

FROM BARRENNESS TO BLESSINGS

LaGrave Christian Reformed Church

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I Samuel 1:1-20

A boy wakes up on the morning of his 9th birthday. He bounds out of bed, races down the stairs, and finds his dad tying his tie in the bathroom mirror. “Dad,” he says, “when can I open my presents?” As the dad continues to adjust the knot on his tie, he looks down at his son and replies, “Good things come to those who wait.”

A husband arrives home from work and inquires to his wife. “Honey, I’m famished. When will supper be ready? Is it nearly done?” His wife peers out from kitchen, “Be patient, dear. Good things come to those who wait.”

Some people think that phrase – “Good things come to those who wait” -- is found in the Bible, but it’s not. The principle, however, of waiting for God’s provision is certainly there. By the end of the book of Judges, the nation of Israel is not in good shape. Moral and religious failure abound, and they are regularly feeling the pressure from their enemies, the Philistines. The Israelites need something new, something to transform them – even though they really don’t know what that will be. Change will come through men like Samuel, Saul, and eventually David, but as the saying goes, “Good things come to those who wait” – and that slow, gradual change begins with a barren woman – one who is empty and unable to have children.

Trouble in the Text – *Hannah is barren and misunderstood.*

It all begins with Hannah, who is part of this Ephraimite family. The husband, Elkanah, has a solid family pedigree, but Hannah, his first wife, has her “womb closed by the Lord” (verse 5). In ancient Israel, children were necessary (especially males) as heirs, as well as for labor for agricultural and household duties. To understand Hannah’s predicament is to understand that in the that time and place, fertility was often associated with divine blessing (Psalm 127:3), and infertility was understood to be a divine curse (Job 15:34). While some women today may choose not to have children, such a choice would have been inconceivable back then. In that ancient mindset, having children was nearly the reason for a woman’s existence. But for Hannah, there is no choice; she is barren.

To rub salt into Hannah’s wound is Elkinah’s other wife, Peninnah, who does have children. Now polygamy – having two wives -- was not atypical nor illegal during those times, especially if the first wife was unable to bear children. However, you can imagine the tension this creates in the household. Can you hear the conversation, “I’ve got to run,” Peninnah says to Hannah, “I need to look after the children, you understand, don’t you? Oh wait, you don’t understand since you’re not a mother.” If I were to ask the third graders in my classroom what they would call this type of behavior, they would say, “Mr. Boorsma, she is a bully.” Perhaps there are other words you can think of to describe her snottiness.

While cruel treatment abounds from Peninnah year after year, the same cannot be said of Elkanah. He takes his family to the temple, and when it comes time to sacrifice, he gives a double portion – or some versions say a choice portion – to Hannah. Peninnah’s cruel treatment of Hannah is so great, however, that Hannah won’t even eat, and this is the time where we see the cracks in Elkanah’s perception of the situation. “Please eat,” he says. “Don’t be depressed.

I love you. Don't I mean more to you than ten sons?" He doesn't get it. He simply doesn't understand the severity of Hannah's barrenness. He has a proud past, yet she has no future.

Finally, Hannah has enough and off she goes to the temple to pray, and pray she does – boldly, passionately, out of her deep distress and anguish. Through tears she makes a vow to the Lord as her lips silently speak the words: "Lord Almighty, if you will only look upon your servant's misery and remember me, and not forget your servant, but give me a son, then I will give him back to you for all the days of his life." It was not customary during those days to pray out loud – like I just did -- so this is an unusual sight in the temple. That may be why Eli, the priest, mistakes her prayer for drunkenness, but perhaps a better reason is what was even more uncommon during this time in Israel's history – people coming to the temple to pray sincere, earnest, passionate prayers – like Hannah's as she pours out her heart to God. Whatever the reason, Eli's mistake alludes to his lack of perception as a priest. He, too, doesn't get it.

Trouble in our World – *We are barren and empty at some point in our lives.*

Some might say, given today's medical advances with infertility, that situations like Hannah's deep desperation are not as severe anymore. Most of us know, however, that this is not true. Those people "don't get it." Most of us know someone who has struggled or is currently struggling with infertility, miscarriages, or some other related issue. The emotions that Hannah feels are just as real for many people today.

I recall reading a testimony by Heather Platt, wife of pastor and author, David Platt. The Platts struggled with infertility for years. They longed to have children, and prayed earnestly for one, but God closed Heather's womb, too. She recalls both the joy and pain of hosting 18 or 19 baby showers while they were in seminary – joy for the mothers-to-be and pain for their own family.

The pain that comes from barrenness – this feeling of being empty – is not limited, of course, to infertility. Both the Comfort and Care Ministry here at LaGrave, which ministers to grieving people, as well our congregation's prayer team, have seen this often. The prayer team, as mentioned in one of Pastor Jonker's evening messages several months ago, prays for ten church families each time we meet, and those families are given the opportunity to submit prayer requests. Similarly, the Comfort and Care Team, as part of our ministry to grieving people, prays for all the widowed members of our church – praying for them during the anniversary month that their spouse passed away. Those widows and widowers also have the opportunity to let the team know how we can pray for them.

