

ADVICE FROM A WOMAN WITH A PROBLEM

Every Christian believer faces real life problems. Even after we've come to faith in Christ, suffering, pain, and trouble still assail us. We do not often look there for guidance, yet God's grace and care for us that we know in Jesus, is found in the people and stories of the O. T.

Today we begin a series of messages drawn from the stories and people found in the book of 1st Samuel. I encourage you to find that book in your Bible and begin reading so that you are familiar with the stories of the people we'll be talking about. All of them illustrate to us a relationship with a real, living, and loving God who wants to be a part of their lives and your life. These stories provide important lessons for us about our relationship with our Creator and what makes for a better life.

A WOMAN WITH A PROBLEM

We'll begin with Hannah, a woman with a real life problem whose faith in God made it possible for her to manage that problem. Hannah lived in ancient Israel, at a time when people had drifted away from God, falling into idolatry, and away from morality. The last verse in the book of Judges describes what the times were like: *"In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes,"* Judges 21:25. When there is a lack of moral leadership, when the lines between right and wrong get blurred, then people simply choose to do whatever they feel like doing. Toleration is the last and only virtue of an immoral society. What does this have to do with Hannah? She became the mother of Samuel, who was one of the great leaders God raised up to bring Israel back God.

Hannah had a real life problem.

She was the wife of Elkanah, though he wasn't the problem. *"He had two wives; one was called Hannah and the other Peninnah. Peninnah had children, but Hannah had none. And because the LORD had closed her womb, her rival kept provoking her in order to irritate her. This went on year after year. Whenever Hannah went up to the house of the LORD, her rival provoked her till she wept and would not eat. Elkanah her husband would say to her, 'Hannah, why are you weeping? Why don't you eat? Why are you downhearted? Don't I mean more to you than ten sons?'"* 1 Sam 1:6-8.

Now, let's pause here moment

and consider what was going on. Hannah's problem was that she could not have children – heartbreaking for any couple that wants a child, but more so for Hannah. In those days the wife's chief role was to provide a male heir for her husband as well as other children. A barren womb was considered a curse. Hannah was spiritually disturbed, socially disgraced, and emotionally depressed. To make matters worse the second wife, Penninah, wasn't content that *she* had children. She felt the need to harass Hannah. *"... kept provoking her in order to irritate her,"* 1 Sam 1:6.

Some of you can relate to that kind of anguish of soul. It's not bad enough that you have a real life problem. It's not enough that this problem has caused you spiritual distress, alienated you from others, and caused you to be depressed. But, on top of all that you have a family member, who ought to be loving, and understanding, but instead provokes you about it every time you are together. Hannah had a real life problem, just like you.

One positive side note: even though Hannah's distress went on year after year, at least her husband loved her and he made a yearly pilgrimage with his family to worship the Lord. When the whole culture was "headed south" spiritually speaking, Elkanah swam against the tide of apathy, and took his family to worship. Here's a lesson: you greatly increase your chances to endure real life problems as a family when you make worship a priority in your family. When you come to a place where there is an atmosphere of faith and love... you won't just survive... you can grow and thrive in it. Elkanah brought his family to worship. He loved Hannah. Consider this: *"Whenever the day came for Elkanah to sacrifice, he would give portions of the meat to his wife Peninnah and to all her sons and*

daughters. *But to Hannah he gave a double portion because he loved her...*" 1 Sam 1:4-5. He treated her as an honored guest who gets the extra helping of food. This was unheard of.

I imagine it was difficult for Hannah to eat the food that was part of the "thank offering," to the Lord when she probably wasn't all that thankful. Having a loving husband helps. He was devout in his walk with God and devoted to Hannah, but he had a divided family. And the cause of this division was Elkanah's decision to marry two wives, which was not God's intent for marriage. Likely, Elkanah had married Hannah first for love and then, because she was not able to have children, he married Penninah. Though the Bible records the polygamous relationships of some of the patriarchs, it never endorses it. God's Word teaches that a man shall leave his father and mother and cling to his wife... not wives. Hannah had a real life problem.

ADVICE FROM HANNAH

What real life problem is confronting you today? Have you ever thought that maybe some of your problems are opportunities for the Lord to be in your life? Here's where Hannah's story speaks to your story. Don't, for a moment, think that the heroes of the Bible were somehow different than you. The Bible is filled with people just like you and me who had real life problems, and learned how to face them with real faith. If Hannah were to give us advice here's what it might be:

1. Face Up To Your Problems

Hannah didn't ignore her problem rather, she brought it to the Lord believing her prayers were heard. Once you confess your problem to the Lord and ask for help, He can get on with it. St. Paul reminds us: *"... in our hearts we felt the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead,"* 2 Cor. 1:9.

2. Pray, Pray, Pray - *"In bitterness of soul Hannah wept much and prayed to the LORD,"* 1 Sam 1:10-11. Our problems should drive us to prayer, not to despair. Hannah didn't withdraw into her shell or lash out at those around her. She didn't blame God or pull away from God and His people. She expressed her faith in prayer. God uses our problems to get our attention and to teach us. *"It was good for me to be afflicted so that I might learn your decrees,"* Psalm 119:71.

Here's Hannah praying with such intensity that Eli asks, "Lady, are you drunk?" *"I have poured out my soul before the Lord."* She was confident that the Creator of the universe was paying attention to her. When people believe that God wants to hear from them they build families and societies that believe that things can get better. Yes, religion does matter ... the nature of your god does influence your person, your family, and your society.

