

The Nature of Things

Part 7 – The Nature of Stuff

I Samuel 1:9-28

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ October 30, 2016 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

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⁹ After they had eaten and drunk at Shiloh, Hannah rose and presented herself before the Lord. Now Eli the priest was sitting on the seat beside the doorpost of the temple of the Lord. ¹⁰ She was deeply distressed and prayed to the Lord, and wept bitterly. ¹¹ She made this vow: “O Lord of hosts, if only you will look on the misery of your servant, and remember me, and not forget your servant, but will give to your servant a male child, then I will set him before you as a nazirite until the day of his death. He shall drink neither wine nor intoxicants, and no razor shall touch his head.”

¹² As she continued praying before the Lord, Eli observed her mouth. ¹³ Hannah was praying silently; only her lips moved, but her voice was not heard; therefore Eli thought she was drunk. ¹⁴ So Eli said to her, “How long will you make a drunken spectacle of yourself? Put away your wine.” ¹⁵ But Hannah answered, “No, my lord, I am a woman deeply troubled; I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink, but I have been pouring out my soul before the Lord. ¹⁶ Do not regard your servant as a worthless woman, for I have been speaking out of my great anxiety and vexation all this time.” ¹⁷ Then Eli answered, “Go in peace; the God of Israel grant the petition you have made to him.” ¹⁸ And she said, “Let your servant find favor in your sight.” Then the woman went to her quarters, ate and drank with her husband, and her countenance was sad no longer.

¹⁹ They rose early in the morning and worshiped before the Lord; then they went back to their house at Ramah. Elkanah knew his wife Hannah, and the Lord remembered her. ²⁰ In due time Hannah conceived and bore a son. She named him Samuel, for she said, “I have asked him of the Lord.”

²¹ The man Elkanah and all his household 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, that he may appear in the presence of the Lord, and remain there forever; I will offer him as a nazirite for all time.” ²³ Her husband Elkanah 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 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. 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 the petition that I made to him. ²⁸ Therefore I have lent him to the Lord; as long as he lives, he is given to the Lord.”

She left him there for the Lord. (I Samuel 1:9-28, NRSV)

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If we would pause to think about it, many of us might easily relate to the desperate place in which we meet Hannah as this story begins. If the very thing which gives your life meaning and worth is denied you or taken from you, you are in a terrible place. In those days a woman was literally defined and valued for her ability to have children. Elkanah had two wives, Peninnah and Hannah. It's an arrangement which was bound to lead to all sorts of problems for everybody involved. Things are exacerbated by this fact, “**Peninnah had children, but Hannah had no children.**”¹ To pour salt in the wound, Peninnah had taken to mocking Hannah for her infertility. “I am blessed and you are not. I am valued and you are not. I am favored and you are not. And my children prove that it is so.” Can you imagine?

¹ I Samuel 1:2

This story will take on greater meaning for you if you can enter into Hannah's desperate place. So let me ask you, where is this place for you, this painful place of scarcity? What thing is it that you have longed for in life but have yet to see come your way? And how is this made worse by looking around at others who possess in abundance that which you lack? Is it a child, like it was for Hannah? A happy marriage? Or even a marriage to begin with? A pain-free life? A job? Is it freedom from some addiction or habit you just can't shake? True friendship? Rest? Hope? What is it for you?

As you consider that place of scarcity, what is stated here for Hannah must be acknowledged for us all. It was the Lord who had closed Hannah's womb. God did this? What do we do with that? Well, first we must accept it, for if God is sovereign, if God has the ability to do whatever he chooses, we must acknowledge that even when God doesn't cause hardship in our world, he allows it. This reality at times leaves us without any explanation that satisfies. It left Hannah a broken woman, full of tears and unable even to eat. She wondered if God had forgotten her. Do you know that feeling?

Elkanah saw his wife's pain and tried to fix it. It's what husbands try to do. I can fix the water heater and the broken sprinkler; surely I can also fix things for my wife. **"Hannah, why do you weep? Why do you not eat? Why is your heart sad? Am I not more to you than ten sons?"**² Elkanah is a kind and good man, unusually so in those days because he has great affection for this wife who is unable to bear him children. Still, his kindness cannot help her. And we all know what this is like. Try as we might, there are times we simply cannot fix things for those we love. Sometimes, maybe more times than we realize, only God can make things right.

