

Gary:

Today, we're going to jump into a great awkward family story... Turn or scroll with me in your Bibles to 1 Samuel 1

There was a certain man of Ramathaim-zophim of the hill country of Ephraim whose name was Elkanah the son of Jeroham, son of Elihu, son of Tohu, son of Zuph, an Ephrathite. ² He had two wives. The name of the one was Hannah, and the name of the other, Peninnah...

“You know, I actually feel kinda awkward myself telling the story of two women. So, I thought it might be a good idea for you to hear the story of Hannah... from Hannah herself..”

So today, we're going to have Heather come not as Heather, but as Hannah, and give us Hannah's story from Hannah's perspective.

Hannah:

Well... Good Morning Fellowship! Wow, what a place. It is such a privilege to be invited here to share the story of my awkward family photos. Well, more like awkward family portraits in my time. We didn't have photos back then, but we had plenty of awkward. Gary transported me through time and space to come here this morning and tell you about our awkward family sketches. Actually, we need to commission a new family sketch soon, because there's a pretty big family change happening. I can't wait to tell you about it! But, if I just tell you, it will seem pretty ordinary. But if I tell you my backstory, you'll see how great our God is. You see, I'm a woman who has had deeply painful experiences... “repurposed” as you would say? by a God of great reversals.

Sorry, I'm getting so ahead of myself. Like Gary said, my name is Hannah –it means “favor” in Hebrew. But for quite some time, my life was defined by “disfavor.” Everyone would tell you that I was cursed by God. Have you been in a season like that? Where things are so bad, you pray a raw prayer, “Are you not entertained?” What do you do when in your days of despair, your God remains silent? When you pray, and heaven rings hollow? Have you ever been in a situation where it felt like God was silent, absent, or so far away? Is there any hope for someone who feels forgotten by God? I spent years wondering if God would ever remember me.

I can't remember when it began. As long as I can remember, I have dreamed of marrying some great godly man and being a mother. Okay, I know that' it's not a unique dream. Seems simple. But it was still my dream.

And after waiting to grow up, God blessed me with the most honorable man in the region of Ephraim –it's like the “hill country of Israel.” Yes, I'm Elkanah's wife! That's right, you're not from Ephraim, or you would know Elkannah. Although he's not the most wealthy man in the district, he's got more than enough to get by -we have a great home on the range). He's well-respected in our area. He is one of the most godly men around and takes his faith seriously. You

don't see many men like that my days –the days of the Judges. Men were not so honorable –we all had #MeToo stories. But Elkanah was a man of honor. So there I was, betrothed to one of the most eligible bachelors in the land of Ephraim, or the land of Israel for that matter. We got married and lived happily ever after. Well, that's his side of the story.

Things were a little different for me, my life, less favorable. Once we were married, I took on all the roles of Jewish housewife that I had dreamed of, all except for one. I wasn't a mother. We tried and tried for kids. All the ladies in the village would tell me “don't worry –this too shall pass.” Or “don't worry –it will happen when you least expect it. Just be content and God will give it.” At first, these words were comforting. This was just a season that would pass. But the season got really long. I would go to the assembly and hear messages about how “a woman's highest calling was to train up her children to love the LORD their God with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength.” And I wanted to live that out so desperately. Elkanah and I kept trying. Each time I would get my hopes up. Yet every time, I was disappointed. And then it became obvious. I could never be a mother. I was infertile.

It shouldn't have been that way. My name meant “favor.” Elkanah's was “Creator God.” You would think “Favor” plus “Creator God” would equal children. But we had none.

So, Elkanah did what most guys in Israel would do to protect his family's inheritance and legacy. He took another wife who could provide children for him. Things are a bit different for us. Penninah was her name. Before I realized it, she had more children than I could count. Fitting – her name means “fruitful” after all. For Elkanah, it was the best of both worlds –one wife to meet his need for affection, another to meet his need for children. Although Ms. Fruity gave Elkanah the children he deserved, my own desire never left. And watching the other wife with her children only increased my longing to be a mother. As I lay awake at night, her infants' cries echoing back the cries of my heart, I would pray, “Lord, my Name is Hannah. You are the God of all knowledge. You know my pain, you know my situation. You rule over everything. Please, remember me.”

