

# **BaptistWay Press® Premium Commentary**

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## **Studies in Character and the Crown (1 Samuel)**

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Lesson One

### **A Desperate Plea from a Faithful Follower**

#### **Focal Text**

1 Samuel 1

#### **Background**

1 Samuel 1-2

#### **Main Idea**

Hannah made a desperate plea to God and fulfilled her vow.

#### **Question to Explore**

What do you desperately need from God?

#### **Quick Read**

God loves us and wants what is best for us. When we cry out to him, he hears us. Regardless of whether he grants our requests, he is worthy of our trust and faithfulness.

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### **Introduction**

For a long time, medical school graduates have taken the “Hippocratic Oath.” By performing this traditional oath-taking, budding physicians promise to follow certain ethical standards in the practice of their healing profession. They vow, among other things, to do no harm to their patients and to maintain the confidentiality of their patients’ conditions. The oath takes its name from Hippocrates (ca. 460 BC—ca. 375 BC), “the Father of Medicine” in western culture.

He earned that title due to his work in declaring that disease had natural or rational causes. This moved the practice of medicine away from mere superstitious assertions.

Page 1 of 8

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Hippocrates emphasized observation of the patient and documentation of what was happening to the body. He was the founder of “medical ethics” or professional standards for physicians. He also advocated cardio exercise when he asserted that “walking is man’s best medicine.”

Periodically, persons find themselves facing a difficult or desperate circumstance. It is a situation in which there appears to be no good or feasible solution. These persons face the critical question, “What can I possibly do to remedy this desperate circumstance?” The cliché is: “desperate times call for desperate measures.” The early expression of that thought comes from Hippocrates who said that extreme diseases require extreme methods of cure.

In the time before the Israelites had a king, a woman named Hannah was in the desperate circumstance of childlessness and took a desperate measure. She pleaded with God and promised God that if he would grant her a son, she would dedicate that son in service to God.

### **Commentary**

The historical period of the Judges had become an increasingly negative experience. God’s people were in moral chaos. The final verse of the Book of Judges summarizes the circumstance well. “In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit” (21:25). It was a desperate time.

Hannah was experiencing a desperate circumstance within her family situation. She was filled with the shame that her culture placed on her because she was not able to present her husband a child. Both the nation and this family were in crisis, and the birth of a boy named Samuel would be God’s faithful way of providing help and hope for both situations.

The literary form of this chapter is a birth announcement story. Biblical authors used this kind of narrative to emphasize the importance of the child to be born (Isaac in Genesis 18:1-15; Samson in Judges 13:12-23; and of course, Jesus in Luke 1:26-38).

This story moves from the problem of childlessness (1 Samuel 1:2), to the resolution in the birth of a son (1:20), resulting in the completion of Hannah’s vow to God (1:28). The birth of Samuel is not only a joyful thing for Hannah. It provides the potential of hope for Israel as well. 1 Samuel 2 includes Hannah’s joyful praise (1-10); the need for Samuel because Eli’s family was corrupt (11-25); and Samuel’s promising growth (26).

### **A Faithful Follower’s Context (1:1-2)**

Elkanah had a solid Israelite pedigree demonstrated by the four generations noted. He lived in the territory of the tribe of Ephraim, but elsewhere he is identified as a member of the priestly tribe of Levi (1 Chronicles 6:16-29). The Levitical tribe did not receive a

land allotment; instead, they were assigned land within the territories of all the other tribes.

Elkanah lived in the hill country of Ephraim. “Ramathaim” (1:1) meaning “double height” occurs only here in the Old Testament. Elsewhere this village is designated as Ramah (1 Sam. 1:19; 2:11), the hometown of Samuel (1 Sam. 7:17; 8:4; 15:34). Although the story begins with describing the tribal and family context of Elkanah, the central character is Hannah.

Elkanah “had two wives” (1:2). The only reason to emphasize this duality of marriage is because monogamy, not polygamy, was the normal practice at that time in Israel. Polygamy was an exception that became acceptable in two areas. Kings enjoyed the privilege of multiple wives. Through these marriages they established diplomatic alliances with other people groups and nations.