Hannah seems to understand this, and so when the whole family goes up one day to worship at the tabernacle at Shiloh, she brings her great need to the only one who might possibly be able to satisfy it. Her prayer that day is raw. Her tears are so bitter and her heart is so heavy that she can't even speak aloud as she begs the Lord not to forget her but to look on her misery and grant her the greatest desire of her heart, a son. If God would do this, she vows to turn around and dedicate her child's life completely to the Lord.

You can find prayers like this all through the Bible. They are called laments. A person laments the fact that he or she is lacking in some vital way and begs God to not only see their poor condition, but make it right. But Hannah's lament is unique because it not only reveals her poverty, what she lacks, but also her generosity, what she is willing to give.³ This isn't just self-pity. She isn't blaming God. You can't even say that she's bargaining. She is asking to receive but, in the same breath, pledging to give. And it ought to give us pause. When we go to God with our requests, do our prayers include generosity along with poverty? If God gives us what we ask for are we willing to then give that gift back to him?

Meanwhile, Eli is a priest who oversees the tabernacle at Shiloh, and he is watching all this happen. At first he thinks this woman is drunk, which considering her strange behavior and the fact that they'd just come from a feast, it's not such an unreasonable conclusion. But once he realizes that she's full of trouble and not wine, and also that the desperate prayer she offers is pure, he speaks a prophetic word to her. "God remembers you," Eli tells Hannah, "and he favors you. Go in peace because he will grant your request." At once Hannah goes back to the hotel and celebrates with her husband.

Seeing Hannah's joy, however, may not fill us with the same. Some of us, maybe all of us, can point to times in our life when we have prayed such a prayer of lament, maybe even as full of generosity as was Hannah's prayer, and yet God did *not* give us what we asked for. The child didn't come. Healing didn't come. The job didn't come. The marriage wasn't saved. Now, we know enough to know that God is not a vending machine – insert prayer and out pops what we asked for. We know that, which means we are left to conclude that sometimes God gives what is requested and sometimes God does not, for reasons we may never know this side of heaven. That's reality.

Still, we do know from this story and perhaps from our own personal experience, that there are at least some times when God does seem to be moved by prayer to respond in ways that make things right? Or maybe prayer moves us to a place where we are now finally ready to receive what God has intended to give us all along.

² I Samuel 1:8

³ I owe this insight to Eugene Peterson, *First & Second Samuel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1999), 19-20.

Either way, this is what happens to Hannah. Just as Eli said, when she returns home the Lord keeps his promise. In due time, Hannah conceives and gives birth to her son and names him Samuel, a name in Hebrew that literally means “he over whom the name of the Lord has been said.”⁴ You see, the Lord did not forget Hannah and now Hannah wants to make sure that she does not forget the Lord. She must have known our human tendency towards entitlement, our tendency to so quickly and easily forget that the good gifts we possess ultimately belong to the Lord. But now every time she calls her son for dinner she will remember.

We named our firstborn Isabel, mostly because we liked the name. When I found out what the name Isable means, however, I was sold. Isabel means “devoted to God.” I actually remember holding my newborn daughter in my arms, just hours into her young life, and being filled with a profound sense of poverty and generosity. I wouldn’t have used those words at the time but that’s what I felt. This daughter was a gift of God, something I never could have brought about on my own. And now I sensed that her life needed to be give back to God. I’ve felt the same with all my kids. When God gives you something completely undeserved, generosity and gratitude are always the natural responses.

Tim Keller is a pastor in New York City and tells of a conversation he had one day with a young woman who had grown up in a church where she had been taught that God only shows us favor if we earn it. If you’re good enough, God will give you want you want and need. But now, in Keller’s church, she was hearing this different and frankly unsettling story about a God whose favor towards her was simply a gift of grace, and this was her response, “*That is a scary ideal Oh, it’s good scary, but still scary.*”

When Tim Keller asked her what was so scary about a God who offered unmerited free grace, this is what she said,

If I was saved by my good works – then there would be a limit to what God could ask of me or put me through. I would be a like a taxpayer with rights. I would have done my duty and now I would deserve a certainly quality of life. But if it is really is true that I am a sinner saved by sheer grace – at God’s infinite cost – then there is nothing he cannot ask of me.”⁵

