

Hannah: Learning to Be Someone



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *1 Samuel 1; 2:1–11, 21; Job 2:12, 13; Matt. 6:19, 20; Luke 12:16–21.*

Memory Text: “Then Hannah prayed and said: ‘My heart rejoices in the Lord; in the Lord my horn is lifted high. My mouth boasts over my enemies, for I delight in your deliverance. There is no one holy like the Lord; there is no one besides you; there is no Rock like our God’ ” (*1 Samuel 2:1, 2, NIV*).

One of the great struggles that many people face is the sense of their own self-worth. What are we worth in this world? What can one life mean amid teeming billions? We read about wars in which millions have perished, often without a trace. Every day thousands are born and thousands die. We sense massive forces over which we have no control, which can run over us and our dreams as quickly as a truck does a bug on the road. How, amid such overwhelming power, can we get a sense of our own meaning and purpose? Do we even have any?

The Bible, of course, teaches that we do, that we are beings created in the image of God. We're important because we are important to God. Who cares what others think of you, if the God who holds the whole world in His hands loves you? His love, above all, is what counts.

This week, by looking at the life of Hannah, a woman without any claim to political or religious greatness, we will catch a glimpse of a God who loves us intimately and personally and of a God who tells us that we are somebody, even though it's easy to get the message from the world that we are nobody.

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, October 16.*

What Am I Worth?

Read 1 Samuel 1:1–16. Why was Hannah so distraught over not having children, even though she knew that her husband loved her?

Hannah’s feelings shouldn’t be that hard to understand, especially in her culture, where to have no male child meant to have no security in one’s old age. Having no child at all was understood as a divine curse. Both in the public and in the family sphere, a woman without a child had to live with a stigma of supposedly being cursed by God. Obviously, this affected her value in the eyes of society, her own self-esteem, and her relationship with God. Hannah must have wondered often what she had done to deserve this. Why was this happening to her?

To understand the depth of despair that barrenness brought to women in the world of the Old Testament, look at the actions and statements of Sarah (*Gen. 16:1, 2*) and Rachel (*Gen. 30:1*). How do they help us understand how strong that sentiment was back then?

Sarah’s action is reasonable in the context of the social and cultural customs of her time. However, it also provides us with a glimpse of the despair she must have felt and the burden she must have carried. What woman would encourage her husband to have relations with another woman in order to have children? Meanwhile, Rachel’s heartfelt cry to Jacob echoes a bit of Hannah’s emotion and the turmoil of her feelings.

For Hannah, jealousy and the sense of “being nobody” created an explosive mix of emotions that finally blew up when she poured out her heart before the Lord. What made matters worse was that Hannah was not getting younger. Time was against her, and, apparently, so was God.

Remember also that in Hannah’s time, a woman’s role in society was associated primarily with child bearing and rearing. There were no other career possibilities. A woman could not just change careers and find fulfillment in another occupation. We have examples of woman judges and female prophetic leadership in the Old Testament, but these are indeed limited and depended on God’s direct call. It was only through children that Hannah could count the worth of her life and leave a legacy. To her, without children her life had no real meaning.

A man had lost his child to leukemia. He told the pastor that he believed his son had died because he hadn’t kept the commandments faithfully, especially the Sabbath, and so God punished him. What’s wrong with that kind of thinking? How can we protect ourselves from getting caught up in that same kind of rationale?

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *1 Samuel 2:1*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Examine the aspects of Hannah's life that illustrate God's idea of what makes our lives significant.

Feel: Sense that even the simplest duties have infinite worth in God's sight.

Do: Trust God with every detail of our circumstances through prayer and praise and faithfully discharge the responsibilities He has entrusted to us.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: Significance in Simplicity

A For some time, Hannah was denied motherhood. How did God turn her life around? How did she respond to God's answer to her prayer?

B What evidence do we have that Hannah was faithful in parenting the son God gave her?

II. Feel: Faithful Parenting

A Even though Hannah had her son with her only a short time, it is evident that she raised him to honor and serve God. How did Hannah's faithfulness in parenting make a mark on the history of Israel?

III. Do: Prayer and Praise

A What challenges do we face that we need to entrust to God?

B What lessons regarding Hannah's approach to God in prayer, as well as her approach to praise, can we apply to our own relationship with God?

C What duties has God entrusted to us that require faithful and prayerful attention?

