

Who was Hannah in the Bible?

Hannah was one of two wives of a man named Elkanah who lived “in the hill country of Ephraim” near Shiloh. The other wife of Elkanah, Peninnah, had children, but Hannah had no child. Because of this, Hannah was very grieved. She desperately desired a child but could not conceive. To make matters worse, Peninnah taunted Hannah concerning her barrenness. Although Elkanah loved Hannah and was very kind to her (1 Samuel 1:5, 8), Peninnah’s unkindness on top of her natural grief was too much for Hannah to bear. Hannah cried out to God about her situation. She promised the Lord that if He would give her a son, she would dedicate him to God as a Nazirite (a man set apart to serve God; see Numbers 6:1-8).

While Hannah was earnestly and silently praying, Eli (the priest at the tabernacle) saw her and mistook her distress for drunkenness. He made an ill-advised comment to encourage her to give up drinking, and she corrected his mistake. “I have been praying here out of my great anguish and grief,” she told him (1 Samuel 1:16). Hannah then explains her predicament, and Eli says, “Go in peace, and the God of Israel grant your petition that you have made to him.” After that, Hannah felt better; she had received God’s promise.

The Lord answered Hannah’s prayer. She bore a son and named him Samuel, whose name means “Asked of God.” When the child was old enough, she kept her promise to the Lord, taking him to Eli and giving him to the Lord to serve in the tabernacle. There, Eli worshiped God along with Hannah. And then Hannah spoke a beautiful prayer, recorded in 1 Samuel 2:1-10.

In Hannah’s prayer, God is presented as the One who helps the weak. Hannah and Peninnah

represent the weak and the strong in this world. The strong often mock the weak, but God hears and rescues the Hannahs of the world. Hannah's prayer addresses the arrogance of the proud, contrasting their haughty words with God's knowledge, which is vast and far beyond their understanding. "The bows of the mighty are broken," she says, "but the feeble bind on strength" (verse 4). She begins her prayer with "My heart exults in the Lord; my strength is exalted in the Lord." Hannah recognized that her strength came from God and not from herself. She was not proud in her strength but rejoiced in God's ability to make a weakling strong.

Hannah's story gives us insight into God's heart. God does not despise human desire. Hannah's longing for a child was obviously placed in her heart by God Himself. Her husband tries to comfort her, saying in loving exasperation, "Am I not more to you than ten sons?" He does not understand why she cannot be content with what she has - namely, him! But Hannah's desire for a son would not be quenched. She was mocked by Peninnah and rebuked by Eli, but heard by God. God did not chastise her for being discontent. We know that godly contentment is great gain (1 Timothy 6:6). But that does not mean that our human desires - even those that overwhelm us with sorrow when they are unmet - are sinful in God's eyes. He understands our feelings. He knows that "a hope deferred makes the heart sick" (Proverbs 13:12). And He invites us to bring our requests to Him (Philippians 4:6).

Hannah's story also teaches us that God can use human weakness to accomplish great things. Samuel, Hannah's son, grew up to be a great man of God - the final judge and the prophet who anointed the first two kings of Israel. But why was Hannah's story necessary? Why not just start with Samuel in the tabernacle or at the start of his judgeship? Why not simply let him be born to a God-fearing couple and send an angel to

tell them to dedicate their son to God? In short, why involve Hannah's grief? Because God is glorified in Hannah's story. Her 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.

Every person experiences desires that will not be quenched and circumstances that cause grief. Many times, we simply do not understand these things. But in the life of Hannah we see that God knows our story from beginning to end, that everything has a purpose, and that trust in Him is never misplaced.