



Chapter 1

Hannah: A Woman After God's Own Heart



The Back-story of Hannah's Life

The books of 1 and 2 Samuel were originally one long book in the Hebrew Bible. Tradition tells us that the author was Samuel himself, the prophet God used to shape and establish the kingship in Israel. However, because his death is mentioned in 1 Samuel 25, he could not have written all the content of these books.

Though we are really not sure who wrote 1 and 2 Samuel, we know they are of divine origin, inspired and blessed by God. 2 Timothy 3:16-17 states, *All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.*¹

The book of 1 Samuel starts out, not with Samuel, but with his parents, a couple by the name of Elkanah and Hannah, who lived in the hill country of Ephraim. Their relationship was complicated by two factors: Hannah's inability to conceive children, and the presence of a second wife, Peninnah. The question of polygamy comes up often in studying the Old Testament. Polygamy was never God's intention. The LORD said in Genesis 2:24 that *a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.* God's design was always for one man and one woman to be joined together in marriage: *the two (not the three) shall become one flesh.* It is likely that Elkanah married Peninnah because of Hannah's barrenness, so that she might provide him children. Polygamy, though tolerated by God, was never part of His design.

It was this very issue of barrenness that became the point of tension between Hannah and Elkanah – and between Hannah and Peninnah.

¹ Unless indicated, all Scripture references are from The New King James Version of the Bible.

Hannah, whose name means “*grace*,” was Elkanah’s first wife. He loved her greatly, even though she was unable to bear any children. Imagine the shame and guilt she must have felt. She was a failure at her major responsibility as a wife. To make matters worse, Elkanah found someone else, Peninnah, whose name meant “*ruby*,” who could give him children. Perhaps this red-head was outwardly even more attractive than Hannah. But certainly she was better at one thing: bearing children.

The biblical record doesn’t tell us how many children she bore, but it is plural in number. So for several years Hannah lived under the same roof as this second wife and her children. And as women are prone to do, I’m certain that Peninnah reminded Hannah all the time of her infertility. In fact, verse six tell us, *And her rival also provoked her severely, to make her miserable.*

Did you catch that? *Provoked ... severely ... to make her miserable.* Hannah didn’t ask for this. She didn’t even deserve it, because the problem wasn’t hers. Verse six ends with the phrase, *because the Lord had closed her womb.*

How could a loving God do such a thing? It was because He had a greater plan and purpose. And His purpose would not be thwarted, even by a taunting Peninnah. Hannah trusted God. She prayed. And God responded.

Hannah eventually did conceive and bear a son, naming him Samuel, which means “*name of God*.” However, the Hebrew pronunciation sounds very similar to the words “*heard by God*.” God had heard Hannah’s prayer. She gave Him the glory and herself a reminder by the name she gave to her first-born.



Hannah’s Tests of Faith and God’s Supernatural Way of Blessing Her

God is very interested in building the faith of His children. One of His consistent patterns in Scripture seems to be to reveal Himself and then make a promise that must be believed. Once that promise is believed, the answer comes in God’s time and God’s way. In the process, our faith is often tested to make it stronger and to bring greater glory to God.

This pattern is seen in the life of Abraham. God revealed Himself and gave an unconditional promise to be believed: Abraham would be blessed by God and he would have many descendants. We are told in Romans 4:3 that *Abraham believed God and it was accounted to him for righteousness.* As one who was justified by faith alone, Abraham would continue to show his faith by his obedience in trusting God for the fulfillment of that promise (even into his 90s).

One of the promises that God gave Abraham was to go to the Promised Land. There God would bless him and make him fruitful (Genesis 12:1-3). Abraham believed God and entered the land – but he was immediately met with a severe test: there was a famine in the land (Genesis 12:10). The natural responses of fear, self-preservation, and the temptation to rely on human wisdom loomed large. Abraham gave in to those temptations and headed toward Egypt where there was food. He was walking by sight and not by faith in God’s promise. God soon corrected Abraham for his lack of faith and sent him back to the Land of Promise (Genesis 12:14-20; 13:1-4).

We will see this pattern of God testing and strengthening the faith of His children in the life of Hannah.

The Greater Purposes of God

Before Hannah's birth and the supernatural birth of Samuel, God foresaw the coming corruption of His Tabernacle through the house of Eli and his wicked sons. God put His plan in motion long before the "*lamp of the Lord went out in the Tabernacle.*" It was God who purposed all things in Christ to raise up for Israel a godly deliverer who would do His will. That deliverer and prophet would be Samuel. Samuel, like Joseph, David, and so many others in the Old Testament, gives us a foreshadowing of Israel's true deliver and the Promised Seed of Abraham in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Thus when we read *the Lord had shut up her womb*, we have to understand that the Master Weaver was weaving the circumstances of Hannah's life into His greater tapestry that magnifies His grace to sinners and His purpose in Christ.

My approach in this study is to find spiritual lessons in Hannah's barrenness and subsequent fruitfulness that parallel God's work in our lives. He brings us to the acknowledgement that we too, like Hannah, are unable to bear lasting, spiritual fruit apart from Jesus Christ.

Now It's Your Turn

I would like you to put this book down and to pick up your Bible and read Hannah's story for yourself. You will find it in 1 Samuel chapter 1, which is twenty-eight verses long, and chapter 2, verses 1-11.

Read these verses thoughtfully, perhaps out loud, taking the time to feel the impact of this story. Take a pen and underline or circle anything in the story that stands out to you.

After reading these thirty-nine verses, take a pen and write down answers to these questions:

- What stood out to you in this story? What did you notice that perhaps you had never seen before?

- In what ways was Hannah weak? In what ways did she become strong?

- In what ways was Hannah fruitless? How did she become fruitful?
- In what ways was Hannah unfulfilled? How did she become fulfilled?
- What emotions did Hannah experience? In what ways did she struggle?
- What promises did God make to Hannah? In what ways did He meet the needs of her heart?



Chapter 2

The Path to Fruitfulness

We all long for spiritual strength, for fruitfulness and for a greater sense of fulfillment. But these qualities do not come naturally. They only come supernaturally.

We will journey together with Hannah through her tests of faith until she ultimately holds little Samuel in her arms. We will better understand Hannah by looking at her life from the perspective of God's purpose long before her birth. And by looking back at the circumstances of her life and her prayer of praise that magnifies the grace of God in dealing with her, we will see the workings of a Sovereign God who does all things well to bring us to strength, fruitfulness and fulfillment. To try to interpret the historical events of Hannah's life in 1 Samuel 1 without the eternal principles of her prayer of praise in 1 Samuel 2 is to miss many of the secrets of true fruitfulness that apply to our lives today.

The actual historical events around Hannah's life are not accidental, but are the very backdrop for us to compare and contrast the way of the flesh to the way of the Spirit, the law of works and grace, and the continual battle between Satan and our victory in Christ.

In this study, we will see the historical events of Hannah's story as eight tests of faith that believers of all ages pass through in their journey to true spiritual fruitfulness. Although not everyone passes through all of these tests, every believer does have to come to understand that God deals with us from the perspective of what Hannah learned through her test of faith and expressed in her prayer of praise, *for by strength shall no man prevail* (1 Samuel 2:9).

1. Barren

The first test of faith that Hannah faced was how she would respond to God with her need. *But the LORD had shut up her womb* (1 Samuel 1: 5). Hannah had four reasons to hope in God that He would open her barren womb:

- **The Purpose of the Womb.** God's purpose is birth and life, and not death.
- **The Promise of the Word.** Hannah was convinced that God did not want her to remain barren and unfruitful.
- **The Power of Biblical Examples.** Without God opening the barren womb of Sarah there is not Isaac and therefore no Hannah.
- **The Persistent Burden.** When it is God who "*shuts the womb,*" then only God can "*open the womb.*" God had given Hannah a persistent burden that He placed in her heart – and He alone would fill that burden.

