



Prayers of the Old Testament

Session 2 – A Prayer of Hannah: “Turning Things Upside Down”

(1 Samuel 2:1-10)

Thursday, September 22

Opening Prayer

God who answers prayer,

We are blessed and humbled that you hear us when we call to you in our time of deepest longing. Just as you heard the cries of Hannah so many year ago, hear our voices this evening – the voice from our mouth and the voice from our souls. We speak knowing that you hear us. Receive our gratitude for your listening ear. May your Word speak to us tonight, as we come together as your gathered community.

In Jesus Christ’s name we pray, Amen.

Session 1 Recap

Last week in our opening session of our study, we examined the prayer/poem/song that Moses lifted to Yahweh after the Israelites escaped Pharaoh and his army through the divided Red Sea. As soon as they were safe on the other side, Moses lifted up a prayer on behalf of the Israelites to their savior – Yahweh. The Israelites had been through an emotional roller coaster – slaves, the wonderment of the plagues, being freed, being chased, and finally being saved. The emotion poured out in this short prayer.

The Prayer/Song of Moses might be the oldest poem in the Old Testament, and in it established some foundational pieces of theology for the Israelites. A military metaphor is carried through the verses, but the understanding is held that their victory only comes from their God, Yahweh, being supreme. Only by Yahweh’s hand and power could they have been saved. The enemy, however, did not give up. Yet, Yahweh subdued them.

The second half of the prayer focuses on Yahweh guiding the nation to the Promised Land. For Israel, this is a victory parade. All foreign nations in between are put on notice, because the Yahweh-led Israelites are coming. The only thing the other nations can do is to stand in awe. Yahweh's story and the Israelite's story are closely intertwined.

Opening Questions...

What are the areas in your life that are the hardest for you to pray for? Why is it hard for you to pray for this/these aspects of your life?

The Setting for Tonight's Prayer

The nation of Israel is in a time of crisis. The nation is facing persecution and invasion from outside forces, primarily the Philistines. The strong leadership that had marked Israel's move into the Promised Land – Moses, Aaron, Miriam, and Joshua – has now crumbled. While "judges" had risen to help bring peace to certain areas of the Israelite kingdom, the periods of chaos and rebellion were growing longer and more frequent.

The chaos was not just from the outside. The internal struggle to keep the people of Israel centered on God was even harder. Eli, the priest at the holy site of Shiloh, was struggling to keep even his own children in lines. Shiloh was where the Ark of the Covenant was kept and was supposed to be one of the most holy sites for the Israelites. However, spiritual upheaval had also fallen on this holy site.

But not all was lost. There were many that were faithful to Yahweh across the Promised Land. One of these individuals was Hannah. Hannah traveled each year to Shiloh to offer sacrifices and to lift prayers for the one thing she desired most – a child. Barren for many years, 1 Samuel 1 shares the story of Hannah being heard by Eli the priest. Eli blessed Hannah, and said her prayers would be heard by Yahweh. Hannah would soon conceive and give birth to Samuel, who would become the spiritual leader for the nation. Tonight, we look at the prayer Hannah lifted to Yahweh after her prayer for a son was answered.

The Prayer – 1 Samuel 2:1-10

1 Samuel 2 begins by telling us that Hannah prayed, but what follows is not just a prayer but a hymn. Hannah sings! Her song is offered to us as the only appropriate response to her experience of God's wondrous grace. This 10-verse prayer/song serves an important role in these early chapters of 1 Samuel.

First, these verses are a song of praise and thanksgiving by a barren woman whose womb has been opened. For Hannah, a miracle has occurred in the birth of Samuel. The language is that of personal praise to God, and Hannah gives praise for "my victory." The "enemies" mentioned in 1b and the arrogance found in other areas would refer to the taunting of Peninnah, her husband's other wife. The reversal of fortune has taken place, and not Hannah will have multiple children. (The passage indicates 7, a common number of completion. Hannah, however, is recorded to bearing only 5 more children.) Some scholars believe the praise sung by Hannah reflects the hymnic qualities of the Psalms, even drawing from some of its known songs in its worship tradition.

Second, Hannah does not just sing as a mother of Samuel but also a mother of Israel. The song moves from lifting high Hannah to lifting high the "horn of God's anointed." The prayer suggests hope for those struggling, and for a nation that feels like it is perishing. Just as Hannah's fortunes could be reversed, so to could Israel's with the hope of a king. At the end of Hannah's prayer, God's anointed one, the king, is to be understood as the gift of God as surely as was the child whose birth is celebrated at the opening of the song.

Finally, the prayer of Hannah should be understood as a witness to the central role of God's providence. Her praise to God points to God's power behind all of the events about to unfold, similar to His power in opening her womb. Only with God is the future bright for Hannah and Israel. Hannah's prayer/song celebrates and gives witness to the power of divine providence to create possibilities for the future that seem impossible through human and historical resources alone. Hannah's prayer/song passionately affirms God's providential presence in human history.

Verses 1 – 3 – The prayer/hymn begins with a personal style of thanksgiving, more so than that of generalized praise. Hannah is praying with passion! "My heart." "My strength." "My God." All speak to the victory in which she rejoices. All are followed with three statements about the incomparability of God. There is

no one like the Lord, the Holy One, the Rock. Hannah's personal joy depends on divine power, a power manifested in holiness and strength. Hannah's prayer/singing gives praise to God as the source of her deliverance.

