

Hannah

The Woman Who Personifies Ideal Motherhood

Scripture References - 1 Samuel 1; 2:1, 21

Name Meaning - The Hebrew setting of Hannah has the beautiful and attractive meaning of "gracious" or "graciousness" or "favor" and by a slight change becomes the smoother Ann, Anne, or Anna – the latter form touching the classic world with keen interest. Anna was the name given by Virgil to the twin-souled sister of the lovelorn Queen Dido. And now Aurora from the heavens had rent the mist apart, Sick-souled her sister (Anna) she bespeaks, the sharer of her heart.

Family Connections - Hannah was the favorite wife of Elkanah, a Levite of Ramathaim Zophim who belonged to one of the most honorable families of that priestly portion of Jacob's progeny - the Kohathites. Although a godly man he followed the common custom of polygamy in those days when "every man did that which was right in the sight of his own eyes." As it was the burning desire of every Hebrew parent to have a son, Hannah who was barren, may have urged her husband to take another wife, as Sarah arranged with Abraham to do, so that Elkanah's name might be perpetuated. The second wife was Peninnah, of whom we know nothing save that she bore Elkanah several children, and grieved Hannah with her cruel and scurrilous tongue. "The sacred writer does not keep us long in Peninnah's company," says Alexander Whyte, "he hastens past Peninnah to tell us about Hannah, that sorely-fretted and sequestered woman, who waters her couch with her tears." The curse accompanying polygamy shows up in Elkanah's home life. Hannah became the mother of the renowned Samuel, and also bore Elkanah three other sons and two daughters none of whom are mentioned by name (1 Samuel 2:21) The Bible has been called "The World's Gallery of Lasting Fame," and in this gallery the portrait of Hannah occupies a conspicuous place. All that is recorded of this mother, who was one of the most noble Hebrews who ever lived, is an inspiration and a benediction. Whether she was as beautiful as Sarah we are not told, but because of her inner serenity she must have had "a very sensitive face, in which her moods were reflected like sunshine and shadow on a quiet lake." The story we have of her is "a harp-note of the immortal triumph of patience." Hannah is a beautiful example of how the most unpleasant and untoward circumstances can produce a character blessing the world. "The outline touches of her life," says John F. Jurst, "sombre and mournful at first, but radiant with faith and hope at last, form the fitting introduction to the narrative of the career of her great son Samuel in his combined character of Judge and Prophet of Israel." Perhaps we can best summarize Hannah's career in the following fivefold way -

Her Sanctity

From the record we have of Hannah she appears to have been a woman with an unblemished character. Piety reigned in her heart, and she maintained constant communion with the religious ordinances of her nation.

Pious Hannah was separated unto the Lord, and amidst trying domestic relationships knew how to have recourse to Him for all necessary grace to bear her troubles. She cried day and night unto the Lord, and was heard in that she feared Him whom her soul loved. Because of her godliness, devotion, trust, patience and self-sacrifice, she came to be signally blessed of the Lord, and, in turn, communicated to her renowned son Samuel something of her saintliness of life and character. It was no easy task to live for years with a nasty woman like Peninnah, but Hannah retained her serenity of soul and was a veritable lily among thorns.

Her Sorrow

While Hannah had a house she did not have a home. The ideal of every Jewess was to be "head of the home," but she had no child, no family. True, she had a devout husband who loved her, and bestowed richer gifts upon her than he did upon his other wife, but she was childless. Comforting her yearning heart Elkanah said, "Am I not better to thee than ten sons?" Hannah, however, longed for a son out of her own womb to love and fondle. As the years went by her agony became more intense, and her barrenness was a greater burden because of the jealousy and heartlessness of her rival, Peninnah, who frequently tantalized Hannah for being childless. But true to her name, she manifested the grace of self-control amid the cruel chidings and reproaches of Peninnah, "her adversary who provoked her sore, and made her to fret." Can we wonder that Hannah referred to herself as, "a woman of a sorrowful spirit"? Jealousy, "the green-eyed monster that mocks the meat it feeds on," had taken possession of Peninnah, but not of Hannah. Although the Lord had "shut up her womb" her heart was still open toward Him. Made to sorrow by those nearest to her, Hannah was never guilty of any unwomanly, retaliatory conduct. Whenever her husband tried to comfort her stricken heart, her adversary was provoked to fresh insults and taunts. The fact that Elkanah loved Hannah and bestowed a double portion upon her only added more fuel to the fire of contempt in Peninnah's heart.