► **Summary:** In response to prayer, God made the life of a miserable woman rich with blessings. In turn, she responded with praise and, in faith, dedicated her son back to God.

With Friends Like These . . .

Living under the supposed curse of God and feeling that her life had no real value must have been hard enough for Hannah. What added problem did she have? *1 Sam. 1:6, 7.*

Those who are closest to us often know how to hurt us most. With Peninnah's constant provocations, it is not surprising that Hannah's life became bitter. The biblical text emphasizes the repeated nature of the provocations. Year in and year out, the same old story. It is interesting to note that the Hebrew word for the action of Hannah's rival ("provoked" [NKJV], "taunt" [NJB]) often is used in the Old Testament to describe grave sins that provoke a direct divine reaction (see *Deut. 9:18, 31:29*). This was not just a quick, sly remark. This seemed to have been a premeditated and conscious strategy by Peninnah to provoke Hannah into doing something stupid. After all, Hannah was her only rival for Elkanah's affections (*1 Sam. 1:5*).

Though Peninnah's taunts were meant to hurt, perhaps the worst hurts come from those who don't intend harm. Who, in the midst of terrible pain, hasn't been made to feel worse by well-meaning people who just happened to say or do the wrong thing?

Skim through the first five or six chapters of the book of Job. **Job's friends were truly sorrowful for what he experienced (see Job 2:12, 13). Yet, how did they make the problem worse for him? Why was this exactly how someone shouldn't react to another's grief?**

Loss of material possessions or of people close to us causes deep hurt. Illness or the circumstances of our lives may seem daunting and cause us to despair. Sometimes it is living with unfulfilled deep longings that drains our lives of any sense of hope. Things go from bad to worse when we have to face not only deep hurt or bad circumstances but also people who seem to specialize in making our life unbearable. This combination of unfulfilled dreams and constant tensions and provocation triggered Hannah's cry before the Lord. Sometimes we need to shout out our hurt and frustrations before God. When we hit rock bottom, we need to search for answers outside of ourselves.

What are ways that we can encourage and uplift those who are going through trial and calamity right now? What would you like people to do for you if you were going through something terrible? Whatever that would be, why not do it for someone else?

Learning Cycle

► **STEP 1—Motivate**

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: Regardless of how society or other people view us, each of us has unique value to God.

Just for Teachers: Emphasize that God never gives up on us, and He will bless us as long as we make Him first.

In 2009, the world was abuzz about a woman named Susan Boyle. Boyle, a rather plain, middle-aged woman from a village in Scotland, somehow beat daunting odds to stand before a jury of celebrities on the British reality show *Britain’s Got Talent*. Her ambition? To become a professional singer. An audible snicker arose from the audience. The judges smirked. Susan Boyle gave a flawless rendition of “I Dreamed a Dream,” from the musical *Les Misérables*, sending the smirks and snickers back into the seemingly distant past. The world was astounded to discover, after a steady diet of airbrushed, seemingly genetically engineered pop idols, “the [as satirist Andy Borowitz put it in rather snarky terms] surprising presence of talent in an ugly person.” But it was no surprise to people who knew her and grew up with her.

God knows you, and He’s not smirking. He knows you’re capable of great things, however unpromising you may look to others or to yourself. Trust Him. Give Him everything you have, and He will give you abilities beyond anything you—or anyone else—ever expected.

Discuss With the Class: How does the biblical story of Hannah provide hope to those of us who may feel like “nobodies”? What are the parallels of feeling like a nobody to the story and lineage of Jesus Christ Himself?

► **STEP 2—Explore**

Bible Commentary

I. “The Bows of the Mighty . . .” (Review *1 Samuel 1:12–18* with your class.)

Napoleon Bonaparte is said to have observed that in war “God fights on the side with the best artillery.” A look at the world around us often

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Pouring Your Heart Out

Human nature can take only so much. Eventually action must be taken. For some, this action can be irrational and even dangerous.

How did Hannah handle her pain? Read **1 Samuel 1:9–16** and describe the steps that Hannah took to deal with her pain.

