

Hannah's story

1 Samuel : 1- 20.

Hannah's story is one which shows us several aspects of God's love and concern for our lives.

There are several stories in the Bible concerning ladies, the most obvious one of course being Mary the mother of Jesus but there are several others; Eve, Ruth, Esther, , Sarah wife of Abraham, Elizabeth mother of John the Baptist, Mary Magdalene, Martha and Mary and others. Each of their lives shows us different aspects of God's love and care for us. Did these ladies always get it right?

The short answer is no and almost all of them got it wrong at some point, some of them quite seriously wrong, but the encouraging thing for us is that despite that God still wanted to use them and to bless them.

It would be a good exercise, perhaps to look up the lives of the women of the Bible and read them through and to see how despite their short comings God still wanted to use them. The same is true, I should say at this point, of the men of the Bible as well who also got things wrong on many occasions and God still used them.

But looking at the ladies in particular I think there are three words which might summarise the stories we read about them and their responses to their circumstances: Bravery, faith and obedience.

Bravery in that some of the things they did were not easy and it took courage for them to accept what God was asking them to do and they had to make hard choices and if they hadn't then who knows what history would have looked like.

Faith, perhaps the most important characteristic; in that if they hadn't had faith in God and/or Jesus, dependant on whether they lived in Old Testament or New Testament times, then what they did would have been far more difficult if not impossible for them as without a purpose, and faith creates a purpose, you are doing it because you believe it is serving God's purposes and as a believer that is important to you and makes it possible to do what you believe God is asking even in the most difficult circumstances.

To give a modern day analogy, the persecuted church and the believers who are in it would find it almost impossible to bear the many problems that they face daily including torture and even death if they didn't have faith in the live changing resurrection of Jesus Christ as their Lord and Saviour. Similarly the disciples had to have faith in the risen Saviour Jesus Christ and the promises He made of eternal life to endure the horrendous deaths that they did because of their profession of faith in Jesus. They the disciples, nor the persecuted church, would have endured what they did and do if they didn't have faith in who and what Jesus was and in who He claimed to be.

Lastly and perhaps as importantly, they were obedient to what they were asked to do. It is no good having all the courage in the world and all the faith in Jesus and God if when we are asked to do something we are not obedient in doing it.

It's like as I'm watching the six nations rugby at the moment, far better than football, and as you see the players go out onto the field, they've not just decided to go out and have a game and hope they win, they have to go out with lots of bravery and commitment, (if you go into a tackle half

heartedly the chances are you will get hurt, if you give it 100% commitment chances are neither you nor your opponent will get hurt because you have done it properly and as you were trained. Speaking of training they are trained day after day by coaches, an overall coach, a specialist coach for each group of players and a motivational coach for the whole team and if the coaches are really good and the players are obedient to the game plan, chances are they will win the game.

God is a very good coach, so good in fact that through Jesus He has already won the battle for us, and if we are brave, if we have faith in Him and if we are obedient then we can be confident that we will be on the winning side.

Are you brave, do you have faith, are you obedient to God's call on your life. Let's have a look at Hannah's story and see how she fared in these three areas.

Hannah was the wife of Elkanah who also had a second wife Peninnah who had several children. Hannah, however, was unable to have children and was not helped by Peninnah who constantly goaded her about the fact she couldn't bear children for her husband even though Elkanah tried to help by giving her double portions of food to show his love for her and assuring her that he loved her even though she had no children and that being married to him should more than compensate for the fact they had no children. (I am assured by those that will know these things, that this would not help in the slightest and probably made her feel a whole lot worse!)

She endured this for many years we are told with Peninnah goading her so much that she ended up crying and unable to eat.

Finally she broke and after having gone through the usual rituals of the sacrifice to God and the following meal she stood up observed by Eli the High Priest she prayed to the Lord. Did she do it quietly in measured tones and eloquent speech? No we are told that she prayed in tears and in bitterness of soul. God wants us to be real when we pray to Him not trying to mask our true feelings (which He will know anyway; but with honesty, openness and a true expression of our emotions) Hannah has bottled her emotions up for years and now the dam has burst and all her pent up emotions come flooding out. She prayed silently but opened her mouth as she mouthed her prayers. Her emotions were so raw and on the surface that Eli mistakenly thought that she was drunk and chastised her for it. How often do we misjudge what we think we see happening in front of us and jump in with judgement too quickly. We need to be certain of what we are seeing before reproving.

In her prayers Hannah made a oath to God, " O Lord Almighty, if You will only look upon your servant's misery and remember me, and not forget your servant but give her a son, then I will give him to the Lord for all the days of his life and no razor will ever be used on his head." A prayer of desperation, but also a prayer of faith, recognising who God is and what He is able to accomplish. Also a prayer that says I just want to be a normal lady and bear children for my husband. Much has been written about why Hannah was so desperate to have a child but we will never really know the answer. What we do know that as an act of gratitude to God, should He grant her wish, she promises to give the child over to God's service all the days of his life.

Eli is told by Hannah that he is mistaken in thinking her drunk but is a lady deeply troubled, pouring out her soul to the Lord and praying out of her great anguish and grief.