2. Benefited

The second test of Hannah's faith was to not accept a substitute but wait for God's best. Elkanah tried to satisfy Hannah by giving her a *double portion* (1 Samuel 1:5). Yet even his gifts of love were not enough for her.

It was this same test of faith that Abraham and Sarah failed when they tried to accomplish God's supernatural work by the works of the flesh. Sarah was also unable to conceive, and she suggested that Abraham impregnate her maidservant Hagar. The end result was Hagar gave birth to Ishmael.

The New Testament looks back on this event as an allegory of the contrast between the bondage of the law and our liberty in grace (Galatians 4:21-31). Every believer must pass this test of faith to know true spiritual fruitfulness in contrast to the children produced through religious effort (Galatians 4:26).

- **The Comparison.** There was a difference in the portion of the blessing that Elkanah gave Peninnah and Hannah.
- **The Consolation.** Someone will make up for what God has refused you.
- **The Comfort.** No one can give us comfort when it is God's will for us to suffer in order to bring us to the end of ourselves and make us dependent upon God.
- **The Contentment.** Beware of allowing others to get us to be content with a substitute.
- **The Counterfeit.** We are often tempted to rely on a counterfeit instead of waiting for God's best. In the story of Abraham and Sarah, it was at this time that Sarah would substitute Hagar for her barren womb.

3. Battered

The third test that Hannah faced was a battering from Satan. The adversary will accuse you, condemn you and put you on a guilt trip. He will use other people to attack you, to discourage you, and to betray you.

And her adversary also provoked her (1:6,7). It is intriguing that the biblical record describes Peninnah as an *adversary*. This heightens our understanding of the rivalry and battle that was going on.

There are times we pray but our burdens become heavier, not lighter. Can you trust God and wait on God during these times? We are often burdened and in distress, to the point of wanting to give up and quit. That's exactly what our enemy wants. We will give up if we rely on our own strength. It is in these times that God often allows even greater pressures on the outside to bring us to absolute surrender and dependence upon Him (see 2 Corinthians 4:7-11; 1:8, 9).

- **We Are Battered and Face Accusations from Foes.** Peninnah was not a friend but a foe. Satan inspired her to accuse Hannah.
- **We Are Battered and Face Accusations from the Flesh.** Our own discouragement from the flesh is our greatest enemy to faith.
- **We Are Battered and Face Accusations from Family.** Hannah's husband did not help. Though he meant well, his words in verse eight only exacerbated the problem. Sometimes the advice from family members can hurt more than help. Do you remember the advice Job's wife gave him? She told him to *curse God and die*. That probably wasn't the gentle and quiet spirit that God encourages in wives (1 Peter 3:1).
- **We Are Battered and Face Accusations from Friends.** Friends will often give us sympathy rather than pointing us to God and encouraging us to trust Him. Friends sometimes misunderstand the work of God in our lives and turn from us. But those friends that have a walk of faith and can identify with you will encourage you, build you up, pray for you and keep you on the path God intends for you.

4. Burdened

The fourth test of faith was to not let discouragement lead to despair but to let your burden lead you to greater faith in God. *And as he did so year by year, when she went up to the house of the LORD, so she provoked her; therefore she wept, and did not eat (1:7, 8).*

- **The Burden and Patience.** Hannah was a follower of those who through faith and patience inherited the promises (Hebrews 6:12).
- **The Burden and Persecution.** Hannah was hurt over and over without relief. Peninnah's words were relentless. However, she endured. She held up under the pressure and trusted God. Can you tell the difference between your own discouragement and a burden from God? Can you distinguish between your suffering and the sufferings of Christ in you? (see Philippians 3:10).

- **The Burden and Perseverance.** Hannah fasted and would not let go of her burden from God. She would travail in soul before she travailed with a child.

When it is the Lord who has shut the womb, then it is only God who can open the womb. When it is God who has closed some door on you, it is only God who can open the door of fruitfulness. Will you continue to trust Him?

5. Brokenness

The fifth test of faith was how tightly Hannah would hang on to God's blessing. She had to answer the question, who does my womb and the fruit of my womb belong to? Is it God's or mine? Through brokenness, Hannah learned that she had to relinquish her rights and give them back to God. Hannah prayed, *then I will give him unto the LORD all the days of his life* (1:10, 11).

In these chapters, we will look at seven principles of brokenness:

1. **The Purpose of Brokenness**
2. **The Proof of Brokenness**
3. **The Process of Brokenness**
4. **The Pattern of Brokenness**
5. **The Principle of Brokenness**
6. **The Pain of Brokenness**
7. **The Product of Brokenness**

Among the many lessons we will learn are:

- Without brokenness, God's glory is marred.
- Without brokenness, the blessings of God become a curse.
- Without brokenness, man is praised instead of God receiving glory.
- Without brokenness, God's gifts are abused.
- Without brokenness, we experience the fruits of the law and not the fruits of the Spirit.

6. Blessed

The sixth test of faith was to find God's will and receive the promise. *Then Eli answered and said, Go in peace: and the God of Israel grant your petition which you have asked of him* (1:17).

- **From Hope to Faith.** Hope precedes faith (Hebrews 11:1).
- **From Perseverance to Faith.** Patience works with faith (Hebrews 6:12).
- **From Faith to Faith:** Faith can grow to greater faith (Hebrews 11:33).

How do we know that we have heard from God regarding our need and prayer? The wise and mature follower of Christ understands that it is by faith.

7. Believing

The seventh test of faith says: Can we rejoice and thank God before the promise is fulfilled? Hannah did. *And she said, Let your maidservant find favor in thy sight. So the woman went her way, and ate, and her face was no longer sad. Then they rose early in the morning, and worshipped before the LORD, and returned* (1 Sam. 1:18-19).

- **True belief will believe before it can see** (John 20:29).
- **True belief will call that which is not as though it were** (Romans 4:17).
- **True belief will lift your burdens and enter into God's rest** (Hebrews 4:9).
- **True belief will change your behavior.**
- **True belief will hold the answer in its heart before it is actually received.**

Hannah was so sure of her son from the moment that God gave His Word that she did not have to wait for Samuel before she gave God thanks. Once a believer learns to hear from and obtain from God by faith, there is no limitation on what God can do through his or her life. They have learned the secret of fruitfulness.

8. Bettered

The eight test of faith: Will I walk with a new faith and dependence upon God in fruitfulness? (1 Samuel 2:1-10).

The paradox of faith and fruitfulness:

Hannah's prayer of praise in chapter two reveals the paradox of the walk of faith and the secret of fruitfulness with God. The paradox is that we cannot prevail with God by our own strength. John 15:5 says that *apart from Him we can do nothing*. In God's great work, the mighty are replaced by the stumbling, the full by the hungry, and the fruitful with the barren of God. It is God's way to bring down the proud and lift up the humble. Thus to bring us to fruitfulness, God often shuts up the womb of our strength, to bring us to barrenness. It is when we recognize our barrenness to accomplish God's greater purpose in Christ and walk in dependence upon God that He opens our barren womb, and accomplishes His supernatural work of fruitfulness.

The blessing of barrenness brought Hannah:

- **To brokenness.**
- **To the end of herself.**
- **To faith and dependence upon God.**
- **To total commitment.**
- **To supernatural fruit that blessed her and others.**

Your Response:

Do you have any need in your life that has been met by God where you can say: this is my Samuel for which I prayed?

