



DESPERATE PRAYERS

Pastor Al Detter 1 Samuel 1:1-28
9:30 & 11:00am Grace Church November 12, 2006

Introduction:

1. A new series starts today called "One-Liners from I Samuel". Here's the one-liner for today: "The Lord has given me the petition which I asked of Him (I Sam. 1:27)."
2. Maybe you've wondered how I get my series. I read the Bible through twice a year. Certain sections of the Bible jump out at me. This time—the incredible one-liners in I Samuel.
3. So it's into a rather obscure but powerful book of the Old Testament. I'll do some teachy things in the book but it will mainly be about some incredible experiences that are 3000 years old yet so applicable to life.
4. Question—How many of you have ever been in a very difficult and disappointing place in life and there was nothing you could humanly do to change the situation?
5. That's what this sermon is about. It's the story of a desperate woman with a desperate prayer to God with an answer that changed everything. I hope you're interested. So take your Bibles and let's get into--

The Story:

Vs. 1—A man by the name of Elkanah from the hill country of Ephraim, maybe 15 miles north of Jerusalem. We don't know much about him except he becomes the father of Samuel.

Vs. 2—He has two wives. Hannah (name means "grace") and Peninnah. Interesting how many men in the Old Testament had more than one wife. We know the standard for marriage was set in Genesis 2—one man and one woman for life (Gen. 2:24). And that's the standard in the New Testament.

Polygamy was never sanctioned by God and in every case of polygamy in the Old Testament, you find multiplied problems with more than one wife. We find it here in this story.

Vs. 3—The Israelites were supposed to celebrate three feasts every year. For some reason, Elkanah would only go once a year with his family to worship and sacrifice to God at the religious center of Israel in those days—Shiloh.

Vs. 4—Peninnah, Elkanah's one wife, had a bunch of sons and daughters. Hannah had none. So on the day of sacrifice, Elkanah provided the portions they would all need.

Vs. 5—But Elkanah would give his wife, Hannah, a double portion because he loved Hannah more than Peninnah. Can you feel trouble in this verse!?

There's something I want you to see in verse 5. It's a common theme in the Old Testament. The Lord is responsible for when and if people have children. In this case, the Lord had closed Hannah's womb.

The Jews were very sensitive to closed wombs. If a woman had a baby, it was considered to be God's doing (Gen. 4:1; I Sam. 1:5, 19) and a blessing from Him (Dt. 7:13-14). If a woman didn't have a baby after the expected age, she was considered to be cursed by God in some way. There was a lot of social embarrassment if you were a childless wife.

Vs. 6-7—Penninah was extremely jealous of Hannah and she chose this occasion every year to wound Hannah about her barrenness. Penninah really knew how to crush Hannah. I can't imagine how much Hannah dreaded these trips. Actually, I can't imagine the relationship these two had during the rest of the year. But Peninnah was so mean, Hannah couldn't eat and all she did was cry at the temple. Hannah wanted a child more than anything else in the world.

Vs. 8—Talk about a clueless husband. Look what Elkanah says to Hannah. READ. He wasn't dialed in to her heart and soul at all. That's been one of the primary shortcomings of husbands all these years. We miss the heartbeat of our wives' needs and say stupid things that miss the mark by a mile.

Vss. 9-10—Eventually Hannah ate and drank and went to the temple. But she was in such distress and turmoil all she knew to do was to pour out her heart before the Lord with sobbing. That's a good thing to do when the pain is so great in a barren season of life that you don't know what to do.

Vs. 11—Hannah makes a vow—"Lord, if you feel my pain and give me a son, I'll give him back to You. He'll become a Nazirite." A Nazirite was a special guild of Jews who would separate themselves from certain things of the world into total consecration to God.

Vss. 12-14—Eli the priest was watching Hannah in the temple. He saw her lips moving but heard no words. So he concluded Hannah was drunk. And he told her so. He was so wrong!

Our job as pastors is to come along side people in their pain, not to make snap judgments and increase people's pain. Pastors need to be people of compassion, grace, and truth. Proverbs 18:13 says that if we speak before we listen, we're foolish.

Vs. 15-16—I like what Hannah said. She spoke up for herself. She didn't let the priest intimidate her. She explained how she was severely oppressed in spirit and that she wasn't drunk at all. She'd been pleading her desperate case in silence before God.

Vss. 17-18—Eli kind of apologized and said he'd be praying for Hannah as well. And Hannah told Eli that she hoped he'd support her in her desperate prayers to God. And they parted.

Something happened in Hannah's experience of prayer and exchange with Eli that changed her. She rejoined her family and ate. But this time her sadness was gone. She was no longer bitterly oppressed in spirit.

