



This Week in the Word

Forever, O LORD, your word is firmly fixed in the heavens. Ps 119:89.



God Answers Prayer

Study Scripture: 1 Samuel 1:9-20

Lesson 2, September 7th, 2019

Key Verse

Eli answered and said, Go in peace: and the God of Israel grant thee thy petition that thou hast asked of him.— 1 Samuel 1:17

INTRODUCTION

Human nature is such that at first glance and even afterwards, often people's first reaction to observing deprivation, misfortune, victimization etc., is to blame the victims. While this might very well be justified in some instances, the people of God should not rule out His direct hand in the testing circumstances of their lives and that of their brethren, as today's Study Text reveals.

Our Study is really a focus on the nature of suffering and grief, suffering which exists on many levels such as physically, emotionally, and that brought by the context of what was happening in the wider society to create a sense of personal abandonment.

We read about the suffering of Jesus who suffered patiently. We also read about the psalmist David who discussed suffering in its many and varied manifestations. We have been exposed to the suffering of the powerful prophet Elijah who told God plainly, ***"It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life"***.

We are now however looking at the women in Israel who did not have enough complex roles in their societies but who nevertheless suffered because of their reproductive role and the anxieties that were imposed on them because of the cultural and economic situation in which they were placed.

We must admit at the outset that in the near Eastern culture women were regarded as somewhat inferior beings. The Law of Moses elevated them. But they lived in a situation where their reproductive status determined how they were regarded. This is not to say that they were not loved and that God did not love them, but the society in which they lived certainly created some problems for them.

Barrenness or infertility was a serious problem and it was a source of disgrace in the ancient world. What was worse was that there would be no investigation as to whether the man had a problem in conceiving or whether the problem was due to the woman's biological situation.

It is to be carefully noted that though you might think that sons are just tiny human beings that mothers especially want to love, care for, and nurture, for ancient societies sons were the future. They were the ones that would guarantee the life of the present generation and the life of the future generation. It was not that daughters were not important, but warrior and leader sons would guarantee the future survival of the tribe or nation. This was a tough unforgiving world.

Hannah the heroine of our Study in her day might have been viewed as just another unfortunate Israelite woman who could not have children. However, she will providentially be the mother of the prophet who will lead the nation through the transition from the 'Period of the Judges' to the Monarchy. The book of 1 Samuel records the process by which God provided His people with a king and like Elizabeth in the New Testament, Hannah will be the mother of the prophet who will designate God's chosen king.

In the Study Text, Hannah provides the example of a child of God who comes to acknowledge God's sovereignty in her life and she after a great deal of stress on her brought by God who closed her womb vows to give to the Lord what would be most dear and cherished to her.

Note also that Hannah's situation was not good at all because remember that if her husband died the sons of the other wife would inherit everything leaving her dependent on their goodwill or lack of it. Without a child and specifically a son she might end up on the street and so she knew she was dependent not only on her husband's kindness and generosity but she was dependent on his living as well.

These situations in Scripture might be just like nice stories to you that might bring a tear to your eyes. But do not be mistaken for they are really powerful dramas intending to teach you powerful spiritual lessons. This was life and death for the people in the story and we should never forget that.

Accordingly therefore we must judge their behavior, their faith, their dependence on God, their fortitude, their sticking to God no matter what the pressure on them, and their immense and unbelievable level of gratitude when God reacted to their prayers and gave them what they were asking for. When God answered their prayers they were willing to promise to give up their very best.

God is Faithful

What about us?

In fact, when you look at this story, it puts us to shame when we consider the level of ease and luxury that many of us have, and the very light afflictions that seem to make us cry and complain.

But we should remember that there are a great many other societies where people have similarly great difficulties like Hannah and we have to remember to pray for them that God will hear their cry.

Just remember therefore that sometimes God will take you to the place where you have to agree and go to give God what you most desire to have for yourself.

The Study Text is set in the time of the 'Judges'; a period that began for the nation a short few years after entering the Promised Land when Israel drifted from obedience to the commandments of God. After an initial good but imperfect period of obedience under the rule of Joshua, a long period of political, moral, and spiritual decline ensued after his death. For over three hundred years, apostasy, moral decline and confusion reigned and as Judges 21:25 put it, "*In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes*".