This prayer was no formal petition or general “please help me” kind of prayer. The biblical author describes Hannah’s prayer as “pouring out [her] soul to the Lord” (*1 Sam. 1:15, NIV*). The term *pouring out* normally is associated with the pouring of liquids, particularly blood and water in connection with sacrifices (*cf. Lev. 4:7, 12, 18, 25, etc.*). It often is used to refer to God’s actions. God can pour out judgment or blessings (*Pss. 69:24, 79:6, Isa. 42:25, etc.*). It has connotations of abundance and fullness. In some Old Testament passages, the term is used in connection with prayer (*Pss. 42:4, 5; 62:8, 9; Lam. 2:19*). This pouring-out prayer is perhaps the most intimate kind of prayer. It involves being absolutely honest with God, expressing our deepest pain and fears. Hannah was so absorbed in her prayer that she became oblivious to those around her and to what they might think of her. She was, in fact, clinging to God the way Jacob clung to his nocturnal assailant (*Gen. 32:26, 27*).

Describe the immediate results of Hannah’s prayer. *1 Sam. 1:17, 18.*

While God does not always answer our prayers immediately, when we pour out our hearts before Him we can be assured that He hears and will answer us (*Ps. 37:4*) in His own time and way. This can give us hope and confidence as we wait to see God’s leading in our future.

In 1 Samuel 1:11, Hannah makes a big promise. Should God hear and answer her prayer and give her a son, she would give him back to God. In the Old Testament we find many people making vows to the Lord. As a matter of fact, vows often are seen in the context of worship and seem to belong to the same category as prayer and adoration.

Hannah’s vow is huge. The hoped-for son was to be given up. What would happen to her position as the wife of Elkanah? What would be her standing in the larger context of the family?

How often do you pour out yourself to God in prayer? Why is that so important for your spiritual walk? What keeps you from doing this as often as you need? Why not do it now? Surely you have painful and pressing needs. Who doesn’t?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

seems to confirm this cynical wisdom. The rich get richer. The “beautiful people” can afford to keep their beauty well into old age with the help of expensive plastic surgeons. How easy to believe that the rich are happier than the rest of us.


How then can we say, as Hannah does, that the Lord “raises the poor from the dust” (*1 Sam. 2:8, NKJV*)? We must change our perspective. We must place ourselves on God’s side (He already is on ours). If we are on God’s side, we are standing with the One who (figuratively speaking) set the earth on its foundations (*vs. 8*).

For us to position ourselves on the Lord’s side, it is necessary to recognize that our own resources are not enough. Hannah realized that it was not in her power to will herself to have a child. When she went to the sanctuary, she literally had run out of options. The thought of not getting what she wanted was intolerable. But when she walked out of the sanctuary, she was at peace. Nothing in her circumstances had changed. Eli, the priest, had blessed her, and that was, no doubt, significant. But even he could do no more than wish her well. We don’t know if she was sure that God would grant her wish in the way she wanted it. But we’re told that “her face was no longer sad” (*1 Sam. 1:18, NKJV*). What had changed was that she had aligned herself with God.

Hannah did get what she wanted. It would have been easy enough for her to believe that it was because of her own merit or because she prayed especially eloquent and powerful prayers. In both the secular and religious worlds, there are many people who secretly (or not-so-secretly) come to believe that they deserve what they have. Yet, Hannah’s response was to worship God, acknowledging that “ ‘there is no one holy like the Lord’ ” (*1 Sam. 2:2, NIV*) or, as it would be stated later, “ ‘There is none good but . . . God’ ” (*Matt. 19:17*). Everything that had come to her was the result of God’s mighty acts, which were not subject to chance or the mathematics of power relationships or wealth or personal charm and worthiness. It was all, instead, God’s grace.

Consider This: Most of us have wishes or desires that for whatever reason have failed to come to fruition. What prevents us from turning them over to God and claiming His peace? What pleasant surprises does Hannah’s story help us believe that He has in store for us when we do?

II. Hannah’s Prayer (*Review 1 Samuel 2:1–10 with your class.*)

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Singing His Praises

Are you someone who sings when you are happy? The Bible often records people bursting into song at key moments in their lives. Miriam and the women of Israel sing at the shores of the Red Sea after having witnessed God's mighty salvation (*Exod. 15:20, 21*). In wonderful poetic language, Deborah and Barak extol God's power over human kings and armies (*Judg. 5:1–31*). When Mary visits her relative Elizabeth, she breaks out into a song of praise about God and His incredible plan of salvation (*Luke 1:46–55*). All of these songs share one common denominator, even though they appear in different historical contexts and under distinct circumstances: they all describe what happens when God intervenes in human history and responds to the pleas of His children.

