

The Covenant Pulpit



Giving Up Our Children:

A Lesson in Motherhood

From

1 Samuel 1-2

Mother's Day

May 10, 2009

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²¹ The man Elkanah and all his house went up to offer to the LORD the yearly sacrifice and to pay his vow. ²² But Hannah did not go up, for she said to her husband, "As soon as the child is weaned, I will bring him, so that he may appear in the presence of the LORD and dwell there forever." ²³ Elkanah her husband said to her, "Do what seems best to you; wait until you have weaned him; only, may the LORD establish his word." So the woman remained and nursed her son until she weaned him. ²⁴ And when she had weaned him, she took him up with her, along with a three-year-old bull, an ephah of flour, and a skin of wine, and she brought him to the house of the LORD at Shiloh. And the child was young. ²⁵ Then they slaughtered the bull, and they brought the child to Eli. ²⁶ And she said, "Oh, my lord! As you live, my lord, I am the woman who was standing here in your presence, praying to the LORD. ²⁷ For this child I prayed, and the LORD has granted me my petition that I made to him. ²⁸ Therefore I have lent him to the LORD. As long as he lives, he is lent to the LORD."

And he worshiped the LORD there.

1 Samuel 1:21-28

Introduction

It's Mother's Day. I hope you sent a card or called, because as Mignon McLaughlin has written, "The only mothers it is safe to forget on Mother's Day are the good ones."¹ It may be *safe* to forget the good ones, but it's not *right*. Mothers are too precious to ignore.

It's not easy being a mother. The comedian Milton Berle once quipped, "If evolution really works, how come mothers only have two hands?" Author Robert Fulghum wrote the following reflection on his mother:

One of the very few reasons I had any respect for my mother when I was thirteen was because she would reach into the sink with her bare hands - *bare hands* - and pick up that lethal gunk and drop it into the garbage. To top that, I saw her reach into the wet garbage bag and fish around in there looking for a lost teaspoon. *Bare hands* - a kind of mad courage.

¹ *The Neurotic's Notebook*, 1960.

As Jane Sellman has observed, "The phrase 'working mother' is redundant." Finally, I love what Peter De Vries has said: "A suburban mother's role is to deliver children obstetrically once, and by car forever after." We all know that being a mother is a high calling and hard calling.

But what's it all for? Where is it all going? What is the goal? How do you know when a mother has done her job? Every mother I know cares deeply about their child. They are concerned about the outcome of their life. They desperately want their children to be happy. And most importantly, mothers want to know that it has all been worth it.

The dramatic and moving story of Hannah, a childless woman who gives up the son she so desperately wanted, helps us answer this question. The life of Hannah and her miracle son, Samuel, refocuses our vision of motherhood. I want to draw out of her life something that I believe is crucial for mothers (and fathers) to understand. Those of you who are looking for a guarantee may be disappointed at first. But I believe in the long run you will be helped. That message is this:

*Hannah teaches us that we must
place our children in God's hands.*

Hannah teaches us that a mother must put her trust in the sovereignty of God. Before we can talk about placing our children in God's hands, however, we must realize that a mother must place herself in God's hands. God is King. God is in control. God can do anything. This is the starting place of a mother's faith. We don't know anything about Hannah's appearance, but her beauty radiates off the pages. Her beauty is an inward one, the quiet yet confident trust in the sovereignty of God. She was willing to let God be King over her life, and then she trusted in his power and leadership.

Hannah was the wife of a man from Ephraim named Elkanah (1 Sam. 1:1). Elkanah's other wife, Peninnah, had children, but Hannah had none (1:2). Although she longed for children, she was barren. The Bible calls Peninnah "her rival"

because she constantly provoked Hannah and ridiculed her on account of her barrenness. Peninnah tried to make Hannah feel like less of a woman.

Here is the first implication of a mother trusting in the sovereignty of God: *A woman's worth is found in more than childbearing.* Don't ever forget that. The text says that Elkanah "gave to Hannah a double portion, because he loved her, though the Lord had closed her womb" (1:5). When Hannah mourned over her lack of children, Elkanah reassured her saying, "Am I not more to you than ten sons?" (1:8).

A woman's worth is found in more than childbearing. Nor is a woman's worth to be found simply in a career, appearance, or material possessions. Although motherhood is the essence of womanhood, womanhood is not restricted to childbearing. A woman's usefulness or worth in the eyes of God is in no way diminished by her inability to have children. A woman may make a baby, but a baby does not make a woman.