Eli recognising the truth of what she was saying sent her away with a blessing, "Go in peace, and may the God of Israel grant you what you have asked of him."

The next sentence is interesting to me at least. We are told that she (Hannah) went her way and ate something and her face was no longer downcast.

I don't know about you but I can remember on the few occasions in my life when I have truly poured out my heart to God with sincerity and honesty there has followed a real sense of uplifting and release as if God is saying why didn't you do that ages ago and I could have lifted your burden from your shoulders earlier. My most vivid memory is of when I recommitted my life to God in 1984 having spent some 19 years wandering around in my own wilderness even though God had prodded me a few times along the way. When I finally came to that place of total submission once more I can still recall the physical sense of a huge burden being lifted from my shoulders and of God putting His arms around me and saying, "Welcome back." I think probably Hannah felt something similar here with a real sense that God had been listening to her, had heard her and would do something about it.

Sure enough in due course Hannah conceived a son and when he was born she named him "Sh'ma Alohim", Samuel meaning "God has heard".

Now comes the most difficult part of all, I think, Hannah has waited all her married life for a son and finally having poured out her woes to God she has produced a son Samuel, naming him in recognition of God's provision to her. Do you think it would be easy for her to fulfil her promise to God and hand Samuel over to the High Priest to be brought up serving God with little contact with his mother? We are told later that his mother made him a robe each year and took it to the temple when they went up to Shiloh to offer the annual sacrifice, and gave it to him, so all contact wasn't lost but it was far from raising him as her own son. Do you think, and I don't know the answer, I just know that when Jack was placed into my arms about three hours after he was born a very special bond was formed there and then which has continued to this day and if I were asked to give him up to the Lord's service, I would find that extremely difficult to do and I'm only his granddad! But do you think that for a little while Hannah may have thought, well God knows what a state I was in when I prayed that prayer all those months ago, that I wasn't really thinking about what I was saying when I made that promise, I'm sure God would forgive me if I didn't carry through on it and brought Samuel up myself.

There's no indication of that in the text other than her husband Elkanah's response when she tells him she will present Samuel to the Lord after she has weaned him. His response, "Do what seems best to you." Perhaps I'm reading too much into it but it sounds a little like, "I want to keep him but if you insist on fulfilling your promise it's up to you."

Whether these thoughts crossed Hannah's mind or not what we do know is that Hannah kept her promise to the Lord and when she had weaned Samuel she took him along with a three year old bull, an ephah of flour and a skin of wine. Once they had sacrificed the bull she took Samuel to Eli and told him that she was the one who had stood with him as she prayed to the Lord for a son,

that God gave her and as she vowed she was now giving him to the Lord's service for his lifetime thus being obedient and fulfilling her promise to God. Do we always keep our promises to God in the same way that Hannah did or can we waver sometimes? God always keeps His promises so be very careful when you promise Him something, He will expect it to be kept and there will almost certainly be consequences if it isn't.

Do you like happy endings? Who doesn't like a happy ending? As you read the rest of Samuel 1 and Samuel 2 you will see how Samuel grew up to serve the Lord and was the last of the ruling judges in the old testament having been called by God as a prophet who was recognised by the whole of Israel.

Having been brave enough to bear her soul before the Lord, having the faith to believe that God would answer her prayer and obedient to release Samuel into God's service was that the end for Hannah?

It might have been and it should have been sufficient for Hannah to know that she had been obedient to God's will. But God is a generous God who loves and care for us and we are told in 1 Samuel 2:20- 21 after Hannah and Elkanah had visited Samuel on their annual visit and were about to go home:

"Eli would bless Elkanah and his wife (Hannah) saying, "May the Lord give you children by this woman to take the place of the one she prayed for and gave to the Lord." Then they would go home. And the Lord was gracious to Hannah; she conceived and gave birth to three sons and two daughters (not all at once we assume!). Meanwhile, Samuel grew up in the presence of the Lord."

Finally after Hannah had presented Samuel to Eli to bring up in the Lord's service she prayed the following prayer of thanks, recognising who God is and what HE can do and that He is a refuge for all the oppressed and downtrodden who turn to Him for help:

1 Samuel 2:1-10

"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.

There is no one holy like the Lord;

There is no one besides You;

There is no rock like our God.

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.
The bows of the warriors are broken,
But those who stumbled are armed with strength.
Those who were full hire themselves out for food,
But those who were hungry hunger no more.
She who was barren has borne seven children,
But she who has had many sons pines away.
The Lord brings death and makes alive;
He brings down to the grave, and raises up.
The Lord sends poverty and wealth;
He humbles and He exalts
He raises the poor from the dust
And lifts the needy from the ash heaps;
He seats them with princes
And has them inherit a throne of honour.
For the foundations of the earth are the Lords';
Upon them He has set the world.
He will guard the feet of His saints,
But the wicked will be silenced in darkness.
IT is not by strength that one prevails;
Those who oppose the Lord will be shattered,
He will thunder against them 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.

AMEN