

# *Real Housewives of Ephraim*

*I Samuel 1: 1-20*

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The doors are open all day in cathedrals in big cities. The tradition of Christian sanctuaries flows from the words of Scripture, “My temple shall be a house of prayer for all nations.” Anyone can come in. And all kinds of people in all kinds of moods and conditions enter. The day I was in St. John the Divine, a man began speaking in a voice well past the polite volume for a cathedral. He was speaking to God. “Hey. I’m walking around here, trying to live, looking for a bit of a break, and what do *You* do all day?” He ranted as he walked down the center aisle toward the high altar. People gave him a wide berth. “Is this the way *You* want it? Can’t *You* do something about it?” He shook his fist at the cross.

I watched from a distance. I didn’t want him to notice me and then turn all that sad rage my way. What could anyone do for him? I wondered what the cathedral staff would do. Surely this was not uncommon in New York. Perhaps a priest would come soon, put an arm around this man and gently lead him to a more private place. Or perhaps security would more insistently escort him out. They did what was probably the wisest, and saddest thing to do. Nothing. The man had his say before the Almighty, got tired of hearing his own voice, and left.

God, of course, is everywhere. But a sanctuary or a temple focuses that presence. People go to a place where God’s presence seems concentrated. There they unburden their hearts. They let out the truth of their lives. That’s what happened in our story from I Samuel today.

Once there was a man named Elkanah. He had two wives. Right there we realize that trouble is ahead! The Bible recognizes the reality of polygamy in ancient times. But Scripture never endorses this as God’s intention. Some of the reasons will soon come clear. His first wife, Hannah, bore no children. His other wife, Peninnah, did. She had lots of kids, and she let Hannah know about it every chance she got.

Now every year the whole family would go up to Shiloh where the temple of the LORD was, to keep a great feast and offer sacrifices. As has ever been the case, all the family dynamics got played out during meals at the holidays. Elkanah loved Hannah even though she had borne him no children. So he would give her a double

portion of meat at the feast. This no doubt made the other wife jealous. So she would use their enforced time together at the party to needle Hannah about her barren state. The text tells us that this scenario recurred year after year.

Have you ever felt like Christmas dinner was playing out according to a script? You could almost predict the lines and the exact moment when someone would dissolve into tears. You could all see it coming but everyone seemed powerless to change the outcome. Here we go again. That's the way it was in the Elkanah household. Peninnah would provoke Hannah. After taking all she could, Hannah would finally break down and cry at the table. She could no longer eat. That would be Elkanah's cue to come over and try to comfort her.

He would say, "Hannah, why are you sad? Why don't you eat? Do I not mean more to you than ten sons?" Ooops. Elkanah, buddy, could I interest you in a marriage seminar? Offering your own smiling face as the answer to your wife's tears is not going to work, you polygamous numbskull! So it went in an endless cycle of misery.

Until the year things changed. This particular year, Hannah didn't stay at the table. She got up and went to the temple of the LORD. The text tells us, "She was deeply distressed and prayed to the LORD and wept bitterly" (1:10). She recognized that the LORD God is sovereign, and so it was not just a matter of her not having children. The LORD had closed her womb. Ultimately, he is responsible. So Hannah brought to the LORD her humiliation, her bitter anger, her jealousy and the deeper, underlying sadness of her childlessness.

"Oh God, will you not take notice of my trouble? Look at me! Keep me in mind. Make it so that I may bear a child. And then I will dedicate that child back to you for his whole life. If you but look upon me and act mercifully, I will give back to you the boy you give to me." With many other words, Hannah kept praying, but not like the man I saw in the cathedral. Her lips moved fervently, but her voice was not heard.

At that moment, the chief priest, named Eli, noticed this woman in his temple. He figured she was drunk. Gesturing. Her lips moving with words that, because he could not hear them, he figured were just gibberish. "What's the matter with you? How long will you carry on in a drunken stupor?"

Was there no safe place for her? Hannah's back was against the wall. She couldn't take it any longer. So she spoke directly, "No, sir, I am not drunk. I am

heart-broken. I've poured no wine into my mouth. But I have poured out my soul before the LORD. Don't think of me as a disgraceful woman who would disregard this holy place. But know that I am a disgraced woman, for I have no child and I cry out to the LORD to open my womb."

At last it seemed that someone understood her. Eli said simply, "Go in peace, and the God of Israel grant you all you have asked of him." Within a year, Hannah conceived a son. She named him Samuel, which means "heard of God". She asked for him and the LORD heard her. He granted her request.

So what do we make of this first story in the epic account of the great prophet's life? Let's draw out three highlights.

**1) Hannah poured out her heart.** She did not hold back any of her feelings before the LORD. She named what she experienced before God. Vexation. Anxiety. Distress. Bitterness. Affliction. She didn't monitor her words. She didn't figure she deserved it. She didn't try to fix God's reputation by praying nicely. She just poured out her soul to the sovereign God who made her.

This teaches us so much about prayer. Every time we go to the LORD, we have a choice. We can *scrub and stuff*. Or *own and offer*. Our choice makes all the difference in our relationship to God. Scrub and stuff or own and offer. Let's unpack that.

Too many times we can try to scrub up our prayers and sanitize our words before we give them to the Triune God of grace. We may feel like we're being disrespectful if we just say what we want. We may feel that pointing out the disparity between what Scripture promises and what we're experiencing is blasphemous. We may feel like we need to protect God's reputation by rationalizing away our desperate situation so he doesn't look like the author of calamity or the bringer of sorrow. We scrub our prayers. Which means we stuff our feelings. We hide our true outrage. We act like we're not really hurt or broken. We scrub and stuff. And those prayers don't do us much good.