Has God created in your heart a deep burden to see God work in such a way that you know that it was not accomplished by your own strength? Have you learned what it means to surrender?

Have you experienced the filling of the Holy Spirit and the abiding life in Christ that leads to fruitfulness?

Our challenge will be that we, like Hannah, may travail in spirit with such a burden to fulfill God's greater purpose in Christ that we will not be satisfied with anything less than God opening the womb that is shut. As we do, we will hold in our hands the thing for which we travailed in prayer.

Are you ready to trust Him?



Discovering Our Barrenness Comes Before Our Greater Fruitfulness

For it is written: Rejoice, O barren, you who do not bear! Break forth and shout, you who are not in labor! For the desolate has many more children than she who has a husband. Now we, brethren, as Isaac was, are children of promise (Galatians 4:27-28).

If we are ever going to see fruitfulness in our lives, it is important that we identify with those in the Bible who were barren. There are great lessons for us to learn when we understand that in a spiritual sense we are all barren in relationship to spiritual children and eternal fruit.

But do you know what the biggest trap is that we fall into? It is the trap of appearances.

There is much that we can do for God that gives the appearance of fruitfulness. We look so good, so busy, so ... religious. But is it really eternal fruit? Or is it only temporal? Will it stand at the Judgment Seat of Christ or will it be like wood, hay and stubble that is burned up?

The Pharisees certainly gave the outward appearance of service to God only to have Jesus expose their works as to be seen of men and not God.

There is a difference between “*working for God*” and “*God working through us*.” Moses was working for God when he first attempted to deliver Israel from Pharaoh with his sword. He failed in his fleshly effort, and ended up on the back side of the desert for forty years. But when Moses returned forty years later, he had learned dependence on God. This time he came with a simple shepherd’s staff – but in the hands of a dependent one, it became the rod of God, and God worked through Moses mightily.

It’s easy to get the two confused, however.

It is often the case that before salvation, we attempted to establish our own righteousness through our “works” only to discover later that they were “dead works” which could not justify us before God (see Hebrews 9:14). After we understand that, in our lost state we are incapable of good works that will please a holy God, we placed our faith in the perfect, complete and finished work of Christ. At salvation we discovered that we were powerless in relationship to God and eternal fruitfulness.

Abraham discovered that he was unable in his flesh to save himself and to produce a line of descendants. He had to die to his own self-effort and trust God by faith alone.

Before we discover our own spiritual barrenness, we work for righteousness, and we work to produce our best self-efforts to gain favor with God. But once we discover that we are barren to bring forth spiritual fruit, we “*do not work*” as in Romans 4:4-5, and we “*cease from our own works*” as in Hebrews 4:10. From such a position of spiritual barrenness and with no faith in ourselves, we are in a position to place our faith in God alone and have many children and bear much eternal fruit (see Hebrews 4:9, 10).

Romans 4:4 says, *Now to him who works, the wages are not counted as grace but as debt. But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness.* Righteousness is a gift from God that originated at Calvary. We receive God's righteousness, not as a result of our works, but by grace through faith ... it is a gift of God by which no one can boast (Ephesians 2:8-9).

Hebrews 4:9-10 tells us that *there remains therefore a rest for the people of God. For he who has entered His rest has himself also ceased from his works as God did from His.*

Jesus taught His disciples that they were to "*abide in Him.*" He reminds us in John 15:4-5, *Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine; no more can you, unless you abide in Me. I am the vine, you are the branches: He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit: **for without Me you can do nothing*** (emphasis mine).

By coming to an understanding that we are just as barren as Sarah was to produce God's Isaac, we are in a better position to believe God to supernaturally open our spiritual wombs.

God calls on us, as the barren of God, to rejoice in the promises of God and in our many children yet to come (Galatians 4:27). Remember, for the desolate (in our case the spiritually barren) has many more children than many of the religious who work so hard for God. The Church today gives birth to far too many "*Ishmaels*" who are the "*strange born*" fruit of the law. Carnal means of the flesh might seem to market or motivate people into the kingdom of God. But they are not of the work of the Holy Spirit convicting and illuminating men's hearts to produce regeneration, repentance and faith.

In this book we will glean principles and lessons from Hannah's barrenness and learn the destiny God has designed for His children.

God revealed Himself as the "*God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.*" It is interesting that barrenness was an issue with all three of these fathers. If God was not the God that opened the barren womb, then Isaac and Jacob would have never been born. All three were part of the promise that through their seed would come the chosen seed, which is Jesus Christ. Yet, all three were helpless to produce that promised son.

What lesson does this have for us?

Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were all tested by barrenness and brought to the place where they understood that only God could fulfill the promises and open the barren womb supernaturally.

We must admit that we too have a spiritually barren womb and trust God to open our lives to eternal fruitfulness by abiding in Christ. I am afraid that so many in religious circles have now turned to the methods of marketing, motivation, human wisdom rather than the miracle of the supernatural to bring forth the children of God.

As I studied through the Bible and learned these lessons of strength, fruitfulness and fulfillment, I wrote the following poem a few years ago to express what I was learning.

Rejoice Thou Barren

From the barren womb, a baby is born
Preceded by a heart, broken and torn
A womb of hope, emptied of dreams
Brings forth God's prophets and kings

The barren of God will travail twice
Once to die to self, and once to His life
Not from Hagar's womb that is alive
But from Sarah's dead womb will Isaac arise

Sarah, Rebekah, and Rachael cries
Give me children, lest I die
Hannah, Elizabeth, and Manoah's wife
To the barren womb, God gave supernatural life.

Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph came
To barren wombs who knew great pain
Samuel, John, and Samson strong
From the barren womb, God did call

When God will visit with mercies to man
He fills the barren with His great plans
Broken, humbled, and brought to our end
Emptied of self, then His great work He begins

With God, is the secret of the barren soul
Greater fruit than you, could ever behold
The dying, the pruning, and the abiding, precedes
The greater harvest of souls that on Christ will believe

So rejoice thou barren and believe to see
More children of faith to come from thee
Like Abraham counted his seed like the stars
Many children of faith will be like you are.²

My dear friend, you may wonder what barrenness has to do with you. Perhaps you feel content in your walk with God. Perhaps you can point out a ministry that has blessed many, and you feel that your life is making a difference for Christ. But the lessons of fruitfulness are for us all. For our God as with Hannah often "*shuts the womb,*" before He "*opens the womb*" to fruitfulness that can only be explained as supernatural.

² E. Truman Herring, © copyright 2006.

Each of us has a God-appointed purpose in Christ. Left to ourselves what we do for God will fall short of that greater purpose in Christ. Thus, God often chooses some area of our life in which, like Hannah, He will purposely close the womb in order to bring us to greater fruitfulness.

In this sense, we all have many lessons to learn about strength, fruitfulness and fulfillment in God. My barren experiences have been many, but from them I have experienced the greatest fellowship with Jesus and have seen God do more through my barren womb than all my struggles to bring forth fruit for God.

My wife and I have identified with Hannah in a physical way as well, when we discovered that after nine years of marriage that we were physically barren and could not have children of our own. Later in this book, you will hear that our story, like Hannah's, has a God-blessed ending.



Chapter 3

How We See Life Affects How We Live Life

As you read through the first two chapters of 1 Samuel, I hope you noticed the comparison and contrast between the two women: barren Hannah with no children, and fruitful Peninnah with many children. But that was simply their outward appearance.

In this chapter we will see a very important principle that you must understand: *how we see life affects how we live life*. Do we see life from a human perspective? If so, our focus will be limited, short-termed and faulty. If we see life from God's perspective, we will realize that He is in control and we will see life through the lens of His sovereignty, grace and goodness.

