

<sup>1</sup> There was a certain man from Ramathaim, a Zuphite from the hill country of Ephraim, whose name was Elkanah son of Jeroham, the son of Elihu, the son of Tohu, the son of Zuph, an Ephraimite. <sup>2</sup> He had two wives; one was called Hannah and the other Peninnah. Peninnah had children, but Hannah had none.

<sup>3</sup> Year after year this man went up from his town to worship and sacrifice to the LORD Almighty at Shiloh, where Hophni and Phinehas, the two sons of Eli, were priests of the LORD. <sup>4</sup> 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. <sup>5</sup> But to Hannah he gave a double portion because he loved her, and the LORD had closed her womb. <sup>6</sup> Because the LORD had closed Hannah's womb, her rival kept provoking her in order to irritate her. <sup>7</sup> 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. <sup>8</sup> Her husband Elkanah 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?"

<sup>9</sup> Once when they had finished eating and drinking in Shiloh, Hannah stood up. Now Eli the priest was sitting on his chair by the doorpost of the LORD's house. <sup>10</sup> In her deep anguish Hannah prayed to the LORD, weeping bitterly. <sup>11</sup> And she made a vow, saying, "LORD Almighty, if you will only look on 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."

<sup>12</sup> As she kept on praying to the LORD, Eli observed her mouth. <sup>13</sup> Hannah was praying in her heart, and her lips were moving but her voice was not heard. Eli thought she was drunk <sup>14</sup> and said to her, "How long are you going to stay drunk? Put away your wine."

<sup>15</sup> "Not so, my lord," Hannah replied, "I am a woman who is deeply troubled. I have not been drinking wine or beer; I was pouring out my soul to the LORD. <sup>16</sup> Do not take your servant for a wicked woman; I have been praying here out of my great anguish and grief."

<sup>17</sup> Eli answered, "Go in peace, and may the God of Israel grant you what you have asked of him."

<sup>18</sup> She said, "May your servant find favor in your eyes." Then she went her way and ate something, and her face was no longer downcast.

<sup>19</sup> Early the next morning they arose and worshiped 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."

■ 1 Samuel 1:1-20

It was a time in Israel when “*everyone did what was right in their own eyes.*”<sup>1</sup>

It was a time when a strongman who was sworn not to cut his hair nor drink from the fruit of the vine was shorn by his enemies, and was cast down in disgrace. It was a time when Levites, priests of the living God, kept concubines and exposed them to rape, murder, and dismemberment. When everyone does what is right in their own eyes, we only end up doing what comes naturally—and what comes naturally is not always what is best in humanity.

This isn't to say that everyone in Israel was a selfish relativist. Elkanah, Hannah's husband, is at the very least an outwardly pious man. He goes to Jerusalem every year to fulfill his family duty, and there he receives his dues as a member of the clan of Levi<sup>2</sup>. This is a fact that the text in 1 Samuel hides from us as though ashamed of how far Levites had fallen with Hophni and Phineas fleecing worshippers at the door. Yet even though he is a Levite, we are never really sure of whether Elkanah's religious piety is sincere, but at least he tries to love his family, including his barren wife.

As you may know, barrenness shows up everywhere in the Bible. We may be aware of some of the more prominent barren women like Sarah<sup>3</sup> and Rachel<sup>4</sup> but the land itself is said to be rendered barren upon Israel's disobedience to their covenant with Yahweh. Barrenness, far from being something that could be fixed by in vitro fertilization of the womb or chemical fertilization of the land, was a sign of the tragedy that is the fallenness of the world, a sign of lifelessness and of death. In the Ancient Near East, a

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<sup>1</sup> Jdg 17:6, 18:1, 19:1, 21:25

<sup>2</sup> 1 Chron 6:33-38

<sup>3</sup> Gen 16, 18, 21

<sup>4</sup> Gen 29:31-30:22

barren woman was a worthless woman, a woman whose dignity was stripped by a culture that viewed her as good as dead.

Hannah, unfortunately, is not left alone to suffer quietly. Instead, every year when she and the rest of her family make their way up to Shiloh where the Ark of the Lord was kept, Elkanah's other wife reminds Hannah of what a worthless woman she is. Year after year, we are told, Hannah endures Penninah's torture, and year after year, Hannah becomes so upset that the feast becomes ashes in her mouth. Elkanah loves Hannah, but he's thickheaded, and cannot understand Hannah's pain. No, Elkanah—even though your name means “Creator God”, you are not enough for Hannah in her withering and dying away. Elkanah may love Hannah, but he does not see her, does not remember her, does not *know her*, and therefore is *not* better than ten sons.

To describe how much being barren tore at Hannah's heart, it is worth looking deeper into the Hebrew text. When Hannah weeps at the Temple in Shiloh, it is not the quiet snuffle of a proper lady. Instead, what we read in English as Hannah's “bitter weeping” might be better translated as Hannah's “weeping of weepings”<sup>5</sup>. Hers was the deepest groaning one can do before the Lord, whom she was sure did not see her and had forgotten her. We can almost imagine Hannah laying flat on the ground, her cheek against the dusty floor, tears and mucus running down her face as she spreads herself out to pray. Even for an ancient culture that was used to public displays of grief such as tearing one's clothes and donning sackcloth and ashes, this was shocking behaviour.