Judges 2:10-12, explains that the generation that entered the Land had died, and the succeeding generation did not know the Lord, nor the work that He had done for Israel. They forsook God and served the Baals; they followed the idolatrous practices of the nations around them, and thereby provoked God to anger and invoked His judgment.

The parents had failed as parents. They did not communicate the reality of God, nor His mighty works to their children, and so the living God was a stranger to those of that generation,
(see Deuteronomy 11).

God did all manner of things to bring His erring people back to Himself. He brought them pain, anguish, abuse by their enemies; periods of servitude, but though this forced them to remember their Lord and cry to Him for deliverance, they promptly forgot their vows of obedience, after God raised up some powerful liberators called judges, who delivered them from servitude. Once the pain ceased and these judges died, the people promptly slid back into the way of disobedience and idolatry.

The Book of Judges records in sad detail this cycle of defeat, oppression, crying out to God, deliverance, and return to apostasy. The effect of all this was a growing, steady decline in the quality of the national life in every respect.

God however was at work. He brought Ruth the Moabitess from the despised nation of Moab that God had vowed not to bless and in His grace showed us that God is able to bring people who respond to the call of the Holy Spirit out of the very pit and into the

congregation of the Lord. In God's strange working of His grace He brought Ruth to Israel during this time and she joined with the godly Boaz to begin a godly line that God would use to produce Israel's great deliverer. God's work is indeed marvelous and it continued during this time of tremendous degeneracy in Israel.

The priesthood also shared in this great decline, but God raised up the hardworking and devoted Eli as High Priest. Though hard working and clearly a strong servant of God, Eli was nevertheless a defective father. Like the rest of the society he was derelict in his duty as a parent. His sons who operated as his helpers, were immoral men. They openly disregarded the God ordained requirements of the religious sacrifices, and committed fornication with many of the women who visited the tabernacle at Shiloh. God warned him of his disgraceful behavior and what he was doing, but he still did not have the courage and fortitude to stand up and do what was right even if it means killing his wicked sons for their disgraceful behaviour. God had sent messengers of warning but it made no use.

It is in this setting we find the touching story of Hannah and it is important that we understand her experience in the context of God's unfolding drama of redemption.

We find Hannah as a barren, heartbroken woman in a strife-torn polygamous family situation. Polygamy was clearly against God's design for the family but was not unusual for the times. Hers was the grief of a hope unfulfilled, a desire for the joys of motherhood that she could see other women experiencing but which had been denied her. Hannah felt cruelly separated from those women and in some cases was likely ostracized by them.

In a society in which a woman's primary vocation was to be a mother, infertility was often taken as a sign of God's displeasure (Deuteronomy 7:14) and resulted in a loss of status. Hannah experienced the disdain of society and might have wondered whether the Lord saw her in a similar light. Importantly we read that "...*but the Lord had shut up her womb...*"

Aside from the societal stigma attached to barrenness in biblical times, the surroundings in Hannah's home made her condition even more excruciating. Elkanah, Hannah's husband, had another wife besides Hannah, named Peninnah. Not only did Peninnah have children, but she taunted Hannah mercilessly for her inability to bear children (1 Samuel 1:6, 7). Peninnah was downright cruel in reminding Hannah of her barren condition. It is hard to imagine how deeply Hannah was hurt by such malicious words from a woman she could not simply cut out of her life.

Elkanah was a well-intentioned man and sympathetic toward Hannah, but he did not fully grasp the extent of her anguish. When Hannah would become so upset during their annual sacrifice, a time of feasting and Thanksgiving to God, that she refused to eat (1 Samuel 1:3, 7), Elkanah would say to her, "*Hannah, why weepest thou? and why eatest thou not? and why is thy heart grieved? Am not I better to thee than ten sons?*" (1:8).

In truth, being a mother of just one son would have satisfied Hannah, so great was her grief at being childless. She was clearly her husband's favourite, but despite his love and affection, he could not give her what she most wanted, namely, a son. He might have been

a nice person, and certainly loved her dearly but he certainly wasn't paying much attention to the reality of her life. He did not understand that his love could not remove either her shame or her vulnerability. One writer even comments:

“I would have been more reassured if he had said, “Hannah, YOU are more than 10 sons to ME”.