Secondly, ordinary Israelites were permitted to take a second wife if the first wife could not produce a child/son for her husband. One of the main responsibilities of the husband was to have a son who would inherit his property and continue his name in the community. As a result, the priority obligation of a wife was to give her husband that son. In that culture, when a couple failed to conceive and bear a child, the blame and resultant shame was always placed on the wife.

Since Hannah, whose name means “charming, attractive,” is named first here, she was probably Elkanah’s first wife. She was not successful, however, in giving a son to her husband. Elkanah, therefore, took a second wife Peninnah who lived up to the meaning of her name “fertile, prolific” and gave their husband at least four children (1:4). This scenario compounded Hannah’s feelings of inadequacy and shame.

### ***A Faithful Follower’s Conflict (1:3-8)***

Included in my childhood memories is one of consistent involvement in a local church family. I had the privilege of growing up in a family that regularly attended worship and Bible study with other believers. My four children also enjoyed that privilege, and I am delighted to say that my nine grandchildren will also look back and remember that kind of experience. That is God’s desire for every family.

Elkanah created that kind of memory within his own family. “Year after year” (1:3) he led his family to Shiloh to worship God and to offer him sacrifices that expressed gratitude. Seemingly these times were acts of free devotion rather than pilgrimages required by the law of Moses.

Shiloh lay in the hills of Ephraim about twenty miles north/northeast of Jerusalem. It was an important place because the ark of the covenant was located there (1 Sam. 3:3). It is unclear whether “the house of the LORD” (1:7) was portable housing (tent) or a permanent building in which the ark was placed.

These annual times of worship were characterized by a festive or celebratory mood of gratitude to God. “The LORD Almighty” (1:3) occurs here for the first time in the Old Testament (first of five times in 1 Samuel). It emphasized either God as the King who is surrounded by spirit-being servants, or as the Warrior who commands an army of angels. Hannah dreaded these times of annual celebration because they were painful reminders of her inability to bear a child.

Kelsey Boessen and Brittany Wong recently posted an article at the Huffington Post entitled “8 Types of Toxic People to Leave Behind in 2018.”<sup>1</sup> In it they identified eight categories of people who are emotionally draining or who have negative impact on others. They declare that a “gaslighter” is one who is insecure and wants to stir things up and create confusion and doubt in the minds of others. Another toxic person is the “scorekeeper” who constantly finds faults in others and keeps up with every mistake and failure in life.

The toxic person in Hannah’s life was “the other woman” or Peninnah, the second wife of Elkanah. “Rival” (1:6, 7) is the word for an enemy or adversary. It was rarely used to describe family relationships. We are familiar with sibling rivalry, but here it is spousal rivalry. The term rendered “provoking” (1:6) and “provoked” (1:7) conveys the idea of a loud sound (like thunder). Its meaning here is probably the circumstance of Peninnah complaining loudly against Hannah. Was she acting more like a “gaslighter” or a “scorekeeper?”

Elkanah knew well the tension between his two wives and took steps to help resolve the tension. First, when the portions of the meat from the sacrificial offering were distributed, he showed favoritism toward Hannah. The “double portion” given to Hannah (1:5) may have been the portion that a woman with one child might expect or it might have been a portion equal to that given to Peninnah and her children (at least four, since sons and daughters are both plural in 1:4).

The motivation for Elkanah’s action is clearly stated as “because he loved her” (1:5). This action of Elkanah was kind, but it did not compensate for the taunting of Hannah by Peninnah. Hannah could do nothing but cry and refused to eat. This language suggests that Hannah was severely distressed or in despair, possibly to the point of depression.

Elkanah attempted to console his wife Hannah. He asked four questions, seeking to find a way to help. The first one “why are you weeping?” is a question that many husbands have asked through the years. Maybe instead of asking whether she thought she was worth more to him than ten sons, he should have asserted the fact that he believed that possibility was accurate.

