

Praying With The Prayers Of The Bible: Praying in the Silence of the Heart

'O Lord of hosts ... if you will give me a son ...I will give him to the Lord all the days of his life.' (1 Samuel 1:11)

Three 'C's will help us to grasp this most personal and moving prayer.

First, the prayer's **context**. Hannah was the childless wife of Elkanah, who had sons and daughters by his other wife, Peninnah. As she longed for a child, she was taunted by 'her rival' (see v.6) who reproached her for being barren. It doesn't take much imagination to understand how miserable and lonely and useless Hannah felt. Although Elkanah loved Hannah, his well-meant sympathy, 'Am I not more to you than ten sons?' (v.8) was hardly calculated to ease her pain! Making the annual pilgrimage to the Tabernacle at Shiloh, Hannah was 'deeply distressed, prayed to the Lord and wept bitterly' (v.10). This is the Bible's first record of a woman praying. We can be certain that godly women, long before Hannah's time, had prayed but this is the first mention in Scripture of a woman praying.

Secondly, the prayer's **content**. Above everything else, Hannah longed to have a son. 'O Lord of hosts, if you will look on my affliction and give me a son, I will give him back to you in service all the days of his life' (v.11). It was a cry from the heart. A lonely wife, longing for a child, taunted by her rival, and not really understood by her husband, poured out her very soul in grief. And it was all done without spoken words! As her lips moved, Eli the priest, misreading the signs, rebuked her for being drunk (v.14). There are times when the burden of our heart is so great that no words can express it, but how comforting to know that God hears us!

Thirdly, the prayer's **consequences**. The Lord graciously answered Hannah's distress and a year later she was nursing her baby son! (vv. 21,22). Hannah's dark night had been eclipsed by a glorious morning. Grief and sorrow had given way to joy and delight but as she cradled her infant son, Hannah did not forget what she had promised the Lord. In token of his faithfulness, she named her son Samuel, meaning, 'asked of the Lord' (v.20). Some time later Hannah took Samuel to Shiloh and presented him to Eli, fulfilling the promise she had made to the Lord. Hannah's dedication of Samuel is a reminder to all of us not only to give thanks to God for answered prayer but also to carry out whatever vows or promises we've made to him. Hannah's words to Eli are so full of praise and gratitude to God that they need no comment. Let them inspire thanksgiving in our hearts. 'For this child I prayed ...therefore as long as he lives he is lent to the Lord' (v.28).

By the Revd Dr Herbert McGonigle,

Senior Lecturer in Historical Theology & Church History, Nazarene Theological College, Manchester

**God give me work till my life shall end
And life till my work is done.**

Winifred Holtby