

Hannah - Through Tears to Hope

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Well, we've just seen some incredible prophecies in Revelation 6.11, words to strike fear into any Christian:

“Then each of them was given a white robe and told to wait a little longer until the full number of their fellow servants, their brothers and sisters were killed just as they had been”

Tribulation Is The Norm

And we live in a world where this is a daily reality. By the time I finish this little talk, ten Christians will have been killed worldwide, four hundred per day, one hundred fifty thousand per year. And that's without taking into account persecution and the censorship and the general lack of understanding of what Christians stand for. A couple of weeks ago, as part of the “Learn To Read The Bible Effectively” course, I felt the need to give a public seminar on whether the Bible was a load of old fairy stories or perhaps something more reliable, and we actually had more people on that day than on all the other days added together. Many people are unsure, they believe, perhaps, that the Bible is a book of fairy stories and fables for silly people who waste their time worshipping dead rabbis and non-existent gods. I was told by a Jewish rabbi that we worship God on a stick by which he meant Jesus crucified, all kinds of otherwise reasonable people are mystified that we place importance on the ideas in the Bible, not that they read the Bible. Many of the more open-minded going to generously say, “Well, whatever makes you happy, as long as it doesn't do anyone any harm. Well, I guess it's okay then.” And to that, we say “Amen!” Against this backdrop of misunderstanding, we have perhaps not physical violence, but we see this continuous subtle censorship and rejection of our ideas, and we self-censor because of it, we wait and bide our time until we get the right until the right opportunity presents itself. We preach “in season” don't we, but it's harder for us to imagine preaching “out of season”. Surely that would result in all kinds of upsetting and derailing experiences, perhaps not to the degree that our Christian brothers and sisters are experiencing today. So as the sounds of war draw closer, I'm sure you probably agree when you look at the news, as the opportunity we have

is growing shorter, we say bring on kingdom, let this time be cut short. We trust Him, in this middle period between now and when the kingdom comes, we have a short time to live out our faith.

What Is Our Purpose?

So we're going to look at Hannah today and ask what she can teach us. Hannah means "Grace, to find favour" and just by looking at her life, I think, we can appreciate why. So the first question I have in my mind before we ask how we're going to live out this short amount of time, how we're going to live "right". The question comes to me. Why were we each created? What's our purpose? Do we know what why we're here? What we're here to do? What we're here for. It's a question everyone has to ask, but we've got a short amount of time. If we believe that God has truly called us. What's he called us to do? And that's a practical question. That's not a "Greek" or philosophical question, where we say "to believe in him and live his life", no it's practical: What does he want us to **do**? What's he got in mind for us in the following weeks, months or perhaps years? It's at once an easy question to answer, and also a very hard question to **really** answer. We sort of have two possibilities. We could say well... we don't have any idea. That's the easy answer. How can we know the mind of God? But in another way, we recognise that we don't answer that type of question by *knowing* the answer. We answer that type of question by *being* the answer, we have to answer practical questions with practical answers, by *being* the answer, by the experiences that we have in everyday life, each moment of our lives that challenges our faith we have to meet with a godly attitude which comes from being transformed by the Scriptures, it comes back from God. So it's that boomerang effect of starting with the gift from God and then reading the Bible, being transformed so that you can then react in a godly way to every difficult circumstance. Gradually we learn what we're here for. So perhaps we have a dim understanding of why we're here. I don't know if you're like me, but in earlier years of my life, I have prayed for very specific things which isn't wrong to do, but I've jumped ahead and tried to pray for the things that I thought were good for me, a few months later, maybe I found that I thanked God for not answering those prayers. I didn't know what my purpose was, I thought I did, but I learned that I didn't, and I was thankful that he didn't listen.

