

## I Samuel 1:18b-2:11 Hannah the joy of devotion to God

### Introduction

The opening section of this book addresses in principle the problem of apparently ‘unanswered’ prayer, that is the individual or people concerned have been asking the Lord to intervene in a particular way in a given situation, but the circumstances in question have not changed or at least have not done so for the better –as understood by the person or people bringing the petition to God. Almost all of us without exception will at one time or another be in this position. Therefore, this story is significant for each one of us. The particular example coming from the family of a wealthy Israelite man called Elkanah will in some respects be very different from our lives today, but the principle under consideration is as relevant in the twenty-first century AD as it was more than a thousand years before the time of Jesus. We would be deeply insensitive creatures not to feel sympathetic to Hannah in her plight - or towards other people today who may be facing their own trials or heartaches. This book of the Bible encourages us to keep our feet firmly on the ground and acknowledge that life in the real world is tough and our experience of it will always include some challenges and difficulties. The problems of and tensions within this family may be very different to our own, but the big picture here of individuals feeling powerless to change their circumstances is common in every generation. The difficulties God may permit you and me to experience will vary, but despite our earnest prayers the majority of the time we will continue to live with these difficulties and pressures. In many cases the words of Paul recording how God enabled him to come to terms with his issue, his ‘thorn in the flesh’, from II Corinthians 12 are so helpful for us all. Remember these words that Paul wrote: *Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. <sup>9</sup>But He said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. <sup>10</sup>That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong* (II Corinthians 12:8-10). For many godly believers this will be their experience until the day they die; with the earthly circumstances for which they have prayed apparently unchanged. We have to accept that in the mysterious will of God His purpose for permitting this to be the case has not been revealed.

In God’s providence, in this particular situation, Hannah’s request would be granted, together with greater blessings than she had sought - over time. The unknown writer of I Samuel is able to reveal to us why this is the case, but we cannot be certain that Hannah and Elkanah had the same degree of insight into their circumstances at the time. In life so many things only become clear with hindsight- such as the unfortunate penalty decision for Scotland in their crucial rugby world cup quarter-final match with Australia (October 2015) that cost them the match and a place in the semi-finals. In real time the referee in question had an extremely difficult call to make and probably the pressure of the occasion led to his mistake. Here in the verses covered in this message we will see Hannah’s personal joy, but the birth of this child was of profound significance for the whole nation. Hannah and Elkanah had not sought or prayed for such an outcome, but their faithfulness to God would result in unexpected blessings both for them as a couple and for the nation as a whole. God has not changed and so the outcome of your prayers and mine might equally have an impact not just for ourselves and for other people for whom we are praying but on a much wider canvas.

When this is the case the blessings and joys received are shared much more widely than we might ever have anticipated.

### 1. **The gift Hannah gave to God** (I Samuel 1:18b-28)

(a) **The attitude of faith before God** (I Samuel 1:18b) *Then she went her way and ate something, and her face was no longer downcast.* In Hebrews 11:1 we read these words: *Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.* There are times when we must earnestly pray and keep on praying, but there are also times when we leave something with the Lord waiting for Him to act. I know there have been times when I have struggled with the latter course of action! Maybe you have as well? Do you need to be encouraged to be confident in God taking care of your future in some way at this time? I believe this was a turning point for Hannah. For each of us there are some big and some small steps of faith that we need to take in our lives as we grow in our relationship with the Lord. No truthful Christian will claim that it is easy to live this way. Hannah, despite her heartache over the ‘unanswered’ prayer she had experienced, reached the place of entrusting her situation to the Lord. Like Hannah it may be costly for you and me to reach such a place before the Lord – but please persevere until you find that place! For many of us it can be a real battle to take a big issue to the Lord and reach the place where we can truly leave it with Him. We do try earnestly often on many occasions, but struggle to reach that place of confidence in God’s resolution of our difficulties. Often the breakthrough only comes when we are willing to say to the Lord that we accept that what we sincerely desired may not happen, and should He have something that He thinks is better for us that we are willing to accept it. This may be a key factor to acknowledge that what we think may be the best outcome for us may not in fact be the case for reasons unknown to us.

