

# *A Spiritual Spring for the Week*

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Sermon Text: 1 Samuel 2:1-10

Sermon Title: "Hannah: Exuberant Prayer" (Great Prayers of the Old Testament)

Morrow Presbyterian Church, Morrow, GA

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When life is good, life *is* good. When things are going our way, everything is roses and sunshine. We put on a happy face. There is an extra spring in our step. We feel fresh, rejuvenated. We feel like we can do anything, because everything will turn out alright.

For Hannah, life is good. Life is good, because God answered her prayer and gave her a baby. For whatever reason, she wasn't able to have a child. Try as she might with her husband El'kanah, she just couldn't give birth. But the Lord remembers her prayers, remembers her faithfulness, and gives to her that which she desired at the right time. When somebody is happy, they find ways to celebrate. Hannah celebrates by offering a lengthy prayer to the Lord in 1 Samuel 2.

She begins by stating how "awesome and impressive" the Lord God is.<sup>1</sup> In those first words, Hannah loses herself in God, gets tangled up in his greatness. She is overwhelmed by how wonderful the

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Great Prayers of the Old Testament*, 25.

Lord God was to her, and can be to anybody else. Her words turn into boasting, but a good kind of boasting about God. Nobody can compare to God. No one is as holy. No one is as strong as a rock as God is. God has no equal. Hannah realizes that as much as she prayed to God, she could never have controlled God to make things happen for her. She couldn't have prayed harder and have said the right words to make God give her a baby. God saw to it on his own, according to his great plan for Hannah's life.

On and on Hannah goes with her prayer, talking about mighty men being lowered and lowly men being raised up. Military strength is broken, the hungry are fed, the proud find themselves not being proud of anything, and the humble find reasons to worship God. At one point, Hannah even says that those who have no children will bare many, but those who have many children will become feeble.<sup>2</sup> According to Walter Brueggemann, having lots of children in a family was seen as having a position of dominance over others. Along with those who are mighty and full of food in the stomachs, those who have big families might think themselves more superior, more blessed, than others. "But YHWH sees!" Brueggemann says. The Lord God notices, Hannah says, and the Lord God

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. 1 Samuel 2:5.

corrects the situation, because none of us are supposed to act more superior than others. Whatever we put our trust in will be wiped out, burned up in the presence of God. God evens the playing field for us all.

What is so wonderful about Hannah's prayer is that it isn't entirely about herself. In fact, she has little to do with the prayer at all. She could have easily prayed, "O God, you have done so many great things for *me*. You have changed *my* life, and given *me* a child, and *my* life is so much better than before, and *I* can now be happy and at peace, and *I*, and *me*, and *I*..." Hannah doesn't fill the prayer with herself. She quickly moves the focus of the prayer to God, and then to others. More specifically, to the plight of others.

Brueggemann, in his book *Great Prayers of the Old Testament*, says that Hannah is highly aware of the poor and needy, since she had been one of them. Her "prayer knows about the environment of those disadvantaged who are powerless, helpless, and without resources. The poor and the needy are regularly diminished, humiliated, and degraded; for them the 'ash heap' [that Hannah mentions in verse 8] stands as a proper metaphor. The anticipation of the prayer, however, is that the helpless will not long remain in such a state, because the God who weighs

and sees and knows will not leave the poor and weak permanently disadvantaged... the prayer imagines, anticipates, and already knows about radical social transformation.”<sup>3</sup>

Life is good for Hannah, and she desires – she suspects – that life will be good for those who are as less fortunate as she was. She cannot think only about her struggle to have a family, and fulfill her role as mother in society; she thinks about everyone else who may or may not be struggling like her, but who are always running up against walls and always fearing that nothing good ever comes to them.

When the economy tanked back in 2008, and then got really bad in 2009, I panicked like everybody else did. I worried about my retirement funds diminishing. I worried about watching the value of my house decline every day. It was not a fun period of time. As I was praying for my needs – as I was praying selfishly for myself – I realized that I needed to pray for others instead. I needed to think of those who would be retiring much sooner than me, and who were counting on monies to be available when they quit their jobs. I have a long way to go before retiring, so I didn’t need any extra money at the time. Others did, and I prayed for them. I prayed for those who had to sell homes,

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<sup>3</sup> *Great Prayers of the Old Testament*, 28.

because they had to move to another location due to job change or a job loss, or due to family circumstances such as getting older and needing to move to a care facility. I have a long way to go before selling my house that is underwater (undervalued), so I don't have to worry about turning a profit on it. Others have to, and so I prayed for them.