Read 1 Samuel 2:1–11. What is the main theme of Hannah's song?

Hannah now knows beyond a shadow of a doubt that God is fully able to control the circumstances of history, as well as her own personal experience. She sees her life from a totally new perspective. Things that others strive for and take as an absolute are in reality very flimsy and could be gone tomorrow. In her song, Hannah makes surprising contrasts to underline the fact that life's circumstances are not always as they appear. The arrow of the mighty warrior breaks, while the feeble are "girded with strength" (*1 Sam. 2:4*). Things we give value to are often not as permanent as they appear.

Hannah has found that true security depends not on circumstances but on knowing our God, who does not change. He is the One who tells us that we each are special. He is the One who gives us value.

Some struggle with verse 6 in Hannah's song. How do we understand that? Is God arbitrary in His goodness or His judgments? In order to understand these verses, we need to remember the basic Old Testament premise about life. This is so different from the modern worldview: God is the Creator of life, and as Creator He has the right to do whatever He wants with His creation. In other words, nothing on this planet is beyond His control. This means that in the biblical worldview, even negative things are subject to God's control. Often the biblical authors describe this perspective in a way that could suggest God's active involvement in the design of bad things happening to humanity. In other words, what God allows, God "does."

What can you sing about? Write a list of things that you would like to praise God for. The more you praise God, the more thankful you will become for what He has done for you. That's why praise is so important.

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

In the story of Hannah, we see three parts to prayer. As we have noted in the previous section, the most basic aspect of prayer is giving our concerns and desires to God, as Hannah did in the sanctuary. Ideally, this should be more than just asking for what we want or even what we think we need. We also are throwing off the burden of our concerns and desires. We are expressing confidence that God is equal to them.

The other parts of prayer are praise to, and adoration of, God and thanksgiving for what He has done for us. We find these elements in Hannah's prayer, recorded in 1 Samuel 2:1–10.

Why does God need to be praised and adored? Is it because He will work on our behalf only if we've massaged His giant, celestial ego? Is God insecure? Certainly the gods of pagan peoples had all these weaknesses, and mythology recounts many instances in which "gods" did many things for the sake of ego, lust, revenge, and similar things. But that is not the God we worship. Our God does not have a fragile ego. He doesn't need us to praise Him; we need to praise Him. The ego problem is ours. That issue is magnified by our short memory. Even the most intense and striking experiences of God's power tend to slip from our memories as life goes on. So, we need to praise God to remind ourselves who God is and how dependent on Him we are for everything, including our very existence.

Closely related is the prayer of thanksgiving. Here, we are acknowledging not only who He is but what He has done specifically for us as a result of who He is. Everyone has at least some smaller general reasons to be thankful to God. And if we think about it, most of us can find one or two huge, personal, specific reasons. But again, we forget unless we make a sustained effort to remember. If we all made that effort to remember what God has done for us, few would doubt God or His intentions for us.

To praise and thank God is also to reject the idea of a universe based on blind chance or inexorable natural law (i.e., God is on the side of those with the best artillery). We are acknowledging God as the Master of natural law, with the authority to bend or break it when it serves His will, like the "bows of the mighty" (*1 Sam. 2:4*).

Consider This: What are some of the attributes for which Hannah praises God in this prayer? How does God work in the world?

► **STEP 3—Apply**

Just for Teachers: Emphasize that God wants to give each of us what we want and need according to His will, and that prayer is our way of communicating these things to God.

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God's Investment Plan

Even though Hannah leaves the tabernacle singing, she also leaves behind little Samuel. She no longer has the stigma of barrenness, but she still goes home to an empty house. With her son dedicated to God and working for Him, who will look after her in her old age? She has, in simple faith and trust, given her most precious possession to God. In this sense, Hannah reminds us of Abraham, another hero who was prepared to offer his son to God. As we already noted, the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham and Sarah also involved a long period of barrenness. However, God "tests" Abraham's faith when the boy is already older, while Hannah has decided herself to give her son, should she have one, to God's service, even before the child is born. After the boy is weaned, he is brought to Shiloh. Can you imagine the feelings that his mother must have felt when she waved him good-bye, especially considering the fact that things were not going that well in the household of Eli, who would now function as the mentor and guide of young Samuel?

