

SERVANT MOTHERS

1 Samuel 1:10-11, 19-28, Matthew 10:37-39 (NASB)

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1. HOLES IN THE HEART

Hannah was a woman with holes in her heart. How do you live with holes in your heart? She was married to a typical, middle-class Jewish man named Elkanah. He was a good provider, ran a pleasant home, and had faith in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. So why did she have holes in her heart? The first rip in the fabric of her soul was that she was not Elkanah's only wife.

Elkanah also had a wife named Peninnah. Now, the nation Israel tolerated polygamy for long periods during its history even though God had said that the divine plan for marriage was one man and one woman for life. It may very well be that the culture had lost its instinctive knowledge of the wrongness of polygamy through seared consciences. But no one can erase the divine pattern from the universe and the human soul. I am confident that Hannah knew in her heart, even if she accepted the polygamy for practical reasons, that it was not right. Would not her soul cry out every time it was Peninnah's turn to repose with Elkanah? I am not a woman, but I know enough of a woman's heart to know that Hannah got a spear through the heart every time she was swapped out and Peninnah was swapped in.

The second hole in Hannah's heart came from her inability to bear children. There are several reasons for this. From what we know of her she had almost certainly married with the idea of family in mind, and then it did not happen. Women do not have to marry for that reason, but the closeness of Israel to the word of God no doubt increased the power of this plan in her mind. Added to that was the sad reality of social disgrace in Israel for the failure to produce children. We know today that this may just as easily be the fault of the husband, but in that time a woman's self-worth was deeply invested in her ability to give heirs to her family line. How many holes in Hannah's heart would have resulted from every trip to draw water with the other women: "So, Hannah, when are you and Elkanah going to start a family?" The intensity of this feeling of loss would have been exacerbated by the fact that Peninnah had borne children for Elkanah. Every child's squeal would have been a knife in Hannah's heart.

The third hole in Hannah's heart came from Peninnah, who deliberately threw salt in her wounds. Peninnah undoubtedly suffered from the knowledge that Elkanah's affection was more powerfully set on Hannah than herself. He openly favored Hannah over Peninnah by giving her a double portion of food. Peninnah decided that the only way to get even was to ridicule Hannah for being childless.

How do you live when you have holes in your heart? Hannah threw herself upon the Lord, as is recorded in 1 Samuel 1:10-11: "**She, greatly distressed, prayed to the LORD and wept bitterly. She made a vow and said, 'O LORD of hosts, if You will indeed look on the affliction of Your maidservant and remember me, and not forget Your maidservant, but**

will give Your maidservant a son, then I will give him to the LORD all the days of his life, and a razor shall never come on his head." This is the first thing we learn about motherhood from Hannah. Take the holes in your heart to the Lord.

It is possible to take Hannah's vow to give her son to the Lord as merely the output of a broken heart which was trying to make a deal to stop the pain. As will become clear, the three big holes in her heart were not the result of selfishness. Furthermore, her vow was not simply a formality. Vows were customary in Israel, though Christ warned us not to do them. No, Hannah had genuinely thrown herself on the mercies of God.

This is proved by what she did next: **"Then they arose early in the morning and worshiped before the LORD, and returned again to their house in Ramah. And Elkanah had relations with Hannah his wife, and the LORD remembered her. It came about in due time, after Hannah had conceived, that she gave birth to a son; and she named him Samuel, saying, 'Because I have asked him of the LORD.' Then the man Elkanah went up with all his household to offer to the LORD the yearly sacrifice and pay his vow. But Hannah did not go up, for she said to her husband, 'I will not go up until the child is weaned; then I will bring him, that he may appear before the LORD and stay there forever'"** (1 Samuel 1:19-22).

Consider the logic of Hannah's vow. Having a child would have been the fulfillment of one of her deepest heart desires. If she were being selfish, she would have clung to this child fiercely. Instead, there is not one hint of faithlessness on her part. The proof that she had cast herself totally upon the Lord is seen by the fulfillment of her vow: **"Elkanah her husband said to her, 'Do what seems best to you. Remain until you have weaned him; only may the LORD confirm His word.' So the woman remained and nursed her son until she weaned him. Now when she had weaned him, she took him up with her, with a three-year-old bull and one ephah of flour and a jug of wine, and brought him to the house of the LORD in Shiloh, although the child was young. Then they slaughtered the bull, and brought the boy to Eli [the high priest]. She said, 'Oh, my lord! As your soul lives, my lord, I am the woman who stood here beside you, praying to the LORD. For this boy I prayed, and the LORD has given me my petition which I asked of Him. So I have also dedicated him to the LORD; as long as he lives he is dedicated to the LORD.' And he worshiped the LORD there"** (1 Samuel 1:23-28).