And he had two wives; the name of the one was Hannah, and the name of the other Peninnah: and Peninnah had children, but Hannah had no children.... And when the time was that Elkanah offered, he gave to Peninnah his wife, and to all her sons and her daughters, portions: But unto Hannah he gave a worthy portion; for he loved Hannah: but the LORD had shut up her womb (1 Samuel 1:2, 4-5)

The bows of the mighty men are broken, and those who stumbled are girded with strength. Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread, and the hungry have ceased to hunger. Even the barren has borne seven, and she who has many children has become feeble (1 Samuel 2:4-5).



“Children Are a Blessing. Being Childless Is a Curse”

In Biblical times, it was thought that barrenness was a curse. Every young woman lived with the hope of having a husband and many children. To marry and then discover that you could not bear children had disastrous results:

- To fail to fulfill your husband's desire to carry on his family name and heritage could mean disappointment, hatred and even rejection from him.
- Barrenness could mean disappointment and anger from your own family and village.

- Other women might mock you and make it quite clear that you were somehow inferior, a freak of nature, and cursed by God.
- Personally, a barren woman could feel isolated, lonely and deserted. Her self-esteem and identity would be skewed by her infertility.
- A barren woman could even blame herself and feel guilt, social rejection and blame herself as a failure.
- Finally, she could even become angry at God and question, “*Why have you made me barren and shameful?*”



How Do You Think Hannah Felt?

- Perhaps the whispers of the town’s women followed Hannah wherever she went: “*There goes poor Hannah. I feel sorry for her husband. But at least he has one good wife that can give him as many children as he desires.*”
- Perhaps she felt like an outsider. Rejected, alone, never included. Have you ever felt like that? Have you ever sensed rejection and suffered from the embarrassment and pain of failure? That was Hannah’s lot ... at least from a human perspective.
- Can you image the dreams that Hannah had for children year after year and yet they remained unfulfilled? Can you identify with some area of your life in which you to have dreamed but your dream seems like it is only vain hopes?
- Maybe she got up every day believing Elkanah was disappointed in her. How would you feel if you believed your spouse was secretly disappointed with you because you could not fulfill his or her needs? Do you feel disappointment or rejection from a spouse, a friend, a family member? Every day she was met with Peninnah’s barbs and judgments. Maybe there is a person in your life that finds your weakest point of disappointment and exploits it and abuses you with it. Is there someone who finds pleasure by going out of their way to keep you down by exalting themselves at your expense? Can you identify with Hannah as you too have experienced one or more who seem to go out of their way to tear you down? Many Biblical characters went through such an experience. We will find that God used Saul in David’s life, much like God used Peninnah in Hannah’s life, to prepare David for God’s greater fruitfulness.
- Did Hannah begin to blame herself for her miserable condition? Did she suffer from low self-esteem and depression? Did she question God’s love for her? Did she ever wish that she weren’t even born?
- Did she get angry at the silence of God month after month, year after year? There was no one else to blame for her infertility but God. Can you blame her? If an earthly, this-life-only perspective is our only alternative, Hannah would be right to be angry and justified at questioning God.



Mirror, Mirror on the Wall

If we had Peninnah and Hannah stand side by side, most people in Israel in 1100 BC would have chosen Peninnah to be the fairest of them all. She was the blessed one, the favored one. Surely, there was something wrong with Hannah . She would not have had much of a chance in the beauty contest of outward blessings.

However, we must not evaluate our worth based on our circumstances. Our worth is not determined by our physical beauty, the size of our bank account, our standing in society, or our accomplishments and successes in this world. We have God's Word that tells us the truth about who we are and what is ultimate reality. God's Word has the ability to change us from an ugly and evil child of Adam to a transformed child of God in Christ.

An Alternative Standard

There is an incredible principle embedded in 2 Corinthians 3:18. That verse states, *But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord.*

The idea is that we are progressively being changed into the image of Jesus Christ. It's a process that takes time, trust and cooperation with the Spirit of God. It is based on truth – because the truest thing about you is what God says about you.

For the one who believes and trusts in the Lord Jesus, what appears to be bad – a problem, a storm, a trial, an attack – is really an opportunity to see God at work in your life in a greater way.

- Abraham failed to learn about trusting God in the midst of a famine. His son, Isaac, discovered that a hundredfold-harvest was possible with God in the time of famine.
- Jacob thought that the famine of his day was working against him. His son, Joseph, knew that God was taking everything in his life, including the impending famine, and was working it all together for his good (see Genesis 50:20).
- What you may feel is a closed door may be God's directing you to His greater open door of blessings.

One of the keys to understanding the secret of fruitfulness lies in Hannah's prayer of praise in 1 Samuel 2:4-9. This praise song from Hannah's lips underscores an unchangeable principle of God in His dealings with His children. The sooner we learn God's ways, the sooner we will discover that Jesus is not only our burden bearer but our very Life. The more you struggle and resist God's process to move you to fruitfulness, the more you will crash into the doors God has sovereignly closed in your path.

Notice the words of Hannah's praise song:

*The bows of the **mighty** men are broken,
And those who stumbled are girded with strength.
Those who were **full** have hired themselves out for bread,
And the hungry have ceased to hunger.
Even the barren has borne seven,
And **she who has many children** has become feeble.
The LORD **kills** and makes alive;
He **brings down** to the grave and brings up.
The LORD **makes poor** and makes rich;
He **brings low** and lifts up.
He raises the poor from the dust
And lifts the beggar from the ash heap,
To set them among princes
And make them inherit the throne of glory.
For the pillars of the earth are the LORD's,
And He has set the world upon them.
He will guard the feet of His saints,
But the wicked shall be **silent in darkness**.
For by strength no man shall prevail (1 Samuel 2:4-9, emphasis mine).*

In these six verses, I've highlighted in **bold** those who, from an earthly perspective, seem to have it all. They are mighty, they are full. But notice what happens: they are killed, made poor and brought low by God. Those who have many children become feeble. Their ultimate fate is silence in the darkness.

In contrast, I've underlined phrases that describe those who don't seem to be blessed with earthly things. They stumble and hunger. What happens to them? They trust in God. As a result, they are girded with strength, they have been made full and are no longer hungry. The barren becomes fruitful. God makes these people alive; they are made rich, lifted up, raised up from the dust, lifted from the ash heap, set among princes and made to inherit the throne of glory. Their feet are guarded by God Himself.

But it is the last phrase of verse nine that summarizes everything up to that point: *for by strength no man shall prevail*. What does that mean? God spoke directly to the prophet Zechariah and said, *Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit, says the Lord of hosts* (Zechariah 4:6).

As we look closer into the mirror of God's Word, we will find that we identify with the men and women of faith and see ourselves in Jesus Christ. But we also must see our old sinful self in the illustration of the flesh to see ourselves as those who battle our flesh, our old identity in Adam. The old Adam in us works tirelessly to find something – anything – for which he can get some kind of credit. But there is nothing in our flesh that can please God.

Consider the following comparison of the two women. Sometimes we look like Peninnah and sometimes we look like Hannah:

- The Natural Way of Blessing: Peninnah. She was mighty, full, fruitful, alive, rich, and a princess.
- The Supernatural Way of God's Blessing: Hannah. She was stumbling, barren, hungry, dead, poor, and a peasant

One of the keys seems to be in the names of these two women. Remember, Peninnah's name means "*ruby*." Perhaps it described her physical beauty and attractiveness. But Hannah's name means "*grace*." Grace is never earned, never deserved. It is the free gift of God.

