

GREAT OLD TESTAMENT PRAYERS: HANNAH

(1 Samuel 1.1-27)

Thank you for your lovely welcome.

As it was Mother's Day last week and the subject today is about Hannah, and her struggle with motherhood, I have some fun comparison pictures to show what the media often portrays motherhood as, and what it can really be like. I think most of you will agree that being a parent is much harder than we imagine.

Slides of perfect and messy mothers...

For me and many other women, just like Hannah in our reading, 1 in 5 women are childless, at some point in their lives.

For many years after we were married, long after we would have loved to be blessed with children, no child appeared.

As a practicing midwife at that time, it was even more poignant and difficult. I remember going back to work after going through the trauma of miscarriage, to be faced with a woman who was really depressed because she had become pregnant and really didn't want another pregnancy.

I had to, and did, manage to deal professionally with this challenge, but later went home to cry and wonder whether I could do the job ever again.

I wasn't a Christian at the time, I didn't have that comfort of knowing Jesus was with me, it's hard to remember just how lonely and desolate that felt. No human relationship can ever come close to the one with Jesus.

After I became a Christian it was one of many experiences that I have had to unburden through prayer to help me move forward, with joy.

Along with many of you here, I also have experienced the painful death of my own mother, the first few years of coming to this church, I cried pretty much through each Mother's Day service.

Bitter sweet tears, as, without her death, I would probably never had looked for more meaning in life, and so would not have found Jesus. Great sadness also, regretting that our relationship had not been better and rethinking the way it could have been.

I know that many people feel that loss especially if it is still raw, and they are still grieving, no matter how long ago. Still others, have had very bad experiences of their Mothers. Neglect, lack of affirmation, suffocating emotions, controlling attitudes, constant criticism....For them, Mother's Day is difficult too.

I now 21 years since my mum's death, can thank God for women, and there are many in my church family, who mother me and guide me, comfort me and laugh with me. I have many wonderful "surrogate" mothers.

I also ask God to help me to be like a mother to others who need that love. It still somehow makes me a little tearful, just because motherhood is such an amazing thing that God designed.

There are also many really sad stories of mothers who have lost their children either through death or irreconcilable separation.

In my work as a Midwife, I supported many families through really difficult situations, as expectations of how they thought parenthood would be, are dashed to the ground.

Some churches have decided that Mother's Day upsets so many people that they have decided not to celebrate it at all. Should we do that?

I don't think so. I think because of Jesus we can 'mourn with those who mourn and rejoice with those who rejoice' as it says in Romans 12.15

May we be able to say our church is a place where motherhood is upheld and honoured, but the pain and sorrow of those who long for what they do not have is acknowledged as well.

What about Hannah? Hannah was a woman who, as we have had read, lived a difficult life. The main purpose of a woman's life in those days was to produce children, and she didn't have any.

There is also another woman, Penninah, who happened to be the other wife of her husband, producing many children and reminding her of her lack at every opportunity.

Polygamy was fairly common practice, partly because so many men were killed in conflicts and battles, also because of the high death rate of people at an early age.

Women were not allowed to own their own home or have money, so the alternatives to being married were slavery prostitution or starvation.

Producing children was so important (children especially sons were necessary to work on the land and help run businesses) that Elkanah (the husband in this passage) may have even felt he had to have a second wife to produce children.

We can see the conflict it causes here, both women's lives lived arguing and feeling low, Hannah because it seems that her life was lived in the shadow of her barrenness, and possibly Penninah because she knew that the first most loved wife was always there with first place in Elkanah's heart.

Elkanah in the middle was the one who tried unsuccessfully to keep them happy.

Hannah, who must have felt deep anguish and a sense of hopelessness, especially each time they went up to the temple, possibly a bit like a Mother's Day reminder for those who are grieving.

They probably went to the temple 3 times a year as was the requirement we read in Exodus 23. Hannah may have felt that people were thinking, there she is again, Hannah, no children, feeling she had let everyone down, and there was Penninah with probably yet another child to show off, or one on the way.

Children were a measure of success in those days, and lack of them could be seen as a curse or a sign that the woman's life lacked the blessing of God.

In her desperation, and grief, Hannah prayed a prayer, she changed the way she prayed and gave everything to God. Something changed that day, she trusted God completely without knowing anything about what the future would bring. She made a vow to God that if He gave her a son, she would give him back to Him.

I read a book last year, and the author and his wife had had a son who only lived a year, instead of asking God why their child had been taken from them, too soon, they thanked God for the joy of having their child for even that short time, and try to put their devastating anguish into a cry for people to know Jesus. I think that's the type of faith I would like to have.