As we go through struggles, our prayers have to turn outward. We may pray for our own problems, but we have to think of others who may be going through the same struggles or not. We all are suffering from one thing or another. We are all weak, and diminished, and humiliated in one fashion or another. So we pray. We pray ever harder for others by name or in general, and we look to the God who can repair anything. We look to God who still directs the plans of their lives, and knows what they should be doing, and knows where they ought to be. As Brueggemann says, and as Hannah believes, "the God who weighs and sees and knows will not leave the poor and weak permanently disadvantaged." God levels the playing field for us all, and makes life good.

There is one more thing to say about Hannah's prayer. Given her situation, it shouldn't have occurred at all. Given what Hannah was going through, she

should never have prayed as she did.

We didn't read her story back in 1 Samuel 1, but let me recap it for you. Hannah's husband, El'kanah, had two wives, Hannah and Pen'innah.<sup>4</sup> Penny, as her friends called her, had many children. Penny had children without a problem. Hannah could not have one child. This made Hannah deeply depressed. She felt inferior to the other wife, who seemed to be super mom. In fact, Pen'innah would jeer Hannah, make fun of her for not being able to bear children. Hannah was so miserable, deeply disheartened, that she couldn't eat, or wouldn't eat. Did she believe that God could solve her problems? With or without children, could Hannah believe that she was still special in God's sight, and that God still had a plan for her?

Given the situation, any woman could have given up on God. When things don't go their way, any person becomes angry, and may reject God for not being good at all. I am sure we have heard stories of people who were not getting what they expected to get, which seemed perfectly good. "Why not, because the person next to me seems to be living a good life. Why can't I have what he or she has, God?" Hannah could have given up on God, but she did not. Even with the other wife making fun at her, even with her prayers

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. 1 Samuel 1:1-7.

not being answered at the present time, Hannah never gave up.

It did help Hannah that her husband was very generous with her. When the family gathered for the big worship celebration of the Lord God every year, El'kanah would offer sacrifices for his wife Penny and for all his sons and daughters. But for Hannah he would offer a double portion out of love for her.<sup>5</sup> He encouraged her to eat, to quit her weeping, and to trust in God. She did. In her weeping, she prayed. In her praying, she vowed herself to God, and even her yet-to-be-born child. In her vows, she believed that life would some day be good for her, if not for others.

Most of us know who Laura Story is. She is a Christian singer who hails from Augusta, GA, and she is known for her song *Blessings*. It is a great song, speaking about finding God's hand in any situation, good or terrible. But do you know the story behind Laura Story's popular song?

In 2005, Laura married her high school sweetheart Martin Elvington, and they moved to Atlanta to become the worship leader and women's pastor for the arts and music community at Perimeter Church. Life was good. He was doing well in church – she was

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. 1 Samuel 1:5.

doing well in the Christian music charts. After a year of marriage, Martin suffered a brain tumor. He was on a breathing machine in the hospital, struggling to live every minute of every day. Laura says in a YouTube interview that she and her husband had been praying for blessings of health and prosperity every day, and it seemed as though God wasn't listening. Laura snickers and says, "So was he blessing us? That was our question." Throughout her husband's hospitalization, Laura kept a journal of her raw, hopeless thoughts; and although she didn't have all the answers, she trusted that God was blessing her husband through all the surgeries and radiation and complications.

In her song *Blessings*, there are a lot of What Ifs. Life is full of What Ifs: What if I don't make it through the day? What if we don't have the money? What if the job never comes through? What if all I have is pain and sorrow to look forward to? There are a lot of What Ifs with God as well: What if blessings come through raindrops? What if God's blessings come through tears? What if a thousand sleepless nights is what takes to know that God is near? In her own words, Laura says, "Though [God] leads us through valleys, that's when we get to trust Him and draw closer to Him all the more. Though I've doubted, His



grasp has never released, never slipped. He's remained completely faithful to me. He has proven that He really is my foundation and my hope.”<sup>6</sup>

Hannah wept and prayed. She never let go of God to bless her or to bless anybody else. Whether a child came to her or not, life would be good for her in the Lord. We may weep and pray. We may hold on for dear life. Perhaps, most of the time, all we get are good moments, not completely good days. Even so, God is good. God will bless and make our lives good.

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.thefish.com/music/reviews/11620380/Laura-Story/> and <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gjB2skJi2co>.