Hannah owned what she felt. She said it directly. I want a son. I am ridiculed by Peninnah. My husband doesn't understand my situation. These holidays are crushing me. I can't eat. I can't stop crying. LORD, you are sovereign. I want you to fix this. Good prayer just says it all directly. We hold back nothing. We say what we want, even if what we want is wrong. That's right, even if what you feel seems

wicked, you say it anyway. Even if what you want is selfish, you ask for it anyway. You own all of your feelings and desires before the LORD first.

Then, you offer these to God for his will to be done. Hannah asked for a son and offered that very son to the LORD's service. After we say the raw feelings, we consecrate those desires back to God based on what we know of his will from his Word. Yes, I want you to smite that person, and that's how I'd like to pray for this enemy. You know how I feel, LORD. But owning that, I will now consecrate my anger to your will, and pray that you who love the enemy as much as you love me, will do what is best for both of us.

Effective prayer does not scrub and stuff. Effective prayer owns and offers as we pour out our hearts before the God who loves us.

**2) Hannah asked to be remembered.** When we are in distress, we can feel as if we've been forgotten by everyone. Forgotten by employers. Forgotten by friends and loved ones. Forgotten by God. Hannah prayed, "Look on the affliction of your servant and remember me!" (1:11). See me. Hear me. Recall that I exist and that I am in need. Father, remember. This is just how Scripture describes the end of our story, "The LORD remembered her. And in due time, Hannah conceived and bore a son."

Remembering is a crucial part of relationship. Just think of the iconic 80's movie where Molly Ringwald sits in her flame-haired misery as her whole family forgets her 16<sup>th</sup> birthday. Or how awful it is when you forget the story of crucial events that someone has shared with you. The very word recollection tells us of its importance: we *re-collect* pieces of life to put them together into a whole. Remembering brings the past into the present. That's the joy in *re-unions*. We bond again over great times. Remember the night we stole trays from the cafeteria and went sliding in the snow? Memory helps us deal with the passing of time. A Mom might whisper to a Dad during graduation, as they're bursting with pride at their all grown up daughter, "Remember when she was just a toddler that needed 5 songs and 3 stories before she would go to sleep?"

In Scripture, remembering is crucial. It's at the very heart of God's relationship with his people. In Exodus we read, "the people of Israel groaned because of their slavery and cried out for help...And God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham. God saw the people of Israel—and God knew" (Ex. 2:24). Our LORD had entered an eternal covenant of love with his

people, and he did not forget them. He remembered. He saw. He knew. He heard. And still does.

The thief crucified next to Jesus called out to him in his agony, “Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom” (Lk. 23:42). He didn’t want to go to the realm of death judged, discarded and forgotten. We live because God remembers us and remembers his promise to be merciful.

It’s no accident then that Scripture calls us to remember our God and all his mighty acts on our behalf. “This is my body,” said Jesus, “Broken for you. Eat this remembering me. This is my blood. Drink this cup remembering me.” Remembering brings the past into the present. Remembering restores relationship. In a special way, we remember Jesus in the Lord’s Supper and discover how he remembers us. He gives himself to us as we remember. He comes presently by his Spirit to us to strengthen our relationship. He reminds us that he does not forget his promises nor does he forget us. As we remember our Lord Jesus we experience how he remembers us with saving grace ever renewed.

**3) Hannah revived through prayer.** After she poured out her heart to the LORD and explained her plight to Eli, Hannah rose and returned to the family. The Scripture tells us “her face was no longer sad.” In the Bible, the face stands for the whole person. Your face reflects your soul. So this means that Hannah revived in body and spirit. That happened before she conceived a son. Before God answered her prayer, Hannah was already changed by the fact of pouring out her heart.

The wisdom of this story tells us, “Go to the place of your pain and there you will find God waiting.” There, in that place where you hate yourself for failing to speak up again, where you loathe yourself for your timidity, God is waiting to give you courage. There, in that place of unfulfilled dreams, that place where life has not turned out to be anything you expected it to be. The place where you reached your limits long before you reached your goals. The place where you ended up barren and childless, either literally or figuratively. There, God waits to meet you and fill you with his presence.

In the windy upstairs rooms with broken panes of glass from all the broken relationships. In the rooms with doors nailed shut by ancient grudges. In the lonely corridors filled with pictures of the long departed. There he waits for you.

He waits for us to come to him and pour out our hearts. We cry out. We don’t scrub and stuff. We own it all before him. We shout our yearning. We

whisper our need. We name failure. We voice our disappointment. We become the vagrant in the cathedral, raising our hands and asking too loudly, “Is this the way You want it? Can’t you do something? See me! Remember me!”

And then we discover, to our utter amazement, that God sends us those who, like Eli, will hear our story and join us in those prayers. As imperfect as Eli was, these servants of God will nevertheless be the flesh and blood reply of God to us. They will remind us that we are not alone. They will carry a load of pain for us. Through them, we hear God’s answer to our solitary prayers, “I am with you always. I will not leave you. I remember. And I will do what I have promised you.”

This morning we get to come to the table together. To remember God’s love in Jesus Christ. To offer him our prayers and our heart cries. To discover that we come to this table not alone but together. To realize anew that God has not left us alone. He is here. He remembers. And he loves.