

## 12 Keys to Spiritual Maturity:

### Letting go of Everything (#4)

By [Derek Thomas](#)

#### 1 Samuel 1

The wonderful thing about the Old Testament is that it stops to reflect on how the doctrines of grace impinge upon the lives of people, and not just "important" people, but ordinary people. In that sense, the Old Testament seems to have time to pause, to linger on the effect of God's truths upon the lives of people in a way that the New Testament does not. I am convinced that all the major truths of Scripture are reflected biographically in the lives of people that God weaves into the Scriptures to provide "real life examples" of how the truths of Scripture are meant to impact upon us. As we continue to reflect on some of the marks of spiritual maturity, there is something in the life of Hannah as recorded in the first chapter of 1 Samuel that is really quite beautiful and extraordinary. I want us this evening to look at something that emerges in the life of this godly woman Hannah. In the midst of the most testing circumstances, Hannah prays one of the most exquisite prayers recorded anywhere in the Scriptures.

It's important for us to realize that there are other issues taking place in this chapter, issues which — if we were studying the entire book, would be important to point out. For this study, we will limit ourselves to some particular issues that have to do with our theme of spiritual maturity. In order to do that, we will have to take a look at some other people, in particular, her husband Elkanah, a woman called Peninnah —a woman that Hannah may well have thought of as an overly-fertile, mouthy, thorn-in-the-flesh who just happens to be Elkanah's *second* wife and with whom Hannah has to share her personal space. And then there's Eli the priest of Shiloh.

It's a deliciously told story that has all the ingredients of a "soap-opera" but in the midst of it emerges something truly surprising. There is a key here to grasp and use. It unlocks the door to meekness, self-effacement and usefulness.

Let me tell the story using three ideas that emerge in it:

**1. God's people can find themselves in testing circumstances through no particular fault of their own**

That's not a very profound thing to say, I realize that; but, it needs saying and needs repeating.

Let's look at this man, Elkanah, first of all. He is a man of some standing (his roots as recorded in the opening verse are impressive) and moderate wealth (if your wondering where that can be seen in the text you're obviously single! Try supporting one wife and then multiply that figure by 2 and you will get the idea!). But more importantly, though he worshiped God and seemed quite sincere in doing so, his life was seriously compromised. Year after year he goes to Shiloh to sacrifice (v. 3 (cf. vv. 19, 21). This is *before* the days of the temple in Jerusalem. It was at Shiloh that the Tabernacle, the "Tent of Meeting," was set up after the days of the conquest. And it is here that Elkanah goes on an annual basis to sacrifice. Later in the chapter, you find him speaking to Hannah in what sounds like very pious language: "do what seems best to you (don't read that as though he didn't much care!) ... only may the Lord make good his word" (v. 23).

But, Elkanah has two wives! His obedience was selective. True, it wasn't unusual for folk, godly folk, in those days to overlook the command of God in Genesis. This was not the pattern intended. It was evidence of the hardness of his heart. It was something God permitted in those days of the church's infancy: there was no penalty, no theocratic discipline. But, to cite Paul, "from the beginning it was not so."

What this says is that sin remains a powerful thing in the hearts of those who know and love God. Elkanah's era was the one that followed the period of the Judges when, to cite the recurring phrase that summarizes that era, "everyone did that which was right in their eyes." And this act was to mar his life as it had the lives of Abraham and Jacob, and as it would the life of Solomon.

We aren't told the details, and therefore we will have to conjecture a little. Hannah is the one that Elkanah loved (see what verse 5 says about that) and we may assume that she was the one he had married first. But her barrenness had "forced" Elkanah to take another wife, Penninah. Perhaps, Hannah is in middle age, and he sees this young pretty thing flashing her eyes at him. Despite the inconvenience that he was already married, for Penninah there was the prospect of a pretty good standard of living under his roof. You may ask what possessed her to want to enter this relationship, but things like this happen without much forethought. For a woman in these times, life could get a whole lot more difficult than this. So, he pays the dowry price, and sets up home with her. Perhaps, he brings her into his own home, under the same roof as Hannah! Perhaps they had two "roofs." That would certainly have made things a little easier for everybody. You have to imagine the pain Hannah feels. Nights spent alone and awake must have been filled with tears.

Of course, polygamy isn't happening on this scale today, but adultery is! You have another woman "on the side." There may not be marriage, but the multi-

partner relationships are as common as ever. There are situations where the wife knows about her husband's unfaithfulness, feels resentful about it, but is unwilling or maybe unable to do anything about it without real pain and hurt to herself and her children and the future of all of them. And perhaps she fears reprisals: abuse, vengeance, a way of life that isn't as materially comfortable as the one she now has. So she puts up with it. And Hannah finds herself in circumstances that she longed were different than they are. But she is trapped.

It's a mess, isn't it? It was in Solomon's life and David's life, as it had been in the lives of the Patriarchs. The pain and hurt between the women; the problems among the children. In Solomon's time, it would lead to the division of the kingdom in the end.

There's a principle here: not to be conformed to this world's agenda, or scale of values. Just because others are doing it gives no excuse for us to behave in a similar fashion.

And then there's Peninnah! She's a miserable little thing. Well, to be fair, she too is in a situation she might not have chosen to be in; but, she makes the most of it. It's difficult to be too sympathetic to this girl. It's the way she rubs it in, "irritating" Hannah as verse 6 suggests.