It is almost an unthinkable thought to a mother, especially one who had yearned so passionately for a child, to give him to others to be raised. We must not think that this was an irresponsible act on her part. In today's world parents routinely give up their children to coaches who take them to other parts of the world to train them into athletes capable of competing in the Olympics. It was common in Israel for women and men to be full-time servants in the house of the Lord. It was as if Samuel was to be an Olympic-quality servant of the Lord. And that is what he turned out to be. If Hannah lived long enough and gotten into one of those mothers' bragging competitions she would not have said: "My son, the vineyard owner!" or "My son, the successful tradesman!" She would have been able to say: "My son, the prophet of the Lord God of Israel, under whose hands the first king of Israel has been anointed!" That would have won the competition.

And now we come to the point of all. Faithful motherhood, done God's way, puts holes in your heart. Weaning in Israel would commonly have happened at two or three years of age. Can you imagine what was happening in her heart the moment Hannah hugged little Samuel, gave him a kiss, and handed him into the arms of a servant in the house of the Lord whom she hardly knew? We must be careful not to misunderstand the Bible at this point. God does not require any woman to make the vow which Hannah made. What the Bible teaches is much more comprehensive. God wants every mother to give every child over to him, without exception. And that is only one of the many ways to get a hole in your heart.

How many times do mothers ask: "If only this or that would change with my family, my heart would not be ripped all the time? If only my husband would act differently and my children would shape up, I would not be pulling my shredded heart around in a wagon every day?" The stark reality is that every parent has to give up his or her children. If you do not, they themselves will turn to you fiercely one day and say: "You are giving me up, and there is nothing you can do to stop me." Sometimes a child will stay with you but often that is worse than if they left, because they will never become fully-formed people. I once ministered to a ninety-year-old invalid woman who received daily care from her seventy-three-year-old son. Eventually I came to call him Young Billy because he was still a child in her mind and even, to some extent, in his own. So she avoided getting a hole in her heart and he lost his life!

Since all parents have to give up their children, the only choice left is whether to give them up to the Lord or to the world. Hannah trusted the Lord God of Israel totally with her own heart and the life of her precious son. Hannah is our shining example that to the final degree of devotion, motherhood is servanthood to the Lord.

2. THE LORD'S PATTERN FOR SERVANT MOTHERS

The moment I even speak or write the words "servant mothers" I am aware of the tidal wave of voices in our culture shouting me down: "You can't say that! What are women supposed to be, doormats? We're not a bunch of slaves, you know!" Add to that the fact that the normal reality of motherhood puts holes in your heart, and it is very easy for women to develop a powerful aversion to what should be one of the greatest blessings in their lives.

The Lord Jesus explained the nature of servanthood to his disciples many times, and one instance in particular reveals the spiritual dynamics of servant motherhood. And while this discussion will focus on mothers, these principles are the same for everyone. In short, servant motherhood requires the embracing of death in order to find life.

Jesus delivered an inflexible priority standard for our relationships which is recorded in Matthew 10:37: **"He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me; and he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me."** This is the uncompromising demand issued to every mother, and for most mothers it sends a shotgun blast to the heart. The fact that Jesus does not mention that he expects mothers to love their family members proves how much it is built into the created order. This may no longer be a good assumption during the decline of Western civilization, but he tells all mothers to demote their instinctive love for their own children to a place below their love for him.

This is what we see in the life of Hannah, faithful mother in ancient Israel. We may not dismiss her by saying that women back then must not have loved their children the way mothers do today. When she wiped Samuel's nose for the last time and extended her arms to move his beating heart away from her own, she was placing her love and devotion to the Lord above her love for her child.

"Well, then," you say, "the Lord must have fixed the holes in her heart so that this was no problem for her." Why would you say that? There is no evidence in the text of that. The only fair assumption we may make is that devotion to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob made it possible for her to live with holes in her heart. This is the crucial point! No mother gets to choose whether she will get holes in her heart! The only choice she gets to make is whether she will personally embrace the grace of God to endure the pain and sorrows which come to everyone. And the only way to do that is to love God above all else, even our dearest human relations on earth. "Who is he to demand such a thing?" you ask. The answer is that he is the only One who deserves such devotion. It is all-surpassing devotion alone which opens the floodgates of his grace.

Jesus made a second uncompromising challenge to mothers: "**And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me**" (Matthew 10:38). In other words, Christ calls women to embrace the death of servanthood.

If a woman compares what her life would be like with children and without them she can make a list of things which having children will affect. It is a list of little and not-so-little deaths which she will have to embrace. The first thing to go is cash. Children are expensive! Every so often someone tries to calculate the lifetime cost of a single child, and the number is always absurdly high. Mothers have also to reckon with the loss of youthful bodies. I cannot relate to this reality in a direct way, but I speculate that having other people grow inside you--and then letting them out--must do a lot of damage.