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<sup>5</sup> “*uvcoḥ uvcaḥ*”

We may ask ourselves whether we could ever do as Hannah does. First, she disrupts her home life by not playing “happy face” with her husband. Next, she disrupts the family Christmas dinner in Shiloh by leaving abruptly. And now, she disrupts the quiet of the Temple by publicly prostrating herself while crying out to God—an indecorous act by a woman already seen as worthless. But Hannah’s response is *the most faithful response* she could possibly make. And in the places where we are barren in our own lives, to cry out for relief is the most appropriate response as well. Many of us in our bland niceness are not being faithful to God in how we order our emotions, for Christlikeness does not consist of perpetual hugs and smiles, nor does it consist of perpetual tears and sighing. Even more, Christlikeness is not in flat affect. No, Christlikeness has always been in the right emotion for the right circumstance—and when you have suffered as Hannah has suffered, the right response is to scream to God for vindication, for rescue.

Elkanah is sincere but stupid. Peninnah is fertile but cruel. Hannah is barren, but she pours herself out before Yahweh, and so is shown to be faithful in the midst of her barrenness. What sets the prayer of Hannah apart is not only her honesty in wanting to finally be seen and remembered by God, but in how she promises that if her barrenness is cured, her child will take on the Nazirite vow as a sign of lifelong dedication to Yahweh.<sup>6</sup> Hannah’s gain, her blessing, would immediately become God’s blessing to others and not for herself—a microcosm of how the blessing of God on Israel was never for Israel itself, but for the world that God loves. It is here, while Hannah is sprawled on the ground crying

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<sup>6</sup> This stands in deep contrast to the way a previous judge’s mother is told by God that her son will take on these vows. We are accustomed to hearing of how Samson never cut his hair—yet the vow that he lived under was God’s demand upon him.

in the “weeping of weepings”, that she looks for God to see her. For God to remember her. And, in that seeing and remembering, for God to do something new.

Yet Hannah still lives in a blind world, one that cannot see her as anything but a useless, barren woman. Eli, the priest at the door, assumes Hannah’s had too much to drink. Eli only sees a drunken woman, a common occurrence during those feast days.

“No, my lord,” she says. “Please do not discount me as just another daughter of worthlessness.” Even though the world does not see or know Hannah for her real worth, she clings to the hope that God still does. She holds out for God to see her, to remember her, taking steps forward in faithful prayer for God to act in *His* character and prove that He *does* see her, and has never forgotten her at all.

The worst part of suffering is believing that we only suffer in silence and hiddenness, and that our tears and raging mean nothing. So we form support groups, hoping that by sharing experiences with others we might be seen in our agony, and so be able to find solidarity in our affliction. Yet somehow, this alone is never enough, for as much as sharing our pain with a community might be helpful, it does *not* eliminate the trauma of life in a broken world.

What we all want when we are in the midst of grief is to *be seen*. It helps when others can bear witness to our pain, but there is only so much that friends and confidants can do for us as we twist and turn in the grip of something awful. And it is as we twist and turn that we hope for deliverance, for our pain to cease—something that no friend, no matter how wise or well-connected, can ever do for us. Whether we realize it or not, what

we want is for God to bear witness to our pain, to see us in our suffering, to remember us as we are turned inside out.

We often forget that Jesus was not crucified alone, but that two other criminals were executed next to him, one on either side. And in his suffering, one of the criminals asks what we all want to ask of Jesus when we are in pain: “*remember me when you come into your Kingdom.*” I can almost imagine Jesus turning his own blood-smeared face towards the man, and maybe he smiles before saying “*today, you will be with me in Paradise.*”<sup>7</sup> Today. Not tomorrow. Not in ten years. Not when we are older and wiser and have perspective on things. Today, I see you. Today, I remember you. Today, you will be with me in Paradise. This, more than anything else, is what I want to hear from Jesus’ lips myself.

Yet while we wait for relief, we often do not suffer well. Most of us simply want the pain to stop so we can carry on with pain free living. Yet this is where the virtue of Hannah shines through: she does not pray for a child so that she can rub it in Peninnah’s face or curry more favour with Elkanah. She does not pray for a child so that she can feel normal about herself or have a son who can take care of her when she is old. No, she prays for a son who will not be for her, but for God.

More importantly, Hannah’s vision for her son is not simply vindication for her feelings of worthlessness, but for God to do a new thing in a time when corrupt priests stood at the door to the Temple and everyone did what was right in their own eyes. The text tells us that God sees and remembers Hannah, but the truth is, He had never ceased

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<sup>7</sup> Lk 23:42-43

watching over her and had never forgotten her. Yet this is what Hannah felt, and what we feel— desperate, unseen and unknown. Yet God sees. God remembers. And by making fruitful what once was barren, God does a new thing. In time, Hannah has a boy, and when she finally brings the boy to Shiloh she sings this song:

"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.

<sup>4</sup> "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 hunger 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 has them inherit a throne of honour.  
"For the foundations of the earth are the LORD's;  
upon them he has set the world.

<sup>9</sup> He will guard the feet of his saints,  
but the wicked will be silenced in darkness.  
"It is not by strength that one prevails;

<sup>10</sup> 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."

This is where many of us who suffer want to be: singing of the goodness of God, singing in our vindication for having trusted Him, singing for our joy made complete. Yet the feeling of God's absence still clings to us like the stench of a morgue. We, like Hannah, cry out for deliverance, for vindication—but in the silence we are afraid that God has forgotten us, and does not watch over me. Yet it is there, in that silence, as heart-wrenching as it can be, that we must choose to remember God ourselves; to throw ourselves down before Him and see and remember Him for ourselves; to remember that His eye is on the sparrow, the smallest of birds, and thus His eye is on me.

With what little strength I have, I ask this: that my barrenness not be removed for my comfort or present enjoyment, but for the sake of some ongoing redemption that I cannot yet see. Let my suffering be meaningful. Let my pain be redeemed. See me, Lord. Remember me, Lord. Heal my barrenness, and through it, do a new thing.

Where do you feel barren? How do you hope God will meet you in that barrenness?