

A Sermon  
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Grace Baptist Church  
Bryans Road, Maryland  
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## **Give It Back to God**

1 Samuel 1:21-28

If you were to start at the very beginning of 1 Samuel and read up to today's text, you might think you've tuned into an episode of "Real Housewives of Ramah." The primary players are Elkanah, the kind and well-intentioned husband, along with his two wives, Hannah and Peninnah. Though things haven't escalated to the point of name calling, table flipping, or hair pulling, there's clearly tension between the two women. It's not about financial disputes, alcohol abuse, or personal betrayal. In this case, it's about motherhood. Not who's a better mom, Hannah or Peninnah, but the fact that one is a mom and the other isn't. The drama in this story is stated simply and clearly at the end of verse 2: "Peninnah had children, but Hannah had none."

In that day and time, being childless was bad news. Children were viewed as a source of strength and a sign of blessing. So to be in the opposite state, barrenness, was perceived as a grave misfortune, or perhaps even worse, an indication of God's disapproval or punishment. Like many women in that situation, Hannah may have felt like one of her key aims in life had been missed. She was unable to fulfill the primary expectation of her social role. No children meant no descendants, no next generation, no future.

This may help explain why Peninnah is also in the family picture. In a period when monogamy wasn't yet established as the only acceptable practice, it's possible that Elkanah took Peninnah as a second wife because she was able to give him children, and thus heirs. Even the wives' names reveal something about their respective places in the story. "Hannah" means "charming" or "attractive," indicating her role as the wife Elkanah loves. "Peninnah" means "fertile" or "prolific," indicating her role as a childbearer.

But Hannah wants to be more than just charming and attractive. She also wants to be a mother. And this longing to bear children, as well as the pain of not being able to, rise in intensity at certain times and places. One of those occasions is the pilgrimage to the sanctuary at Shiloh. Each year, Elkanah packs up his clan and makes the journey as a special act of devotion. He looks forward to it as a time for family worship and sacrifice. But Hannah sees it as more of a duty than an opportunity, an annual moment when the burden of childlessness feels even heavier. When Elkanah thinks of Shiloh, he thinks of family bonding time. But when Hannah thinks of Shiloh, she thinks of how bad it is not to be a mother.

What's worse, Peninnah uses Shiloh as an opportunity to taunt Hannah, to take jabs at her emotions and her broken state. When they pass out the meat used in the sacrifice, compassionless Peninnah never misses an opportunity to remind Hannah that she and her sons and daughters get a large portion, while Hannah gets her one portion. More children equals more meat, while no children equals just a little bit of meat. Bless his heart, Elkanah tries to be a caring husband and gives Hannah a double portion of the meat as an expression of his love for her. But this only ends up making Hannah feel worse about being childless. What he can't accomplish with the extra meat, Elkanah tries to do with words.

"Why are you crying?" he asks Hannah. "Don't be sad. Isn't my love worth more to you than ten sons?"

Hannah's answer is a simple, "No." Well, Elkanah meant well. He should at least get some good husband points for trying to be compassionate and supportive. But the way he puts it makes himself, not Hannah's plight, the central focus. He's still not as in tune as he needs to be with Hannah's heartache. Maybe he should have said something more like, "Hannah, don't cry. Don't you know that you yourself are worth more to me than ten sons?" That might have worked better.

After that unsuccessful conversation with her husband, Hannah decides that the best conversation to have is with God. The writer says, "Hannah rose and presented herself to the Lord" (v. 9a). It was one of those deep and desperate prayers, the kind where she would pause every few words to wipe the tears from her cheeks. Eli, the priest serving in the sanctuary, mistook Hannah's behavior for drunkenness, and stepped in to deal with this apparent violation of worship decorum.

Bishop Noah Moore, Jr. tells of a woman who came to the altar during one of his congregation's worship services. The woman's clothes were torn. Her hair wasn't combed and her eyes were red and bloodshot. Assuming her to be drunk, he said to her, "Daughter, you know better than to come to church drunk like this." She said, "Pastor, please let me pray. You don't understand. I had to fight my husband in order to get out of the house to come to church and I will have to fight to get back in. But I had to come here this morning to get the strength to make it another week."<sup>1</sup>

As for this woman, so for Hannah. There are indeed spirits involved in this situation, but these are the nonalcoholic kind. The only thing being poured out before God is Hannah's soul. In fact, she describes herself as a "deeply troubled" woman. The phrase could also be translated as "hard, obstinate or stubborn of spirit." And that's the way she prays. She keeps on petitioning heaven for a child. At this point, all she can do is take her empty womb and her desperate heart, and lay them before God.

