

Her Story – Background to the song

So, in our series of Old testament Characters, we come to Hannah, who in the grand scheme of things, has a small, but very important appearance at the start of 1 Samuel.

She's introduced to us in a bit of a rough patch in life. She's one of two wives and she's struggling to conceive. Now for any family in today who are trying unsuccessfully to have a baby, it's a hugely painful and rough situation, but go back to the times of Hannah, and you'll find even more cultural pressure heaped on this young woman's shoulders.

To many around her it would have been a sign that she was not blessed by God, that she was unfavoured. There's also a fierce rivalry with the other woman in the picture, who has no problem with having children, and we can see that she taunts Hannah on a regular basis. Reading between the lines in the text, this might be because Hannah is actually the favoured wife.

And so, this whole family goes to a place that is sacred to them to worship. It's a place they go to every year on pilgrimage, and this whole event finishes with a celebratory meal. Only Hannah is not in the mood for celebration. She is downcast and refuses to join in – instead spending the time praying at the temple. She promises God that if she has a son she will bring him back to the temple to be dedicated to the Lord.

And it's here we see the level of her pain. We are told that she wept bitterly, and that however she was acting in the temple, Eli the priest mistakes her for being drunk (perhaps demonstrating what he normally had to deal with!).

But after explaining her situation to him, he sends her away in peace and we see a transformation in her attitude. She doesn't go back happy to her situation, but she goes with joy and peace. She starts eating again and joining in with the celebration.

And then as time passes, she conceives a child as Eli the priest promised on behalf of the Lord she would. After the child grows a bit, she brings Samuel back to Eli to be dedicated to the Lord's service, as she promised she would, and we get to this morning's reading – the song/poem/prayer – different translations advertise it as a different thing!

The Song

And Hannah's song starts by proclaiming the greatness of God and the fact that her strength is found in God. And those who are fans of Luke's gospel will notice here that the song starts in a very similar way to the song of Mary sometimes called the Magnificat in prayer books but found at the start of Luke towards the end of the first chapter – I don't think that's an accident!

In both circumstances we have a child who is born as the result of God's faithfulness! In this case it's the promise of Samuel, who will be responsible for choosing Israel's Kings, one of whom will be the ancestor of Jesus. And of course, Jesus is the long-awaited promised Child who will be the king for all of humanity!

I always say too people that the old testament is like a game of where's wally – but with Jesus instead of Wally. And amidst the chaos of the stories, you can normally find him waving. And even at this point, at the start of Israel's Kingdom, before a king is even chosen, the arrival of Jesus is being foreshadowed in Hannah's prayer.

The other thing I love about Hannah's song is that she is rejoicing not on what she's done, but in who God is.

She acknowledges that it is God who watches over every aspect of life, it is him brings low and exalts. She knows in the depths of her heart that her blessing and her worth is not found in who she is and what she's done, but in who God says she is and the promises that he is fulfilling in her life. It is about God's faithfulness that is the difference.

The takeaways

And so, this morning what can we take away from Hannah's story? What lessons can we learn from her and the events of her life – I've got three quick takeaways for you this morning:

Be honest in prayer

The first is that when we come before God in prayer that we are not afraid to be honest before him about what's going on in life.

What I love about Hannah, is that when things are tough, when she doesn't know where else to turn, and whilst it might have been very tempting to do something nasty to her rival, her first response is to pray. It's to come before God and be completely open about where she is and how she's feeling. She weeps bitterly before God at where she finds herself.

And I think it's true for so many of us that we think God won't be interested in our whole lives. That we can only bring before him the bits of us that are perfect, or the things we think we have together. But the bible teaches us something different.

It's not just Hannah that is this way – Joseph in prison, the psalms, the people of Israel when they're in exile.

It's OK to not be OK.

And relating that to now, one challenge I could ask all of us is are we being honest about God with the current situation?

Even as a more introverted person there are a lot of things that I'm not OK with! I had plans for this summer, I was going to be playing cricket, I had trips to air shows planned with my father. There's the what felt like run of the mill days out that we can't do at the moment. And there's the fact that we can't gather as a church community.