And there's a further problem. Hannah cannot have children! God has closed her womb (v.6). She is barren. Worse, Peninnah is having children by the calendar! Every year there's another one! Verse 4 mentions "sons and daughters!" And Peninnah's aggravation has sent Hannah into despair. She stops eating. She cries a lot. She spends a lot of time alone, listening to the voices of Peninnah's children playing in the distance. It makes her sick to the stomach!

You think this doesn't happen today? A woman in her forties and her husband sees a young thing wearing something provocative and he leaves her, has an affair, and children are born and the cycle is the same.

There are times when it's hard to cope! (note the language of weeping and despair in verses 7, 10, 15 and 18). Imagine being in this situation! And there will be Christians who will say to you: "It can't be right that you feel like this!" It's the voice of the pit making you feel worse than you did before! There are situations that are terrible and that others can make worse. They will persecute and torment and exploit. You are following the Savior and life turns sour.

Nor is Hannah by any means the first.

Sarah, Abraham's wife—the one he loved the most—was barren for the greater part of the story of Abraham's life. Isaac isn't born until Abraham is a hundred years old, and Sarah has to endure the mocking of Hagar in much the same way as Hannah has had to endure Peninnah's.

And Rebekah, Isaac's wife is barren for the first 20 years of their marriage.

And then there's poor Rachel. She has another woman, Leah, to contend with who has had four children already (and there were three more to come later). Rachel is exasperated and hands over her servant girl Bilhah to Jacob by whom there were two children; and then she gave another servant girl of her's, Zilpah to Jacob by whom there were another two children.

And you think *you* have problems!

## **2. In every difficult circumstance there is grace to help in time of need**

What I want us to see is that God helps Hannah in this situation. Two things in particular come to the surface.

### **i. *She knew God!***

Trusting the God of Israel gave her a framework in which she could handle this situation without coming apart at the seams. It may not sound a very profound thing to say, but that would be a mistake. Knowing God in a personal way gives us stability in times of stress. Knowing God as our heavenly father encourages us to take every situation to him and "talk it through." It encourages trust in circumstances that seem to indicate trouble. Knowing God means sharing a confidence that everything works out according to a plan and purpose that is beneficent. This is the beginning of her spiritual maturity. It helped her keep her head. Rudyard Kipling's poem, *If*, says what I want to say here.

*If you can keep your head when all around you they are losing theirs, then you will be a man!"*

### **ii. *She was willing to accept her situation selflessly.***

The lack of bitterness and revenge in her response is breathtaking! She might have responded with a prayer that goes something like this:

"Lord teach her a lesson!"

"I'm tired of her patronizing, biting words!"

"Give me a child and I will show her what boasting is all about!"

Of course, Kipling was thoroughly Edwardian and he said, "you will be a man," but we can say "you will be a woman" and still retain the idea he meant to convey. Knowing God helps us keep our heads when life turns sour.

You think Christians can't pray like that?

And not only did she refuse to become catty with Penninah; she also refused to take things out on her husband. She was loyal to her husband even when we might forgive her for spelling out what a cad he had been.

What accounts for this response? The answer seems to be that she had taken her bitterness, what there must have been of it, to the Lord and seen it dissolve in His presence. In her submissive, quiet way she had shown herself to be more mature than her husband! One or two things might have helped her: Elkanah loved Hannah and there were times when that showed itself in very tangible ways. Verse 5 tells us that Elkanah gives Hannah a special portion of the sacrifice because he loved her very much (though there is doubt about this reading of the text). And Elkanah does seem to be sensitive to her pain. "Why are you weeping?" he asks at one point (v.8). You might be cynical and say, "you should know!" But perhaps, and I think it is, it's Elkanah being thoughtful.

Grace can be found in the most difficult circumstances of we are prepared to look for it.

### **3. The grace that helps forges in her a key to spiritual maturity: complete consecration**

What Hannah didn't know, and what none of us know either about our lives, is that God was going to use her to bring forth an important person in the scheme of things—Samuel. Hannah was a conduit in the purposes of God for Israel. She did not know that, but it was no less true because of that.

We have to ask ourselves, are we prepared to be an instrument in God's hand, no matter how painful that be for us? Pain is always accompanied by strength to bear it. When we are without strength God steps in and does something to advance his purposes and help us in the process. It takes great God-centeredness to see that, and believe that. You will need to have your heads above the clouds beholding the Lord Jesus sitting at God's right hand to be as stable as Hannah is here.

It's the prayer she utters that is most remarkable. It is at one of those visits to Shiloh. She has finished eating, and she begins to pray to the Lord. What she says, in effect is this: "You give me a son, and I will give him back to You" (v.11). I think this is one of the most remarkable prayers in the whole Bible! Eli, the priest, saw her lips move but heard no sound and concluded that she was drunk, and quickly rebuked her!

I think it outshines any of the great prayers that we find. It's a lesson in

consecration, self-effacement, in forgiveness. Its saying: whatever you are pleased to give to me, I am going to use it for your kingdom. That could be a job, or our health, or a marriage partner. Or it could be our money!

George Matteson's hymn comes to mind:

*O love that wilt not let me go  
I rest my weary soul in Thee  
I give Thee back the life I owe...*

So does the hymn,  
*All to Jesus I Surrender  
All to Him I freely Give...*

And then, her life changes! Just when hope seems gone, God steps in and she has a son, Samuel. Things don't always go on as they might appear to do.

She went to the means of grace and touched omnipotence.

What is that you most desire? And are you prepared to hand it over to God for Him to use in whatever seems best to Him?

It is a key to spiritual maturity. What a tough key it is!

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