

1 SAMUEL—WEEK 1

CONSEQUENTIAL PRAYER



F. Michael Slay
A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

*The Cover Picture is David and Goliath by Titian (1487–1576)
On display in the church of Santa Maria della Salute in Venice, Italy*

Hannah is living the unbearable pain of a barren woman in Old Testament times. In her anguish she vows to give a son to the LORD if He will grant her one. Deal.

Hannah delivers the young boy to Eli and then sings God's praises.

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! Samuel, Week 1 — Consequential Prayer

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1 1 Samuel 1:1–7

Now there was a certain man of Ramathaim Zophim, of the mountains of Ephraim, and his name was Elkanah the son of Jeroham, the son of Elihu, the son of Tohu, the son of Zuph, an Ephraimite. And he had two wives: the name of one was Hannah, and the name of the other Peninnah. Peninnah had children, but Hannah had no children. This man went up from his city yearly to worship and sacrifice to the LORD of hosts in Shiloh. Also the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, the priests of the LORD, were there. And whenever the time came for Elkanah to make an offering, he would give portions to Peninnah his wife and to all her sons and daughters. But to Hannah he would give a double portion, for he loved Hannah, although the LORD had closed her womb. And her rival also provoked her severely, to make her miserable, because the LORD had closed her womb. So it was, year by year, when she went up to the house of the LORD, that she provoked her; therefore she wept and did not eat.

The book of 1 Samuel begins with an intense drama. Instead of living the dream, Hannah is living the scream.

Being barren is hard enough on a woman in our age, but it was indescribably brutal back then. There were no fertility clinics, no way to know what was wrong or what to do about it. Presumably, there were countless “cures” promoted by hucksters and even well-wishing friends.

But month after month it became increasingly clear to Hannah that the “cures” did not work. Her hopes would rise and crash in a consistent, soul destroying cycle.

And, on top of all that, her husband had a second wife who was not barren. The other wife was intentionally cruel to Hannah, teasing her relentlessly.

So, the stage is set. Against this backdrop, God’s power, might, holiness, and grace will be displayed.

I love drama—unless it’s my drama. I don’t like boredom, but I want my life to basically be boring.

God seems to love drama—all drama. The beginning of 1 Samuel is a great example of that. The drama in Hannah’s life is so great that sometimes she refuses to eat.

That bothers people. Even though the purpose of Hannah’s drama will soon be revealed, they think that no drama would be better.

This leads to a dreadful conclusion. They doubt God’s goodness, or even His existence. They think that God shouldn’t allow certain types of drama—infertility, cancer, war, etc.

To them, the cross is foolishness. God allowing painful drama in our lives is bad enough, but allowing it in His life is nuts.

They need to relax and think about this clearly. God should have higher priorities than pain avoidance.

And so should we. I shouldn’t want a boring life. Life in Christ is exciting, meaningful, and full of drama.

2 1 Samuel 1:8–11

Then Elkanah her husband said to her, “Hannah, why do you weep? Why do you not eat? And why is your heart grieved? Am I not better to you than ten sons?”

So Hannah arose after they had finished eating and drinking in Shiloh. Now Eli the priest was sitting on the seat by the doorpost of the tabernacle of the LORD. And she was in bitterness of soul, and prayed to the LORD and wept in anguish. Then 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 male child, then I will give him to the LORD all the days of his life, and no razor shall come upon his head.”

Hannah cracks and makes a bold, desperate, world-changing vow.

But notice why she cracks. Her husband’s clumsy attempt at comforting her drives her over the edge. No, he is not better than ten sons, despite the word “not” in, “*Am I not better to you than ten sons?*” That wording implies the answer. It’s not really a question. He’s implying that he is better than ten sons.

Also, the line about ten sons shows that he knows why she’s weeping. So, what’s the point of asking questions he knows the answer to?

Elkanah’s questions just increase the pressure on Hannah. They imply that she shouldn’t be crying. Presumably, he’s just trying to comfort her and give her a reason to stop crying, but it has the opposite effect. Hannah is now ashamed of her tears on top of being ashamed of her barrenness.

