

Day 1 From Sadness to Singing

“For this child I prayed, and the Lord has granted me my petition which I asked of Him” (1 Samuel 1:27).

We all have an image of how a family of believers, the local church, or even the church as a whole should look. We want church members to be eager to study the Word of God, like those in Berea (Acts 17:11), with an active prayer life and involvement in mission. Of course, a living and spiritually powerful church is made up of consecrated families, families that study the Word of God and make a daily habit of praying to and praising Him. I invite you to go in your mind to the time of the judges. It was one of the most troubling periods in the history of the people of Israel. The moral and spiritual deterioration is obvious; this period can be called the Dark Ages of the Old Testament.

The first two chapters of the book of 1 Samuel present the real life, without retouching, of a family of those times. Elkanah gathers all the members of his family every year and goes to Shiloh, the spiritual and religious centre of Israel, “to worship and sacrifice to the Lord (1 Samuel 1:3). Seeing the whole family heading to the place of public worship was something to be appreciated in those days, as it is today.

Instead, the reality beyond the appearance was different. According to the customs then, if a family did not have children, some would take a second wife. All such examples in the Bible speak of the negative consequences of such a wrong step, and Elkanah’s case is no exception.

A Family and a Nation in Crisis

The narrator presents the tense relationships within this family. Exactly when they most needed a joyful attitude for their worship to become a real heartfelt experience, everything turned to bitterness, strife, and disappointment. Elkanah had two wives—Peninnah and Hannah—and there was much tension between the two of them. Even at the place of worship, Peninnah continued to denigrate Hannah

because Hannah was childless in words that hurt her soul (1 Samuel 1:6). The only thing Hannah could do was to withdraw from the celebration in tears. A family in spiritual and relational crisis actually showed what was happening at that time on a different scale, at the level of the whole nation.

Pilgrims from all over the country came to Shiloh for one reason—to worship. Those there who should have led all the people in the holy act of worship “did not know the Lord” (1 Samuel 2:12). This is the main reason for the moral and spiritual crisis that the people of Israel were experiencing. Compromise led to conflict and chaos. External enemies attacked the nation (1 Samuel 4-7), and corruption prevailed within. The sons of Eli, the high priest, were guilty of a great sin because they “abhorred the offering of the Lord” (1 Samuel 2:17).

From this sad story, we see that the devil’s strategy is to ruin God’s children. When worship is absent or becomes a failure at a personal, family, or church level, the devil’s victory is assured. For this reason, “the word of the Lord was rare in those days; there was no widespread revelation” (1 Samuel 3:1). Like Hannah, who could not have children, Israel had become a fruitless people, a barren and fruitless land.

God Still Works

The strongest proof that God does not give up on us is the book of Judges, the books of Samuel, the entire Bible, and especially the cross at Golgotha. God is working, but He chooses people to carry out His plans.

He chose Hannah, an ordinary woman who was not a prophet like Deborah or Hulda, but who had a spiritual sensitivity and fear of God. Her name appears on the pages of the Holy Scriptures along with the great men of faith for the simple reason that she prayed. As a

result of her prayer, the history of the people of Israel turned and took a new direction. If she had not prayed, would we be talking today about Samuel, the prophet and judge, whose leadership resulted in real moral and spiritual reform? He is the one who ensured the transition from the period of the judges to the monarchy. He wept for Saul, but he had the privilege of anointing David, a man “after His own heart” (1 Samuel 13:14), as king.

Hannah longed to become a mother, and the lack of children was a shame in her culture, a sign of divine displeasure. Little by little, however, this dream of hers died and had become the object of Peninnah’s mockery. This time, though, when Peninnah mocked her, Hannah did something completely unusual. She rose from the table, not to mourn in solitude, but to carry the burden of her soul before God in prayer. The expression repeated many times regarding this event is, “before the Lord” (1 Samuel 1:12). “Before the Lord” she prays and cries; she makes a promise; here, she stays for a long time, and maybe she would have stayed longer if she had not been interrupted by Eli, the high priest.

This expression is one consecrated in the Old Testament; the worship had to take place before the Lord. God and not man should be in the centre of worship. What a need we have today of such a worship, in which singing, praying, preaching, or any other element of worship is done to the Lord and not for other people.

Hannah asked God for a child, and the reason she asked for this was clearly expressed. It was not for the mockery to cease or to have the shame of infertility removed, but to give God a gift, the most precious gift, a child. Hannah knows that a true relationship with God, like any relationship, develops not only by asking but also by giving. This is why her prayer is unique in the Bible and becomes a vow (1 Samuel 1:11). Hannah’s gift, just like Mary’s gift (John 12:1-8), is so precious because it is a gift of sacrifice. She promises and fulfils it with all her heart.

A Promise Before Owning

Staying “before the Lord,” Hannah makes a promise to God that she will return the child even before having him. A vow is an initiative of the worshipper it is an act of worship. During the Old Testament period, most of the elements of public worship were conditioned by the presence of priests. One could not offer a sacrifice without the intercession of the priests.

But the promise, or the vow, was then and continues to be today something done in direct relationship with God, without the intercession of any person. True worship costs. It costs time, preparation, offerings, and tithe. David said he could not bring God “a sacrifice that would cost him nothing” (2 Samuel 24:24). But, most of all, worship does not cost us, it costs God, by giving His Son. The One who first promised an offering is not us, but God Himself (Genesis 3:15). Worship without offering is not worship!