Hannah's Suffering

In Hannah's life, we have an example of someone who might have been looking forward to the Messiah and wanting to be part of it, perhaps we might say she was generating her purpose. She wanted to have a son who would be given God, I mean even in her prayer, we see that she was thinking along the lines of the Messiah, we have an example of someone who was under intense pressure, looking for her purpose. In the end recognising that it was just by being faithful in the circumstance God placed her in her attitude and approach that gave her, a meaningful life. We meet her at a time when she was *unproductive*. We have a lot to learn from her. We picture poor Hannah year after year, showing up as a defeated and humiliated woman with an empty house, taunted by her rival, whom she was forced to share her husband with. In your mind's eye just think, the sound of laughter always coming from within Peninnah's House. (Her name means Pearl, and I'm going to call her Pearl from

now on.) The children were always happily playing outside *her* house in the dirt, from the youngest to the oldest, they viewed Grace at a distance. They viewed her as someone with an unhappy face. She was a lonely figure, someone they respected, sort of liked, but always got in trouble when they approached too near. And I suppose I'm thinking here of the difference between believes and unbeliever for a moment. Believers look at us, they may respect us, but they always get in trouble if they get too near us. We look sometimes downcast, but somehow we have the strength that comes from somewhere. They'd like to ask us where, but it's hard for them to approach us. That's our time to preach "out of season" to go and ake the effort to speak to them. To call them out as it were, on their respect for us. But back to Hannah. Peninnah was always eyeing her with suspicion. The wife that he loves more than me. Jealousy. Always bubbling under the surface. She taught her children, perhaps to look down on Grace. She was childless and felt it. No cuddles, getting too close would result in a taunt: "Get your own child!" Or the scared child being called back by one of its brothers and sisters. Every year dreading going up to Shiloh, a place where relatives met, for children to mingle, for mothers to talk and swap stories of motherhood. Lonely in the crowd, her husband off doing something. She was broken, resentful, unhappy and defeated, her mind far away from *her* purpose. Depressed. As a man, Elkanah loved his wife. Perhaps also *he* was slightly depressed, early off about his work, burying his head in that, gathering food only to find Hannah in the same state of mind when he came back, unaware perhaps of the taunting that had gone on during the day.

"Why are you weeping, Hannah? Why are you downhearted? Don't I mean more to you than ten sons?"

A man of substance and position. He loved her but didn't *understand* her. Maybe she didn't even bother to reply to that, just staring into space, praying to God. I thank you for my husband. You should be enough for me, Lord. He should be enough for me. But I feel empty. Try as he might to lift her spirits and offer her a route out of it, she remained broken year after year, month after month, bullied, belittled, broken. We've all been there. Perhaps we're there now with a pain in our life so persistent. It's resistant to everything. We're unable to solve it. We can't touch it. We have no answers for it. We can't deal with it. And this is where the question comes to us.

Silent In Prayer - Or Just Silent?

Well, have we forgotten how to ask God for the solution? Do we even *believe* that God can provide the solution. I mean, when you're barren, you're barren. After all, when you're suffering from a disease, well you have that disease, what's the point of asking? It won't go away, it's a physical fact(!?) Perhaps we've lost that childlike innocence of asking our parents for the solution. We're able to cope with niggles and pray about them - annoyances - but when big things won't go away, we allow ourselves to be worn down and defeated. In a way feel we can't cope with it, and we grow strangely *silent* and we find coping mechanisms common to everyone, believers and unbelievers alike. We withdraw from our spiritual purpose. But God knows each of us. He made us. He foreknew us, we're told and so he knows exactly what we're going through, and more to the point, he brings it on us so that we *do* go through it.

“Now all discipline seems painful at the time, not joyful, but *later* it produces the fruit of peace and righteousness for those trained by it. Therefore, strengthen your listless hands and your weak knees and make straight paths for your feet so that what is lame may not be put out of joint, but healed.”

Reaching Rock Bottom

So when they had finished eating and drinking in Shiloh, Hannah stood up. Her suffering had brought her to rock bottom. The pain was so intense that something snapped. Can anything good come from this type of pain and suffering? Yes, absolutely. It can. All pain and suffering is there to bring us to God.