### ***A Faithful Follower’s Desperate Plea and Promise (1:9-18)***

Every time of annual celebration was a very sad experience for Hannah. On one occasion Hannah was especially distressed. Because of her “bitterness of soul” (1:10), she was

weeping uncontrollably and was crying out to God through her tears. She petitioned God or interceded in her own behalf (1:10, 12, 26, 27). Her son Samuel is the only other person in 1 Samuel who petitioned God and interceded for others in prayer (7:5; 8:6; 12:19, 23).

Hannah's desperate pleading with God led her to make a promise to God. The plea and promise were connected through the declaration of a "vow" (1:11). Vows in the Scripture were different from the vows that we make today. In the contemporary setting a vow is a sacred and unconditional commitment, a voluntarily made promise (like a wedding vow). In Hannah's religious culture, a vow included two elements: a request for God to act graciously in behalf of one in distress AND a promise to God to respond positively to his gracious action. Vows were made elsewhere by Jacob (Genesis 28:20-22) and Jephthah (Judg. 11:30-31).

Hannah begged God to end her childlessness and give her a son. If God did, then she would give her son back to God as a demonstration of her gratitude. Asking God to "remember me" (1:11) did not mean that someone wanted God to recall something; rather, it meant that someone wanted God to act, to do something. Hannah's promise included one feature of the Nazirite vow (Numbers 6:1-21), that of using no razor on her son's head.

When circumstances bring us misery and diminish our joy, we have several options. We can give up on the future and resign ourselves to the reality of our misery. We can give up on God and attempt to make things different in our own power. We can choose to hold on to God, to live in continued trust in him, and be secure in his care. Hannah chose the third option. She had faith in a God who cared for her.

Hannah was quite emotional in her petition to God. She evidently prayed long and loud enough to be heard by Eli, the priest of Shiloh. Eli's assumptions were less than sensitive and pastoral. He thought that she was desperately drunk (1:12-14).

Hannah strongly denied Eli's assumption and accusation. "Wicked" (1:16) translates an adjective that was used to describe Eli's sinful sons (1 Sam. 2:12) and the violent men of Gibeah (Judg. 19-22). Hannah was a righteous woman, only under the influence of her anguish and grief, not wine.

The priestly assurance announced by Eli (1:17) is the turning point in the story. It is uncertain, however, what the nature of that assurance was. Did Eli deliver a prophetic word from God that confirmed God's granting of her request, or did he, instead, express his wish for her through a word of desired blessing? The language appears to convey a word of blessing or wish, but Hannah understood it to be an assuring or confirming word from God. That explains her complete change of behavior. She stopped crying and was no longer in misery. Her speech contains a pun as the Hebrew word for the "favor" that she seeks (1:18) is the same word that is part of her name.

***The Faithfulness of God (1:19-20)***

Elkanah and his family concluded their annual time of worship and celebration and then returned home to Ramah (1:19). Elkanah and his wife Hannah engaged in sexual intimacy, but this time they achieved a different result. “The LORD remembered her” (1:19), and when Yahweh remembered or acted in response to a cry from one of his people, a new thing became possible.

The reality toward which the story has been building for nineteen verses is now stated simply and briefly. The barren and childless Hannah achieved pregnancy. It was a result of the favor extended to her by God. The language is that typically used in birth announcements. They had intimate relations resulting in conception and the birth of a child. The unusual thing here is that Hannah is the one who named her son, a privilege usually reserved for the father.

Eli had expressed the wish that God would grant what Hannah “asked” of him (1:17). That is exactly what Hannah admitted she had done. She had “asked” God for a son (1:20).<sup>2</sup> She asked God for a son, and God was faithful to hear that which she asked and honored her request.

Hannah faithfully trusted in the faithfulness of God, and God acted positively in her behalf. Jesus-followers believe that often God is faithful to answer our prayers according to what we have asked him. At other times God is faithful to strengthen us, to provide us support, and to encourage us when we do not get everything that we have asked of him. He is always faithful to be present with us.

***A Faithful Follower’s Fulfillment of a Vow (1:21-28)***

After the birth of Samuel, the time for the annual time of worship at Shiloh arrived. Elkanah’s vow (1:21) was probably a vow routinely made by him (and others) associated with agricultural prosperity. This vow was a promise to express gratitude to God if he graciously granted them a year of good harvest.