When it looks like death has triumphed over life, and despair has conquered hope, there's no better place to be than on our knees before the Lord. After all, that's who the Lord is, the God of salvation. And that's why the books of Samuel begin with a story of salvation, a story of how new life comes out of barrenness and despair is transformed into thanksgiving and praise. By the time Hannah leaves the sanctuary at Shiloh, she has regained both her appetite and her hope. After the family returns home, Elkanah and Hannah do what husbands and wives do to make babies. And hallelujah, God creates one. "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" (v. 20).

Hannah asked, and God gave. Remember that by doing so, God wasn't just giving a child to one barren woman. He was also giving a future king to his people. In addition to being a story about the transformation of Hannah and her future, this is also a story about the transformation of Israel and its future. The larger narrative here is Israel's transition from being a league of tribes under the leadership of judges to being a people under the rule of a king. The first king was Saul, but God eventually replaced him with Samuel. So when Hannah gets the child she prayed for, Israel gets the king, and the future, that God has promised.

Notice that Hannah knows how to give credit where credit is due. So when the right time comes, she and the family return to Shiloh for a service of dedication. "Remember me?" Hannah says to Eli. "I'm the woman you accused of having one too many glasses of wine

before coming to the Lord's house. But when I left worship that day, you were confident that God would respond to my fervent petition. Well, here in my arms is the answer to that prayer." Hannah goes on to say, "Now I give him to the Lord. For his whole life he will be given over to the Lord" (v. 28).

Hannah asked. God gave. Now Hannah gives back. When it comes to God's grace, that's the way it should work. For you see, like Hannah, we worship and serve the God who saves. The God who takes what looks like an end and transforms it into a new beginning that opens the way into a different future. And the good news is that this God who forms life where there's barrenness is still at work to create new possibilities of grace in our lives and in the world.

These gifts of God's grace can take many forms. A child. An act of healing. A period of comfort and encouragement. A relationship restored. A financial or material blessing. A job. A skill or talent. An opportunity for education or training. A particular calling. A specific ministry or mission. An opening for peace. An injustice set right. And most of all, the unmerited gift of forgiveness and new life through Christ. To believe in God's grace is to believe that the God who governs the affairs of the world remembers our plight and raises up hope where we see only impossibilities.

In whatever ways God's grace brings new life to us, we need to claim it and receive it, and most of all, give it back. Not in the sense that we don't want it or need it, but in the sense that it's not really our doing to begin with. It's God's doing, and God's purposes, that are in motion. We're just stewards, entrusted with the various forms of his grace. So we dare not try to hold them too tightly or cling to them as if they're our property, our possession. Hannah prayed fervently and faithfully for a child, and when the act of grace named Samuel was given to her, she held him. But she held him lightly. She didn't treat him as if he belonged to her, but to God. Hannah both received Samuel from the Lord and gave him to the Lord.

That's the way we're supposed to handle God's grace. For example, if you've received healing from God, give it back to God by using your renewed health and strength to serve and care for others, especially those who are sick. If you've experienced reconciliation and restoration in some way in your life, give it back to God by being a peacemaker in the lives of others and in the turmoil of the world. If you've received some type of material or financial blessing from God, whether great or small, give it back to God by generously using it to bless and enrich the lives of others, especially the poor. If you've been graced by God with a particular talent, passion, or calling, give it back to God by devoting it to the work of God's kingdom rather than just the pursuit of your own personal kingdom. If you've been brought by God's compassion and mercy through a dark, painful, and hopeless time in your life, give that story of deliverance back to God by sharing your experience with others and helping them find the hope of life where it looks like there's only the power of death.

By coming and participating in congregational worship today, you're refusing to treat God's gifts like they're your personal property or your own accomplishment, since that only sucks the life-giving power out of them. Instead, your presence here shows that you want to handle God's grace gratefully and hold it lightly. By joining together in worship, you're taking the grace of God in Christ and returning it to God, dedicating it to God, in the form of praise and thanks. You're doing here at this Shiloh, in this sanctuary, on this Sunday, what you're called to do in between Sundays, namely, to take the grace of God and give it back into his service.

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<sup>1</sup> Zan W. Holmes, Jr., "When the Odds Are Against Us," in *When Trouble Comes* (Lima: CSS, 1996).