God ultimately blessed Hannah, not because she deserved it, not because she was better than Peninnah, or had done more religious activities than her rival. It was simply because she trusted God. She sought Him *by faith*. And God is always a rewarder of those who seek Him by faith (see Hebrews 11:1-6).

We see this same principle in effect at the birth of Jesus. The Holy Spirit would conceive in Mary's womb the Promised Seed who is our Lord and Savior, not because she was deserving ... but because she was *graced by God*. And she sang,

My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior. For He has regarded the lowly state of His maidservant; for behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed. For He who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is His name. And His mercy is on those who fear Him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with His arm; He has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. He has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich He has sent away empty (Luke 1:46-53).

As you read those verses, you may have noticed some familiar language. Read the last four lines again and notice the words *mighty, lowly, hungry, and rich*. Do those words sound familiar? Those are the very words Hannah used in her prayer to God.

How do you see life? Are you a *victim* or are you *blessed*? Are you *trying to please God* or are you *trusting Him because of all that He has done for you*? Are you *disappointed in life* or have you recognized that *everything in your life is filtered through the lens of a loving, heavenly Father? Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning* (James 1:17).



Understanding God's Principles of Fruitfulness

And he had two wives: the name of one was Hannah, and the name of the other Peninnah. Peninnah had children, but Hannah had no children.... But to Hannah he would give a double portion, for he loved Hannah, although the LORD had closed her womb (1 Samuel 1:2, 5).

Notice the phrase, *But the Lord had closed her womb*. The original King James translation says that God *shut up her womb*. That seems to emphasize the forcefulness and finality of it all.

Hannah was loved by her husband even more than Peninnah but *the Lord had shut up her womb*. Elkanah loved her but that did not solve her problem of barrenness. No matter what good things you might be able to say about Hannah, a giant neon light hung over her head flashing the words “*But she had no children.*” She did not have what mattered most ... and she was grieved.

No matter how successful we might become, no matter what heights we may achieve, at the end of our life none of that matters. If the epitaph on our grave marker is “unfruitful,” we will have misspent our lives. As a Christian, no matter what you may accomplish in life, if you are spiritually barren it means little in eternity.

Principles of Interpretation

One of the ways that I like to study Scripture is to look at the big picture first and interpret all of Scripture through the lens of *God’s Greater Purpose in Christ*. Life is not about us ... it is about Jesus Christ.

And though the story in 1 Samuel chapters 1 and 2 accurately records the events of Hannah’s life, there is a greater story at work – the story of God’s Greater Purpose in Christ. It is not about Hannah first; it is about Christ first. It is not about me first, and the problems that I am going through like Hannah but it is about how Hannah fits into God’s bigger picture and God’s Greater Purpose in Christ. The same is true of us.³

And before the lamp of God went out in the tabernacle of the LORD where the ark of God was, and while Samuel was lying down ... Then the LORD said to Samuel: Behold, I will do something in Israel at which both ears of everyone who hears it will tingle (1 Samuel 3:3, 11).

God had a greater purpose than Hannah. He wanted to correct the idolatry and disobedience in Israel and restore the nation back to Him. He also wanted to prepare David to sit on Israel’s throne, ultimately laying the groundwork for the King of Kings who would come from the lineage of David.

To accomplish all of that, God used a simple, barren Hebrew wife who had been the victim of her rival’s ridicule and scorn. God always gets His way ... and He uses the weak and dependent to accomplish His purposes.

A second way that we will study this theme of God preparing us for fruitfulness is to remember that the Word of God and the Old Testament in particular is written by God progressively revealing Himself until we have His full revelation in Jesus Christ and the completion of the New Testament. Therefore we look back on the barren like Hannah through the lens of the full New Testament revelation of God’s Word and principles.

Beyond the normal rules of interpreting Scripture in its context, language, and culture, we also know that the Scripture is a commentary upon itself and its topics and characters are not isolated but woven together into God’s tapestry of Truth. Thus we will seek to weave Hannah to all in

³ See *God’s Greater Purpose in Christ*, E. Truman Herring.

Scripture who are struggling with fruitfulness to better understand the secrets of fruitfulness that God has for us.

Hannah, like most Jewish girls, dreamed of a happy marriage with many loving children. Before Connie and I were married, she was given a beautiful hope chest. It was made of cedar and just to open it sent out an aroma of cedar and hope. It was quite large, four feet long and two feet in depth and width. It was meant to hold many of Connie's dreams for our marriage. One of those dreams would be like Hannah's to have children of her own. To that dream Connie's hope chest would become more of a casket with a miscarriage but no child from her own womb. Connie and I continued to hope for nine years before we gave into the admission that we were barren.

We are not told how long Hannah was married before she realized that she was barren. It was obviously a period of many years. From month to month, year after year, she must have hoped, "*This could be the month I get pregnant.*" Despite the shame from her culture and the pain in her heart, God was at work in her life. Her inability to conceive children was not a sign of God's displeasure. He was working out His greater plan and purpose in Jesus Christ.

God has made His children to hope. He identifies Himself as the "*God of all hope.*" Without hope we cannot face tomorrow. Hannah had to keep opening the hope chest of the Word of God and be refreshed by the fragrance of God's love. She could not and would not let her hope chest become a casket to her God given dreams.

But God had shut up her womb. Let's examine this phrase from several perspectives.

How did Hannah interpret her circumstances? Obviously she knew that she had been unsuccessful at having children in contrast to her husband's other wife who had many children. She knew that her husband Elkanah was not sterile. Many would just see this as a health issue that perhaps time would heal. Others may have seen it as a chance issue and in one of the future months she would get lucky and get pregnant. It seems that no matter what her husband or Peninnah thought in their hopeless labeling of Hannah as barren, she still had a firm hope in God that would not let hope die.

She brought her case to God year after year. She pleaded her case, as did Abraham and Sarah, to God as a loving Father. She held on to hope when all hope was gone, like a mother who would die before she would let her child die. God Himself had impregnated her with hope and she would go through the labor pains until hope turned to the faith that obtains promises from God (Hebrews 11:33). She came to God as a daughter of Abraham and like him, *after he had patiently endured, he obtained the promise* (Hebrews 6:15). She yearly followed the footsteps of the faithful Abraham to worship God and prove herself a daughter of Abraham in her hope in God. Against the pain of her barrenness, she hoped in the God of fruitfulness. Even though Romans 4:18 describes Abraham's faith, it can equally be applied to Hannah's faith: *Who against hope believed in hope, that he might become the father of many nations, according to that which was spoken, so shall your seed be.*

One of the signs that you are maturing in grace is that you don't hope in hope. You hope in Jesus, so you hope well-beyond what you can see. Is there a time in your life where you can say you "saw" with the eyes of faith and hoped against hope because your hope was in Jesus?

Certainly the words of Jesus should give us hope as well that we are not His unfruitful children but have been chosen to bear much fruit (John 15:16).

How do you interpret that area of your life where God may have shut up your womb? God will design an area of your life in which He will teach you that you are barren and that *without (Jesus), you can do nothing* (John 15:5). Have you given up hope that your prayers will ever be answered? Have you tried to knock down doors that God has shut? Have you like Jacob tried to manipulate God and man to accomplish what you think is God's will?

But God had shut up her womb.

From heaven's perspective, God had a blueprint for Hannah that was related to a much bigger picture than Hannah's calendar and personal agenda. God has purposed His will before time began and we are chosen to fit into God's purpose and time-table and not our own.

