***PRAYING OR BARGAINING?***

John C. Peterson

Covenant Presbyterian Church, Staunton, VA

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Texts: 1 Samuel 1:1-20, 24-28 and Matthew 7:7-8

Hannah was miserable. She cried and she didn’t eat and she would not be consoled. She was miserable because she was unable to bear a child in a society in which a woman’s worth was measured by her fertility. It didn’t help that her husband’s second wife had borne him children, and that her rival’s name was Peninnah which means “fertile” or “prolific”. How would you like to wake up every morning longing for a child and then sit down to breakfast with your husband’s wife, fertile Myrtle, and her flock of kids? Peninnah took every opportunity to point out that Hannah was childless and by implication worthless. Hannah’s husband seemed kind enough; he gave Hannah extra portions of food and tried to console her by suggesting that he should be more valuable to her than ten sons. But he never suggested that Hannah was more valuable to ***him*** than ten sons. So Hannah wept and refused to eat and would not be consoled.

There is some misery which seems to be beyond human consolation. No words, however well-intentioned, are adequate to ease the pain. No action can set things right. No assurance is reassuring. Perhaps you are acquainted with such misery in your own life or in trying to ease the misery of someone else. Those who battle depression or chronic despair or the sudden loss of a spouse or child have been there and back. Those who endure continuing frustration in having a child or finding a job or battling a debilitating disease have been there. Those who lost everything in the fires in California or the floods in South Carolina have been there or are there. There are those who live in such misery day in and day out in refugee camps and in VA hospitals and behind the closed doors of their homes. It is misery that lacks company or finds no comfort in the company offered. It is the suffering of families in and around Bethlehem shortly after Jesus’ birth when Herod sent soldiers to kill all the children under age two:

*A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation,*

*Rachel weeping for her children;*

*she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.*

Hannah would not be consoled, not because she lost a child, but because she had no child to lose.

In her distress Hannah went to the temple of the Lord and poured out her heart with a cascade of tears. She sought out the Lord to whom she attributed her barrenness and asked God to take note of her misery. She asked God to remember her and to bless her with a male child, and she vowed that if God were to grant her request she would dedicate the child to the Lord. That was her prayer, spoken silently with trembling lips and tears streaming down her cheeks. Hannah asked for what she longed for: to be remembered by a God who had forgotten her, to be noticed by a God who seemed strangely apathetic to her misery, to be blessed with a child by the God who had to that point closed her womb.

I wonder whether the greater source of Hannah’s misery was her barrenness or her sense of abandonment by God. Or were they so entwined that one could not be distinguished from the other? Hannah’s inability to bear a child was, for her, a sign of God’s absence or disdain for her. Yet still she prayed to the God who had forgotten her – hoping, trusting that God might hear her prayer, remember her, and have mercy upon her. God promises to be near to us, always more ready to hear our prayers than we are to pray. Ann Weems, the poet laureate of the Presbyterian Church, perhaps speaks for Hannah and for some of us in these words:

*O God, hear me!*

*I’m at the end of my rope!*

*I’m at the edge of the cliff!*

*I’m in the eye of the storm!*

*I’m going down for the third time!*

*O God, are you going to let me die?*

*My dreams, O God, are gone.*

*Dead*

*Buried one after another*

*Gone forever…,*

*Am I to be buried with them?*

*When dreams die does the dreamer die with them?*

*God, O God, O God,*

*Strain your ears to my prayer.*

*Search for me among the perishing and pluck me from the fire.*

*O faithful God,*

*You hear our prayers and grab us from the jaws of death.*

*There is nothing that can separate us from our God.[[1]](#endnote-1)*

In such silent, fervent prayer Hannah turned to God in the house of the Lord. The priest Eli thought she was drunk, but she was only miserable, and in her misery she prayed. To whom do you turn when you are miserable, disconsolate, or unhappy? “Take it to the Lord in prayer,” says Jesus, say saints across the ages, says Hannah.

But one might wonder whether Hannah’s plea was truly a prayer or the offer of a desperate bargain: *If you bless me with a male child I will dedicate him to you until the day of his death.* Those were the gist of her words. Have you ever made such a prayer and offered to God something in return for granting your request, a quid pro quo of sorts? *Lord, if you will ease my pain, I will be more faithful. If you will give me the answer to this question on the test I will go to church without complaint. If you will heal this disease I will turn my life around. If you answer my prayer I will never ask for anything again. If you will just \_\_\_ then I will \_\_\_\_,* and you fill in the blanks. Is that praying or is it bargaining – you give me something, Lord, and I will give you something in return?