Hannah’s promise is the promise of faith and love. Ellen White tells us that in those times, “such a prayer could rarely be seen. Eli’s reaction is obvious in this regard” (1 Samuel 1:14). I believe that on her behalf, God could say the words: “O woman, great is your faith!” (Matthew 15:28).

Hannah promised that the child would be “consecrated to the Lord” (1 Samuel 1:11).

In special words, Ellen White expresses Hannah’s faith, love, and consistency: “When separated from her child, the faithful mother’s solicitude did not cease. Every day he was the subject of her prayers. Every year she made, with her own hands, a robe of service for him; and as she went up with her husband to worship at Shiloh, she gave the child this reminder of her love.”¹ Hannah not only makes promises to God, but she also keeps her word! (1 Samuel 1:26, 27).

Hope For Difficult Times

There are many precious truths that we can learn from Hannah’s example. We can see how God can use the negative experiences in our lives to create something great. He can use the

1 Ellen G. White, *Christian Education*, p. 214.

most painful trials to teach us what trusting in Him means.

Hannah learned to trust God in all those things that were beyond her power to control. Now, as I write down these thoughts (2 April, 2020), almost the whole world is in quarantine, worried about what could come next. The fear of contamination and of what will happen tomorrow has covered all humanity. For Hannah, suffering and the trial she was going through was a call to prayer and trust in God. She prayed, and when she left the place of prayer, “her face was no longer sad” (1 Samuel 1:18). On her face there were no more tears, but a smile of joy. Through trust and hope before the Lord at Shiloh, Hannah found peace even before receiving an answer to her prayer. Imagine Elkanah’s home the day Hannah saw the divine intervention and the answer to her prayer in her life—when Samuel was born!

When we come “before the Lord” through prayer, we recognise His sovereignty; nothing is out of His control. There is hope for times of crisis in the family, in the church, and in the whole world. We have a God who takes care of and wants to work for those who trust Him. Hannah’s song (1 Samuel 2:1-11) talks about this. When you see God’s intervention, you cannot stop singing!

Questions:

1. If a single prayer could change the history of a nation through God’s intervention, what could happen today if we pray?
2. Standing “before the Lord,” what are the things we promise, personally, in the family or as a church?
3. Are there ways through which we can also express our hope and trust in God today?
4. Why do you think Hannah was able to fulfil her vow and bring her precious offering when she realised the corrupt spiritual condition of religious leaders at that time?

I Promise

To **SET APART** the first moments of each day to commune with the Lord through **PRAYER**, the **STUDY** of the Bible, Spirit of Prophecy and the Sabbath School lesson, and in **FAMILY WORSHIP**.

Children's Story: Johnny's Faithful Prayer

“Assuredly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child, will by no means enter it” (Mark 10:15).

Jesus loves children in a special way, and He always likes to answer their simple, honest prayers. There is a true story about a low-income family going through a serious financial crisis and struggling for their daily needs. The father had lost his job shortly before winter, and he had no money to cover the needs of his family. His wife and two young children did not complain, even as the amount of food became much less each day. The mother would cook bread from the little flour they had left, and they rarely had anything else other than that on the table, until one morning, when she sadly announced that she had used the last flour to cook that day's bread. With a worried expression, the father told her that in a few days they would also run out of wood to set the fire in the stove, and he was concerned because they expected the winter's low temperatures to last a few more weeks.

Little Johnny, who was just 4 years old, looked at his parents' worried faces and understood that the situation was serious. When his father called him and Sarah, his little sister, who was only 2, to come to the evening family worship, Johnny asked if he could say the prayer. “Dear Jesus,” he prayed, “thank You for taking care of us! Please send Daddy some wood for the fire, some flour for Mummy to cook, and ...” after he paused a few seconds, he added, “... and two bananas for Sarah and me. Amen!”

When his mother put him to bed that evening, he told her: “I can't wait to get Jesus' gifts!” His mother smiled as she kissed him good night, wishing she had his strong faith and confidence.

The next morning, the father decided to go to a friend's house to ask him to lend him some money for the family's needs. But when he walked out the door, he saw in front of the

house a basket containing some chopped wood, and on the doorstep there was another big package. He immediately called his wife to tell her the great news. Johnny, who had already woken up and was feeling hungry, as he had gone to bed the night before without eating anything, ran outside in a hurry. He didn't even blink as his mother opened up the package and pulled out a big bag of potatoes and another bag filled with white flour.

When she pushed the empty box away, Johnny looked at her, and with eyes full of hope, he said: “Mummy, can you please check one more time for our bananas?” His mother's heart melted, and she felt like crying when she realised his faithful expectation. “I'm sorry,” she said as she hugged him, “there is nothing else in the box, Johnny.” “It's OK,” Johnny replied. “Maybe He will send another angel later with the bananas.”

But as the mother went into the kitchen to pour the flour into the flour box, she found hidden inside the flour two—yes, exactly two—bananas. They had been put inside the flour so the potatoes could not smash them. With tears in her eyes, Mother called little Johnny and Sarah and gave them their much-awaited bananas! “I told you, Mummy,” Johnny said with a sparkle in his eyes. “I knew Jesus hears all our prayers. He just has unique ways to answer them!”

Questions:

1. Why do you think children are special to Jesus?
2. Can we trust God even when He answers our prayers different than we expect?
3. Do you have an experience when God answered your prayer? Can you share it with the group?