

Abiding Fruit

Informing the Mind & Inflaming the Heart

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Remember Me...Your Servant 1 Samuel 1:11

This passage of Scripture in 1 Samuel is about prayers being offered and prayers being answered. There is nothing as powerful and comforting as to pray and tangibly have your prayers answered directly by the Lord. I have always loved the story of Hannah because it is about God remembering His people and it is about God not forgetting His people. It seems strange that Hannah (or anyone for that matter) should pray in this way. To ask that God remember you already implies that God not forget you. To ask God never to forget you is to ask God to remember you. So what is the purpose behind this double reference to the same thing?

The Bible often uses this method of communicating truth by emphasizing both the positive and negative side of the same coin. The book of Samuel gives us an account of the history of Israel from the end of the 12th century through to the beginning of the 10th century BC. It is however, imperative for us to read the historical books not merely as historical, but as theological. What is God saying to us through the historical account? In 1 Samuel, we see the rise of David to the throne, and ultimately we see Jesus as David's greater Son to whom the throne belongs. It appears from Acts 2:29 -36, that the Lord Jesus has fulfilled this in His resurrection from the dead and in His ascension to glory. God's promise to set one of David's descendants upon David's throne is said to be accomplished with the resurrection of Jesus in that He was not abandoned by God to Hades nor did He see corruption. This is what we mean about interpreting the book theologically as well as historically.

The initial chapters of 1 Samuel (1 – 3) focus on Samuel the prophet from his birth to his presentation to Israel. Samuel is the son of Hannah, the wife of Elkanah (1:2). She was one of two wives, the other being Peninnah. It is clear from 1 Samuel 1 that there was dissension and conflict in the house of Elkanah over the fact that Peninnah was able to have children and Hannah was barren. It is natural to expect such conflict. A Hebrew man's posterity was inextricably linked to his having sons as descendants, and any inability on the part of a wife was viewed as curse from God. It was also the practice of Hebrew men to take another wife should the first wife be barren. Such a practice was never sanctioned by God. It was a sign of the troubled condition that Israel was in. Nevertheless, God blesses the unloved woman with children. Elkanah was from the tribe of Levi (1 Chron. 6:33 – 38) though he lived in Ramah (1:1, 19). He should have known better than to have two wives. It was this Levitical connection that enabled Samuel to serve as a priest.

We see this aspect of barrenness in the lives of Sarah (Gen. 6:1), Rebekah (Gen. 25:21), and Rachel (Gen. 29:31; 30:2). In these passages there is a link to the fact that the wife who was loved was barren and the wife who was either unloved or second best was fruitful and produced children. This was God's way of blessing the unloved woman. This alone would produce conflict in any household (1 Sam. 1:2, 5 – 8). It is also clear from these passages that only God gives children as He pleases. If He wants the barren to bear children, only He can open their womb. This should always be borne in mind in the pursuit of modern medical science. Children are both a gift from God and a blessing (Deut. 7:13; 28:4, 11; 30:9; Ps. 127:3; see also Luke 1:42).

Hannah knew that Deuteronomy 7:13, 14 spoke of children as a blessing from God. It is comforting to see that Elkanah's love for Hannah does not diminish due to her barrenness (1:8). This certainly must have been of some help to Hannah during these very distressing times, however, the depth of distress is due to her sorrow at her inability to bear children and the provocation of Peninnah (1:6). Elkanah's love for Hannah prompted this jealous interaction between the two women. Hannah would receive a double portion from Elkanah, and Peninnah, a single portion. This would happen every year at the time for sacrifice (1:3 – 5). This is evidence of a wife unloved, and therefore, Peninnah reacts against Hannah. A similar situation existed in Jacob's household (Gen. 30:1). 1 Samuel 1:7 states that every year Peninnah would provoke Hannah. What can Hannah do in such a situation? The answer is nothing, except cast herself upon God and His mercy.

Every Hebrew male was required to present himself at the three major feasts every year at the Tabernacle or Temple before the Lord. At this time, the Tabernacle was in Shiloh about 15 miles north of Ramah. It is here in the presence of God on one of these occasions that Hannah seeks the Lord (vs. 10). Her prayer is offered in deep distress (lit. bitterness of spirit) with much weeping. The Hebrew root word here is the word *מָרָה*, *marah* which speaks of bitterness (see Ruth 1:20 & Ex. 15:23). Such a prayer cannot but move the heart of God. During her praying she makes a vow to God (she vowed a vow). She points out that her condition is pitiable. She describes herself as one who is afflicted – as one who is in misery, and she desires that God would remember her and not forget her. It is this double emphasis that stresses the severity of her distress before God. It is not enough that the Lord remember her. She also desires that He not forget her. This prayer indicates both the positive and negative aspects of prayer, yet both driving to the same conclusion.

Springing forth from this prayer is the promise (the vow) that if God would give her a son, then she would give the son back to the Lord forever (all the days of his life). Hannah also vows that her son shall be a Nazarite from birth. The Nazarite vow is described in Numbers 6:1 – 8. The Nazarite vow was a voluntary vow made for a specific time and is described as being made to the Lord. The vow contains 3 major parts. The first part is that the person shall not drink any wine or strong drink – he was to separate himself from wine or strong drink (Num. 6:3, 4). Secondly, the vow requires that no razor come upon the head of the man for as long as the vow lasts. The allowing of the hair to grow, or the not cutting of the hair, reflects the holiness of God (Num. 6:5). Thirdly, the Nazarite was not permitted to go near a dead body (even of parents and siblings) for the period of the vow (Num. 6:6 – 8). We have examples of individuals who were Nazarites from birth (e.g. Samuel, Samson, possibly Jeremiah the prophet and John the Baptist). What is significant in regard to Hannah is the fact that even though she is so desperate to have a child, she promises God that He can take him away from her (1 Sam. 1:11). This seems incongruous to us. Surely the very thing we want, we pray for and then when we get it, we acknowledge God, but we still have what we prayed for. Hannah goes beyond this. It seems as though she is content just to have Samuel for a time, and then he will be gone from her as a Nazarite in the Lord's Service. She desires the blessing that she craves from God be turned into an opportunity, not merely to overcome her barrenness, but to magnify and promote God in and through the life of her son. In this, she knows that her barrenness and reproach among others will be taken away, and thus while she receives the benefit, the real benefit belongs to God.

When the time came for Samuel to go to the Tabernacle to serve the Lord, there is no evidence of restraint by Hannah or Elkanah (who is aware of the vow – think what this also meant for him as the father). We see Hannah keeping contact with Samuel when she and Elkanah went to worship the Lord, by bringing Samuel a robe each year (1 Sam. 2:18, 19). This would imply that every day Samuel would be wearing something from his mother, and this would mean something to Hannah knowing this. Hannah, of course, is blessed by God with other children and so her reproach vanishes (1 Sam. 2:21). Our reproach has been taken away by our Lord Jesus and He has clothed us with garments of salvation. Let us pray that we may walk worthy before the Lord year by year clothed in the righteousness of Jesus. We can thank God that He has not forgotten us, but has remembered us in all our trials and afflictions.