

## Followers of the Way

### Children belong to God

Preacher: Lynda Rose

#### 1 Samuel 1:1-20

In the ancient world, children were regarded as a gift of God, and in Israel, as with many cultures in times gone by – as of course with some cultures still today – to be infertile and not to have a child was a mark of shame. This was the position in which Hannah found herself at the beginning of the first book of Samuel. She was the second, younger, wife of Elkanah and it sounds like they'd actually been married a while, but try as Hannah might, she hadn't managed to get pregnant and have a baby.

To make matters worse, Elkanah's first wife, Peninnah, seems to have had a lot of children. We read that when the family went to offer sacrifice at Shiloh, Elkanah gave portions to Peninnah and to *all her sons and daughters*. So, the problem seemed definitely to be with Hannah, and it would appear that Peninnah made her life hell. V.6 we read that the first wife would provoke Hannah severely about her childlessness *to irritate her* – and this went on for years. Hannah appears to have been devastated.

In v.9, we read that on this one occasion in Shiloh her distress is so great that she goes and throws herself before the Lord, begging His help, and she promises that if He will only give her a male child, she will give him back to the Lord as a nazirite, for life. Now a nazirite was someone consecrated to the service of the Lord and, as such, separated from the rest of the community. Commonly, they didn't cut their hair and they abstained from alcohol. Samson was a nazirite, and this is what Hannah vows on behalf of her yet to be conceived child. If Yahweh will give her a son, she'll give him back.

She's pretty upset at this point but, unbeknown to her, the priest Eli is close by and overhears. She's acting in such a disturbed/deranged manner that he decides she's drunk, so he goes to tell her off. You just don't behave like this in the sanctuary! But when Hannah explains why she's so upset, and what she's doing, he's full of compassion, and (v.17) he says, 'Go in peace, the God of Israel grant the petition you have made to him.'

Well, I imagine most of us can identify with Hannah at some point in our lives. When we've really wanted something that we felt was right and good – and somehow, inexplicably, it just didn't happen, or things went wrong. A job we wanted, maybe; a relationship we thought was special ... but that wasn't; financial help when we were wondering how on earth we were going to manage ... and yes, perhaps even a child, which of course can be either because a baby is wanted – or because, at that precise moment in our lives, it isn't. Even Christians aren't immune to the problems and challenges of life. And, it must be said, Christians too – like humanity as a whole – sometimes get things wrong.

So, what is God saying to us in the story of Hannah, and Samuel's miraculous birth?

I think the most obvious lesson, but one that's often overlooked, is that if something 'good' seems to be 'not happening', we shouldn't be too quick to assume that means it's not God's will. Yes, sometimes we have to accept that something we want is not part of God's plan for our lives – but sometimes the answer to our prayer is delayed because it's not the right time for fulfilment, maybe because the conditions aren't right, or because there's something we need to understand first.

It would appear here that Hannah's desire to have a child had been delayed because God had a very special purpose for the son she was going to bear, and Hannah needed to realise that, and give him back to God, for the fulfilment of that purpose. Hannah needed to know that from the moment of conception, the son she was going to bear was set apart by, and for, God. She *had* to make this promise that she would hand over the child to Eli to serve, for life, in the sanctuary. If she hadn't had the experience of childlessness, that led her to make the vow, she wouldn't have done it. So, our first lesson is that all things really do work together for good, under God, and that His timing – which, when we're going through the mill, and it's maybe very difficult to understand – is perfect.

But second, we learn from Hannah that we mustn't give up. Resigned acceptance would have been completely wrong here. It was right for her to share her anguish and bewilderment, and to keep on crying out to God – to persevere, in fact. And there's an important lesson here for all of us. Sometimes we get an immediate answer to prayer, and that's great, but sometimes the answer is delayed ... and sometimes, of course, it's a straight 'no'. But the thing to remember is that prayer is a two-way street, and God hears ... and He answers. God doesn't want our pained resignation – He wants to engage with us. So, it's okay to shout at God and get upset, as Hannah did here. The important thing is that we're honest. Because then God can engage with us.

Third, we must keep our vows. Hannah promised she would give her child back to God. From before his birth, God purposed Samuel to be priest to Israel. Samuel couldn't be born till Hannah was prepared to let him go, so that he might fulfil that purpose. And this perhaps is saying the most important thing of all about motherhood. Children *are* the gift of God, and they bring delight – but they also 'belong' to God, and not to us. As mothers and fathers, we're entrusted with the task of looking after them. But they're on loan. They belong to God.

I encourage you to read the whole of the story of Samuel, his consecration and surrender to Eli, and the gradual unfolding of his understanding, as God gently teaches and reveals himself, preparing *the child* for his future role. In God we find the finest and clearest example of what it is to be a loving parent, gradually leading and teaching the child at a pace it can understand. Never forcing anything.

And that brings me to my final point. Though God entrusts His children to us to care for, as already said, they are always 100% His. He knows every child, and every child has a purpose – both for his or her individual development and fulfilment, and for the wider community. Life is a training ground, but we are also here to serve, and our prayer for

our children ought always to be that they become fully what God has made and intends them to be. That they enter into their calling.

We know that there's a battle raging over the earth between good and evil, and it's been that way since our creation in Eden. We know that in this life we all have to face temptation and challenge, and that sometimes we fall. Indeed, it was to rescue us from bondage to sin and death that Christ came – and it's by His sacrifice that we're set free and restored to that relationship with God for which we are created.

Those who joined the Call to Repentance yesterday, whether physically or online, will have heard me say that over the last 50 years, in England and Wales, we have aborted 10 million babies. The lie that children don't really matter till they're born, dependent on whether or not they're wanted, is a demonic delusion, designed to destroy not just the baby, but the whole of humanity. And it's working. We're under judgment. So this Sunday, as we celebrate motherhood, let's once again honour all life as the gift of God, to be respected and cherished from the moment of conception through to its natural end. And whether blessed with children ourselves or not, let us thank God for the gift of new life, and pledge to defend and protect those who, for whatever reason, cannot defend themselves.