Before we ever offer to bless God, God blesses us. With the breath of life and the joys of living, with love and forgiveness, with prophets to guide us and Jesus to save us, God blesses us. God does not bargain with us and offer to love us if we will do something in return or bless us only if we ante up. Jesus did not come to save us on the condition that we do something for God; in fact John tells us that it was while were still sinners that Christ died for us. God loves us and blesses us unconditionally and calls us to be faithful disciples so that we might experience the joy of being God’s people and embrace the comforting assurance of God’s promises for us. God invites us to pray, to ask for what we want or need without any vow on our part that we will reward God for granting our request. Prayer is not a bargaining session; it is conversation with a God who already loves us and has already blessed us and stands ready to bless us yet again. Our faithfulness is not a bargaining chip with God; it is our response to the blessings we have already received.

There is a Maxine cartoon in which she is in her car, anxiously searching for a parking spot. In desperation she prays, “Lord, have pity on me. If you find me a parking spot I will go to church every Sunday for the rest of my life and give up sex and tequila.” Miraculously an open spot appears. Maxine looks heavenward and says, “Never mind. I just found one.” Too often we take our blessings for granted or renege on our proposed bargains with God. We accept our blessings and move on, forgetful of what God has done for us. The bargains we offer are truly one-sided – the blessing of God in exchange for the promise of our fickle faithfulness.

Hannah did not offer faithfulness to God in exchange for a child. She was already faithful; instead she offered the child to God. When God granted her plea and she bore a son, it must have been tempting to renege on the vow she had made. But unlike many of us, who quickly forget our vows when the prayer is answered, Hannah remembered her vow and fulfilled it by giving her son to the Lord. Samuel would become the great prophet of the Lord who anointed Saul as the first king of Israel and then anointed David as Saul’s successor. From out of Hannah’s great misery God not only brought her great joy, but also brought to Israel a great king. In many Bibles there is a superscription entitled “Hannah’s Prayer” that comes, not before that heartfelt plea she made in the temple, but in the poetic praise she offered following her dedication of little Samuel to the Lord. In that prayer Hannah declares God’s greatness, for she was healed of her despair and grateful to God for the gift of a child who confirmed that God did indeed remember her.

“Ask and it will be given to you,” says Jesus. “Seek and you will find. Knock and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.” Hannah is living proof of that truth! But is she the exception or the rule? Does everyone who asks really receive and all who seek find? It sounds too good to be true. Just get down on your knees, ask for what you want and voilá, there it is! Is that how prayer works – God sits by the prayer line waiting for your order to come in so that it can be filled as requested? Experience tells us that it is not always so – we ask for healing for a friend, but the friend dies. We ask for relief from our pain, but in the morning the pain is still there. We ask for the teacher to cancel the exam, but the exam is still given. With millions of people around the world we ask for peace on earth, and still there is no peace. How can we take seriously these words of Jesus when reality seems to say, “Not so!”

Perhaps the starting point for coming to grips with what Jesus says is by not filling in the blanks in what Jesus says. “Ask and *it* will be given to you,” says Jesus. What is the “it” that will be given? We assume that “it” is the thing for which we pray, but what if “it” is the answer that God deems fit? When we seek what do we find – that which we are looking for or that which God shows to us? Our tendency is to fill in the blank with what we want, to receive what we ask for – as Hannah did. But the child Hannah received was much more a part of God’s divine plan than the solution to Hannah’s problems. If we fill in the blank with only what we want, with that for which we pray, then we make God some kind of cosmic bellhop who jumps to fill our requests, even though sometimes our requests aren’t the good thing that we think they might be. Sometimes in retrospect we are just as glad that we didn’t get what we asked for. In the words of the Garth Brooks song: *Some of God's greatest gifts are unanswered prayers. [[2]](#endnote-2)*

Sometimes the gift is what you ask for as it was for Hannah, and sometimes it is an unanswered prayer for which you will only be grateful years later, and sometimes it is something else that you are given, something that you could not even imagine at the time of the prayer. But it begins with that prayer, with voicing your needs – even your misery – as Hannah did, not as a bargain, but as a prayer to a God who is always listening. Do not be discouraged if the answer does not come right away or if the prayer seems unanswered, for God hears you and will give you what God knows you need. In the words of the hymn: *Earth has no sorrow that heaven cannot heal.* So keep praying – in joy, in sorrow, in misery – keep praying and so be healed – and blessed. Amen

1. Ann Weems, “Lament Psalm Forty-five”, *Psalms of Lament*, Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, 1995 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Garth Brooks, “Unanswered Prayers” [↑](#endnote-ref-2)