(b) **The actions in faith towards God** (I Samuel 1:19-23) *Early the next morning they arose and worshipped before the Lord and then went back to their home at Ramah. Elkanah made love to his wife Hannah and the Lord remembered her.* <sup>20</sup>*So in the course of time Hannah became pregnant and gave birth to a son. She named him Samuel, saying, ‘Because I asked the Lord for him.’* <sup>21</sup>*When her husband Elkanah went up with all his family to offer the annual sacrifice to the Lord and to fulfil his vow,* <sup>22</sup>*Hannah did not go. She said to her husband, ‘After the boy is weaned, I will take him and present him before the Lord, and he will live there always.’* <sup>23</sup>*‘Do what seems best to you,’ her husband Elkanah told her. ‘Stay here until you have weaned him; only may the Lord make good His word.’* So the woman stayed at home and nursed her son until she had weaned him. Hannah kept her promises. She was a woman of great integrity. When she made a commitment to do something she carried it through even if it cost her a great deal. Praise God for the men and women of integrity today. Value and treasure such individuals because they are unlikely to be the majority in our land at the present time. So many people have lowered their own standards even if only in a small way because they see so many other people profiting from saying or doing things that ought to have been done differently. In a world where a modest amount of lying to smooth one’s path in the workplace in relation to colleagues or customers is taken for granted; to walk a different path at times can be very difficult. Hannah is a fine example to us of a person who had her standards and kept to them and despite the moral decline around her in Shiloh of all places it was not used as an excuse to go back on her promise to God. What joy came into this home when Samuel was born but overshadowing his arrival was the recognition that his presence in that family was limited to the approximately three years before a child was officially ‘weaned’ in that society [R. Klein, *I Samuel*, p. 10]. Hannah wanted to spend every possible moment with her first-

born son and because of the vow taken concerning Samuel's future deliberately stayed at home with him when the rest of the family went to Shiloh for the religious festivals. This was an arbitrary decision but one discussed and agreed with her husband Elkanah. The cost of this decision for someone who has longed for a child for so many years is huge. It is to the credit of Hannah and Elkanah that this promise was kept. In the light of the improper behavior of the younger religious leaders at Shiloh, that is the sons of Eli, we must say that only a person rightly convinced of the will of God could take such a step of faith and be vindicated for it. You and I too will make judgement calls at times concerning our own lives and those of others within our families; people outside may view our choices negatively or positively, but what matters is that we carefully and prayerfully do what we believe God would have us do. He promises to honour those that honour Him. Hannah would soon experience the painful joy of serving the Lord.

(c) **The cost of obedience to God** (I Samuel 1:24-28) *After he was weaned, she took the boy with her, young as he was, along with a three-year-old bull, an ephah of flour and a skin of wine, and brought him to the house of the Lord at Shiloh.* <sup>25</sup> *When the bull had been sacrificed, they brought the boy to Eli,* <sup>26</sup> *and she said to him, 'Pardon me, my lord. As surely as you live, I am the woman who stood here beside you praying to the Lord.* <sup>27</sup> *I prayed for this child, and the Lord has granted me what I asked of Him.* <sup>28</sup> *So now I give him to the Lord. For his whole life he shall be given over to the Lord.'* *And he worshipped the Lord there.* The day came when this young boy who had spent every day of his life with his mother would set off to Shiloh knowing that his young life would never be the same again. He is between three and four years old and will go to live with the aged Eli in his 90s and presumably younger women in his family who would have handled the household responsibilities. At that time people lived as extended families –the modern experience of people living on their own or away from family and friends for a variety of reasons was simply unknown back then. We must not imagine for a moment simply a young boy and an old man in this home! For all of us as God's people there are sacrifices to be made as we honour the Lord. For some people it is a decision to remain single in order to be more effective in ministry (John Stott, is a good example here); or in order to serve on a particular mission field or because no suitable spouse is available. Marrying the wrong person can be infinitely worse than the loneliness some have felt when they longed to find a suitable husband or wife. In some other mission contexts parents have had to leave their children in boarding schools because of the dangers on the field or the lack of educational facilities for them. Other Christians have taken positions with lower salaries and prestige in order to have adequate time for God and His service and also some times in order to have time for their families. Over the course of your life and mine there will be one or two or maybe a handful of really hard choices. The possibilities here of contexts where sacrificial choices might be made are many and they are often very personal matters. What might be the correct for one Christian may not be so for another. So we need to be very careful sometimes how we view the choices fellow believers make because we may be less aware of the factors involved in making the choice they took. Hannah when she made this choice had absolutely no idea whether she would conceive another child. Do you have a big decision to make in your life at the present time? Remember God knows your situation and by His Spirit can give you the strength to do the right thing that is most honouring to Him.