The nurturing and life-giving aspect of femininity finds innumerable expressions in the home, church, and society. Those of you here today who do not have children can still learn and live the lessons that Hannah's life teaches us. Women bear part of God's image, and femininity can be expressed regardless of whether one has biological children. For example, the Apostle Paul described his mission work in Thessalonica this way, "But we were gentle among you, like a nursing mother taking care of her own children" (1 Thess. 1:7). Hannah was loved by God and her husband *before* Samuel came along, and so are you!

Secondly, as Hannah trusted in the sovereignty of God, she learned that *a woman's womb is in the Lord's hands.* In a day of advanced fertility technology we often forget this foundational truth, but Hannah didn't. By faith she knew that if it was the Lord who had closed her womb, then it was the Lord alone who could open it. She also humbly accepted that if the Lord did open her womb, he knew best when to do it. After Hannah poured out her heart to God in the Tabernacle, the Bible says that "the Lord remembered her. And *in due time* Hannah conceived and bore a son" (1:19-20).

Thirdly, Hannah's trust in God's sovereignty taught her that *a woman's life is in the Lord's hands*. As Hannah later prayed in her magnificent prayer of chapter 2, "The Lord kills and brings to life; he brings down to Sheol and raises up. The Lord makes poor and makes rich; he brings low and he exalts" (2:6-7). In other words, God controls human history in a way that blesses his people, fulfills his purposes, and glorifies his Name. This may bring about situations in our lives personally that we find to be the blessed answer to our deepest desires. On the other hand, it may create circumstances that we at first find painfully inconvenient or disappointing. We may respond "triplets!" or "Oh no, triplets?!?!". A woman must be willing to take her lead from the Lord and his Word, not from the culture.

Secondly, Hannah teaches us to pray for children. As we will see, there was something in Hannah's desire for a child that pleased God. And in our day, there is a great need, especially for those of us in the church, to pray for children, that God would give us more of them. Why?

History turns on the birth of children. Hannah was used to forever shape the flow of human history through the birth of her son, Samuel. Not only did Samuel provide much needed leadership for the Israelites, he also started the monarchy in Israel, eventually anointing David as king. In Hannah's day Israel was languishing under their Philistine overlords and the inept spiritual leadership of Eli, the priest and his worthless sons. However, Samuel's birth marked the beginning of revival in Israel and the dawning of its Golden Age.

Go to Psalm 127. It begins with a triumphant statement that it is God who must build a city and defend it, despite our most valiant efforts. But how does the Lord do this. The rest of the Psalm tells us, "Behold, children are a heritage from the Lord, the fruit of the womb a reward...Blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them" (Psalm 127:3, 5). There it is! The Lord uses the birth of children to bless the world and shape human history. Who knows which child is being born today who will forever change the course of civilization? Who knows whether a great missionary,

preacher, president, lawyer, doctor, or business man is being knit together in his mother's womb as we speak? Let's pray for children as Hannah did.

Furthermore, the clear and resounding message of the Bible is that *to multiply is a blessing and not a curse*. It seems so insultingly basic, but it deserves repeating and emphasizing in this day. After God created mankind he gave them this mandate, often referred to as the Cultural Mandate: "And God blessed them. And God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion..." (Genesis 1:28). Notice that it said God *blessed* them and *not* cursed them. Big families are not always celebrated in our day. Scientists tell us that having too many children will exhaust natural resources, destroy the environment, and lead to overcrowding, violence, and social anarchy. Others have more pragmatic reasons for either not having children or having very few. Overpopulation will lead to attention-deprived children, burned-out and unfulfilled parents, and poverty-stricken families who are denied the basic privileges of a modern society.

This all seems to run against the worldview of the Bible. The fact is the zero percent growth folks are breeding themselves out of existence. Did you know that the United States is the only industrialized nation that is reproducing itself? And this is only possible, thankfully, because of Hispanic immigration and their high birth rate. For instance, in Europe the average birth rate ranges from 1.3 to 1.8 children per family, well below the minimum 2.2 children per family that is needed to sustain a culture. Islamic birth rates in Europe now are between 4 and 8 children per family. Most estimates are that by the year 2050, Europe will be a fully Muslim continent. Now Muhammad is second only to Jack as the most popular name for baby boys in Great Britain. Now statistics and trends don't determine the future, God does. So we need not fear. But we should pray! Let's pray for more children to raise for Christ and pray for Muslims and their children to be saved through faith in Christ. As we discussed this trend at our Young Adults bible study this week, one person somewhat humorously said, "Let the Muslims have all

the babies and then we will convert them all.” Maybe. Nevertheless, let’s not forget that children are a blessing and pray that God would give us more whether by us or by others.