When the stories of Genesis (stories that Hannah likely had heard), the creation of the world and humans, were being set down to writing what was going on in the rest of the world? Over in Egypt, one of the most influential civilizations on earth they were worshipping ibises, crocodiles, and dung beetles. No one there looked at humans as made in the image and likeness of one loving creator God. The gods and humans were completely different, and this difference was most certainly reflected in the care shown to real live people. The pharaohs were sacred, but all those thousands who built the pyramids? They were merely expendable labor, treated no better than animals.

What a contrast from the God of Israel, who hears the prayer of a poor woman, a woman who hurts because she cannot fulfill what her culture and family expect of her – to bear a child, especially a son. This is a God who cares about a woman who hurts and gives her a chance to redeem her circumstances by coming to her aid. The stories of the O. T. highlight a God who makes personal contact with individuals, revealing himself to His creation as their loving Father.

Too many times people give up too soon in prayer. But God wants us to pray until we get the answer. A good part of that answer is the process in which we come closer to Him and become more like Him. Sometimes God gives you the grace you need to get through the day. Sometimes God calms the storm around you. Sometimes God calms *you* while you're in the storm. God does not always give you what you want, when you want it. What I can promise you is that God will give you what you need if you will pray... trust Him to answer you out of His heart of love for you.

3. Remember God's Answers - *"Early the next morning they arose and worshiped before the LORD and then went back to their home at Ramah. Elkanah lay with Hannah his wife, and the LORD remembered her. So in the course of time Hannah conceived and gave birth to a son. She named him Samuel, saying, "Because I asked the LORD for him.""* 1 Sam 1:19-20. They worshipped ... that was their practice. When her prayer was answered Hannah named her son Samuel, which sounds like the Hebrew word for "heard of God." Every time she said his name she was reminded of God's faithfulness.

4. Keep Your Promises - Hannah dedicated herself to her child, nursing and nurturing him, knowing that when he is able to eat on his own, she *"...will take him and present him before the Lord, and he will live there always."* People make promises to God all the time, only to forget them once the problem passes. Not Hannah. She kept her promise knowing that Samuel was God's gift even as she gave him away. She acted in honor and integrity.

5. Remember to thank God and Worship Him - After she brought the small boy Samuel to the temple Hannah broke out in praise: *"My heart rejoices in the LORD ... there is no Rock like our God"* Samuel 2:1-2.

Interestingly the Bible tells us: *"Each year his mother made him a little robe and took it to him when she went up with her husband to offer the annual sacrifice,"* 1 Samuel 2:19. Hannah expressed her love for her son while she and her husband continued to be faithful in worship. Then later on we get a glimpse into young Samuel's heart: *"And he worshiped the LORD there,"* 1 Sam. 2:28. Even as a little boy he was able to worship. Now where do you think he learned how to do that?

MEN AND WOMEN OF FAITH MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Having faith that God can move mountains will transform your families and whole societies. Mother Teresa was once asked her opinion on what would make for world peace. She answered: a good family life. Gentlemen: one of the greatest feats you can perform in your life is to wait on the Lord, attend to worship, and to encourage those in your family to follow your example. Demonstrate to your spouse, your sons and daughters, your friends, your extended family, and your neighbors that your strength is not about your physical conditioning or mental prowess, but rather arises from your walk with God.

Ladies: whether or not you have a child God loves you for who you are, not for what you do. Lift up your head and realize that He understands your sorrow and your pain and He'll meet you right where you are. If you're a mom, make it your mission to dedicate your children to the Lord. There's no greater purpose for your children than for them to give their lives in surrendered service to the Lord of Hosts. I don't mean they become priests or pastors ... I mean they learn to seek God in all they do. This they learn from you.

Next week you'll hear about some other persons in the book of 1 Samuel; the priest Eli and his sons Hophni and Phineas. Those two boys did some evil and perversely detestable things. It's telling that their mother is never mentioned anywhere. We don't know if she died or if she was just not involved as a parent. Samuel, on the other hand, was profoundly influenced by his mother, and went on to become one of the most significant individuals in God's redemptive history.

Moms and Dads, men and women of faith, you matter greatly to your kids, your grandkids, and to the very future of our nation! Hannah's life and faith display the importance of the need for each of us to be growing in our own relationship with God. If we want the next generations to learn about God, and to love Him with all they have, they must first see this devotion demonstrated in our lives first. It's got to be real in us.

Maybe you've heard this story about a young family whose baby had just been baptized. As they were driving home from church, little Johnny, the older brother, sat in the back seat crying. Mom asked him three times what was wrong. Finally, the boy replied, "That pastor said he wanted us to be brought up in a Christian home...but I want to stay with you guys!"

If you want your kids brought up in a Christian home, make sure that Christ is at home in your heart. Maybe some of you here today are thinking “Too late. I wish I’d done that, now my kids are all grown.” It’s never too late to pray for them. If you don’t have kids find some to pray for.

Hannah’s faith can be yours. It’s real faith for real life problems. Remember:

1. Life will bring you problems. Problems can actually be gifts from God. Ask God what He is teaching you through this trial.
2. Realize the power of prayer. Turn to God in times of trouble ... pray till something happens.
3. Be a person of your word. Honor your vows to the Lord even in times of trouble. Faithfulness, not feelings, will always steer you in the right direction.
4. Be a person of praise. Praise conditions your attitude. No matter what’s happening in your life, choose to praise God in spite of it. You’re on the winning team!

“There is no one holy like the LORD; there is no one besides you; there is no Rock like our God,” Samuel 2:1-2.