I know I speak for myself, and for the members of both teams, that it is a rich privilege to pray for others and to be entrusted with those requests. Hearing those requests, however, reminds us that there are many people who are barren, who feel some type of emptiness inside them. For some it's the hole left by the death of their spouse or perhaps the emptiness they feel as they search for the right spouse. For others it's trying to pick up the pieces after their marriage ends in divorce. Some are struggle with children who have wandered away from the Lord. For still others, it's an ongoing medical struggle – lingering cancer, unresolved heart issues, chronic pain, failing eyesight, a surgery and recovery that didn't go as planned.

Barrenness is felt not just by people like Hannah; it's felt by the majority of us at some point in our lives. Sometimes we struggle with an emptiness for years as we wait upon God to fill us, in his way and in his time. We feel powerless when his schedule doesn't seem to match ours, when his plan doesn't seem to line up with what we think is best. You and I are either now or have probably experienced some type of emptiness in the past, and we long for it to end, for us to be filled with God's blessing.

Good News in the Text – *God gives Hannah the faith to believe her prayer has been heard, and that he will answer.*

Hannah longs for it to end, too. That's why she finally goes to the temple to pour out her heart to God in prayer. We may wonder why she does not go sooner, but that's not really important. What is important is that she goes, and she prays.

Then, afterwards, she needs to defend herself against Eli's accusation. "Me? Drunk?" she asks in shock. "No, sir. I haven't been drinking wine or anything stronger. I am not a wicked woman; I am deeply troubled and was pouring out my heart to the Lord." Eli responds with words that are perhaps typical priestly words, but they are words of blessing: "Go in peace," he says, "and may the God of Israel grant you what you have asked." She leaves the temple, eats something, and her face is no longer downcast.

What a dramatic change for Hannah! She is no longer discouraged. She is no longer downhearted. She is no longer depressed. Hannah is a person filled with hope! But what brings about this change? Perhaps instead we should notice what *doesn't* bring about the change. For Hannah, the turning point in her struggle is, surprisingly, not when God brings an end to her struggle, her barrenness, her emptiness. The Lord, by his Spirit, lifts her out of depression despite the fact that her womb is still closed. God blesses her instead with the gift of faith through the power of prayer and the encouraging words from Eli. She brings her case before the Lord. Now she is content to leave it in his hands.

After worshiping the next morning, the family goes back home to Ramah. At some point Elkanah makes love to Hannah, and the Lord answers her prayer. He remembers her, and she becomes pregnant. God, in his timing and by his power, removes her barrenness, opens her womb, and fills her emptiness. God blessed her before with the gift of faith; now He blesses her with a son, and she names him Samuel, "because I asked the Lord for him."

Good News in our World – *God gives us the privilege of coming to him in prayer and trusting his plan for our lives.*

God's filling of our emptiness is indeed a beautiful thing. It is for Hannah, whose son is eventually dedicated to the Lord and becomes a great leader for Israel.

It is for David and Heather Platt, who I spoke of earlier. After God leads them to adopt a little baby boy from Kazakhstan, they find out two weeks later that Heather is pregnant. Some years go by, and they decide to adopt again – this time a little girl from China -- and after a few months, they found out yet again, that Heather is pregnant. God gives them quadruple blessings!

God's filling has been wonderful for many of you as well. We rejoice in the answers to prayer, in the barrenness being removed, in the ways God uses his Spirit to fill the emptiness in the lives of his people. But that doesn't always happen, does it? For many, barrenness remains. So how do we find fulfillment when struggles and emptiness persist?

Hannah, of course, never knew the Apostle Paul nor read his letters, but if she did, I believe she would grab onto the words of Philippians 4:6-7. I believe she would commit them to memory and let them sink deep into her soul: "Do not be anxious about anything," Paul says, "but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God. And the *peace of God, which transcends all understanding*, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus." Are you feeling barren tonight? God invites you to pour out your heart to him, to let him fill you with his peace.

And that peace that we experience...that blessing...that filling... God invites us, calls us, to help share it with others.

A week and a half ago, LaGrave's prayer team left its meeting as it often does -- with a sense that God strengthened our faith during our time together, and that he filled us with hope. Jolene DeHeer often ends our prayer time with words such as: "Father, thank you for the sweet time of being in your presence..." Several people, knowing that tonight was coming, assured me of their prayers and offered words of encouragement. The peace and blessing I received that day -- as a gift of God's grace -- is probably similar to what Hannah felt as she left the temple. Although we are not Old Testament priests like Eli, we are part of the priesthood of all believers today, and God can use us to encourage and bless others just the same.

Before we leave this place tonight, let me offer one more image of emptiness that leads to the reason for our hope. How is it that we can approach God's throne in prayer, to come freely before him with our pleas and petitions, and to receive his blessing and his peace? The answer is found in the emptying that was shown by Jesus Christ when he died on the cross. Our Savior emptied himself of everything except his love for you and for me. Friends, the veil is torn, the grave is empty, and God stands ready to fill us as we come before his throne. Amen.

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