It's impossible for those who don't have God to understand that God brings us pain and that that's what makes him good. For those who look from the outside, God is a petty, malevolent God because he allows us to suffer, but from the inside it's God's goodness and faithfulness, the fact that he works through us using suffering - *that's* the mechanism. He becomes invisible in our lives using this mechanism - suffering is common to all - and yet we are trained by it, and the lame instead of being put out of joint or breaking, is healed. It's fascinating, that suffering itself, if it leads you to God, leads you to the answer not just to this life but the life to come. Remember, the Lord had closed Hannah's womb! How can this be a god of love? Remember the man who had for decades been waiting for Jesus to heal him? Who sinned his father or mother or him that he's in this state? Well Neither he's in this state so that God's love and Name could be shown. We truly don't understand the love of God. **God** had closed Hannah's womb.

Fortunately, we don't have to make these kinds of decisions. We wouldn't have a clue how to progress the plan of God or what pressure to apply to whom and how. In Hannah's world with raids by the Philistines, violence increasing, godlessness, no king, moral decay in the church, everyone doing whatever they felt like doing, hypocrisy at the highest levels at Shiloh, the pressure of jealousy from Pearls, her happy children, her loss of happiness, the loss of purpose, the unproductiveness, her lack of reputation, of sharing her husband with this woman taunting her. God only added to her pressure, *He* prevented her from having children.

“Nothing is impossible with God, and all things work for the good for those who love him.”

God is ensuring that every single pressure we have in our lives works for our good. He provides us with the spiritual equivalent of flesh and blood enemies like the Philistines, constantly raiding their villages and setting fire to their fields. We're engaged in a spiritual battle, instead of faltering and becoming lame, God wants us to be healed, to keep our minds on Christ and our lives dedicated to God and each individual tiny little circumstance that comes our way is to be used in His service - in the face of continuing hardship and loneliness.

Listening To Our Weakness

We don't have a huge amount of energy to help others. We've virtually enough for ourselves,

it's enough to put one foot in front of the other. We're sometimes so weak we can hardly carry on, and we're certainly not great company. I like to imagine Hannah and Elkanah together despite her having no reputation, despite the people of her local community thinking she must have sinned, worthless by all measures of their society, unable to even pass on knowledge of God to her children. Perhaps we reach rock-bottom like that every night, and the only people we have that really know us, are our husbands and wives and best friends. This is where Christ is waiting to act, at the proper time, for God's reasons, as we bear with each other.

“In deep anguish. She prayed to the Lord, weeping bitterly and made a vow. Lord Almighty, Yahweh, If only you will look on your servant's misery and remember me and not forget your servant and give her a son. I will give him to the Lord for all the days of his life, no razor will ever be used on his head.”

She wasn't able to keep it together anymore, and she wept bitterly. At **that** moment, she faced God and admitted he'd been in control all the time and rather than bitterly blaming Him, she looked to him, had been aware of it all along. It's a powerful thing to notice about these people that are accepted by God. They look to **Him** as their source of help, they give up talking to others, they go inwards, they consider, they **break**, and they choose God. And in those moments we're asked to recognise that we need to forgive God as it were for our suffering, that yes, He **knows!** yes, maybe it's **from** Him! but, that it's for a reason, and we accept that and Him as our solution. It's like children isn't it, God can see a little smile coming. You know, we don't want to smile, but we should. We do want to smile really. It's spiritual joy to know that we really do want to smile in our suffering, because we really do know that the One who just disciplined us is doing it for our good. Eli observed her mouth.

“Hannah was praying in her heart and her lips were moving but her voice was not heard”

and this man, who himself failed to discipline his very own children and execute his office as priest and judge, was judging her, a man as it were, going blind with age, whose sons were the very opposite of Hannah. It says a lot about Eli that he noticed the small thing, the splinter, the movement of Hannah's lips, and that was enough to judge, but failed to notice the behaviour of his sons.

“Not so, my Lord, I'm a woman who's deeply troubled. I've not been drinking wine or beer. I was pouring out my soul to the Lord. Don't take your servant for wicked woman. I've been praying here out of my great anguish.”

She was not angry. She was not indignant, that such a man is Eli, with all the liberties his sons were taking would dare to call her drunk. No, she was brokenhearted. She respected this man and his office more than herself. A humble, brokenhearted women. And he says:

“go in peace and may the God of Israel grant you what you have asked of him.”