But the Lord remained silent. As if saying goodbye to my childhood dream wasn't bad enough, being infertile, or what we call “barren” carries a stigma in my time. While the depth of Elkanah's love had room for a barren wife, I knew my society didn't. I saw the stares. I heard the sighs people tried to hide as I stepped through the streets. My society has no place for infertility. Barrenness is a social disability. I couldn't fulfill my civic duty as a wife to increase the population of our tribe. Maybe some of you know that feeling of being useless, or the fear of being exposed as not a real woman or not a real man. There was no place in our society for a useless barren woman like me.

And Penninah made sure I knew that there was no place in our house for a barren woman. Maybe some of you know what it's like to not be able to provide for your family. As much as I wanted, I couldn't avoid her mocking. She was my –sister-wife?! There's our awkward family

photo. It was common in my day, but not what God intended. While God Himself did say, “It is not good for man to be alone,” He only created one woman to do the job. But my not-so-dear sister-wife made it very clear that *she* was the true woman of the house.

Nonetheless, dysfunctional families still must function somehow. The best of family times and the worst of family times fell once each year. Every year, we travel to the house of the LORD in Shiloh to worship and sacrifice to the LORD. My family takes worship seriously. Entering the house of my God was the highlight of my year. Yet as the years wore on, the excitement turned to dread.

We took this annual pilgrimage to thank the Lord for His provision in our lives. It was like our Thanksgiving. However, Penninah took this time to make clearer than ever God’s *lack* of blessing in my life. There’s nothing like a celebration of God’s blessing to remind you of His cursing. And everyone knew that an infertile woman was cursed by God.

Yes, Creation experiences seasons. Yet my body remained frozen. The Lord was preventing my body from experiencing the natural cycle of life. Our Creator God loves to create, but he wouldn’t let me create in His image. And every year when celebrating God’s faithfulness through the seasons of life, Penninah reminded me of my changeless state. Our pilgrimage for worship had become a pilgrimage of weeping. Every year, our family’s sacred time with the Lord left me scarred.

So now the season for sacrifice arrived once again. And once again, like a widow dreads the annual anniversary of her husband’s death, I braced myself for the pain. As we traveled through the limestone hills of Ephraim, I began to turn my heart to stone. I had done it many times before. You try to shut down to survive. Yet I forgot that the hardened heart becomes the fragile heart. And the fragile heart, with just one shove, becomes the broken heart.

I quickly forgot my pain when I caught sight of my favorite scene – the House of the LORD in Shiloh. There is no place like the home of the LORD. And my heart began to hope -against hope- that maybe, just maybe this year would be different.

The family time of worship and sacrifice came. And it always came with a feast. And my family knows how to feast. As the spiritual leader of our family, Elkanah led us in the festival. After the sacrifice, he would portion out the best steak of the year to each member of the family. To show that he loved me even though I couldn’t give him kids, he gave me an extra portion. While I appreciated the sweet efforts, on the one hand, meat isn’t exactly my love language. On the other hand, this didn’t exactly serve as a peace treaty for Peninnah. This would make her jealous and trigger her torrent of taunts.

But what do you do when the taunts are true? She was “providing him with economic stability,” while I remained a financial burden. “To be feminine is to be fertile.” And she would remind me that my body was “no more good than a man’s.” She cut at the core of who I was as a woman.

(PAUSE) And then there were the things she didn't have to say. Every time Elkanah's face light up at the sight of one of his sons, it was clear. She could bless my dear husband in a way I never could (pause).

And this year, something different did happen. I just couldn't take it anymore. I wept as I have never wept before. And as my body was broken, so was my heart, so much so that I could not even bring myself to eat the food of the feast of faithfulness. It was like when you're in a worship service, and your heart is so heavy that any happy song feels like mockery. There was no breaking in my favor as I praised –it felt like a lie to sing that. And I just couldn't bring myself to eat the food celebrating what I didn't have.

So, Elkanah, seeing that I was in angst and unable to celebrate, swept in to be the noble husband the rescue. Since the meat didn't work the first time, This time, he tried to console me through his words. "Hannah, why do you weep? And why do you not eat? And why is your heart sad? Am I not more to you than ten sons?"

His words- I mean... the guy means well... And I hate the pain my pain caused him. But his words of comfort had a subliminal sting to them. How could I make him understand that this wasn't about him! that the depth of my desire did not relate to my love and respect for him? How could I make this dear man understand? There are some things no man can fix. There are some hearts no word can mend. There are some situations where only God can be the Hero.

And I needed a Hero. My neighbors would quietly tell me I should seek out the fertility goddess, Asherah. Others would offer me old wives tales about mandrakes. But there wasn't a medical solution in my day to this problem. No, I needed a real hero. I knew that the Lord who closed my womb was the Lord who could open it. And now my emotions were too much to hold together. I had no face left to save. So I had to pour out my heart to someone who would actually understand me. I had to go to the LORD.