I understand from this lesson therefore that men and husbands can be somewhat insensitive at times. We all should therefore examine ourselves and should be careful to speak appropriately so that we do not “twist the knife” into those we love who are hurting.

Let us read our Text and be reminded that our God is faithful, to be trusted, is sovereign and since He in our lives as our Lord and Savior, we should not be restrained in pouring out our hearts to Him in the testing circumstances of our lives.

THE TEXT

Verses 1 – 3. These verses introduce the main characters in the narrative, Elkanah, a well-to-do Israelite with two wives Peninnah and Hannah; crucially we read that Peninnah had children and Hannah was barren. Eli is the High Priest aided by his sons Hophni and Phinehas at the Tabernacle in Shiloh and we are in the time of the Judges.

... an Ephrathite... likely describes Elkanah's geographic designation. Genealogically, he was a Levite (1 Chr 6:33–34). Joshua 24:33 describes Levites as living in the hill country of Ephraim.

... He had two wives ... polygamy recalls the patriarchs of Genesis, particularly Abraham and Jacob (Gen 16:3; 29:21–28; 30:4, 9). It is possible that Hannah was Elkanah's first wife, and he married Peninnah because Hannah did not bear children.

Hannah had no children ... the narrative portrays Hannah in the same manner as the matriarchs of Genesis—Sarah, Rebekah, and Rachel (Gen 21:1–5; 25:21; 29:31–30:2). The Text indicates that her conception of a child will be an act of God, and that her child will do great things for God and His people.

... yearly to worship... demonstrates his piety (Deut 12:5–7). Elkanah with his family observed the yearly feasts and visited the Tabernacle for those designated occasions.

Verses 4 – 8. All is not well in the home. Hannah is the favorite wife and her inability to have children provides on-going occasion for spiteful taunting by the mean-spirited Peninnah. The situation is acerbated at Feast time, for while Hannah can avoid her adversary at home, the family travelled and had formal meals together on their visits to Shiloh. Peninnah used these occasions to provoke Hannah.

These annual pilgrimages and their accompanying feasts would have been a source of great shame for Hannah. Peninnah would receive larger portions of food because she had given birth to many children.

Elkanah tried what he thought was his best to comfort and reassure his favorite wife of his love but there was little joy for a childless woman in that society and the constant needling of her rival made for a bitter and very unhappy Hannah.

In the ancient Near East, husbands were essential for a woman's survival, but children brought them honor. Without children, Hannah would have felt only shame.

Unbeknownst to Hannah and everyone else, her infertility was a direct act of God.

All this leads us to one particularly vexing and pivotal family visit to observe a feast at the Tabernacle which our Study Text now details.

Unexplained difficulties can bring grievous problems and can even bring not only a sense of loss but a sense of guilt. It is clear that Hannah's life was not in good shape and she describes herself as miserable. But she did not know what caused her misery for there is no reference that she had made bad choices, or followed any sinful pattern in your life that led to her present situation. She knew her husband had had children so he was not to blame for her infertility. In this situation of extreme difficulty all she could do was to pray for she knew that God was faithful.

This brings to mind Jesus' response to His disciples when they asked Him whether the blind man or his parents had sinned so that he was born blind. Jesus simply told them that the blindness was not a result of anyone's sin, but was there ultimately for the glory of God.

This is a tough lesson and this is tough teaching but we should remember it for things like this play out in our lives from time to time. We are just looking through a glass darkly. And so we pray that the time will come quickly when we will see things face-to-face.

We should bear in mind though that eventually Hannah's experience enormous good for she was allowed to bear six children including the great leader Samuel who turned Israel from its darkest time and back toward the light of God.

Verse 9. *Shiloh* was where the tabernacle was set up once Joshua and the Israelites had taken control of the Promised Land (Joshua 18:1). Shiloh was located within the tribal territory of Ephraim and centrally located in relation to the rest of the land. Thus it was a fitting location for the Tabernacle. Note that Samuel' father was an Ephraimite which meant that he belonged to the tribe of Ephraim. (See Joshua 18:8–10; 19:51; Judges 21:19: 1 Chronicles 6:22).