Her Supplication

Childless, Hannah was not prayerless. Barren, she still believed, and her pain found a refuge in prayer. In God's house, she besought the Creator "to raise her into the empire of motherhood," and to interfere with the law of nature on her behalf. How moving is the episode of Hannah pouring out her soul before God in His house and vowing that if He would give her a son, then she would give him back to God for His exclusive use! She bargained with God, and kept her bargain. She took her particular sorrow to God, and prayed, not that Peninnah's joy might be less, but that He would take away the cause of her own anguish. She gave herself to prayer, and in the presence of God her sorrow burst its bonds. Yet even in God's house at Shiloh she did not find at first the sympathy and understanding she sought. Think, for a moment, about some of the features of her heartfelt cry! First of all, her prayer was of a peculiar kind. It was a supplication without external speech. Her lips moved but there was no sound. Her prayer was internal, and as she spoke thus to herself she created the impression that she was drunk with wine. She had learned that prayer is the Christian's native breath, "unuttered or expressed." While she never said a prayer, "she breathed a wish in her soul and sent it up unspoken right to the throne of God. It is a unique experience for the age of the Judges; the piety of Hannah is a ripe flower in an almost sterile field." The old priest Eli, not meaning to be unkind when he saw Hannah's lips moving and her whole being caught up in the fervency of her supplication and yet heard no words being expressed, somewhat felt that Hannah was drunk and upbraided her for coming into God's house in such a condition. How his hasty, ill-founded conclusions added gall to the sorrow of her heart. Hannah protested her innocence and declared that she had never taken strong drink, and then poured out her soul to Eli who, discerning that her desire for a child was intense and her spirit, sacrificial, for she wanted nothing for herself alone, assured her that her inarticulate prayer had been heard. "Go in peace, and the God of Israel grant thee thy petition that thou hast asked of him." Down she went to her house content for *she believed. She was no longer forlorn, sorrowful, heart-hungry, but joyous and buoyant.* God granted her wish, and the yearned-for child arrived and she called his name Samuel, which means, "asked of the Lord."

Her Song

Hannah's Psalm of Thanksgiving marks her out as a poetess and prophetess of no mean order. With her desire fulfilled she bursts into song and pours forth her gratitude to God for His goodness, and her Magnificat became the basis of the one the blessed Virgin Mary was to offer to the same covenant-keeping God. The reader will find a strong resemblance between Hannah's song and that of Mary's (Luke 1:46-55). The spiritual lyric of Hannah is equal to any of the Psalms and is eloquent with the divine attributes of power, holiness, knowledge, majesty and grace. Such an elevated poetic utterance elicited by God's answer to her prayer, has stirred the hearts of saints all down the centuries. The following parallel arrangement brings out the points of resemblance between Hannah's song and that of Mary's -

Mary's Song

My soul doth magnify the Lord
And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour.
He hath shewed strength with his arm;
He hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.
He hath put down the mighty from their seats,
And exalted them of low degree.
He hath filled the hungry with good things;
And the rich he hath sent empty away.

Hannah's Song

My heart rejoiceth in the Lord,
Mine horn is exalted in the Lord;
The bows of the mighty men are broken
And they that stumbled are girded with strength.
The Lord killeth, and maketh alive:
He bringeth down to the grave and bringeth up;
They that were full have hired out themselves for bread;
And they that were hungry ceased.

Her Sacrifice

Hannah prayed and promised, and when her prayer was answered she quietly redeemed her promise. More than anything in the world she wanted a son, and when God gave her one, she gave him back to the Lord. Although Samuel was not born to the priesthood, his mother had sacredly pledged him to the Lord; and that pledge must be kept no matter what it might cost her in loneliness. So when weaned, Samuel was taken to the house of the Lord, "there to abide forever." Once a year she visited him and what a human touch we have in that she made a little coat for him to wear. Her saintliness and sacrifice were rewarded for she bore Elkanah five more children.

As for Samuel, he grew up to reflect his revered mother's godliness. True to the meaning of his own name, and in likeness to his mother's prevailing intercession, he became a man of prayer and intercession all his days - and beyond all men had power with, and from, God. How appropriate are the lines of Tennyson as we think of Samuel and his saintly mother, Hannah –

**Happy he
With such a mother!
Faith in womankind
Beats with his blood, and trust in all things high
Comes easy to him, and tho' he trip and fall
He shall not blind his soul with clay.**

The lessons to be gathered from the fascinating story of Hannah are clearly evident. First of all, as we think of all Samuel became we realize how the excellencies of many men have usually been foreshadowed, if not exemplified, in the characters of their mothers. "The genius and intellectual sweep of Goethe were foretokened in the many sided brilliancy of Frau Rath." The mother of John Wesley was remarkable for her intelligence, godliness and executive ability earning her the title of "The Mother of Methodism." As no one in all the bleak world is more fitted to guide little feet God-ward, may heaven grant us more mothers like godly Hannah. From Peninnah's harsh treatment of Hannah we discover how a thoughtless, unloving word of ours can give sorrow to others. How necessary it is to guard our tongues! (James 3:9, 10). From Hannah's conduct under much provocation we first of all learn that the heart of God is a comforting retreat for a sorrowful soul. Whatever our particular sorrow may be, the Man of Sorrows waits to undertake. Hannah carried her trial and yearning to God in prayer and she teaches us something about the necessity for form and the spirit of intercession. Compare her silent heart-prayer with Psalm 19:14 . From Eli who misjudged Hannah we learn not to be too hasty in our conclusions. Too often we wrong others by misinterpreting their motives. In Hannah's mild and dignified defense of her character we learn how to defend our rights in all humility (see John 8:48, 49; Acts 26:24-26).