So I left the meal and rushed to the house of God. I guess I passed Eli, the high priest, but I barely remember seeing him seated outside the door. All I knew was that I needed to go to worship my God. There was room in my worship for weeping. As a servant pours out wine during a feast, I let my tears form, then trickle down my face, one joining the next as tributaries join to form a river of sorrow from a life of hope denied. And there was room in my faith for desire. No amount disappointment could suppress it. For I knew that the arm of my Lord was long enough to handle my longings. (PAUSE) But I had nothing to offer him but myself. So I prayed.

Oh, LORD ALMIGHTY,
If you'll look with compassion on the suffering of your servant,
If you'll ever remember me and not forget me
And give me a son
I'll dedicate Him to You, LORD, all the days of his life.

Like a Nazirite, no razor will touch his head. “

I begged and begged God to remember me, not just for my own sake, but so I could give what I asked for back to Him. Not to try to manipulate him –I honestly wasn’t thinking hard enough for that. But if God would do the miraculous to take away the shame from my name, the least I could do is let this make His name great too. I kept praying through my sobs. I don’t know how much time passed. I was lost pouring out my grief before God that I jumped when I heard a man utter in disgust,

“How long will you go on being drunk? Put your wine away from you!!” I was startled as I turned at his voice. It was Eli, the high priest. He had seen my lips quivering as I poured out my heart before God and assumed I was... drunk?!! Have any of you been hurt by or misunderstood by someone in the community of faith? To be fair, the state of Israel at the time probably gave him reason to be jaded. I guess Eli’s seen so many women pouring another drink that he hasn’t seen any pouring out their hearts recently.

It hurt, but I was too broken to be defensive or frustrated, and God knew I could use a man of God. So I just told him my story. So I said between my tears,

“No, sir. I haven’t had spirits. I’m a woman troubled in spirit. I’ve been pouring out my soul before the Lord. Please don’t look at me as daughter of destruction. I’m not like them. This whole time I’ve been just speaking out of the depths of my despair”

Realizing his mistake, Eli replied, “Go in peace, and may the God of Israel grant your request.” In a moment of empathy, Eli proclaimed truth to my troubled soul. Not everyone receives a personal blessing from the High priest.

I left the house of God much differently than I had entered it. For in my book, a promise from the Lord is as good as done. I had my appetite back –I can’t remember when I was last that hungry. Everyone noticed there was something different about me.

The feast complete, the sacrifices made, we traveled back home. And sometime in the next months, Elkannah and I... Well... I mean, you know what married couples do from time to time. And my heart found hope less painful. And something different happened. A few months went by. And something just felt wrong with me. I got pretty sick. I started gaining weight. I started feeling nauseous at the smell of food... or at the smell of anything... I was so tired... And as the weeks passed, I realized there wasn’t something wrong with me. For the first time –there wasn’t something wrong with me. No, the Lord remembered me! Oh if you could see Elkanah’s face when I gave him the news! It was everything to share in this joy with him. And the time came, I gave birth to a healthy baby boy. I named him Samuel, which, in my language, sounds like the words “ask” and “God.” Every time I saw this boy, I was looking at what I asked for from God.

Although the LORD had given Samuel to me, I knew it was only so I could give him back to Him. And as I traced the toes of my Samuel, I remembered I had to tell my husband that I had vowed his son away. According to the Law, Elkanah had every right to repeal my vow. But my husband takes vows seriously. When it came time for the annual pilgrimage, I knew I couldn't make the journey. I told Elkanah, "As soon as Samuel is weaned, I will bring him, so that he may appear in the presence of the LORD and serve there forever." Elkanah agreed, saying, "Only may the LORD keep his word."

I spent those few precious years of weaning as years of preparing. I hoped that Samuel would grow to be a man of faith. I prayed that he would know that there is no one beside God. And as I prayed over Samuel, I wondered, as any mother might, "Will anyone in Israel ever know just how special my son is?"

But, the few years drew to a close. Oh the mess of emotions. As yeast can't be separated once mixed in with the dough I could not separate my delight in the faithfulness of God from the pain of parting with my son. But as if parting from my child was not bad enough, reality sunk in. I was leaving my son in the care of Eli, and Eli's sons were worthless men. Now, I in no way mean disrespect to the High Priest of God, but his lack of judgment worried me. I mean, he did confuse my prayers with being drunk! But I was reminded –I'm not giving Samuel to Eli; I'm giving him to the LORD. The Lord to whom I made the vow was the Lord to whom I was entrusting my son.