So, in an attempt to escape her nightmare, she prays a prayer of desperation to the LORD. Her barrenness includes both sons and daughters, but Elkanah mentioned sons. So her focus goes to a son ,and she asks specifically for that. If the LORD will remove her shame, He can have the boy.

Deal.

Desperate prayers have something special—a sort of purity. All pretense is gone. Even logic is gone. All that’s left is heart and soul. We don’t care if it’s okay to scream. The masks are off.

Absent any sense of self-sufficiency, we finally get into the appropriate posture. The connection is strong because the prayer is straight from the heart.

Desperate prayers don’t need to lead off with adoration, confession, and thanksgiving. That’s a great way to get into the right posture and focus our minds on His holiness, but desperate prayers already have that—in spades.

So, desperate prayers are the best. Unfortunately, they need one thing to work—desperation. You can’t make up a desperate prayer.

It has to be given to you.

3 1 Samuel 1:12–20

And it happened, as she continued praying before the LORD, that Eli watched her mouth. Now Hannah spoke in her heart; only her lips moved, but her voice was not heard. Therefore Eli thought she was drunk. So Eli said to her, “How long will you be drunk? Put your wine away from you!”

But Hannah answered and said, “No, my lord, I am a woman of sorrowful spirit. I have drunk neither wine nor intoxicating drink, but have poured out my soul before the LORD. Do not consider your maidservant a wicked woman, for out of the abundance of my complaint and grief I have spoken until now.”

Then Eli answered and said, “Go in peace, and the God of Israel grant your petition which you have asked of Him.”

And 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.

Then they rose early in the morning and worshiped before the LORD, and returned and came to their house at Ramah. And Elkanah knew Hannah his wife, and the LORD remembered her. So it came to pass in the process of time that Hannah conceived and bore a son, and called his name Samuel, saying, “Because I have asked for him from the LORD.”

Hannah’s heartfelt response to Eli’s accusation was unexpected and may have even embarrassed him. He misjudged her. So he blessed her with the striking words, “*and the God of Israel grant your petition which you have asked of Him.*”

Eli’s words don’t carry the weight of prophecy, but they do come true. No gender reveal party needed this time. The LORD has granted Hannah’s request.

Her shame has been replaced with that special kind of joy that only comes from answered prayer.

Answered prayer has a curious quality that nothing else has. It feels like it comes in at a unique angle. It’s wonderful—you get what you asked for—but you also get a sense of God’s presence. It’s just different.

What makes it so different is that it’s a bit scary. It’s too big and too personal. Suddenly, God fills the room. Your prayer request was important, or so you thought. Now the agenda has expanded and you aren’t sure how. The answer to your request isn’t the whole story.

This is what’s happening to Hannah. God didn’t just fix her problem and take away her shame; He’s up to something—and she can feel it.

But she doesn’t know what He’s up to—something more, but what? So, it’s all very great and very scary at the same time. She’s elated but smacked with a sense of responsibility and mystery...

...which is even more elating.

4 1 Samuel 1:21–28

Now the man Elkanah and all his house went up to offer to the LORD the yearly sacrifice and his vow. But Hannah did not go up, for she said to her husband, “Not until the child is weaned; then I will take him, that he may appear before the LORD and remain there forever.”

So Elkanah her husband said to her, “Do what seems best to you; wait until you have weaned him. Only let the LORD establish His word.” Then the woman stayed and nursed her son until she had weaned him.

Now when she had weaned him, she took him up with her, with three bulls, one ephah of flour, and a skin of wine, and brought him to the house of the LORD in Shiloh. And the child was young. Then they slaughtered a bull, and brought the child to Eli. And she said, “O my lord! As your soul lives, my lord, I am the woman who stood by you here, praying to the LORD. For this child I prayed, and the LORD has granted me my petition which I asked of Him. Therefore I also have lent him to the LORD; as long as he lives he shall be lent to the LORD.” So they worshiped the LORD there.