A mother's spare time goes out the window. Just try to drink a cup of tea while sitting on the back porch! Wait--what's that sound from the other room? Better go check! Of great concern to many mothers is the loss of careers they would have had if they had not borne children. The hobbies tend to get put in boxes, as do many of the sports. Finally, mental acuity can take a hit over years of talking mostly to small people. Dad comes home and asks: "Honey, what do you think of the government's policy regarding our borders in the age of terrorism, especially with regard to economics and homeland security?" "Ummm, I think they should let nice people in and keep bad people out." Jesus Christ does not remove these impacts. He invites every mother to embrace these aspects of death which cannot be avoided in true servanthood.

Some mothers try to fake this. They start a family because they want to add the experience of motherhood to their lives. The family ends up jammed into a woman's schedule where no room has been made for it. This does not work! The whole family gets the message: "You are second or third on my list." Some mothers try to make up for the losses by living through their children's achievements. You will see them berating the soccer referee, demanding things from teachers, and pressuring their children. Perhaps the most damaging attempt to patch the holes in the heart come when adults try to draw adult love from their children.

What could Jesus Christ possibly say that would make servant motherhood with all of its losses seem worthwhile? **"He who has found his life will lose it, and he who has lost his life for My sake will find it"** (Matthew 10:39). This explains Hannah's behavior. She found herself! She discovered life itself in the Lord which overtopped the losses. There are joys hidden there which cannot be known until a mother goes there personally. How much does it cost to discover them? A short parable from Christ explains: **"...The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant seeking fine pearls, and upon finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it"** (Matthew 13:45-46).

3. HOW TO EMBRACE THE JOY OF SERVANT MOTHERHOOD

No human being in his or her right mind would embrace the little deaths without a purpose and a payoff. Paul the Apostle described the purpose in 2 Corinthians 4:10, where he said he was **"...always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body"** (2 Corinthians 4:10). The problem is that our bodies do not want to do this. Andree Seu writes in a column in *World* magazine that she is aware of a long list of ways to avoid the carrying around of the dying of Jesus Christ, but: "Better is the embracing of fresh death served up every moment....[Which] refuses all self-made refuges and self-anesthetizing (think of giving birth and passing up the epidural)....I want, with Paul, the moment-by-moment death working in me that allows Jesus' moment-by-moment life to shine" (6 May, 2006, p. 55).

In other words, feel the pain. Accept the holes in your heart. The only way to do this is to deliberately shut down all the things we do to kill the pain. Seu gives the following list: We may diminish others in order to reduce our own pain: "Oh, their careers aren't that great after all!" We may nurse a false hope of restoring all our lost things when it would be better to abandon hope rather than nursing an ersatz form of life. We may turn to substance abuse or sleep to kill the pain. These are not options for a saint, and they simply do not work. We may turn to fantasizing. But the pretense that reality is not real is a dilute form of madness. We may try to be stoics: "I'm tough. Nothing can touch my heart!" No, the Lord Jesus modeled how to be tough-minded but soft-hearted. A hard-hearted Christian is a contradiction in terms.

By contrast, we read what the Bible says, that Hannah ended up in joy even as she was choosing to live with a cannonball-sized hole in her heart. When you give up your child to the Lord, the pain does not go away as soon as you get home from the house of the Lord. The absence of childish squeals and clutter on the floor reminds you every day, drawing fresh blood. And Hannah lived in joy!

CONCLUSION

These foundation stones for finding joy and life in Christ are the same for pastors and missionaries. Jesus Christ has only one radical minimum standard for his followers. We would all instinctively see that a pastor or missionary who is still trying to pursue his private goals all the time is on the wrong track. It is the same for mothers.

What about leadership? Is motherhood only about nurture? Since all leadership in Christ's church is servant leadership, servant mothers are exerting its most effective form. That is why, in spite

of all the talk about pastors needing to be CEO's, every new pastor discovers that ministry is more like parenting than management, more like agriculture than manufacturing, and more like animal husbandry than computer-aided design. Never let anyone tell you that Biblical servant motherhood is not leadership!

Was Hannah's sacrifice worth it? Her son Samuel became one of the most important men in the history of the nation Israel. And Hannah got the immediate daily payoff of living in the joy of the Lord.

Andree Seu writes: " I wasn't practicing daily dying but avoiding it like haggis. Now I'll own death, since Christ owned death for me, and we'll just see." What about you, mothers? What about you, women and men? Will you block the life of Christ in your life by many clever ruses or lose your life in order to find it? No one can make that decision except you.