So once Samuel was weaned, I returned to Shiloh with Elkanah for our annual feast. Yet this time, *I* had a child to bring with me! I could celebrate the faithfulness of our God in a way I never had before. And I definitely ate more than I ever did before.

But the time came -it flew by so fast. The time came for us to leave Shiloh, and for me to leave my son. I brought him to the house of God. The flashbacks. Where I had once stood begging God to remember me, I now stood with the evidence of God's remembrance. I could not wait to tell Eli. We brought a typical thanksgiving offering -a bull, 35lbs of flour, and a skin of wine. But don't worry Eli –I wasn't drinking it this time either! As soon as I saw the High Priest, I shouted, "Oh, my master! I'm back! Remember me –that crazy lady you thought was drunk? I am that very woman who stood here before you, praying to the Lord. This boy is what I asked God for, and the Lord has finally remembered to show me, Hannah, his favor. So, I'm loaning him to the Lord. As long as he lives, Samuel is on loan to the Lord."

I left a piece of my own heart in Shiloh the day I left Samuel. But I still visit him. And I give him a new robe each year to remind him that even though He belongs to the LORD, I will always be his Mother.

Now, what did I learn through all this? And what does my story of a barren woman have to do with the likes of you? Friends, when the Lord remembers you, remember Your Lord. When the Lord remembers you, remember your Lord.

Some of you today may feel forgotten by the God who spoke your life into existence. He remains silent in the midst of your bareness... brokenness... singleness... loneliness... sadness... weariness. Although you'd never let another soul hear it, your heart cries out a raw prayer, "Lord, my name is _____. Do you even remember me?" I don't know where you're at today. Some of you may be in a really long difficult season. And if you were honest, you wonder where is this good and powerful God? It feels like he's abandoned you.

Others of you may be like me. You have a dream or desire –and it's for a *good* thing that could honor God. But you wonder if God will ever fulfill it.. or if he's forgotten about your desires. There are two things you can do with a God-honoring dream: you can suppress it or you can surrender it. Contentment is not the absence of desire; it is the active choice to surrender desire to a God who is trustworthy.

Some of you today may be new to the idea that there is God who remembers those who are stranded at the margins of our society. If you want to have a relationship with this God, Gary or I or anyone on church staff would love to talk to you about how you can have a relationship with the God who remembers. Others of you may have a relationship with this God, but it's really hard for you to trust Him. Now, I Hannah don't know much about this, but Gary has told me there's a weekend you call Good Friday or Easter Sunday? If God remembered you when you were most helpless to overcome your sin, you can trust Him to be the same God of my story – Hannah's, and trust Him to remember You in other areas of life.

The Lord will Remember you.. I was barren. I had a baby! That doesn't happen. But by the grace of God it does because we serve a God of great reversals! And the Lord will remember you. I can't tell you how He will. He may never fulfill your desire the way you hope –he hasn't promised everyone a husband, a wife, a child, a dream career, relief from chronic illness, whatever it may be. But the Lord will remember you. Don't limit God's faithfulness to your lack of creativity. It may not be when or how you expect, but your Creator remembers you.

And when He does, remember your Creator. Maybe you've already forgotten how God answered your past prayers. What would it look like for you today to remember our God? Maybe you need to set up time with your family or life group each week to take time to remember God's faithfulness. Maybe you need to journal or keep a list of when God answers your prayers. In the pages of Scripture, remembering always drives action. When God "remembered me" or other barren women, he took action. When we remember God, we need to take action and live faithfully. If God gives you your desire, what would it look like for you to honor him with it? How can you use it to "live out your God given purpose?" If you make a vow to the Lord in your brokenness, don't you dare forget it when you're healed. If you have experienced the faithfulness of God, remain faithful to Him. If He speaks into your sorrow, if He delivers your desires, if He heals your heart, remember Him in faithful obedience.

Speaking of remembering, I almost forgot to tell you about our next family portrait. Well, as my story shows, we serve a God of great reversals. Next year, we'll have to commission a new family portrait. Because the Lord has remembered me. The LORD Almighty has remembered me, Hannah, again.

Gary read: *"1 Samuel 2:21 'Indeed the LORD visited Hannah, and she conceived and bore sons and two daughters. And the young man Samuel grew in the presence of the LORD.'"*