I feel a deep sense of bitterness at the fact that so many things have been taken away. I wonder if there are others in our community who are feeling similarly about life at the minute!

If Hannah teaches us anything, it's that we can bring before God the things that deeply pain us.

Joy can be found despite circumstance

The second thing that Hannah teaches us is that peace and Joy can be found despite circumstance.

One of the key moments for Hannah in her story is when Eli sends her away in peace. It's a pivotal moment in her journey. She goes to pray, opens up before God and leaves with peace and with a sense of I think joy.

I think it's that sense of Joy from joy that comes from God that is the difference for her. And I also think we need to be a little careful with how we interpret this. The scripture does say that she was sad no longer – but sometimes I think we can make the mistake of thinking that an absence of sadness must mean that she was happy.

That's not necessarily the case. There's no immediate answer to her prayer that evening. She is still going back to the same situation and the same rival who has taunted her.

Yet we can see that something is different. She is going back to that circumstance with a fresh perspective and an assurance of God's goodness despite her situation. The place where she has drawn strength from has changed – we can see that in her prayer of thanksgiving. It is the Lord who has lifted her.

I think it's really worth noting that Happiness and Joy are two very different things. Happiness is fleeting emotion – if we are not careful, we can spend our whole lives chasing happiness.

One of the biggest issues I've seen in some churches is the need for everybody to be happy all the time. There are those who are seemingly afraid to say do you know what – everything is not OK. Life is hard right now.

I think to be joyful is something that changes our perspective on things, and I think that it comes in tandem with that sense of peace. I spoke a few weeks back about that peace that passes understanding that comes from God and how important it is.

Hannah teaches that again for us, and relays what's at the heart of that peace – knowledge of God's goodness.

We are dependent on the Lord's faithfulness

And that's the last point I want to make this morning. Is that so much is dependent on God, who he is and his faithfulness to us.

Hannah, whose name means grace, knew that everything was dependent on grace! She was humble before God, and obedient. And she knew that her success in life did not depend on her ability to do anything, but on God's faithfulness to be with her in life and to make the way for her.

I remember a few years back a friend and I tried to record a song at church. We went, set up all the equipment and tried to record. It didn't work. And in fact, we went through every single IT method we knew of to try and fix the problems that we were encountering.

We'd planned two days of this and by the end of the first day we left with grumpy and with a terrible headache.

On the second day we both arrived and looked at the setup. We then tried a different approach, and one that in hindsight, we should have started with on the first day. We prayed for God's presence to be with us.

We switched on the equipment and then something strange happened, everything just worked first time and all day.

Whilst the experience was not pleasant on the first day, and whilst we didn't get everything, we wanted to get done out of those two days, we learnt an important lesson.

It doesn't matter if you have all the right equipment, knowledge and skill in the world, God's presence and faithfulness to us is more important and precious than anything else. Things work very differently when we involve him!

It would have been so easy for Hannah to have taken matters into her own hands. To try and fix the problem. We see Abraham in the book of Genesis trying to fix the problem himself without God and all he does is create a mess.

As is common in life, Hannah, a woman has more sense. She goes to God first and relies on him.

She brings everything before God in humility, she prays, and she knows God's presence in her situation. And as a result, she is blessed.

And the most beautiful thing about this morning's reading is that it is the song of a heart that has been touched by God – and you can tell those songs, because most of it is about his goodness and his love.

And her song finishes with what I'm trying to say with this point: 'The Lord will judge to the ends of the earth; *he* will give strength to *his* king, and exalt the power of *his* anointed.' What's she saying here? It's all about his presence working in our lives. It's his anointed, he that is the one doing. Hannah knew this and knew it well.

She repays God's faithfulness by being faithful to God. She knows that the blessing of Samuel is God's faithfulness displayed to her and she is faithful by giving him back to God.

It would have been very easy for her to have tried to hold onto Samuel and have him for herself – but the whole thing wasn't about her; it was about God.

So this morning, be honest in your prayers with God, know that his peace and his joy can be found despite our circumstance and know his presence in your life. It will make all the difference.