Hannah declared that she would not accompany her husband to Shiloh again until she was no longer nursing her son. (In that time, children were two or even three-years-old before they were weaned away from the nursing mother.) Then, when she took Samuel to Shiloh, she would fulfill her promise and leave him there to serve God. The text does not reveal any vacillation by Hannah in her determination to fulfill her vow.

Elkanah concurred with her plan of action but said something curious, “only may the LORD make good his word” (1:23). Many other translations are quite similar in the way they render this phrase. For example:

- “Only the LORD establish his word (KJV)
- “Only—may the LORD establish his word” (NRSV)
- “Only may the LORD confirm His word” (NASB)

The Hebrew says literally, “what comes out of your mouth” according to the Old Testament commentator Ralph Klein who then translates it as “May Yahweh bring to pass what you have said.”<sup>3</sup> The desire of Elkanah is for Yahweh to bring to fulfillment (through Hannah’s action) her promise to dedicate their son to him.

Hannah, as a faithful follower of Yahweh, completely fulfilled her vow or promise to God. She offered an appropriate sacrifice (1:24-25), reminded Eli of her stated vow (1:26-27), and presented her son for the service of God (1:28).

The reading of “a three-year-old bull” (1:24) differs from the “three bullocks” in the King James Version. The KJV follows the Hebrew (Masoretic) Text, while the NIV follows the reading of the Greek Text (Septuagint), the Dead Sea Scrolls, and the Syriac version. The NIV translation is seemingly corroborated by the recorded slaughtering of only one bull (1:25). The fact that God commanded Abram to sacrifice a heifer, goat, and ram, all three-years-old (Gen. 15:9) suggests that it was an offering of substantial value. Hannah also took a half-bushel of grain and a leather bag of wine. Notice that both Hannah and Elkanah participated in offering the sacrifices.

The terminology of the Hebrew Text does a better job than the English versions in pointing out the inseparable connection between the request that Hannah had made and the fulfillment of her pledge to God. Both Eli (1:17) and Hannah (1:20) had used that important verb *shaal*, meaning to ask, with reference to her request. That verb is also prominent in the last two verses of this chapter. It is the word rendered as “what” (literally the petition or asking) and “asked” (1:27) and as “give” and “will be given” (1:28). She “asked” for a son from God and then “asked” God to take her son and use him in his service. The proper response to a gift from God is to give that gift back to him.

This narrative began with Elkanah’s custom of going to Shiloh each year to offer worship to God. It concludes with worship offered to God by the son given to Hannah and Elkanah. “He” (1:28) could only refer to Samuel, although we have difficulty understanding what that might have meant referring to a three-year-old child.

## **Conclusion**

A young adult friend of mine declared that she never prayed more earnestly and seriously for anything else in her life than the time in middle school when she prayed for God to give her a good husband. Her mother was in an unhappy marriage and encouraged her “to start praying now for a good husband.” On her knees, she desperately asked God to guide her to a good husband. She smiled as she recalled being quite specific in her prayer. Her request included desired ethnicity, height, color of eyes and hair, and a preference that he be “good in math.”

She met someone who fit that description in high school, and they dated some. My friend is still single, but who would question what God can do? Whether someone desperately prays for a son (like Hannah) or a husband (like my young friend), God is faithful to hear

our requests. A son was granted. Not yet has a good husband been given. Both women, however, testify that God is a faithful God.

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**Meet the Writer: Dr. Ron Lyles**

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/bye-toxic-people\\_us\\_5a452515e4b0b0e5a7a547d9](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/bye-toxic-people_us_5a452515e4b0b0e5a7a547d9) (Accessed 12/29/17).

<sup>2</sup> Some Old Testament interpreters have pointed out, and rightly so, that the Hebrew verb *shaal* rendered “asked” is the verb in the name “Saul” rather than Samuel. The name “Samuel” contains the verb *shamah*, meaning “to hear.”

<sup>3</sup> Ralph W. Klein, *1 Samuel*, second edition: *Word Biblical Commentary* (Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson, 2000), 3.