruel taunts or by engaging in a quarrel with her. Instead, she held her peace and resolved to commit her cares and anxieties to God. She refused to let her troubles come between God and her and make her rebellious against His providences. Instead of fuming and fretting, as many would have done under similar circumstances, Hannah determined to lay her case before the God of Israel, Whom she loved and worshipped, and to ask Him for help. What a blessed thing for anybody to do in an hour of distress, agony and need! Hannah had the good sense to take her troubles to God, which is exactly what all believers should do. In her helplessness she left the feast and went away to be alone with God in earnest prayer. Perhaps she did not know it, but her trials were developing in her a strong character. They were teaching her to be patient, kind, forgiving and long-suffering. Strong character is often fused in the fires of affliction, hammered out on the anvil of adversity and tempered by trials. Whatever increases our dependence on God is a blessing indeed.

IV. Hannah's Prayer.

In her distress Hannah made her way to the Temple, and there sobbed out her prayer to God. She asked Him to consider her affliction and to remember her. She was exceedingly anxious to have a son. She did not look upon motherhood as a drudgery, but as a privilege. She did not think of it as something that was to be abhorred because it would narrow her sphere. She believed that a child was needed to change her house into a home. Even though she had a big house, a good husband and plenty of servants, she did not believe that she had the best. She wanted the hug of baby arms. She wanted the kiss of baby lips. She wanted to hear the patter of baby feet. She wanted to become the mother of a son. So, she promised God that, if He would look upon her affliction and give her a son, she would lend him unto the Lord as long as he lived. She determined that, if the Lord would take away her reproach, she would dedicate her son entirely to His service.

Hannah desired that this son for whom she prayed should become a man, true to the divine ideal, who would glorify God through his life of service. She promised to give in return for what she hoped to get, saying, "O Lord of hosts, if thou wilt indeed look on the affliction of thine handmaid, and remember me, and not forget thine handmaid, but wilt give unto thine handmaid a man child, then I will give him unto the Lord all the days of his life, and there shall no razor come upon his head." Hannah thus purposed in her heart that if God would, in mercy, take away her reproach, she would dedicate her son entirely to the service of Jehovah. This was a mighty argument with God. He will not withhold from those who petition Him for the things that will bring glory to His name. Hannah had every confidence that God could and would grant her the desire of her heart.

Eli, the priest, noted the fact that Hannah continued in prayer longer than the average person. Observing the motion of her lips, but not hearing the sound of her voice, the priest concluded that she was intoxicated. In accusing her of this evil he made a very grave mistake. In self-defense against this false accusation, she graciously assured Eli that in bitterness of soul she was pouring out her heart to God in earnest prayer for a son. Well may we follow such an example of graciousness in the case of any false accusations against us. Following her explanation, Eli pronounced a blessing upon Hannah and joined in the prayer with her that God would grant her the desire of her heart.

Believing that God would answer her prayer and that she would have a son, Hannah went away with great satisfaction of mind. Her face was bright with joy, as her grief gave way to gladness. Disappointed in herself at not being able to become a mother, despised by another who had several children, and misjudged and falsely accused by God's minister, Hannah certainly had been sorely tried. But the glorious thing about her was the fact that she was submissive to God's will.

Hannah's prayer was answered. When her son was born, she named him "Samuel," which means "asked of God." She had prayed for a son and God had granted her request. What a welcome that baby boy must have received when he came into that village home nestled among the mountains!

V. Hannah's Praise.

There is a lesson for us here, namely, praise should always follow answered prayer. Hannah's heart was filled with the Holy Spirit and overflowed with joy and praise. She had received help from God and she owned it with gratitude. God had intervened in her behalf and she was glad. However, she did not speak about her gladness, but about the God Who made her happy. Hannah is a wonderful example of a godly mother. It is no wonder that her son became the noted and beloved judge and prophet Samuel. She dedicated her son to the perpetual service of God, rather than the making of a name or the gaining of a place in the world.

When Samuel was weaned, Hannah fulfilled her vow by taking her son to the temple and dedicating him to the Lord. Thereafter, he belonged to God. With faltering step she turned homeward, but God saw her quivering lip and those tears that refused to be controlled. Understanding fully, God took the ache out of her heart and filled it with His peace. Year after year that wonderful mother renewed her vow. When she went with her husband to offer sacrifices in the temple, she took a coat for Samuel who appeared more lovely and more winsome each year, but there was no yielding on her part to any impulse to take him back. Hannah never ceased to rejoice that God had enabled her to bring a son to Him and present him for His disposal and use in His service. From Hannah, the woman who kept her promise, we learn that each of us should dedicate himself to God and to do all that he possibly can to bring glory to His precious name.