A disclaimer: This is not a sermon intended to scare you or guilt you into having children early and often. I am not here to tell you how big your “quiver” should be, just that it should be full if God has that for you. And for those who do not or cannot have children, you are not under a curse. Remember, God is sovereign. If you are his in Christ, he is not withholding children from you to punish you. His love for you is no less than his love for those with children.

Another reason we should pray for children with the same passion as Hannah is that *the kingdom of God comes in part through the birth of children*. Hannah’s desire to be a mother reflected her desire to take part in God’s work of blessing the world. As a descendant of Abraham she knew that God had chosen her people to be a blessing to the whole world by bringing the Messiah into the world and by making his glory known among the nations. I don’t believe that Hannah prayed for a child to help her self-esteem. Her willingness to give Samuel to the Lord shows her selfless devotion to the Lord and his coming kingdom. Hannah’s prayer for a child helped to fulfill the whole flow of redemptive history leading right up to the birth of Jesus Christ.

As Christians we are called to “make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:18-20) through bold evangelism of non-Christians. However, the cultural mandate to be fruitful and multiply is compatible with the Great Commission to make disciples. They both have the same intended goal: to fill the earth with the knowledge and glory of God. As God declares through the prophet Malachi, he invented marriage because he was seeking godly offspring (Malachi 2:15). Hannah wanted children so that she could point them to the Lord and his kingdom. Her prayer is one from which we could learn.

Most importantly, Hannah teaches us to “wean” our children. When Hannah prayed to the Lord for a child, she made a vow, a binding promise. *“O Lord of Hosts, if you will indeed look on*

the affliction of your servant and remember me and not forget your servant, but will give to your servant a son, then I will give him to the Lord all the days of his life, and no razor shall touch his head” (1:11). When God did graciously answer her prayer, Hannah followed through on this vow, even though it must have been gut-wrenchingly tough. The child she wanted so badly she was willingly to give back to the Lord in a very tangible way. At the age of three, when she had weaned him off of nursing, she brought him to the Temple and left him there to serve and worship the Lord for the rest of his life. As the story so poignantly recounts:

“Then they slaughtered the bull, and they brought the child to Eli. And she said, “Oh, my lord! As you live, my lord, I am the woman who was standing here in your presence, praying to the LORD. For this child I prayed, and the LORD has granted me my petition that I made to him. Therefore I have lent him to the LORD. As long as he lives, he is lent to the LORD.” And he worshiped the LORD there (1 Samuel 1:25-27).

This is the point of the story of Hannah and Samuel. WE must place our children in the Lord’s hands—no matter how much we cherish them, or perhaps because we cherish them so much. We must “wean” them off of us and onto Him. What does this look like in the life of a mother?

Weaning our children requires us to always remember the difference between stewardship and ownership. We are caretakers of our children. We have the primary responsibility for them and their well-being. However, Hannah reminds us that only God owns them. As stewards we must do our best to nurture and care for them. However, as stewards we must remember that it is our responsibility to disciple our children; but only God saves them. I love what the Scottish pastor William Still has to say:

Prayer, example, and precept, in that order, are the means of bringing up children and young folk in the faith. Nor will high pressure tactics and brainwashing techniques avail when young folk have gone off on their own. Some young folk, alas, will have

their fling and sow their wild oats and come at last to heel, sadly, like the prodigal son. It is where Christians pathetically put their trust in external techniques and artificial stratagems that young folk go astray. Nothing takes the place of the realism of holy living and secret wrestling with God in prayer for our youngsters. We must commit them to God so utterly that we dare not interfere or tamper with their souls.²

He's right. We are called to teach and train and disciple and love our children. Nevertheless, only God can change their hearts. The results of their lives when you have done all must be left to God. That is why prayer is so essential in parenting. Always lift your child up to the Lord. Easy? No! Necessary? Yes!