Hannah was deeply burdened by her inability to conceive. But what Hannah could not see was the future of the Priesthood was at stake through Eli's evil sons. She did not understand that God would not let the *lamp of the Lord go out in the Tabernacle of the Lord* (1 Samuel 3:3). She did not understand that God had planned before her birth that her son Samuel would be a prophet, a Judge and a leader of Israel. She did not understand how God had also chosen her son to be part of God's greater purpose in Christ and that God would promise Christ as His faithful anointed priest that would serve before Him forever.

Whatever problem you face in life remember that we see only today. But God's plan is much bigger and we must trust Him and remember that "*all things work together for our good and His glory*" (see Romans 8:28).



Chapter 4

Barren

And he had two wives: the name of one was Hannah, and the name of the other Peninnah. Peninnah had children, but Hannah had no children.... But to Hannah he would give a double portion, for he loved Hannah, although the LORD had closed her womb (1 Samuel 1:2, 5).



The First Test of Faith

God takes Hannah through a series of eight tests of faith, designed to strengthen her, deepen her faith, and bring glory to God. The first test of faith is this:

How will she respond to God with her need?

An Opportunity to Trust

God often creates a need in our lives to grow our faith. That need can come from a disappointment we experience. For some, it is the loss of a job; for others it may be a health issue; for others, perhaps a divorce or the death of a loved one. At other times, it may simply be a challenge we face.

Do you remember the story in the Gospels where the disciples encountered a fierce storm on the Sea of Galilee? The winds and waves were about to sink their boat – and Jesus was asleep on a cushion. The disciples quickly woke Him up and said, in what sounded like an accusation, *Do You not care that we are perishing?* (Mark 4:38). Jesus arose, rebuked the wind and waves – and there was a great calm on the sea. But then He turned to the disciples and said, *Why are you so fearful? How is it that you have no faith?* (4:40). That last phrase, *how is it that you have no faith*, is very powerful. The word *you* is emphatic. The idea is, *how is it that YOU, you who have followed Me day after day, have no faith?*

It's obvious from reading this story that what was uppermost in the purpose of Jesus was to increase the disciples' faith. Can you identify with that? Think back over the last few years of your life. What circumstances were there that challenged you? What fears did you face? What disappointments did you experience?

As you look back on those days, can you see the sovereign hand of God at work? Ask yourself these questions:

- Did my trial catch God by surprise? Was He even aware of what I was going through?
- What did I learn through that experience?
- Did my need or problem drive me closer to God, to live in greater dependence on Him – or did I allow it to drive me further from God? It is critical that our need not drive us *from* God but *to* God.

Hannah had such an opportunity to trust God. Through her inability to conceive, she was faced with a series of choices:

- Would she trust God – or would she lose heart and become discouraged?
- Would she obey God – or would she become rebellious against Him?
- Would she praise God no matter what – or would she become bitter?
- Would she allow her barrenness to define her – or would she make the right choices so that her faith would define her?
- Would she despair – or would she have hope?

Hannah had reason to hope that she would one day bear children. That hope was not based on her physical condition. Her womb had proven to be closed. But her hope was in God and His promises. Hope precedes faith and helps us seek God and His mercies. Hebrews 11:1, 6 says, *Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.... But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him.*

Hope is based on the person and character of God. We hope in God before we receive a specific promise from Him about our need.

Reasons to Hope

Hannah had four reasons to hope in God that He would open her womb:

1. The Purpose of the Womb

God created the womb for birth and placed a natural longing in women to have children. At Creation, God said *be fruitful and multiply* (Genesis 1:28). God has also spoken to every believer and said that His purpose for us is to be fruitful. Jesus said, *You did not choose Me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should remain, that whatever you ask the Father in My name He may give you* (John 15:16).

We Were Designed to be Fruitful

Spiritually, every believer has a God-given responsibility to bear fruit. Just as God created Hannah to give birth to the prophet Samuel, God's purpose is for us also bear fruit and to be vessels through whom many of God's choice servants come to Christ. Our God is not only the God of hope. He is the God of purpose as well. Nothing God ever planned is without purpose. Look at the masterpiece of the stars. They declare the glory of God throughout the heavens and move in their orbits in orchestrated precision. There is a design and purpose to Creation.

Hannah knew that there was a design and purpose to her womb as well. That womb was not a tomb. To Hannah, barrenness did not fit into God's purpose for her life. In hope against hope, she believed. And that hope carried her through the days of discouragement and gave her strength in the face of the many discouraging voices she heard.

Settling for a Lesser Destiny

One day I came face to face with a great American bald eagle. I stared in awe at his beauty and size. He looked so powerful. I imagined how with his great strength he could swoop down from the sky and capture his prey and carry it back with his powerful wings up to the mountains. God had equipped him with powerful talons and a beak able to rip apart his meal to share with his eaglets.

My interest in the eagle was piqued because I had recently preached a message entitled "*Carried on the wings of the eagle and our rest in God.*" I remembered Isaiah 40:31 where God's promises His power to the weak and allows us to *mount up with wings like the eagle*. I thought of how such a large eagle could simply raise its mighty wings and let the power of the wind carry it without effort over the mountain heights.

But as I looked into the eagle's eyes, I saw something I had not expected. It was not the alert look of a mighty hunter that noticed every movement around him. It was the look of boredom and defeat. Why? Because I wasn't in one of our grand National Parks. I was at the zoo. I was staring into the eyes of a caged eagle – not one that was free in the wild.

How long had it taken that magnificent eagle to surrender its purpose and destiny for a cage? God the Creator had programmed into that eagle's DNA a purpose to fly to great heights. But this great bird had apparently given up hope that he would ever fly again.

In contrast to that caged eagle, Hannah's hope could not be caged by an empty womb. She had a firm confidence that God had a greater plan for her life – that her womb would one day carry His gift of a child.



My Story

I've learned these lessons the hard way. There was a day that I served Christ half-heartedly. Later I tried to serve him with zeal and grew weary with all my Christian commitments of service. In both attempts I failed to find fulfillment and rest. I was living and ministering in my flesh, attempting to please God with self-effort.

Then I discovered what Hannah knew, that *by strength shall no man prevail*. The eagle soars not by his own strength but by the lift of the unseen wind. I know when I am carried by the Holy Spirit like the eagle, and I know when I am struggling in my own strength. We do not live the Christian life in our own efforts. It is by His power and strength.

Paul writes about this truth in Galatians 2:20. *I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.*

Several years ago I wrote the following poem to express this idea of the exchanged life – that we are able to mount up on wings like eagles and soar, not because of our own strength and ability ... but because of the grace and power of the Lord Jesus Christ who lives inside of us and empowers us daily.

Eagles Wings and the Cross

I walked but then fainted
With the cross I did bear
I ran to do God's will
But grew weary with my cares

I did not mount up like eagles
Carried by the Spirit's wind
I did not know the power
That begins where my life ends

But in my weakness I discovered
Two crosses made for me
One that I took and carried
And one cross that carried me

By faith we must discover
The two deaths of His cross
There Jesus died for my sins
And there I died with Him

Wait upon the Lord
And soar with eagles wings
By faith exchange your life
For the Life His cross will bring ⁴



God's Design for Your Life

From the moment that you were born again, God put in you a spiritual DNA to produce spiritual fruit. We cannot be content to be caged in a man-made religion. God made us for better things – to soar with His Spirit and to be fruitful in our service for Him.

Unfortunately, so many settle for a lesser destiny. I have known thousands of Christians. In the eyes of most, you will see discouragement and defeat. They have accepted the status quo. They have settled into a religious routine of going to church once a week, reading the Bible occasionally, and serving in small ways in the ministry of the church. But the rest of their lives are their own to live as they please.