Hannah is now focused like a laser beam on her vow and her role in God’s grand plans. The text doesn’t tell us how much she confided in Elkanah, but it must have been a lot. To his credit, he not only allows Hannah to deviate from the family’s plans, he supports and encourages her. The Hebrew that’s translated as, “Do what seems best to you,” (עֲשֵׂי הַטּוֹב בְּעֵינֶיךָ) literally means, “Do the good in your eyes.” He’s affirming that she’s doing the right thing.

And just imagine the look on Eli’s face when this woman he had insulted, then blessed, a year earlier shows up with the kid she had been praying for. She brings a huge sacrifice (three bulls!), reminds him of the incident, and presents him with the boy. He had to be at a loss for words.

So they worshiped the LORD there.

Even though Eli wasn’t the one who prayed the prayer, he blessed it. Now he’s hit with all that scary sense of responsibility and mystery that accompanies big, answered prayer.

And this one has all the marks of being significant for his ministry, maybe even all of Israel.

Hannah probably didn’t plan to “spring” this on Eli, but that’s how it played out. It was God’s scheme, not Hannah’s.

The LORD is preparing Eli. Life as a priest can get repetitive. The text doesn’t say much about Eli’s life, but, as we’ll soon see, his sons were extremely disappointing. It seems that he was just soldiering on in faithful service to the LORD.

But now he’s been lit. He’ll have to just continue soldiering on while the boy grows up—God’s timetable can be long—but his sense of purpose has gotten a shot in the arm.

And his radar has been activated. He’s on the lookout for whatever the LORD has planned next.

5 1 Samuel 2:1–10 (KJV)

And Hannah prayed, and said, My heart rejoiceth in the LORD, mine horn is exalted in the LORD: my mouth is enlarged over mine enemies; because I rejoice in thy salvation.

There is none holy as the LORD: for there is none beside thee: neither is there any rock like our God.

Talk no more so exceeding proudly; let not arrogancy come out of your mouth: for the LORD is a God of knowledge, and by him actions are weighed.

The bows of the mighty men are broken, and they that stumbled are girded with strength.

They that were full have hired out themselves for bread; and they that were hungry ceased: so that the barren hath born seven; and she that hath many children is waxed feeble.

The LORD killeth, and maketh alive: he bringeth down to the grave, and bringeth up.

The LORD maketh poor, and maketh rich: he bringeth low, and lifteth up.

He raiseth up the poor out of the dust, and lifteth up the beggar from the dunghill, to set them among princes, and to make them inherit the throne of glory: for the pillars of the earth are the LORD's, and he hath set the world upon them.

He will keep the feet of his saints, and the wicked shall be silent in darkness; for by strength shall no man prevail.

The adversaries of the Lord shall be broken to pieces; out of heaven shall he thunder upon them: the LORD shall judge the ends of the earth; and he shall give strength unto his king, and exalt the horn of his anointed.

Hannah's song rates right up there with Mary's song (The Magnificat) in Luke 1:46–55 and Zachariah's song in Luke 1:68–79. Both of them begin with soaring praise:

*“My soul doth magnify the Lord,
And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour.” — Luke 1:47 (KJV)*

“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he hath visited and redeemed his people.” — Luke 1:68 (KJV)

Hannah is in the same spirit when she prays, *“My heart rejoiceth in the LORD, mine horn is exalted in the LORD: my mouth is enlarged over mine enemies; because I rejoice in thy salvation.”*

When a heart is filled with joy, magnificent things pour forth from the lips.

These prayers feel like they have a heartbeat.

We would do well to study these passages and learn to pray like that. They show worship at its purest.

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. Do you have too much drama in your life?
2. What desperate prayers have you seen, or even said?
3. When has a positive answer to prayer felt intimidating?
4. When has God's answer to someone else's prayer surprised you?
5. How can we incorporate this into our prayers?

Items for prayer: