

The Path to Peace

1 Samuel 1:1-20

When Elkanah first saw Hannah, his heart caught in his throat. The moment they met, he knew he loved her.

Marriage was not simple and easy in Israel. There were contracts and dowries and ceremonies. But eventually, Elkanah and Hannah stood beneath a cloth canopy. And an old rabbi read the marriage vows.

For the first few months, life was good. But as the months piled up into years, it became obvious. Hannah was unable to bear children.

And more than anything else, Elkanah wanted sons and daughters. So he married a second wife.

Now there was a certain man from Ramathaim_zophim from the hill country of Ephraim....He had two wives: the name of one was Hannah and the name of the other Peninnah; and Peninnah had children, but Hannah had no children. Verses 1,2

Polygamy was never God's perfect will. And it never made for a peaceful, happy home. Nevertheless, the Law of Moses did allow a man to marry more than one woman.

Of course, Elkanah didn't love Peninnah. He had no love for any woman but Hannah. But in his mind it was a necessity. He dreamed of having children around the house. And he could see no other way of fulfilling that dream.

God places a great deal of importance upon names. And Hannah's name means *grace*. Her story is more than a tale of a woman obsessed with having children. It is a chronicle of one woman's search for peace and fulfillment. But that is not all it is.

It is also a parable: a spiritual map of the road to peace with God.

Grace and Desire

The Law required God's people to appear at God's house three times a year. But this was the time of the judges.

In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did what was right in his own eyes. Judges 17:6

And once a year was enough for Elkanah. So each year, he, his two wives and his children would travel to Shiloh. That is where the tabernacle, the tent temple, was pitched.

Now this man would go up from his city yearly to worship and to sacrifice to the Lord of hosts in Shiloh. And the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were priests to the Lord there. Verse 3

It was a holiday for the family. But for the two wives, it was a time of tension. Peninnah considered her husband's first wife a rival. So she would needle and pick at Hannah. And she always used the same needle.

"You are under a curse," she would smile. "That is why you have no children. The God of our fathers' is displeased with you."

It happened year after year, as often as she went up to the house of the Lord, she

would provoke her; Verse 7

Hannah did not argue with the younger woman. She merely hung her head and fought back tears. Peninah spat out the ugly words to hurt her. Hannah knew that.

But the younger woman was merely saying what Hannah knew to be the truth. Deep inside, she knew God was the one who had kept her from having children. And she was right.

Her rival, however, would provoke her bitterly to irritate her, because the Lord had closed her womb. Verse 6

And in the end, that was what made Hannah's heart ache. Her problem was deeper than the fact that she had no children. She knew Peninah was right. God was not pleased with her. She was not living in His blessings, but under His curse.

Facing that hard fact of life is the first step on the path to peace with God. Before we can find forgiveness, we must realize we need it. We must accept what the Bible says about us.

Cursed is everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, to perform them. Galatians 3:10

God's standard of righteousness is absolute perfection. And like Hannah, we all fall terribly short of that mark.

No doubt Hannah spent her days washing, cleaning, and helping Peninah care for the children. No doubt she also tried to live a pure and holy life. But like the rest of us, she fell far short of God's requirements.

So she was under a curse. She knew that deep in her bones. And no amount of effort could erase it. Her empty arms shouted out the truth.

Most of us are willing to accept what Hannah knew about herself. We know we are imperfect, and God demands perfection. But this woman did not stop there.

More than anything in all the world, she wanted to find perfect peace with God. And in her mind, having a child would be positive proof that she really had found that peace.

Elkanah took his family to the tabernacle at Shiloh to offer a sacrifice of peace. So as they traveled, they led a lamb on a short length of rope.

At the tabernacle, a priest would lay his hand on the sheep's head and proclaim that all the sins Elkanah and his family had committed were laid on the lamb. Then, since the penalty for sin is death, the lamb would be slain. And the family's sin would be atoned.

That little lamb was a sign and a symbol that one day God would send His own beloved Son. And all of our sins would be laid upon Him.