This woman had come to realize that if the salvation of her life really was a pure gift from God, that meant her life was no longer her own. She owed God everything! And what is true of the gift of salvation is no less true of all God’s gifts. If Samuel truly was a gift from God, an unmerited gift of grace, then he ultimately belonged to God. Same with my children and yours. Same, in fact, with every good gift we have from God which, by the way, is every good thing we have. As James 1:17 declares, “**Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.**”⁶

In light of this, look what Hannah does next. She nurses Samuel and, when he is ready, weans him and brings him to Eli in Shiloh to fulfill her vow by dedicating his life to the Lord’s service. This didn’t happen right away, of course, because in the ancient Middle East, as it still is in many parts of that world today, this process of nursing and weaning would have taken three to five years. That means that when Hannah finally made that trip to Shiloh the bond between mother and son would have been strong. Still, she is faithful to her vow, and her words to Eli that day are worth repeating,

“Oh, my lord! As you live, my lord, I am the woman who was standing here in your presence, praying to the Lord. ²⁷For this child I prayed; and the Lord has granted me the petition that I made to him. ²⁸Therefore I have lent him to the Lord; as long as he lives, he is given to the Lord.”

What Hannah does here with this gift from God models for us a four-part pattern we all can follow with the gifts we have received from God, whatever those gifts might be.

To begin with, Hannah recognizes her poverty, that her son is a gift from God and even chooses a name that will help her remember this is the case. In the same way, we also ought to look at our lives and recognize that every good thing we have is a gift from heaven. Your health, your family, your talents and abilities, your mind and education, your imagination and passions, even your very life, it is all an undeserved gift from a gracious Father in heaven.

⁴ Peterson, 22

⁵ Tim Keller, *The Prodigal God* (New York: Riverhead, 2008), 135-6.

⁶ NIV

Second, Hannah receives her gift in a spirit of generosity. Because she knows Samuel is a gift she holds on to him loosely and immediately dedicates his life to God. In the same way, if the things we possess, even our very lives, are a gift of grace, then we like Hannah, and like the woman in Tim Keller's church, would do well to recognize that there is now nothing the Lord cannot ask of us when it comes to how those gifts are used.

Third, Hannah nurtures and weans her gift. In this case, of course, she literally nursed and weaned Samuel. And remember, the ultimate purpose of weaning is to let the child go, and as parents we don't only wean our children off the breast but wean them in every way so that in time they will no longer be dependent on us and set free to whatever purposes God has for them in life.

This is not just true for children but all gifts. For example, if God gives you some talent, say an especially sharp intellect, that is also a gift and you ought to nurse as best you can by studying in school, and reading, and learning, and finding worthy teachers to help that gift mature. But when it matures, don't forget who it was that gave you this gift and then keep it to yourself for your own purposes. No, your mind, and the knowledge you have nurtured, ought to be weaned from your own purposes and devoted to God's purposes in this world, whatever those might be.

The same is true even of the gift of our material possessions. John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist church, once famously said in regards to money, "Make all you can. Save all you can. Give all you can." That's simply nursing and weaning. As God blesses you with material resources, be wise and prudent in the way you nurture and grow those resources. But don't forget who they ultimately belong to. They were not given only so you could use them for your own purposes, but for God's. And yes, part of God's purposes for the money he gives you is to provide for the needs of yourself and your family, but beyond that his desire is that those resources should also be dedicated to his wider work in the world, particularly through the work of his church. If we can learn to do this with our money, perhaps we can then learn to do it with things which hold even more value to us, even our very lives.

This is actually what we all will be doing next Sunday when we come to dedicate a portion of our income next year to God's work in and through his church. We will be weaning wealth, releasing it to be used for the purposes for which it was first given. It's why we use the word 'stewardship' to describe this practice. We are merely stewards, trustees, of what we possess. We ask God for what we want and need and when God provides we remember that these gifts are still his. Eugene Peterson writes, "Worship is not something one does to get something, and once it is got can be discontinued. Worship is a way of life."⁷ Hannah worshipped God as the only one who could satisfy her deepest longing but once that longing was satisfied she didn't forget God. Neither should we.