We can see the transformation in Hannah after the prayer clearly in the passage, she was able to have something to eat and *her face was no longer downcast*. She had left her problem with God and was trusting in Him.

Hannah suddenly seemed to have an insight into the heart of God, maybe part of that was she saw His sovereignty and knew that all children belong to God, and He is in control.

She knew that each child is a gift from God and we just have the privilege of borrowing them for a while, as our children grow older and make their own way in the world that becomes a lesson that we have to practice more and more.

I read an account of a Christian lady a few years ago who had been called to live and serve in a country with her husband which meant that their children, when they reached secondary school age had to leave home and board at a school all term. The woman wrote about the absolute wrestle and anguish she had with God, she felt as if she were wrenching her own heart out to send them away.

However after praying and listening to God she realised that they are His children, and like Hannah she was able to give them back to Him and pray for their protection and nurturing.

Knowing He is with them always, never leaving them. I have had to work so hard and wrestle with God in prayer many times to try not to control my children. Especially if I think they are making a wrong decision.

With Hannah, God's plan was going ahead, and was better than anybody at the time could see, or any of us now could have foreseen. Hannah's anguish and heartache led her to pray fervently and with absolute conviction, and not only did this prayer change her life, but it also changed the future of her people and the age in which she lived. God is certainly glorified in Hannah's story.

Samuel, her son, was called to be one of the greatest prophets, priests and judges in the Old Testament. He was very wise and godly, and had a pure heart, he ruled Israel during a difficult time.

Samuel heard God's voice and chose and anointed the first two Kings of Israel, as well as ruling Israel for many years and leading the nation back to God.

We also have a Samuel, (which means 'heard of God') he is 6ft 7 and wonderful, God didn't just stop there in blessing us, he also gave us a beautiful and amazing daughter Alice, who many of you will know. I didn't know of Hannah's story then, but I feel a great affinity with her now.

Hannah's weakness, her trust in God as she turned to Him, the fervency of her desire, and her faithfulness in bringing Samuel to God as promised are all evidences of God working in Hannah's life.

Her tears were ordained to be part of the glorious story of what God was doing in Israel's history.

The idea as a mother of giving your son of 2 or 3 (probably when a child was weaned in those days) to another person is very difficult, but she also had seen that Eli was flawed, his own sons, most people knew, were not turning out to be good people and she was leaving little Samuel in this same environment, *but* she had met with the living God and knew she could trust Him completely.

If you read on to Chapter 2 it describes Hannah making a little robe for young Samuel to take to him each year, as he grew. It makes me want to cry. (Picture)

I love the prayer of Hannah in chapter 2

My heart rejoices in the Lord; in the Lord my horn (strength) is lifted high. My mouth boasts over my enemies, for I delight in your deliverance.

'There is no one holy like the Lord; there is no one besides you; there is no Rock like our God.

She rejoices in knowing that Samuel is where he should be, and she has been part of God's purpose (as an aside she also had 5 more children).

There are often barren, unfruitful areas in our lives, ones which can consume our thoughts and lives and keep us from experiencing the full joy of knowing God.

We may feel that they define who we are, Corey Russell again says ' Do we realise that God deliberately sets up scenarios that force us to confront our barrenness. He puts us between a rock and a hard place and waits for our strength to run out, until brokenness and desperation produce a new prayer deep within our spirits.'

He states that 'when this prayer is birthed in the hearts of intercessors across the nation, then we will see revival. The spirit of conviction will rest over entire cities, and thousands will be saved in a moment. Leaders will emerge with authority and anointing on their words. But this will only happen through prayer. The prophetic silence is always broken by agonising intercession.'

I think God is calling us to give Him our barrenness, our frustrations, our longing for more, our deep desires. To give back to Him the desperation that He allows to rise up in us.

Ministry time...

Is there anything in your life that you are putting before your relationship with God, something that defines who you are, in your thoughts and prayers, ask Him to show you what it is. Give it up to Him, take that passion and fervency and change it to giving your all to Him. Let Him take your whole life and turn it around, for His glory. Knowing you can trust him completely.

Do you feel that you are between a rock and a hard place and have been hoping and waiting for change for a long time, but none comes. You would like help, to change the way you pray and know God's blessing.

Do you have regrets and grief from relationships in the past, with your mother or children or others, ask God to intervene and restore, repair and ask for His help to forgive and move on.

Are you called to be an intercessor? Do you feel overwhelmed and passionate even angry and tearful about something, that you know God is passionate about, turn it into pleas, and cries to Him, give him our frustrations and join with His spirit to change things.