Each year Elkanah took his family to worship and perform a sacrifice at the tabernacle at Shiloh. This may have been at a national festival such as Passover, but the text does not specify. It appears that families can plan special gatherings of worship together, perhaps along the line of family reunions (1 Samuel 20:6, 28, 29).

Apparently a fellowship meal shared by Elkanah's family followed the time of sacrifice. This was meant to be a joyous time, but it was certainly not joyful for Hannah since her "adversary" Peninnah was constantly ridiculing her barrenness (1 Samuel 1:6). On this particular occasion, the fact that Hannah rises *after they had eaten* the fellowship meal may mean that she herself had not eaten anything because she was so upset.

Bear in mind that holidays times or times of great family festivities are often very difficult times for people when they have problems. We therefore should learn to be sensitive to these situations. Our sensitivity and caring will please God.

...the temple of the Lord... the Hebrew word translated *temple* is used in the Old Testament to describe a number of structures. These include the Tabernacle (here and in 1 Samuel 3:3), a king's palace (1 Kings 21:1; 2 Kings 20:18), Solomon's temple in Jerusalem (18:16), and the Lord's heavenly temple (Micah 1:2). Virtually nothing is said about the Tabernacle in the book of Judges, probably because the spiritual condition of the nation of Israel was so poor at the time. Thus, the tabernacle is not a priority because God was not often prioritized by the people. Note that the people of the nation bypassed the Tabernacle and Shiloh and went to the prophetess Deborah was located in a totally different direction for advice and spiritual guidance and direction.

The Tabernacle however was still revered as a sacred place to those who sought to maintain a true relationship with the Lord. To his credit, Hannah's husband, Elkanah, was one of those individuals who desired to raise his family to honor the Lord.

Hophni and Phinehas ... Eli's two sons are mentioned as priests of the Lord (1 Samuel 1:3), but nothing is said about Eli's service until the present verse. It is generally assumed that Eli was serving as High Priest in Shiloh at this time. Perhaps this is why he is stationed *upon a seat by a post* of the Tabernacle. People can come and bring their concerns to Eli or seek his counsel.

Verse 10. *prayed unto the Lord, and wept sore*. Hannah's prayer likely included more than the words recorded in the lines that follow. But this segment contains the most significant part of her prayer: the *vow* that she makes before the Lord.

We can understand to bitterness of her soul, and we can understand the weeping. But now note that Hannah made another amazing decision for she turned to the Lord with an amazing promise of her own.

Verse 11. ... *vow* ... the only woman recorded in the Old Testament as having made and kept a vow to God.

... Lord of hosts... identifies God as a commander of armies—those of Israel, as well as heavenly armies. It speaks of God as the helper of Israel and the comfort to Israel in time of distress and failure. Hannah was personally in a time of distress and failure, so she uses this expression.

... *handmaid* ... Three times she refers to herself as the Lord's *handmaid*, a polite way of speaking of herself and emphasizing her lowly status in presenting her request.

... *remember me* ... Hannah uses the words *remember* and *not forget*, meaning, do something about my misery. This implies God's action to fulfill His word—in this case, to act in answer to a prayer;

Her repetition emphasizes how desperately she hopes the *Lord of hosts* will hear her and honor her prayer.

... *no razor come upon his head*... Hannah adds as part of her vow that *no razor will come upon her son's head*. This sets her son's dedication apart from the dedication of all firstborn sons to the Lord (Exodus 13:2; Leviticus 27:26).

These words reflect Hannah's awareness of the Nazarite vow, the regulations of which are explained in Numbers 6. A man or a woman could make such a vow, which includes not only abstaining from cutting one's hair but also from both fruit and drink from the vine and from going near any corpse (Numbers 6:1–8).

Normally the Nazarite vow is voluntary and is taken for a limited period of time. Hannah, however, was placing her son under this vow for life, even before he was conceived. The Lord placed Samson under a similar vow, also before he was conceived (Judges 13:2–5).

... *I will give him unto the Lord* ... Hannah might have wanted a son for several reasons: for herself, to be vindicated as a woman, for her own pleasure, to please her husband, to silence Peninnah and everyone else who reproached her, or possibly even to enhance her own sense of worth!

All of these are reasonable motives but are all personal. At some point Hannah decided that God's glory and His service was most important and so she would give her son to the Lord for his entire life.

