

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior,  
Jesus Christ, amen.

The story of Hannah is very personal to me. I was born the baby of our family. I had 4 older sisters, the youngest was 10 years old when I was born. My parents really wanted a boy to finish off their family, but every time a new baby came along it was another girl. After the fourth girl they must have been resigned to an all-girl family because they named my youngest sister, most of you know her as Jr, but her full name is Harol-dene Jr. My dad's name was Harold and they must have figured Jr would be the closest they were going to get to a namesake. From the time I was old enough to understand language I can remember my mother telling me how she prayed and prayed for a baby boy. She even told me that she bargained with God. She promised God if He would give her a son, she would dedicate him to serving God. When I was young, I had no idea who Hannah was, but when I began reading the Bible and read Hannah's story it sounded just like what my mom told me as she held me on her lap as a toddler. For her part, she did make sure I was brought up in the Church and even in our darkest time, when my dad was sick and bed ridden, she still made sure I got to Confirmation classes. My religious education was that important to her. I'm really glad she didn't follow the rest of Hannah's story and just drop me off at the Church and let them raise me, like Hannah did with her son, Samuel...

So, why was Hannah so special that God heard her prayer and used God's almighty powers to circumvent the natural laws of biology, in this case to open the womb of a woman who was incapable of bearing a child? To answer this question, we first need to look at the context of the Hannah story. Hannah lived about midway between God calling Abraham out of the land of Ur and the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem. That places this story at about 1000 BC. Moses had already led the Hebrew people for 40 years through the wilderness. His successor, Joshua, had led the armies of the Israelites into the promised land, killing or throwing out all the prior inhabitants. The people of God at that time were a very loose confederation of tribes with no central government or national identity. When trouble arose, God would raise up a leader to handle the situation. These leaders were called Judges and you can read about all of them in the Book called, Judges. The trouble with this system was that the people showed great faith during the time when a Judge was busy protecting or defending them against their enemy, but as soon as there was a period of peace and prosperity, they would turn away from God and do as they pleased. Every time they turned away, God would remove His divine protection and the natural consequences of their actions would result in being overrun by their opponent. This went on and on, in what seemed like an endless cycle. Finally, the people asked God for a King like other Nations had. They thought a strong king would always protect them from their enemies.

Of course, this grieved God. Of course, this offended God. Of course, God answered their prayers. Enter Elkanah and his wife Hannah. Elkanah had 2 wives. His second wife had given birth to sons and daughters and never let an opportunity pass by without rubbing it in to childless Hannah. In the Bible there's several stories of childless women being given the miraculous gift of a child. Sarah, Abraham's wife; Elizabeth, mother of John the Baptist, and Mary, Jesus' mother, were all chosen by God to give birth to sons' who would go on to do God's will. In the case of Hannah, her son Samuel, would grow up to be the one to anoint both King Saul and later King David when David was still a young shepherd boy.

So, here's the situation; God wants to answer the peoples' prayers for a king to lead them, even though God knows they would be much better off repenting and trusting in God as their king. At the same time God hears Hannah's prayers and feels her anguish over being childless. Bible stories like these and my own personal experience tells me, God never causes bad things to happen, but God can and does use bad things to bring about God's desired outcome. It's a pattern repeated over and over through out the Bible. So, God saw Hannah and her faithfulness. God heard her prayer and the incredible promise she was willing to make, offering her son as God's servant. Hannah named her son Samuel, a name that meant God had heard and answered her prayer. When her son was old enough, Hannah did as she had promised. She took him to Eli the high priest to

raise in the temple, teaching him to serve and obey God. Later, God would call the boy Samuel raising him up to be both the last judge of Israel and the first prophet (or spokesperson) for God. Samuel would be the one to anoint the first two kings of Israel who were able to bring the loose federation of the tribes of Israel together and make a great nation, strong and secure. All this was accomplished because of the powerful faith of one woman who trusted God to turn her fortunes around and to answer her prayer.

Hannah's story is an important one, even if it isn't a particularly well known today. There are several things that we can learn from this woman of God and her faithfulness. Because, truth be told, we live in a time like the one at the end of the book of Judges, with everyone doing what was right in their own eyes. Hannah felt worthless and for good reason. Her society only valued women who produced sons. Despite her feelings of worthlessness, she believed God did not see her as worthless. She trusted God to see her value and God's love for her. Our world is marred by greed and selfishness. Sin is rampant. In the greater culture, people can't even agree on what's right and wrong. People are turning away from God more than any time in my life. So many lives are treated as being worthless today. Those of us who still trust in God are praying for God to do something. Do anything to save us from ourselves!

As God's people, we are called to be like Hannah during this time. We're called to continue to trust in God's goodness and God's grace. We're called, like Hannah, to implore, to beg, to bargain, to plead for what we most need and what we most desire. This pleases God because it demonstrates our faith in God's willingness and God's ability to save us. The Bible raises Hannah's life and story as an example for us today. We can still lay our needs out plainly before God in prayer. Because of stories like Hannah's we learn to trust that God hears our prayer and will use our need, wants, and desires to fulfill God's will. Hannah simply and straightforwardly expressed her need to God. In doing so, she recognized that wholeness in her life was far beyond the things she could control. Hannah knew her help rested entirely in the hands of a loving God who felt her pain and her anguish. God was and still is compassionate and able to help those who trust in God's goodness. What Good News for us today! Roughly 3000 years after Hannah prayed for a son, we're still reading about her and learning from her, how to persist in prayer and how God uses what we perceive as a horrible situation to bring about a blessing and for God's perfect will to be accomplished.

I don't know if my mother ever read Hannah's story, but I'm certainly glad she was also persistent in her prayers for a son. Even though I spent a good part of my adult life running away from the claim God had on my life, God never gave up on me. I know God will do the same for you. God sees the shape our world is in

today and my best guess is we still cause God lots of grief and frustration. In the days before King Saul and David, God used individuals to bring about the changes that were needed. After the failure of the Kings, God knew there was only one way to put an end to this problem of sin. God would have to come down here and be the King we needed and longed for. That's exactly what God did when He became incarnate and lived among us as an actual human being. Any other human king could never do. Only a perfect, sinless person could fulfill God's perfect will and be the perfect King for every tribe, nation, and people. Once a year we recognize the Kingship of Christ on Christ the King Sunday. This son, who God gave to a virgin named Mary, grew up to be not just our savior, not just a good example or a great teacher. Through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, He became our King of Kings and Lord of Lords, forever.

May Christ always be our King! May all of God's people, like Hannah, turn to God in prayer with our most urgent needs and desires. May God continue to listen to God's people and continue to bless us with His powerful and mighty, divine acts of grace and mercy. Just as Hannah trusted God and God answered her fervent prayers, may you trust in God's love for you, amen.