

God Answers Hannah's Prayers

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from our Savior, Jesus Christ, amen.

The story of Hannah is very personal to me. As a small child, I remember my mother telling me how much she and dad wanted a son. They had 4 girls and then a ten year gap. (SLIDE) My mom always told me that for all those ten years she prayed and prayed God would give her a son. She promised God she would dedicate a son to serve God and finally, I came along. What she never told me was I wasn't the first son to be born in our family. I was already an adult when I found out they had another baby boy born a year or so after my youngest sister. They named him Harold after my dad... He was born with water on the brain and only lived 24 hours. I think this all came rushing back into my memories after PJ and I delivered the beautiful quilt made by the Prayers and Squares Ministry to Morgan's Place this week. (SLIDE) Molley, the founder of Morgan's Place, took us on a tour of the tiny cemetery she and her husband started after the death of two of their unborn children. For those who don't know, Morgan's Place is a cemetery for babies who don't make it all the way to full-term or who die shortly after birth. These might be from miscarriage or even the remains after an abortion. (SLIDE) Molley knows the details of each of the babies buried at Morgan's Place and each story is extremely emotional. In my family's case, mom and dad had their tiny baby cremated. I always wondered why mom kept a bronzed baby shoe next to her

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bed. (SLIDE) I learned after she passed her first baby boy's cremains were inside that baby shoe. After she passed my sisters had that shoe buried with her.

In our scripture reading for today, Hannah is childless and everyone blamed her. Elkanah, her husband, had at least one other wife and she was able to bare children, including precious male offspring, but not so with Hannah. (SLIDE) Ancient peoples assumed when a woman was unable to conceive a child, she must have committed some sin to offend God. We don't know her name, but Elkanah's other wife never missed an opportunity to rub it in Hannah's face that she had given Elkanah male heirs. So, Hannah prayed for a son. (SLIDE) She didn't just pray for a son, I mean she prayed and she begged and she bargained with God for a son. She traveled to the temple at Shiloh where her shame and suffering were placed on display for all to see. Perhaps the others who were at the temple saw her affliction and also prayed for her. That's what we would do today. We might even make Hannah a prayer quilt. Of course, today we don't blame childlessness on God. We know a thing or two about where babies come from and there are certain In vitro Fertilization procedures couples can try to have the baby they long for.

Hannah came along in the Biblical narrative at just the right time. For many decades, probably centuries, the Israelites had been thinking and acting according to their own wants and desires. They routinely abandoned God and took up the

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worship of whatever god was handy. (SLIDE) Then the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob would withdraw His Godly protection and the nearest enemy would come in and overthrow them. After a while God would hear their cries and prayers and raise up a leader. In the Bible they were called Judges. Most of the time these judges were like God's superheroes. They were super strong like Sampson.

(SLIDE) The Judge would solve the current crisis and then fade away. The people would then go back to doing what they wanted, again forsaking their one true God. This pattern repeated itself over and over again. (SLIDE) You can read about it in the Book called Judges in the Bible. As I said, Hannah came along at just the right time. Something had to be done to break this cycle. God heard Hannah's prayers and saw her faithfulness. The answer to her prayers and to the dilemma of how to break the cycle of sin, repentance, forgiveness, then sinning again was to raise up a true man of God who would be the one to anoint both the 1st and 2nd kings of the Hebrew people. Hannah's son grew up to anoint both Saul and David. (SLIDE)

Last week we read how Moses prayed to God using logic and persistence and in the end, God changed God's mind regarding wiping out the stiff-necked people. (SLIDE) This week we read about Hannah and her prayers for a child. In our translation it says Hannah was "deeply distressed" and prayed. Another way to translate the Hebrew is to say she prayed stubbornly. Hannah wasn't giving up after casually mentioning her need to God. (SLIDE) She constantly pounded on

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the doors of heaven until God heard her and answered her prayers. As I think about my prayers and prayer in general, I think Hannah is given to us as an example of how to pray. It makes me wonder if the saying is as true in heaven as it is here on earth that “the squeaky wheel gets the grease.” Another great example of what I’m talking about is the way Jesus prayed. On the night of his betrayal, Matthew tells us Jesus threw himself to the ground and prayed three times in the Garden of Gethsemane for the cup to pass him by. (SLIDE) In Luke’s version Jesus prayed so urgently and in such anguish that his sweat became blood. He literally sweated blood he prayed so hard. When I read stories like this one about Hannah and the example Jesus gives us of prayer, it makes me sad and embarrassed when I compare my prayers to these. It’s no wonder my prayers seem to go unheard.

It reminds me of how honey bees behave when the scouts find a rich source of nectar or pollen. The scouts return to the hive and begin to do a dance. (SLIDE) This dance has at least two purposes. First the direction of the dance tells the rest of the workers the direction of the food, but the fervor and enthusiasm of the dance tells the others how good the new food source actually is. The more rigorous the dance the better the food supply and the more the workers react to the dance. I think that’s how prayer works too. The more rigorous our prayers, the more we get God’s undivided attention. Hannah prayed with vigor.

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Another thing Hannah had going for her was that her prayers aligned with God's plan. We can pray for more stuff or for our loved one's health, but if we already have more stuff than we need, or our loved one hasn't lived a healthy lifestyle then God isn't convinced and we're not praying according to God's plan. That doesn't mean our prayers go unheard or unanswered. It means God might answer them in ways we could never see or expect. Here's what I mean. When I was in the Air Force my career was skyrocketing. I was consistently selected as the Company Grade Officer of the Quarter. I was our command's Personnel Officer of the Year several times. I even made the inside of the cover of Time Magazine... (SLIDE) All was looking up. Then I went to Alaska and I ran into a brick wall. Despite working 12 to 16 hours a day I couldn't seem to turn the marginal unit around. I met with resistance on every front. I began to pray and pray and pray. No matter what I did, it seemed to get worse. Then one Sunday we attended a new church and the message for the day was from the Gospel of John where the disciples had been fishing all night, but catching nothing. Right away I knew that described how I was feeling. In that Gospel story, Jesus calls to the disciples and tells them to cast their nets on the right side of the boat. When they do, they catch a boatload of fish. (SLIDE) That Sunday things got real interesting. The Pastor said if you're not feeling satisfied or fulfilled in your chosen profession, maybe you're not fishing where Jesus is calling you to fish. That's when it hit me

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that I was dedicated, just like Hannah's son, Samuel, to God and I was actually running away from that calling on my life. From that day on, I changed course and have tried to follow where the Jesus has led me. The answer to my prayers wasn't for God to help me fix a marginal squadron in Alaska (**SLIDE**), but to change the course of my life and finally begin to follow the path God had intended for me all along. I have never regretted making that course correction. It hasn't been easy but it has been fulfilling.

Prayer isn't easy and it's not for the faint of heart. I firmly believe that when you ask God for help, you better be prepared for the answer. It might not be the answer you expect. In fact, it might just be the answer you feared the most. That's when you turn over your wants and desires and fully lean on God for His strength. My experience has been, when I begin to finally trust God, God always provides, especially when my prayers are stubborn or enthusiastic, like our honey bees.

The Lord hears all our prayers. May we be prepared and ready to follow through when God answers. May your deepest needs and desires be satisfied, knowing God has indeed heard you and answered your prayers. May you become stubborn as Hannah and open as Jesus to the strength and leading God always provides to those who are faithful. Amen.