Next, weaning our children means that security must replace possessiveness. A mother like Hannah must be secure enough in her relationship with God and her identity as a woman that she can freely give to her child what he/she needs. The great temptation of a mother is to become possessive of her child. Susan Hunt explains,

The possessive person clings with all her might to that which gives her significance or security.... We are masters of masking our sin; our logic is that we cling because we care. The truth is that we cling because we are trying to get our security and significance from the wrong place.³

A mother must find her security, happiness, and self-worth in her relationship with God. Listen to Hannah's prayer: "*My heart exults in the Lord; my strength is exalted in the Lord, my mouth derides my enemies, because I rejoice in your salvation*" (1 Samuel 2:1). Weaning our children requires us to always place them in God's hands. They are his. We are just borrowing them. We cannot cling to them in an unhealthy manner, which brings us to our next point.

Weaning our children means that we must be willing to equip our children to fulfill God's purposes and not our plans. This is where a

² William Still, *The Work of the Pastor*, p. 56-57.

³ Susan Hunt, *Spiritual Mothering*, p. 101.

biblical worldview must replace my worldview. We all have hopes, plans, and dreams for our children. But they are not always the same as God's. A mother (or father) must never forget that we are called to equip our children to fulfill God's purposes and not ours. As Proverbs 22:6 "Train up a child in the way that he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it." In other words, every child has a leaning, and bent, and inclination toward a calling and purpose God has made for them. You can't make a musician become a scientist, or a lawyer become a baker. You can't always make an artist be an athlete. Hannah was willing to support Samuel in his unusual calling as a priest and a prophet rather than serving her own selfish desires for him. We can learn from that. We must. Blessed is the man or woman whose mother learns this secret.

Weaning our children means that we must use her home to prepare children for God's House. There is an Irish proverb which says, "A man loves his sweetheart the most, his wife the best, but his mother the longest." How true. A mother's love is long. We remember them with grateful and warm thoughts to the day we die. However, the Lord's love is longer. It's eternal. A mother's job is to wean her child by using her lengthy love to point her children to the eternal love of God. She must use her home to prepare her children for an eternity in God's house. Hannah did. She nursed little Samuel only to give him away to love in the Lord's house the rest of his days. That is a perfect picture of our parenting. They are just passing through your home. Hopefully, by God's grace, they will journey on to dwell forever in God's presence and worship there as Samuel did (1:28).

And so as long as they are with us, we must point them to Christ. We must teach them of the only Son whom God willingly gave up so that we could become his sons and daughters forever. As John 3:16 so familiarly puts it, "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." That is the ultimate litmus test, mothers. Did you use your home to point them to Christ and the salvation that only comes through him? After that we must leave the results to God. We must place our children

back in his hands and say with Hannah, "For this child I prayed. Therefore, I give him to the Lord. As long as he lives, he is given to the Lord."

Conclusion: Encouragement for Mothers and Children

By way of conclusion, I wanted to share with you a portion of a speech given by former First Lady, Barbara Bush, at the 1990 commencement of the very feminist and liberal Wellesley College. Mrs. Bush listed three choices that the graduates would face in their lives. Here are her comments on the third.

The third choice that must not be missed is to cherish your human connections: your relationships with family and friends. For several years, you've had impressed upon you the importance to your career of dedication and hard work, and, of course, that's true. But as important as your obligations as a doctor, lawyer or business leader will be, you are a human being first and those human connections --- with spouses, with children, with friends -- are the most important investments you will ever make.

At the end of your life, you will never regret not having passed one more test, not winning one more verdict or not closing one more deal. You will regret time not spent with a husband, a child, a friend or a parent.

We are in a transitional period right now ... fascinating and exhilarating times ... learning to adjust to the changes and the choices we ... men and women ... are facing....

Maybe we should adjust faster, maybe we should adjust slower. But whatever the era, whatever the times, one thing will never change: Fathers and mothers, if you have children --- they must come first.

You must read to your children, hug your children, and you must love your children. Your success as a family ... our success

as a society depends not on what happens in the White House, but on what happens inside your house.

I think Hannah would agree. It's a message for all of us. Cherish your relationships, especially your children. Your success as a family, our success as a society, depends on what happens *in your house*. Mothers (and fathers), love your children. Train your children. Invest in your children.

Hannah would also be quick to remind us of this: in the end, your children aren't really yours. You are just borrowing them. Place them in the Lord's hands.