The long sought son was already a Levite and could be at the Tabernacle at age twenty-five but Hannah was committed to his life-long service to the Lord.

Christian parents know that children are a gift from God. They know that they are charged with teaching their children to follow Jesus. Parents often dedicate their babies publicly at a Sabbath service but even so, very few parents would presume that babies can be "dedicated" to specific service of the Lord as Hannah dedicated her future son.

The question is what happens next? How do we daily demonstrate in concrete ways our dedication to raising children in the fear of the Lord?

Verses 12, 13. Hannah continues *praying ... in her heart*, or silently. That Eli marked *her mouth* means that he observed the movements of her mouth. Had Eli heard her speaking,

he may have prepared a response to Hannah's vow, possibly to question its validity. Regulations for vows state that if a wife makes a vow and her husband hears it, he can forbid her from keeping the vow and nullify it (Numbers 30:6–8, 10–15). Nothing is said about what happens if a priest should hear the vow.

... *Eli marked her mouth*... Then Eli noticed that her lips were moving, but she was not speaking aloud. He assumed, mistakenly, that Hannah was drunk. This suggests she also made her vow silently.

Verse 14. ... *How long wilt thou be drunken* Eli's accusation of drunkenness on Hannah's part and his inability to recognize her genuinely deep sorrow may say something about his spiritual sensitivity or lack of such (1 Samuel 3). It may also reflect the sad state of spiritual life at the Tabernacle, something that unfortunately Eli has seen demonstrated all too often in the conduct of his own sons, Hophni and Phinehas.

These two men, priests though they were, had become widely known for their scandalous behavior within the sacred space of the Tabernacle (1 Samuel 2:12–17, 22–25). While Eli rebuked Hannah for what he viewed as shameful behavior, it is Eli who will receive the Lord's rebuke and judgment from Hannah's son Samuel for his own shameful behavior regarding the conduct of his sons (3:10–18; 2:27–36; 4:4, 11–18).

Verse 15. ... *have poured out my soul before the Lord*.... Hannah is quick to counter Eli's accusation of drunkenness. Her agitated state is not the result of hard liquor but of a hard life. She has not poured *wine nor strong drink* into her body; instead she has *poured out* her distressed *soul before the Lord*.

Verse 16. ... *a daughter of Belial*: the term *Belial* can take a range of meaning from "worthless" to "wicked." Ironically (and sadly) it is the label later attached to the sons of Eli (1 Samuel 2:12).

Paul transliterates the same word to speak of Satan in 2 Corinthians 6:15. Hannah is no such person. *Out of the abundance* of her sadness comes the anguished, earnest prayer she has just prayed and the vow she has made.

In contrast to some of the matriarchs in Genesis, Hannah took her problems directly to God in prayer (Gen 16:1–3; 30:1–21).

One write opines: **"Note the words that describe Hannah's emotional state: "anguish, grief, I'm not a worthless woman, sorrowful spirit, troubled, distressed, bitterness of soul, pouring out her heart to the Lord." Now, what kind of a prayer do you think this was? Was this an "O LORD, bless everybody" prayer? "Bless my family; bless me"? What was this? This was from the heart and this is an honest prayer."**

It is important to be honest with God and to tell him how we are feeling, because He knows anyway.

Verse 17. ... *Go in peace* ... *Eli* is satisfied with Hannah's explanation. To send her away in *peace* suggests that Eli hopes Hannah will find wholeness and healing from her distress.

He declared a blessing on Hannah: *the God of Israel grant thee thy petition that thou hast asked of him*. Whether Eli's words constitute a promise or merely a hope is difficult to say. The latter seems preferable given his spiritual weakness. This blessing may also be the standard way for a priest to respond to a request offered by any worshipper in prayer.

Verse 18. *grace in thy sight*... here Hannah concludes her exchange with Eli by asking that she *find grace in his sight*—a reversal of the scornful attitude that he had previously displayed toward her.

... *peace* (vs.17) and *grace* ... the presence of both *peace* and *grace* in these verses form a strong contrast to the "bitterness of soul" with which Hannah had approached the Tabernacle (1:10).

These blessings await the penitent believer when we pour out our souls before our faithful God.