In the eyes of other Christians, there is a spark of faith to fulfill a God-given destiny. They know they have been called to bear fruit. They refuse to follow Jesus half-heartedly. They will not be caged by living lives equal to those around them. They expect God to show up and work in and through their lives every day. These eagle-like saints of God know it is God's purpose that their lives make a difference in the kingdom of God.

Stop here just for a moment. Take a spiritual inventory of your life. Have you been living a caged, defeated, fruitless life? Have you settled for a lesser destiny? Jesus has set you free to soar on eagle's wings. Are you ready to follow the One who has said *Follow Me and I will make you fishers of men?* When James and John heard those words 2,000 years ago, *they immediately left the boat and followed Him* (Matthew 4:19-20). That was their God-given destiny.

What's yours? Are you ready to experience it? Do you trust God as He guides you on the great adventure of discovering His purpose for your life?

2. The Promise of the Word

⁴ *Eagles Wings and the Cross*, E. Truman Herring, © copyright 2005.

There is a second reason Hannah could have hope in God. Not only was God's purpose for her to be fruitful – but she also had the promise of His Word.

Promises, Promises

God had given a covenant promise through Moses that if Israel was in a right relationship with Him, there would be no one in Israel who would miscarry or be barren. God Himself said in Exodus 23:26 that when Israel was obedient, *no one shall suffer miscarriage or be barren in your land; I will fulfill the number of your days.*

What a promise! God would supernaturally protect and bless Israel as she faithfully followed Him.

Not only had God destined Hannah for fruitfulness, she also had a promise she could hold on to. It was a pledge from The-One-Who-Cannot-Lie that promised fertility.

God's Word is such an encouragement to us:

- The Word of God produces faith in our lives. Romans 10:17 says, *Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God.*
- The Word of God also tells us of the character of God. He is holy, loving and trustworthy. He will not withhold good gifts from us. When teaching on prayer, Jesus often referred back to the character of God. *If a son asks for bread from any father among you, will he give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will he give him a serpent instead of a fish? Or if he asks for an egg, will he offer him a scorpion? If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him! (Luke 11:11-13).*

God spoken personally and directly to Abraham, giving him a very specific promise regarding Sarah in Genesis 17:21. He said that by that date next year, Sarah would bear a child. Abraham believed God – and it indeed did come to pass.

But Hannah did not have a clear, direct promise from God. However, she did have the principle and general promise that God had made to Israel in Exodus 23. And with that, she yearly went to the tabernacle to worship God in hope. I can imagine her praying, *“God, if I am in a right relationship with You, then I want to apply the promise that none of Israel faithful servants should be barren. I ask You to open my womb and give me children.”*

And with the same confidence that Abraham had in Genesis 17, Hannah believed God. When the prophet Eli told her that her petition had been granted, she went on her way rejoicing. Her heart was no longer sad. And she was assured that, by the next year, she would have a child.

Application

We have already seen in John 15 that God has promised that none of His children should be spiritually unfruitful. Jesus said that *you will know them by their fruits* (Matthew 7:16).

As we walk in step with God's Spirit, we should expect the fruits of the Spirit to be produced in our lives (Galatians 5:16-25). In contrast to the works of the flesh, Paul writes that we will daily experience fruit of the Spirit, which is *love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control* (5:22-23).

Are those qualities evident in your life? The Apostle Peter promises, *if these things are yours and abound, you will be neither barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ* (2 Peter 1:8).

As part of the laborers in God's harvest, we should expect the Word to bring forth thirty, sixty and one hundred-fold fruit (Matthew 13:23). Like Hannah, we should cry out to God until He makes us fruitful.

Would you take a moment and pray now: *God, I know Your will is that I be fruitful. Your Word has promised that. I desire to walk in step with Your Spirit. Produce fruit in my life. May the qualities of love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control be borne in my life. May others come to know You through the words of my lips. And may You be glorified in my life as I seek to walk with You every day.*

3. The Power of Examples

Gaining Strength through Lives from the Past

The Bible is full of biographies. These stories of men and women of faith are meant to encourage us. They are the stories of people who trusted God in the face of insurmountable trials and problems. Hebrews 11 says that many of them never saw the answers to their prayers in their lifetimes. Yet they remained faithful ... full of faith.

Think of Samuel growing up, hearing the story of how God answered his mother's prayers.

- How encouraging it must have been for Samuel to know that his name meant "*asked of the Lord.*"
- Knowing that his very conception and birth were miraculous must have given him a sense of destiny and purpose.
- His mother cried out to God to give her a son and God answered her prayer miraculously.
- He was raised in the house of Eli the priest because his mother had dedicated him to God. *Therefore I also have lent him to the LORD; as long as he lives he shall be lent to the LORD* (1 Samuel 1:28).

What an impact this knowledge must have made on Samuel! If Hannah remained barren and God did not answer her prayers, then there would have been no Samuel. Samuel had to feel like a child of purpose and destiny.

Hannah must have received similar encouragement as she looked back in her ancestral lineage.

- Abraham's wife, Sarah, was unable to conceive. Not only that, she was almost ninety years old and her husband Abraham was one hundred. Yet God performed a miracle and Isaac was conceived. If Sarah remained barren, then there would have been no ancestral line to Hannah.
- Later, Isaac and Rebekah had difficulty conceiving. But God also opened Rebekah's womb and she gave birth to Jacob.
- There were other examples, too, like Rachael giving birth to Joseph. And Joseph became the one through whom Israel was preserved through the famines in Egypt.

Hannah saw these examples and gained hope that God would do the same for her. Through the power of the examples of Scripture she had reason to hope.



From My Personal Discipleship Diary

In a small way, I can identify with Samuel and how he felt when he understood his mother's prayer had been answered in relationship to his ministry. After God brought a revival to my life in my second year of marriage, I became sensitive enough to God to have the assurance that God had called me to preach. Though my godly mother influenced me by example to have a love relationship with Jesus, she never planted the thought in my mind to be a preacher. It was only after I made it public that I had surrendered to the ministry that she told me of her prayer. *"Son, when I was pregnant with you, I laid my hands on my belly and asked God to dedicate you to be a preacher of Christ. I dedicated you to God to be a preacher from my womb."*

Her story made a great impact on me because it confirmed a private moment that I had with the Lord as I struggled with God's call to preach. I was kneeling beside my bed and trying to explain to God that I was a poor choice to preach. I was not a good speaker and often stuttered when I was nervous and began to talk too fast. On many occasions I was publicly embarrassed by having someone stop me while I was speaking and tell me rudely, *"I cannot understand a word you are saying."*

Still on my knees, I was praying and reading my Bible. Immediately after pouring out my excuses to God, I read these words from Jeremiah:

Then the word of the LORD came to me, saying: "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you; before you were born I sanctified you; I ordained you a prophet to the nations." Then said I: "Ah, Lord GOD! Behold, I cannot speak, for I am a youth." But

the LORD said to me: “Do not say, ‘I am a youth,’ For you shall go to all to whom I send you, and whatever I command you, you shall speak. Do not be afraid of their faces, for I am with you to deliver you,” says the LORD (Jeremiah 1:4-8).

In that moment I made the application of that passage to my personal prayer and felt another confirmation that God had indeed called me to be a preacher. From my perspective it was private – just between God and me. When my mom told me of her Hannah-like prayer, I had a deep sense that God’s call on my life began long before I even knew about it.

Nearly fifty-two years after my mother dedicated me to God to preach His Gospel, she was on her deathbed. I was torn between staying with her and leading our mission team to India. Part of my assignment was to lead a pastor’s conference and to preach two of the three nights of a mass crusade of 55,000. My mom had given me to the Lord before birth and she now gave me to the Lord at death. She knew I had to decide between staying at her bed-side or preaching the Lord Jesus in India. She pulled me close and prayed that God’s Spirit would be on me and then in her weakness she whispered in my ear, *“Win many souls to Jesus, win many souls to Jesus.”* Like Hannah released Samuel, mom again released me to preach.