In the second phrase of the prayer, she uses a Hebrew idiom, "my horn is raised." This is a common metaphor in Hebrew poetry, used to evoke the image of a horned beast. The horn is a symbol of strength. To "raise it" is to affirm power and dignity. Sometimes this image is used in Hebrew poetry with specific reference to God's giving of children. (This would be very appropriate for Hannah!) The emotion that is exuding from Hannah's prayer is JOY! What begins with the raising of Hannah's horn in verse 1 will conclude with the raising of the king's horn in verse 10. The power of God, which can make a barren woman rejoice in a child, can also transform threatened tribal Israel into a kingdom.

Verse 3 provides a warning. If Hannah rejoices, those who are inclined to pride or arrogance should beware. God both knows and weighs actions. (The actions of Peninnah's come to mind...) This is an open-ended statement that applies to all.

Follow Up Question...

- 1. Which of these characteristics of God mentioned in verses 1 through 3 is most important to you today?**

Verses 4 – 8 – In these verses, Hannah's prayer/song becomes a catalog of surprising reversals that are brought on by God's power. The recital is divided into two groups. Verses 4 and 5 speak in passive voice of groups whose fortunes are reversed, but God is not named as the agent of the transformation. The text focuses on the strong who are made weak, and the weak who are made strong. Verse 5 reverses the order, beginning with the weak. This time, the barren woman is given seven children, while the woman with many children is forlorn. The intent of the prayer is to emphasize God's power to transform the customary human realities.

In verses 6 through 8, Hannah's prayer names the Lord as the power behind these reversals. The focus shifts from the hope of those in need of God's transforming power to a doxology in praise of the transforming One. A series of active verbs emphasizes God's power behind both negative and positive human

experience. It is the Lord who “kills”, who “brings down to Sheol”, who “makes poor”, who “brings low”. The Lord also “brings to life”, “raises up”, “makes rich”, “exalts”, “raises up,” “lifts”, and “makes them sit and inherit”. The positive list is longer, naming the poor and the needy as the recipients. The poor and needy will sit with princes and inherit the thrones! Talk about role reversal! The prayer points the reader ahead both to lowly Israel’s taking a place among the kingdoms and to David as a shepherd who would be king.

In verse 8, the identity of the God who can do this is revealed – God is the Creator. The hope of Hannah and the hope of Israel are rooted in the same power that hold the cosmos in place. God has placed the world on its foundations, and God is the Rock that those who are in need can rely. Hannah has experienced it – turning her life upside down – and she shares it in her prayer/song.

Follow Up Question...

1. When have you seen God perform reversals like the ones described in verses 4 through 8?
2. Hannah’s prayer focuses on people in need and people on the margins of society. In what way is Hannah herself marginalized? How can we help those who are marginalized?

Verses 9 – 10 – The God of these reversals is a God who distinguishes between the faithful and the wicked. The faithful are those who trust God’s power to transform their lives and the social realities in which they live. The wicked are those who trust in their own might, power, and wealth. The list of groups whose fortunes are reversed in verses 4 through 8 is here equated with the faithful and wicked in the eyes of God. God will care for the faithful, but the wicked, God will “cut off in darkness”.

The last phrase of verse 9 states a critical principle for the story of Israel that will unfold in the books of Samuel: “For not by might does one prevail.” Human efforts will fail apart from trust in God in what He is doing. In Hannah’s prayer, all of the ways of human power can be reversed through the power of God. It is God’s power that endures.

As we arrive at verse 10, the emotion leaps from Hannah's lips. A cry of God's name followed by a series of phrases celebrates the power of God, who shatters adversaries, thunders on high, and judges the earth. Hannah cannot keep it in anymore.

Then, in an interesting twist, the last half of verse 10 relates the power of God is linked to a king. Hannah concludes her words that says God will give strength to the king who will raise the "horn". The key is the possessive. It is God's king and God's anointed one. The prayer/song that which began by celebrating God's gift of a child to Hannah, anticipates the gift of God's king to Israel; and it is Hannah's son, the prophet Samuel, who will anoint Israel's kings, Saul and David.

God was at work in these events. Hannah saw it in her own life. So she prayed/sang to God!

Follow Up Question...

1. In this prayer, God is portrayed as all-powerful and also willing to enter into a broken world. What does this combination mean to you personally? For our community? For the entire world?

Applying Hannah's Prayer/Song to our Prayer Life...

- When you pray, let your emotions flow! Hannah was praying/singing from the depths of her soul for the gift of her son, Samuel. Do not hold back from expressing the emotions that you are feeling to or for God – joy, happiness, anger, doubt, etc.
- There are times in our lives where we feel like we need a reversal. Maybe we got up on the wrong side of the bed. Maybe a relationship is steering us the wrong way. Maybe our motivation to honor God in our work is faltering. Allow Hannah's prayer remind you that He reversed her fortunes, and God can do the same for you!
- Hannah's prayer was specific. When we pray to God, be specific with your needs, frustrations, celebrations, and concerns. God knows, but it helps our understanding of who He is when we are specific to Him.

Closing Prayer

*God of all knowledge,
Hannah's prayer resonates not only across the ages
but in our hearts, as, like her, we praise you
as our rock and our redeemer.
We worship you with awe,
knowing that there is no holy One like you.
And yet you took on our humanity
to reveal your love and your mercy in person.
In Jesus who, taking the form of a servant, taught us about your power.
The power dreamed of by Hannah—power at the service of others,
raising up the powerless,
strengthening the weak,
healing the sick,
replacing despair with hope,
bringing life where there was death.
We praise and adore you, O God, for these wonderful signs of your love.
May the service of our lives
be a worthy response to these gifts.
This we pray in Jesus' name and for his sake. Amen.*

Next Week...

Prayers of the Old Testament

Session 3 - "A Prayer of Samuel: Learning to Listen"

1 Samuel 3:1-14

Thursday, September 29 6:30 PM