And that leads us to the fourth way Hannah is a model for us, specifically in the way she does all this with joy. Though there certainly must have been some tears that day she dropped off her little boy in Shiloh, beneath the tears was joy because she knew that she was not holding her son back from his God-ordained purpose in life. In fact, in the very next verses we read a prayer which Hannah prayed on that occasion and the prayer begins this way, "**My heart exults in the Lord; my strength is exalted in my God.**"⁸

Perhaps you know what this is like. On Christmas morning somebody gives you a gift that is so thoughtful, so generous, so unexpectedly beautiful, that when you open the gift you respond not by embracing the gift but the one who gave you that gift. You love the gift, of course, but even more so you love the one who would give you such a gift.

Even if you are somebody today who finds yourself in the midst of desperate prayers of lament, wondering why God has left you with such bitter tears, perhaps even you can glimpse the goodness of your Father in heaven who, in his time, not always gives us what we want but always gives us what we need. If you take time to recognize it you'll see that God has given you more than you probably realize. Beyond that, he has plans to one day give you more than you can imagine. Because his own Son has entered into our poverty, he is now poised to show us his unfathomable generosity.

And so even in the midst of your prayers of poverty, can you also summon generosity, a willingness to offer back to God whatever he has already given you and also whatever he will give you in the days to come? Then perhaps you will know, even in the midst of scarcity, the joy that Hannah came to know.

⁷ Peterson, 22

⁸ I Samuel 2:1

Let us pray.

Lord, our hearts are full of joy because of what you have done. You alone are our strength. There is nothing which stands against us in this life – no enemy, no scarcity – which will overcome us. In you, Lord, we have victory! There is no one holy like You, no one besides you, no Rock like you, Lord.

Father, keep us from boasting. Keep us from forgetting. Keep us from wandering. When you look into our hearts we want you to see gratitude and not pride. Those who think they are strong and self-sufficient are bound to fall. We do not want to fall. In you our weakness is made strong, our sickness turns to health, our scarcity becomes abundance, even death becomes life.

Who are we to question your ways, Lord? You bring death and you bring life. You take us to the grave but you also raise us up. You bring poverty and you bring wealth. You lower us down and you lift us up. So in whatever place we find ourselves today, lamenting or rejoicing, help us to trust you, our good, good Father, knowing that we are loved by you. That is who we are.

Some of us here today see no way forward. Lord, bring hope. Some of us here hate what we see in ourselves. Lord, bring dignity, dignity rooted in your love for us. Where there is darkness, bring the light of the sun! And when you answer our prayer, help us to be generous with whatever gift you give to us, never forgetting from whence it came. Show us each some gift we now hold too tightly. Teach us the freedom which comes from releasing our grip.

Lord, you alone are God. The very structures of this earth belong to you. Your plans are perfect and will never be frustrated. You will never lose those who belong to you and nothing that stands against you will stand forever. So come, Lord Jesus, come into our world. Set things right. Make your will known, your kingdom present on this earth, in this city, as it is in heaven. All this we pray in the name of the one who always keeps his promises, Jesus Christ. Amen.

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The Next Step

A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. Read I Samuel 1:9-28 again. What is the first thing in this story which stands out to you?
2. We are told here that the Lord “closed Hannah’s womb.” Why would God do this? Can we explain it?
3. What has brought you the most grief over the years? When have you been in a place in life similar to the place Hannah was in, where you were desperate for the Lord to meet a need you knew only the Lord could meet? What happened?
4. Have you ever asked God for something in prayer but at the same time promised that if your request was granted you would dedicate that gift to God?
5. Hannah saw her son as a gift from the Lord and so dedicated his life to the Lord. Do you think we are called to do a similar thing with our children and grandchildren? What does that look like?
6. Hannah gave her son a name that would help her remember that he was a gift from God. What can you do to help you remember that what you possess is also a gift from God?
7. What is one gift you believe God has given you which you are now ‘nurturing’ and ‘weaning’ so that it can be used for God’s purposes?
8. Is this a good story and message to consider before Stewardship Commitment Sunday next Sunday? Why or why not?



Table to Table Question

A question for kids and adults to answer together

Why do you think we always want things to be fair?
 What is one unfair thing in this world
 which you think God wants to fix?