All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all. Isaiah 53:6 (ESV)

Afterwards, parts of the lamb would be burned as an offering to God. The rest would be butchered. And the priest would get breast and the right shoulder.

The remainder of the meat would be roasted. Then Elkanah and his whole family would sit down for a meal to celebrate God's favor and forgiveness.

At that meal, Elkanah would set a portion before each member of the family. Then, to express his great love for Hannah, he would add his own portion to hers.

When the day came that Elkanah sacrificed, he would give portions to Peninah his

wife and to all her sons and her daughters; but to Hannah he would give a double portion, for he loved Hannah, but the Lord had closed her womb. Verse 4-5

Hannah never doubted the truth of the sacrifice. She knew the little lamb really had paid the price of blood and death for all her sins. But merely knowing was not enough for her.

And knowing that Jesus paid the price for our sins on the cross is not enough for us, either. It takes more than knowledge to bring us into a right relationship with our Creator.

Hannah knew that. And she was obsessed and overwhelmed with a desire to find real lasting peace with God. She hungered and thirsted to come to a right relationship with her Lord.

And Jesus said that if we are to come into a right relationship with God, our desire must be every bit as deep as hers was.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied. Matthew 5:6

Our loving Lord paid the terrible price of blood and death for our sins. And He offers forgiveness to anyone and everyone who is willing to come to Him.

But God has no time for those who come to Him with an offhand, casual desire to know Him. He reveals Himself only to those who seek Him with all their heart. And He demands that we love Him with all our heart and mind, with all our soul and strength.

It is the same if we would come to Christ and find the sweet satisfaction of peace and forgiveness. We must hunger and thirst for His righteousness. More than life itself, we must crave His power and His presence, His favor and His forgiveness.

Anything less is unworthy of His sacrifice.

Grace and Determination

When the family sat down to share the celebration feast, Peninah's jealous words were like acid in Hannah's ears.

It happened year after year, as often as she went up to the house of the Lord, she would provoke her; so she wept and would not eat. Verse 7

It was forbidden to eat that meal in sorrow. God commanded His people to celebrate His grace and goodness with joy not sorrow, with smiles not tears. So Hannah would hang her head and refuse to touch the double portion of mutton on her plate.

In much the same way, our Lord has commanded those who love and trust Him to celebrate His favor and forgiveness with songs of joy and jubilation. But if we do not know for sure that we really are forever forgiven, such joy is out of reach.

We cannot give glad thanksgiving to God for that which we have not received. Hannah knew that. And one year, the pain became so great, she determined she would do something about it.

Jesus told a story about a wicked, wayward son who demanded his inheritance early. Then, after he squandered all his money, he was reduced to feeding pigs.

But there came a day when that young man suddenly woke up. He came to his senses and decided to do something about his sin and his shame. That is what Hannah

did. And if we are ever to experience God's peace, that is what we must do.

We must not merely mourn our guilt and our shame, our sorrow and our longing to know God. We must do something about it. But quite often, when we make that decision, we must overcome some obstacles if we are to realize our dream of a new life.

The first obstacle Hannah faced was her own husband. Elkanah was a kind, considerate man and a loving husband. And he wanted nothing but good for Hannah. But he did not understand the sorrow, the despair, and the spiritual desire that burned within her.

Then Elkanah her husband said to her, "Hannah, why do you weep and why do you not eat and why is your heart sad? Am I not better to you than ten sons?" Verse 8

In that ancient age, women wanted sons to care for them in their latter years. But, Elkanah insisted, Hannah did not need sons to care for her. He would care for her better than many sons ever could.

Hannah's husband was a good man. But he simply did not understand her hunger and thirst for peace. And all too often, those who love us the most do not understand why we have such a craving for Jesus Christ.

But we cannot let that stop us. Our love for those nearest to us must never eclipse our love and desire for our Lord. If it does, we will never know the fullness of God's grace.

He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me; and he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me. Matthew 10:37

Hannah did not try to explain the hunger in her heart. She simply got up from the table and walked to the tabernacle.

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. Verses 9-10

Eli was a very old man. As both high priest and judge over Israel, he sat on a sort of throne to supervise what went on in the temple compound.