Vs. 19—They all return home and guess what? Hannah gets pregnant. I can't imagine the joy Hannah had and the fun she had telling everyone.

Vs. 20—The baby is born and Hannah names him Samuel because of her gratitude that God had heard her prayer.

Vs. 21-23—The yearly time for going to Shiloh to worship at the temple comes around. Everyone's is packed and ready to go except Hannah. She asks to stay home and care for Samuel until he is weaned. When that happens, Hannah plans to take Samuel to the temple and give him to Eli so that Samuel can serve the Lord the rest of his life.

So Elkanah agrees. So Hannah keeps Samuel at home until he's weaned. Weaning was the age when the child would stop nursing and live on prepared food. That was about age three.

Vss. 24-25—When Samuel was weaned and the time came for the yearly worship and sacrifice at Shiloh, Hannah was true to her word. She took Samuel along with her sacrificial things. They sacrificed the bull to God and they gave Samuel to Eli.

Vss. 26-28—As she brings Samuel to Eli, Hannah says, “Remember me? I’m the woman you thought was drunk when I was pouring my heart out to God. Well, here’s the answer to my petition—little Samuel. Here’s what I’m going to do. I’m giving Samuel back to the Lord to serve Him as long as my boy lives.” When Hannah said that, verse 28 says that all Eli could do is to worship God.

Well, that’s the story. What I want to do now is to apply this story to our lives. At some point in our lives and possibly a number of times, we’re all going to be in a place like Hannah—a heartbreaking circumstance in which we’re powerless to do anything. If God doesn’t come through, we’re sunk.

Having said that, you need to know that Hannah’s story is her story, not ours. We can’t use her story and make it normative for our lives, that if we do what Hannah did, God will answer our desperate prayers and give us what we want. Nonetheless, I think that there’s a valid model here for us that’s very transferable. So let’s move to--

The Application:

When we’re extremely distressed about something and it doesn’t look like there’s a thing in the world we can do about it, this is the pathway I would suggest for you. I call it “The Hannah Pathway”.

1. Assess the situation (vss. 4-8).

Sooner or later, we’re all going to hit a difficult reality in life. Something extremely taxing is going to happen or we’re going to experience a very difficult situation. What are we going to do?

It’s really important to assess what’s going on or you won’t be able to deal with it properly. And if you can’t deal with it properly, you’re not going to come out too well.

I was at a seminar recently taught by Henry Cloud and John Townsend. All week long they kept saying, “Reality is your friend.” We tend to avoid reality as unpleasant. But we have to know what’s real in order to deal with it. We have to be able to know and embrace the negative realities of our lives if we’re going to get past them.

Hannah knew her reality. She was barren and grieving over it. Penninah was provoking her to anger and depression. I think Hannah had a real sense of the reality in her life.

We have to understand our negative reality and accept it. We can’t ignore it or color it in ways that aren’t real. This is crucial because it’s the only thing that allows us to do something that’s very important—go towards the negative reality with a determination to do something about it. Otherwise we’ll live in a stuck position somewhere and never properly deal with it.

So take an honest look at reality. What’s going on? How am I feeling? Do my closest friends see the same things I see? Assessing the situation is the launching pad for change.

2. Take positive spiritual initiative (vss 9-18).

Assessing the situation is only half of the solution. The other half is doing some right things in the situation. Our basic tendency is to do the wrong thing. We have to work hard at doing something healthy and constructive in the middle of a bad situation.

I put three words together that are very important in this point. POSITIVE—SPIRITUAL—INITIATIVE. All three aspects are critical. This is what Hannah did.

Positive—doing the right things in the middle of bad circumstances. If we do wrong and stupid things, we only make matters worse.

Spiritual—at the heart of the mess we’re facing is a spiritual battle. We must recognize that. Anything negative in our lives is a spiritual issue. You’re going to need spiritual tools and weapons to deal with it.

Initiative—you have to take some steps. You just can't sit there and let it come to you or watch things continue to deteriorate. You have to take action.

Hannah did two important things that we must do:

1) Get passionately before the Lord (vs. 9-13). Prayer became a major part of her life. Prayer wasn't some passing little extra she did. It became a determined action in her life.

When she prayed, she went to a prayer-conducive place where she could take some time without distraction. Prayer for difficult realities must be done like this. You've got to stop what's going on and get before the Lord in an appropriate place.

And not just casually. Hannah came with her whole heart before the Lord. She put it all out before Him. She wept bitterly before the Lord (vs. 10). Have you ever had that experience? I have and it's good for us.

We see something very interesting in verse 11. Hannah is so stressed about the situation, she bargains with the Lord. In the form of a vow, she said, "Lord, if you give me a son, I'll give him back to you."