We remember King David's powerful words, a couple of generations later, to the Jebusite farmer Araunah, from whom he bought the land and equipment to offer a sacrifice to God: *But the king replied to Araunah, 'No, I insist on paying you for it. I will not sacrifice to the Lord my God burnt offerings that cost me nothing.'* (II Samuel 24:24). In our time commitments to God; in

the level of our financial giving to church work; in the use of our gifts in His service –it will at times be costly to live in a way pleasing to Him. It is good each year to look afresh at what we are giving to the Lord in each area our lives. Hannah in the giving of her very best to God is a role model to us as she won the battle to overcome the heartache of ‘unanswered’ prayer. Although we can never pretend that the answers God will give will always be the ones we have asked for –what we can be assured of is that in His time, and in the way that He believes is best for us, our prayers will be answered for our good and for His glory.

## 2. The song Hannah sang about God (I Samuel 2:1-11)

(a)Praise for who He is (I Samuel 2:1-3) *'Then Hannah prayed and said: 'My heart rejoices in the Lord; in the Lord my horn is lifted high. My mouth boasts over my enemies, for I delight in Your deliverance. <sup>2</sup> 'There is no one holy like the Lord; there is no one besides You; there is no Rock like our God. <sup>3</sup> 'Do not keep talking so proudly or let your mouth speak such arrogance, for the Lord is a God who knows, and by Him deeds are weighed. Why was Hannah able to act in the way she did? It was supremely due to the God-centredness of her life. When you take pictures with a camera what you have focused on at the moment the shot is taken will determine the kind of picture that has been captured. If the focus is in the wrong place, at a minimum the balance of the picture will look wrong and at worst it will simply turn out a picture you will want to delete rather than print out. It is no surprise that Mary in her song The Magnificat, in Luke 1:46-55, models it on Hannah's declaration of praise to God. Mary begins her song with these words: *My soul praises the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour...* (Luke 1:46-47a). God chose a girl of at most 13-14 years to carry out this incredible calling of being the mother of Jesus. In a society that idolizes young adulthood as the time when people ‘count’ and should be centre-stage, we must be counter-cultural and take a step back and protest. God can use people of that age such as Joseph, the Vizier of Egypt in his late 20s. Yet He will equally use Moses and Aaron aged 80 and 83 to lead the Exodus from Egypt (Exodus 7:7), or use young Samuel as a Primary School age child or Mary ‘the teenager’ to accomplish His will. It is not your age, but your availability that matters to God! God has a plan and purpose for us all whatever our age and if we willingly offer ourselves to serve Him then He will open those doors for service that will bring real joy and fulfillment in our hearts. Hannah was not praising God because life was easy and pain-free it most certainly wasn't for her, but because she had placed herself in the centre of God's will for her life and recognized that it was the best place she could be. The joy within her then overflowed in worship and adoration to the Lord. The reference here to *my horn* is an agricultural image used by Moses in his song in Deuteronomy 33:17 where speaking of Joseph son of Jacob in Egypt he declared: *In majesty he is like a firstborn bull; his horns are the horns of a wild ox. With them he will gore the nations, even those at the ends of the earth.* It is a statement about a person's strength or resources to do what they need to do (this image is also used by Asaph in Psalm 75:5). In other words it is an Old Testament equivalent to Paul's declaration in Philippians 4:13: *I can do everything through Him who gives me strength.* Hannah's words are a testimony to her readers that through life's good times and tough ones the Lord stood with her each step of the way. If today you are feeling overwhelmed by something going on just now – these words are especially for you –God will grant you the strength to accomplish what you need to do for Him whether it is at home or at work or in some other place. Hannah urges us to join her in trusting God with the whole of our lives because of who He is- a faithful utterly reliable promise-keeping God.*