Those would be the last words I would hear from my saintly mom’s lips as her ninety years on earth ended and her eternity in heaven began. They echoed in my ears during my time in India. Over 12,000 decisions cards were turned in at the crusade, indicating people’s commitments to the Lord Jesus. Again my mother’s prayer had been answered, *“Win many souls to Jesus, win many souls to Jesus.”* Those words still echo in my ears. My mother’s example and her prayers have truly made an impact on my life and ministry.

The examples from the lives of godly men and women in the past give us great encouragement. God placed every Bible character in Scripture for us as an example to build our faith and to believe that God can meet our needs as well (1 Corinthians 10:11).



Let’s Look at the Lives Around Us

The examples of Scripture are for us as well. As we look at them, God can start a fire of hope in us: *what He did for others, He can do for us.*

Why should we be unfruitful when we have powerful examples of God answering the prayers of His children? Why would any of us want to face the giants of our Promised Land and not follow the example of Joshua and Caleb and boldly say that we are well able to take what God has promised us rather than draw back in fear like the ten spies who choose fear over faith? (see Numbers 13).

God also puts living examples around us to challenge our faith. Paul told the Philippians to follow his example (Philippians 3:17). Paul praised the church at Thessalonica because they had become examples of faith to the believers at Macedonia and Achaia (1 Thessalonians 1:7). Pastors are to walk with God as examples for the flock of God to follow (1 Peter 5:3).

Despite the encouraging examples around us, many of us continue in our unfruitful condition. It's easy to ignore our lack of fruitfulness. We rationalize that our lives are not that different from most Christians. Unfortunately, that may be true ... but it does not excuse us. God has called us to be fruitful. How can we be satisfied with little or no fruit when Jesus said, *Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me. I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing* (John 15:4-5).

Some believers envy the examples of faith in our generation that God has raised up in His vineyard. Others mock or condemn these powerful examples of faith. What we should do is to find out what unbelief, what sin, what fear, or what apathy is present in our lives that has left us with little fruit ... and then deal with that issue before God.

I have only been fishing a few times in my life, but I've learned that some people can catch fish out of the same boat on the same river while others do not. If someone in your boat is catching fish and you are not, you need to ask yourself why.

- Perhaps there is sin in your life. God will not use an unclean vessel. Repent from it. Confess it to God and ask Him to cleanse you from it.
- Perhaps your problem is simply one of not knowing what to do. Don't be so stubborn that you won't follow the example of those who are winning people to Jesus. Find out what bait they are using and where they are casting their bait. Have them point out the mistakes you are making in your casting technique. But do not excuse your lack of catching fish on the sovereignty of God. Don't try to explain it away by saying that evangelism is not your gift. If somebody in your boat is always catching fish while you are not, then be motivated by them.

If others are winning the lost to Christ and you are not, something must change. Why remain unfruitful in that area of your Christian life? Listen to the instructions of Jesus and *Cast your net on the other side and you will catch men*. Remember Jesus said, *Follow me and I will make you fishers of men*.

If someone is following Jesus and becoming a fisher of men, then it just may be God challenging you to follow them like they follow Christ.

My faith has grown in these last years as I've been challenged by the example of others. Do not use the excuse that God is working through their life because they are smarter, more talented, better communicators or more gifted than you. God still works through the weak, the foolish and the base to accomplish great things (1 Corinthians 1:27-28). Fruitfulness is always a heart-and-faith issue, never an issue of talent and ability.

For the eyes of the LORD run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to show Himself strong on behalf of those whose heart is loyal to Him (2 Chronicles 16:9). I'm convinced that God wants to demonstrate His strength and power throughout the earth. All He needs is one of His children to have a heart that is completely devoted to Him.

Are you ready to do that? Are you ready to trust Him, to be inspired by the examples of those in Scripture and those around you? Don't lose hope – rather, be inspired by the hope that you see in others.

4. The Persistent Burden

There is one final reason that gave Hannah hope. It was her persistent burden. There was something deep within Hannah's heart that would not allow her to give up the dream of fruitfulness.

Sometimes it is hard to determine if what we are praying for is from God – or if it is based on our own fleshly desires and motives. Did our burden originate in the heart of God, or did we simply invent it and wish it were true on our own? How can you determine the source?

- **The Test of Perseverance**

A prayer based on selfish desires fades away after a period of time and is forgotten. However, when the burden is from heaven, it is followed by persistent prayer that does not lose heart. If the burden is not self-motivated out of personal bias, and it will not subside, then it is probably God's burden from heaven for you. If so, persevere. Don't quit.

Remember God was just as much involved in shutting Hannah's womb as in opening her womb. God was just as much involved in sending a famine as He was in sending Joseph to provide during the famine (Psalm 105:16-22). The same God who shut up the heavens for Elijah also opened the windows of heaven at His Word and purpose (James 5:16-18).

Do you have a persistent burden that you believe God has given you? Then you must wait on God and be persistent in prayer.

- **The Test of Motive**

What's your motive in praying for that which is on your heart? Is it to give ... or to get? Is it selfishly driven or Gospel-driven? Is your motive to be generous or to keep for yourself?

Admittedly it is hard to understand and trust our own hearts. Jeremiah 17:9 states that *The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it?* But there is hope in the very next verse: *I, the Lord, search the heart, I test the mind, even to give every man according to his ways, according to the fruit of his doings.*

God knows our true motives. Ask Him to reveal them to you. He tests the heart. Ask Him to test yours.

- **The Test of Glory**

Ultimately we are called to do all things for the glory of Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 10:31). As you pray, will your prayer glorify God? Will Jesus Christ be lifted up through the answer to your prayer?

Hannah knew her burden was from God. She also knew that the answer to her prayer would glorify God. That's why her words of praise in 1 Samuel 2:1-10 ring so true. They express the true joy found when God answers a deep burden of the heart.

Christian history gives us many examples of God placing the burden of His heart in heaven in the soul of one of His children on earth. One example was the burden God gave John Knox for the country of Scotland.

Knox was a leader in the Protestant Reformation in the 1500s. He faithfully fought for the truths of the Gospel, but was persecuted throughout his ministry, ending up in prison and later in exile. However, his passion for his countrymen never wavered. His famous prayer was born out of that burden: "God, give me Scotland or I'll die."

One account states,

During these troublesome times of Scotland, when Rome was using all her power to suppress the Reformation, the cause of Protestant Christianity was in great danger. John Knox was seen to leave his study and proceed to the rear of his home. He was followed by a friend who, through the silent darkness, heard Knox as if in prayer. After a few moments of silence his voice became clear, and the earnest petition went up from his struggling soul to heaven: "O Lord, give me Scotland, or I die!" Then a pause of silent calmness, then again the appeal broke forth: "O Lord give me Scotland, or I die!" Once again all was silent, when, with a yet intense poignancy, the thrice repeated intercession struggled forth: "O Lord give me Scotland, or I die!" God gave him Scotland despite Mary. Knox's prayer was heard and largely answered.⁵

Has Your Burden "Passed the Test"?

Has God created a persistent burden in your soul that will not go away? Are your motives pure? Will He receive the glory when the answer comes? If so, take heart. Persevere. And look expectantly for His long-awaited answer.

⁵ Taken from a web site article entitled "Revolution and the Battle of the Boyne and a Prayer for Scotland," <http://www.tranenttrueblues228.50megs.com/custom3.html>