... *and did eat, and her countenance was no more sad*... with her spirit at peace, Hannah was now in a better frame of mind to *eat*. No longer was her "heart grieved" (1:8). Her *countenance*, or facial expression, also reflected her state of contentment and her trust that her barren condition will be reversed through the Lord's intervention.

What had happened to change her? What circumstances were different? None! Note, she prayed, she wept, she made her vow, and she walked out not knowing whether God was going to take her up on it or not, and yet she was at peace inside. What does that tell us about Hannah? She believed God! Her faith gave her that joy. She trusted God regardless.

One can have tranquility of spirit, even visibly in the midst of trials after we have come before our God and are assured in our hearts that He is faithful, hears and answers prayers.

Verse 19. ... *Ramah*... because *Ramah* could be one of several different locations, the trip from Shiloh could be anywhere from three to thirteen miles. Samuel continued to live in Ramah after he became a recognized leader and judge among the Israelites (1 Sam 7:15–17).

One can only imagine how different Hannah's worship was following the events of the previous day and whether Elkanah or Peninnah notice anything different about her. Her prayer on her next visit to Shiloh might be some indication of her change of heart (1 Samuel 2:1–10).

... *Elkanah knew Hannah his wife*... At some point after the return home, *Elkanah* and *Hannah* become intimate. The Old Testament commonly uses the term "to know," as a euphemism for sexual intercourse.

... and the Lord remembered her... The Lord remembers Hannah, thus answering her earlier request (1 Samuel 1:11). This indicates that Yahweh now turned His attention to her; He had not forgotten her (Gen. 8:1; 30:22; Exod. 2:24). Through Hannah, God initiates a new phase in His plan for Israel (Gen. 8:1; Exod. 2:24).

Verse 20. *... she bare a son...* the result of the Lord's remembrance of Hannah was the birth of a son, whom Hannah names *Samuel*. She states her reason for doing so: *because I have asked him of the Lord*. The name Samuel has been understood to mean "asked of God" or "name of God." His name was a testimony.

Samuel he son of Elkanah and Hannah, served as a priest, prophet, and judge in 1 Samuel. He was God's instrument in Israel's transition from the period of the judges to the monarchy, and he functioned as God's kingmaker. Samuel anointed both Saul (1 Sam 10:1) and David (16:13). He served God faithfully during Saul's reign but died before David took the throne.

CONCLUSION

Hannah's barrenness became so excruciating for her that she finally vowed to the Lord that if He gave her a son, she would then give him right back to the Lord. The making of vows is something more in keeping with Old Testament law and practice than with New Testament practice (Matthew 5:37). Prayer, however, continues to provide a means for anyone with a bitter soul or a sorrowful spirit to lay bare their grievance before the Lord as Hannah did.

The God to whom Hannah poured out her soul in her anguish is the God who hears our prayers today. He remains our rock, our fortress, our deliverer (Psalm 18:2), our strength and shield (28:7), our hiding place (32:7), our shepherd (23:1; John 10:11). He is the God of all comfort (2 Corinthians 1:3), and the God who will never leave or forsake us (Hebrews 13:5). What Paul advises in Philippians 4:6 still applies, and he was under arrest when he wrote it: *"In every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God."*

Hannah demonstrated her faithfulness long before Paul wrote. She did so by taking her deepest hurt to the Lord. He, in turn, demonstrated His faithfulness by taking away her pain by providing the blessing she desired.

We keep in mind, however, that we are not guaranteed to receive what we ask of God. And His answer of yes, no, or wait always is in line with His bigger plans. In Hannah's case, her son became a pivotal figure in being the last of the judges and the first of the prophets (Acts 3:24; 13:20). We do not know the future and neither did Hannah. But with her we can say,
"My heart rejoiceth in the Lord ... There is none holy as the Lord: for there is none beside

thee: neither is there any rock like our God”
(1 Samuel 2:1, 2).

It is not a part of our Lesson Study but we highly recommend that you read Hannah's prayer and see how different it was from the start of her earlier prayer. This prayer was made about four years after the first prayer. During this interim period she had become pregnant, had her son, weaned him, and turned him over to the service of God.

She had learned and now came to understand the reality of God's presence. She has learned who God really is and she believed that God was going to do great things for her, her son, and her nation. Accordingly, she was ready to give an extraordinary prayer of praise to God.