(b) **Praise for what He has done** (I Samuel 2:4-8) *‘The bows of the warriors are broken, but those who stumbled are armed with strength.<sup>5</sup> Those who were full hire themselves out for food, but those who were hungry are hungry no more. She who was barren has borne seven children, but she who has had many sons pines away.<sup>6</sup> ‘The Lord brings death and makes alive; He brings down to the grave and raises up.<sup>7</sup> The Lord sends poverty and wealth; He humbles and He exalts.<sup>8</sup> He raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap; He seats them with princes and makes them inherit a throne of honour. ‘For the foundations of the earth are the Lord’s; on them He has set the world. Hannah has praised God in this song for His holiness (2:2); for His power –using similar vocabulary in 2:2 to Moses in Deuteronomy 32:31: *For their rock is not like our Rock, as even our enemies concede.* For His incredible knowledge of our past, present and future (2:3); In Isaiah 46:10 God declares: *I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say, “My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please.”* When you have such a solid foundation on which to base your faith as Hannah does here it is natural to move into giving thanks for the acts of God in history. Her thanksgiving personally is naturally for the birth and life of Samuel her precious son, but the words she chooses in her song are quite general to indicate that this is a matter of principle not just something for her personally. She gives three examples where God can be praised for acting in particular circumstances, but these are illustrations not the boundaries of God’s actions in history. She rejoices firstly: (i) **In the triumph over evil people** *The bows of the warriors are broken, but those who stumbled are armed with strength* (I Samuel 2:4) In the various passages that use this imagery in the Old Testament the focus is on breaking not literal weapons but the breaking of the hard hearts of wicked people who need to mend their ways and acknowledge God (Gordon Keddie, *Dawn of a Kingdom: The Message of I Samuel*, p. 33). Are there individuals in your school or workplace or some other context that seem to be getting away with all manner of wrongdoing? Hannah here wants to assure us that this will not continue for ever because God will have the final word. The people who have been bullied or exploited will not be treated in this way forever. The hold of wicked people over them will be broken. Praise God for that! The people who were close to giving up were given the required strength that they needed. Do you need that encouragement today? Have you been close to stumbling? Has someone here even had ever darker thoughts wishing life was over and contemplating how that might come about because life was so hard at the time. Hannah urges people in that position to be assured God will come to your aid and strengthen you. (ii) **In the provision of our present needs being met** *Those who were full hire themselves out for food, but those who were hungry are hungry no more* (I Samuel 2:5a) Paul expressed it this way in Philippians 4:19: *And my God will meet all your needs according to the riches of His glory in Christ Jesus.* Our needs can be material, or they may be spiritual or take some other form. What is important says Hannah is that we trust God to meet our daily needs. In the prayer that Jesus taught His disciples He recommended them to say: *Give us today our daily bread* (Matthew 6:11). In other words, Lord help me to distinguish between needs and wants and trust You to provide all the former for me. Agur, a peripheral figure in the Biblical story, prayed a prayer along these lines, recorded in Proverbs 30: 7-9: *‘Two things I ask of you, Lord; do not refuse me before I die: <sup>8</sup>keep falsehood and lies far from me; give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread. <sup>9</sup>Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you and say, “Who is the Lord?” Or I may become poor and steal, and so dishonour the name of my God.* Although we sometimes have to wait much longer than we would like, Hannah declares that we can trust the Lord to get us through our really difficult times in life. (iii) **In the provision of our future needs** *She who was barren has borne seven children, but she who has had many sons pines away* (I Samuel 2:5b). The number *seven* in Scripture is the perfect number –and need not be viewed*

literally here as a model number of children each family should have! Our future focus and hopes are not to be on the things we desire- even when it is children we seek- but on God and His provision. When our focus is on collecting more things it will never be enough. In the illustration Hannah provides the first woman is overjoyed because God has met her need and given her more blessings than she had even sought. By contrast, the second woman may even have more than the first one but she has gained no happiness from it because she was always wanting 'more' of whatever it may be. We can lose our joy in the Lord with an unhelpful focus on 'more' of something, rather than in placing our hopes and trust in His provision of what we need, not necessary what we have been asking Him for in prayer. In a materialistic social context we may need a spiritual detox to cleanse us from thinking along these lines. Do I need to challenge myself in some area of my life because I have been adopting materialistic attitudes that ought to be challenged and resisted? Am I willing to leave the provision of my future needs whatever they may be to God?

(c) **Praise in advance for future blessings** (I Samuel 2:9-11) <sup>9</sup> *He will guard the feet of His faithful servants, but the wicked will be silenced in the place of darkness. 'It is not by strength that one prevails; <sup>10</sup> those who oppose the Lord will be broken. The Most High will thunder from heaven; the Lord will judge the ends of the earth. 'He will give strength to his king and exalt the horn of His anointed.'* <sup>11</sup> *Then Elkanah went home to Ramah, but the boy ministered before the Lord under Eli the priest.* The final part of the song continues to declare confidence in God's future provision into the indefinite future. To the end of time and into eternity when His eternal kingdom will be established God will provide for our needs. As New Testament believers we have had a fuller revelation of what that looks like through the person of Jesus who first modeled for us how to live and then died in our place on the cross. But that is only setting the scene for His triumphant coming as King of Kings and Lord of Lord (Revelation 19:11-16). Hannah is in effect exhorting us to commit not only our short-term future but also our long-term future into God's hands. May God help each one of us to do that, for Jesus' sake, Amen.