He watched as a young woman with red-rimmed eyes walked through the gate. God's people usually stood and prayed aloud. But this woman fell down on the ground and muttered words he could not hear.

Now it came about, as she continued praying before the Lord, that Eli was watching her mouth. As for Hannah, she was speaking in her heart, only her lips were moving, but her voice was not heard. So Eli thought she was drunk. Then Eli said to her, "How long will you make yourself drunk? Put away your wine from you." Verses 12-14

Eli represents a much more insidious obstacle those who hunger for God's grace must face. The high priest is a striking example of critics that inhabit church congregations today.

The old priest's judgment was blunted by his own sin. For years he had sat idly by while his two sons committed theft and adultery within the temple walls. And in his self-righteousness, he was too numb to see Hannah's agony. So he strode over to where the young woman wept out her prayers to God and bitterly accused her of drunkenness.

It should not be so, but some of the most savage critics of sinners seeking salvation are right within the church. Years ago, I spent the better part of six months bringing a young woman to a personal knowledge of Jesus Christ. From a family of criminals, she

knew nothing about God's goodness. And when she finally did receive Christ, she was elated.

She attended church the next Sunday and sat, shy and shaking with fear, in a corner pew. The church members should have welcomed her with open arms. But they had nothing but scorn and criticism of her. So the young woman waited for the service to end and never returned.

But that young woman's self-righteous critics were not entirely at fault for her failure. If we would come to Christ, we must expect critics within the church. They are the tares—the weeds our Savior said the enemy plants among true believers. And they are always among us.

Hannah was not put off by Eli's criticism. She did not even lash out at him for his poor judgement. Neither did she tell him he ought to look at the blatant sin in his own family before criticizing others.

But Hannah replied, "No, my lord, I am a woman oppressed in spirit; I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink, but I have poured out my soul before the Lord. Do not consider your maidservant as a worthless woman, for I have spoken until now out of my great concern and provocation." Verses 15-16

If we would seek our Savior, we must not be put off by critics either. And we must respond with the same grace Hannah exhibited. If we would know our Lord, we must be like Him.

Grace and Deliverance

When Hannah prayed, she did not seek selfish blessings from God. She did indeed want a son, but not for herself.

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." Verse 11

Hannah came to the tabernacle to give herself to God. She sought a son as a sign that God really had accepted her: that His peace did indeed reign in her life. And as evidence of her commitment, she dedicated the son she sought to a life of service to her Lord.

Hannah would remind us that if we would come to Christ, we must selflessly commit all we are and all we have into His hands.

To his credit, Eli did not persist in his misconception of Hannah. He realized she really was in agony and sought God with a rare intensity.

So the old man's face softened. He did not know precisely what the young woman was praying for. But he offered her a blessing.

Then Eli answered and said, "Go in peace; and may the God of Israel grant your petition that you have asked of Him." Verse 17

That was enough for Hannah. The high priest's kind words were all she needed. She sought peace. She relied upon the sheep as a sacrifice for peace. And now the high priest himself extended that peace to her.

She said, "Let your maidservant find favor in your sight." So the woman went her way and ate, and her face was no longer sad. Verse 18

God did give Hannah the son she prayed for. But she did not need that baby boy to prove her Lord had accepted her. His peace reigned in her heart. And she went away in perfect peace.

When she returned to the celebration supper, she ate with joy. And that is not all. The next day before they left for home, the entire family spent some time in worship. And this time, Hannah joined them. The joy her God had given her could no longer be contained.

If we would know God's goodness and grace, we must pour our hearts out to Him just as Hannah did. We must hunger for Him and let nothing stand in our way. And just as He did with Hannah, our God will pour out His blessings to us.

Hannah never prayed for another child. But our God always delights to give good gifts to His children. So the Lord not only answered her earnest prayer. He also gave her two more sons and two daughters.

But the greatest blessing she received is the same one our God would give to us. It is the greatest gift anyone can receive.

The abiding, eternal peace of God Jesus purchased for us on Calvary.