How does God honor Hannah's expression of faith and love? *1 Sam. 2:21.*

Hannah could have refused to give her boy to the Lord and selfishly clung to him as her only security. However, by giving him to God, she not only received five more children, but her giving Samuel to the Lord also had a profound influence on Samuel himself. In time, he became God's special mouthpiece and one of the greatest educators and leaders of Israel.

What dangers do we face when we hoard? *Matt. 6:19, 20; Luke 12:16–21.*

God is in the business of taking whatever we give to Him, multiplying it, and giving it completely new dimensions that we never would have dreamed of. Hannah learned that the greatest treasures are really secure only when given to God. That which we hoard for ourselves here can, in an instant, be gone.

Hannah knew who she was in God's eyes. This sense of her own worth gave her the freedom to give.

We must remember that everything we have, all that we are, and all that we own, are ours only because of God's grace and goodness to us. How should that thought help us be more willing to give back to the Lord rather than hoard for ourselves? What does hoarding tell us about ourselves, our character, and our lack of trust in God?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED**Thought Questions:**

1 In the time in which Hannah lived, childbearing was pretty much the only path to what society regarded as real or successful womanhood, just as being able to father a son to whom one could pass on property and perhaps a trade was a measure of successful manhood. What are some of the comparable measures of success in today's society?

2 Although God does want good things to happen to and for His people, sometimes they fail to happen; or, on the contrary, sometimes very negative things do happen. How can God turn negative occurrences or circumstances into positive ones?

Application Questions:

1 In the Old Testament, we are shown many examples of people who have had prayers answered by God in just the ways they wanted, Hannah being a prime example. Of course, in many cases these instances of fulfillment have been preceded by years of waiting and even suffering. Most of us have examples of things we prayed for that just didn't happen or that did not turn out to be what they had seemed at first. How can we avoid disappointment and bitterness?

2 How can actively praising God in our daily lives improve both our attitudes and our circumstances? What are some ways we actively can cultivate an attitude of praise?

► STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: The following activity is meant to emphasize the role of praise of God in the Christian life.

Activity: Emphasize that all of us have things to praise God for and that praise has less to do with circumstances than it does with intentional cultivation of an attitude. Ask the class about things they may do in their lives to generate this attitude of praise. Or you might pose the question more hypothetically, asking what one can do to cultivate such an attitude. You might focus on one particular area, such as music, challenging class members to think of new and innovative ways in which music can be used in worship and shared with others as praise to God.

Further Study: “Parents, give your children to the Lord, and ever keep before their minds that they belong to Him, that they are the lambs of Christ’s flock, watched over by the True Shepherd. Hannah dedicated Samuel to the Lord; and it is said of him, ‘Samuel grew, and the Lord was with him, and did let none of his words [the Lord’s words through Samuel] fall to the ground.’ 1 Samuel 3:19. In the case of this prophet and judge in Israel are presented the possibilities that are placed before the child whose parents co-operate with God, doing their appointed work.”—Ellen G. White, *Counsels to Parents, Teachers, and Students*, p. 143.

“What a reward was Hannah’s! and what an encouragement to faithfulness is her example! There are opportunities of inestimable worth, interests infinitely precious, committed to every mother. The humble round of duties which women have come to regard as a wearisome task should be looked upon as a grand and noble work. It is the mother’s privilege to bless the world by her influence, and in doing this she will bring joy to her own heart. She may make straight paths for the feet of her children, through sunshine and shadow, to the glorious heights above. But it is only when she seeks, in her own life, to follow the teachings of Christ that the mother can hope to form the character of her children after the divine pattern. The world teems with corrupting influences. Fashion and custom exert a strong power over the young. If the mother fails in her duty to instruct, guide, and restrain, her children will naturally accept the evil, and turn from the good. Let every mother go often to her Saviour with the prayer, ‘Teach us, how shall we order the child, and what shall we do unto him?’ Let her heed the instruction which God has given in His word, and wisdom will be given her as she shall have need.”—Ellen G. White, *Conflict and Courage*, p. 138.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ Who in your church is experiencing difficult circumstances at home or in their personal lives? How can you as a group and individually help to support these people? How much of yourself are you willing to sacrifice in order to help?
- ❷ What are some cultural stigmas that abound in your society; that is, what are things that are deemed terrible by your culture? Ask yourself, Are these things that God Himself also sees as bad? Are we, as a people, in danger of stigmatizing, because of culture, things that God doesn’t? What are some examples where we might have done that? How can we know the difference between what is cultural and what is biblical?