And this is the most astonishing part of this chapter for me.

“May your servant find favour in your eyes and she went her way and ate something, and her face was no longer downcast.”

After the storm of tears, we see a changed Hannah. And it's interesting that she went her way. And it reminds me of the three times in the New Testament where Jesus killed non-Jewish people. The Canaanite woman's daughter who had an illness that meant she herself couldn't come to see Jesus. Her *mother* came to see Jesus and she petitioned Jesus, who at first ignored her.

"Why should I give the food of the children to the dogs?"

An astonishing reply. But she wouldn't let go. She not only had heard of Jesus, she *trusted* him, she *expected* of him that he would *want* to heal her daughter. And then she went home, not having the evidence of it, she went home rejoicing. The Centurion's servant. He had to go home as well, without having seen the evidence of this healing. The Official's son in Capernaum again, three amazing examples of faith, where Jesus could act at a distance. And it's astonishing that Jesus went into his *own house*, his own village, and there was not enough faith in there for him to heal. He did no miracles there. And yet here we have three Gentiles figures and Jesus could act at a distance. And we are those gentiles. (And we are his house.) Jesus is not standing here with us now, but he acts at a distance. And we remember when he was approached,

"If you're willing, and he looked at them with compassion and with tender heartedness. I am willing."

The Jesus that we know who is acting at a distance *is* willing in our suffering. He's willing us on.

"We glory in our sufferings because we know that they produce perseverance and that produces character and character produces hope and hope doesn't put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit."

So this is the beginning of Hannah's transformation, and it should be the beginning of our transformation as well. The firm assurance that this man who we've never seen is tender-hearted and wants to act in our lives at a distance, expects us to come before him with expectation. He answered her not a word until she had come in and begged to prove that she believed that she trusted him and that she expected that he would heal her daughter.

"Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed"

Truly. The answers to our prayers are not as simple as we might want or think. We may not know quite what we were created for, there maybe so many combined factors that we may never know. But it's surely together that we move to the kingdom, it's surely not enough to view our purpose and our reason for existence as being as only individual. We remember those three gentiles. They were all healed by people who came on their behalf. And we should do likewise, praying for each other as our brother Chris did earlier, and those prayers are listened to. And it's in that combined strength that we will achieve our true purpose.

I think I would just like to end by stating facts really.

Hope Big

God requires us to hope big in the face of suffering, to expect that it's from Him (at least allowed by Him). To be strong spiritually in that acceptance of our weakness, to see, like Hannah saw, ourselves as part of the plan of God, though we don't know how or why. Perhaps our purpose will be in the future, that's when we will really appreciate why we were given the tests we were given. She says:

“Let the weak say I am strong. Yahweh brings death and makes alive. He brings down to the grave and raises up, He seats them with princes and makes them inherit a throne of honour. But He will give strength to His King and exalts the horn of His Anointed.”

We're now in Christ Jesus, and so perhaps unlike those gentiles who Jesus healed at a distance, we have been brought very very near to God. It's through our God bringing us unproductivity in our lives, and us hitting rock-bottom, that we might be productive through Him, that we realise that it's not through our *own* strength that we can become productive, it's by *Christ's* strength. The purpose of our lives is to give back everything that we've been given ourselves, to preach “out of season”,

“to rejoice always to pray without ceasing to give thanks in all circumstances”

the ultimate example of this, which we can't understand, is how Jesus was able to remain sinless in every circumstance, waiting in agony as he felt his life draining out of him. No physical strength, but all the power to leave the cross and step down any time. In this moment of his utter weakness all he had was the pain and the memories of those he had spoken to and had rejected him, the memories of those who had tried their best but had left him and run away. Jesus stayed where God wanted him, despite the suffering, not just of himself, but of those who loved him. Looking on, he was able to stay until it was finished, just those few short hours. He beat his own survival instinct. He went against the culture of the day. He went against his better judgement, perhaps, of trying to fit in. He risked it all, but through that he now has an immeasurable amount of children, seed, though he himself was childless

“to Him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb, be praise and honour and glory and power forever and ever. Amen.”

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