Hannah had been beat up for so many years, she was at her wit's end. This vow kind of prayer was her last resort.

This is the kind of desperate praying that comes out when you feel like you can't take it anymore. I can't say whether this is a good kind of praying or not. But let me give you some advice about this kind of praying:

1} Be sure a prayer like this falls within the will of God. We can't be asking God for inappropriate and selfish things. Fortunately for Hannah, her prayer was in the developing will of God. We should only pray a prayer like this with a certainty that, if answered, would be compatible with God's will.

2} Be sure you are willing to keep your part of the bargain. Don't make a promise you will back down from. Ecclesiastes 5:4-5 says, "When you make a vow to God, do not be late in paying it, for He takes no delight in fools. Pay what you vow! It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not pay." If I had any doubts about what I would promise God, I wouldn't pray a prayer like this.

3} Be sure not to hold God hostage. Just because we try to make a deal with God, it doesn't mean that He's party to the arrangement. He sees and understands things we can't see or understand. We must defer to God and accept what comes to pass after a prayer like this without becoming disillusioned about God if the answer we want doesn't come. God doesn't exist so we can force Him to do something for us.

If you understand what I've just said and you're at the point where you know you can't go on much longer and you need a breakthrough, then pray something like Hannah prayed. There's no indication that God was offended and in this case, He answered her prayer.

One more thing about praying. Keep at it. The sense of this passage is that she kept at it with her petitions to God. She kept knocking and she wasn't about to stop.

Friends, when reality is crushing you, you need to get before the Lord. Miss this step and I offer little hope for a good outcome.

Here's the second initiative Hannah took that we need to take:

2. Connect with a spiritual partner (vss. 12-18a).

For Hannah, this happened almost by accident. But she seized the moment. When Hannah was praying before the Lord, she caught the attention of Eli the priest. After they got their little misunderstanding ironed out, Eli became a partner with Hannah concerning her petition before the Lord. Hannah had an ally in prayer.

This is so important. When we're going through tough times, we need someone on our team that can pull with us. It doesn't have to be a pastor. But it needs to be a person who can connect with God on your behalf and share the burden you carry. We need to receive something from a person or two outside of us. Galatians 6:2 says, "Carry each other's burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ."

Under stress, we can't go into a cave. People who connect vertically as well as horizontally do so much better when they're in stressful situations. It's important to connect with God. But it's also important to connect with a friend or spiritual leader who can carry the burden with you. There's real power in that.

Well, something happened in verse 18 that leads to the next step in Hannah's Pathway.

3. Release the situation to God (vs. 18b).

After her time with God and Eli, verse 18 says that Hannah went her way and ate and her face was no longer sad. The outward circumstances had not changed, but something happened inside Hannah that made her able to accept her situation.

My sense is that Hannah finally dealt with her grief. She dealt with the loss of her barrenness and came to the conclusion that she was going to be okay. She was able to let go of the negative situation and live in the acceptance of what was.

At this point there was no assurance that God would do anything. But Hannah was no longer sad. She finally came to the place where she said, "If my happiness depends on what I don't have and who is not distressing me, I'll never be happy." She got to the point where she was ready to move on.

I don't think God wants us to stay stuck in an unhealthy relationship or situation. I think sadness lifts when we can release our dream and our grief to God and allow Him to work in our lives by answering our prayer or by moving in some other direction.

Finding release is not easy. And there's no timetable. It comes by the grace of God given through other people. When that happens, you'll begin to notice that you're feeling better even though you may not have any assurance that you will get what you want. You'll just know that whatever God does will be okay for you.

Hannah came to that place. I believe she believed God would hear her prayer and make some kind of response. And that was the turnaround point.

Here's the next step in the Hannah Pathway:

4. Wait for God to answer (vss. 19-20).

I believe when we're praying to the maximum and somebody's on the team with us, God's going to do something. Hannah didn't do anything different. She went home and continued life as she had been used to living it. But something happened. She got pregnant.

She knew in her heart that God had answered her prayers. So she named her boy Samuel. And we're told why in verse 20, "Because I have asked him from the Lord." She named her boy so she'd never forget what God did.

Samuel means "the name is God" (the name of God is El {power}). For all intents and purposes to Hannah, the name "Samuel" meant "Heard of God". His name was her per-petual reminder that God had heard her at her lowest point.

Here comes the first real problem in my sermon. What if God doesn't answer my prayer? What if He doesn't come through for me like He did for Hannah? We can't ignore this. There are many times we don't get the petition we prayed for. NOW WHAT?

The response on this one is very complex and can be rather unsatisfying. All I can do is make a brief response in this sermon. I think God is going to answer any prayer that is as emotionally distressing as was Hannah's. I think He'll answer in at least three possible ways.

1) God will give the specific answer we prayed for. That's the home run we're hoping for.

2) God will give grace to remain in the situation. This one is less popular with us. We want out of a bad reality. But God told Paul when he sought healing from the thorn in his flesh, "My grace is sufficient for you (II Cor. 12:9)." And Paul somehow knew why he was to remain in the difficult situation.

3) God will change the situation. We don't get the answer we want, but God gives us a satisfying replacement. He either brings something our way or we get peace to make a change.

In any event, I think God is going to respond to the heartfelt cries of His children. It's not our job to tell God how to answer, but to go with the flow.

Here's the last step in Hannah's Pathway:

5. Keep your promises to God (vss. 21-28).

I don't know if you noticed anything about Hannah's prayer. To me it's remarkable. Hannah said, "If you give me what I want most, I'll give it back to you." How crazy is that? Yet that's actually the secret of fulfillment in life.

Hannah told her husband, "Let me keep Samuel until he's three. I'll nurture him in his infancy and then I'll take him to Shiloh and give him to Eli to serve the Lord for the rest of his life." That's exactly what she did. And she had no idea of the powerful impact Samuel would have in Israel's history.

Any of you ever have a 3-year-old child or grandchild? How hard would it be to give that child to your pastor to raise? (GIVE ME A 3-YEAR-OLD FROM THE NURSERY.) You'd love to give us your teenager!! But a baby? That had to be heart-wrenching!

In I Samuel 2:19, we're told that Hannah would come once a year to see Samuel and that she'd bring him a little coat. But she gave up all the day-to-day stuff you love when kids are growing up.

Hannah kept her promise and I think she did it willingly even though I'm sure she would have felt some deep separation emotions.

Let me tell you why I think Hannah was able to give God the very thing she asked for. She wasn't selfish in her request. She didn't want to use God to get something she would enjoy apart from God.

That's where we get into trouble—asking God for things we keep to ourselves and away from God. When we ask God for anything, they need to be things that God and we can enjoy together. To get something from God and keep it for ourselves and away from Him is wrong.

When we understand that whatever we ask of God we also want to fully share with Him, then we can keep our promises to Him because it's not another loss, it's a huge gain. Whatever God gives me, we enjoy together!

This gets at one of the great concerns I have about Christians in general. Whether we made a promise to God about a specific thing in prayer or not, we've all made promises to God when we signed up as a disciple. We promised to serve and follow Him. Yet how many of us go off doing our own thing, keeping God out of much of our lives except for a little church.

I don't think we're going to be in a position to get our prayers answered if we don't keep the promises we make every week when we sing to God songs like "All to Jesus I Surrender" and "You Are My All in All". Our lives are not about using God for what we want while we keep it from Him. Our lives need to be about a relationship with God that includes Him in everything we do and say.

Conclusion

Well, that's the applicational pathway of desperate prayers we learn from Hannah. We could all tell stories about the desperate prayers in our lives. But I want to close with how I've traveled Hannah's Pathway. All I can do is skim the surface.

When Marie and I were first married, our great hope was to have children. The years began to tick by and the doctors told us we'd have a better chance of going to the moon than having our own kids. If we wanted to have children, we needed to adopt.

Marie and I went through this very pathway I talked about.

It wasn't easy. But after 7½ years of childlessness, God eventually gave us 3 adopted children and you guessed it, one by Marie's getting pregnant. By the way, if you're experiencing problems connected with infertility and pregnancy, we have a great ministry called Heartstrings. Check out our website or call Lisa Ward.

With our oldest son, Jason, we have found ourselves on the Hannah Pathway once again. He was critically injured in a car crash 10 years ago and he's handicapped to this day. I find myself cycling through the Hannah Pathway often. Sometimes I have to reassess reality. Sometimes I'm crying out to God with tears and I call out to some close friends around me for help.

Sometimes I feel like I've released it all to God and I do better. I do a lot of waiting and God answers prayers in ways I haven't asked for. He hasn't yet answered my prayer to restore Jason. And I work hard at keeping my promises before God even though I often fail.

The Hannah Pathway is before me all the time. The thing I've noticed more than anything is that a bad reality is not bigger than God. God uses difficult things to change our lives for the good. And I've come to realize that the number one thing in life that changes us for the good is pain, if we let it.

Yes, I'm a pro on the Hannah Pathway. I haven't always gotten her results. But I know that through it all, I've been changed for the better.

What part of the Hannah Pathway are you on? My prayer for you is—no matter what your reality—get on the Hannah Pathway! You'll come though okay if you stay with it.