

OFFERED TO THE LORD

1 Samuel 1:20-28

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For this child I prayed, and the LORD has granted me my petition that I made to him. Therefore I have lent him to the LORD. As long as he lives, he is lent to the LORD (1 Sam. 1:27-28).

In its promotional materials, the United States Marine Corps communicates its desire for quality over quantity. All the Marines are looking for is “a few good men.” There are times in the Bible when it seems that a few good men and women is all God has at his disposal. But what a difference even a few committed believers can make, by his power, in a dark time. So it was with the birth of the child, Samuel, who would grow up to be one of Israel’s greatest leaders. A story that began with a humble priestly family appearing before the Lord to worship leads to much greater events as God answers Hannah’s prayer and so meets Israel’s need.

HANNAH’S VOW FULFILLED

So far, so good, we might say regarding Hannah. Arriving at the Tabernacle with the grief of childlessness on her heart, Hannah turned to the Lord for help. Afflicted by the mean-spirited barbs of her rival co-wife, Hannah prayed not for vengeance but for a son whom she might offer to God. Instead of stuffing her heart with bitterness and resentment, Hannah poured out her soul before the Lord. And when Eli, speaking *ex cathedra* in his office as high priest, gave words of benediction over her prayer, Hannah received it as God’s answer and went home with peace and joy. Since God responded by providing Hannah with her cherished son, we might say that her approach “worked.” Indeed, Hannah does provide a model of

effective prayer, however God may have chosen to respond. Most importantly, humble and prayerful Hannah possessed just the kind of believing heart that God always looks for and that God is pleased to bless for the sake of many others.

But now, at the end of this opening chapter, there remains one critical question. Will Hannah make good on her promise to the Lord? Will she fulfill her vow to consecrate her little son in life-long service to God? Or will she see things differently once the baby boy is rocking in her arms? Were Hannah to hedge on her vow – a promise made under duress but forgotten once the trouble passes – she would not be the first, and she certainly would not be the last to do so. Perhaps God would understand if she adjusted her promise to allow little Samuel to serve the Lord at home in Ramah. Perhaps she would now think it best to devote more time to spiritually nurture the child and allow him to make his own decision?

Perhaps a good place to start is by inquiring of God’s attitude towards solemn vows made to him. The Bible answers: “When you vow a vow to God, do not delay paying it, for he has no pleasure in fools. Pay what you vow... Why should God be angry at your voice and destroy the work of your hands?” (Eccl. 5:4, 6). It turns out that God takes our vows most seriously. Vows made to God – including marriage vows, ordination vows, church membership vows, and oaths of office – should be made soberly and with mature judgment. Ecclesiastes continues, “It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not pay” (Eccl. 5:5). With this in mind, Cyril Barber comments, “Vows... should not be entered into by those who are immature and do not have the means to carry out the intents of their hearts.”¹ Hannah’s actions suggest that she was mature and that she made her vow to God in sober judgment and honest intent. Because of this, what she began well in prayer she now concludes well in action, following through in offering her son to the Lord.

Several characteristics evident in Hannah’s response explain why she was willing to follow through on so demanding a vow. First, it is clear that Hannah’s godly behavior is animated by *gratitude to the Lord*. We see this in her explanation in presenting Samuel to Eli:

¹ Cyril J. Barber, *The Books of Samuel*, 2 vols. (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux, 1994), 49.

“For this child I prayed, and the LORD has granted me my petition that I made to him. Therefore I have lent him to the LORD” (1 Sam. 1:27-28). Notice the sequence: I am giving him to God because God gave him to me. In just this way, all true Christian service and offerings are presented to God in thanks for his gracious provision to us.

Hannah’s example shows that God’s grace rightly demands that we respond by giving back to the Lord. All that God gives us belongs to him and is intended for our good and for God’s glory. To receive God’s gifts merely for our own pleasure is to misuse them and despise the Giver, little appreciating God’s generosity and little realizing our dependence on his grace.

J. C. Ryle comments: “Grateful love is the true spring of real obedience to Christ. Men will never take up the cross and confess Jesus before the world and live for him until they feel that they are indebted to him for pardon, peace, and hope... The godly are what they are because they love him who first loved them and washed them from sin in his own blood.”² It is for this reason that the gospel of Jesus Christ is the greatest force for transforming greedy, proud, and self-loving people so that they instead seek after holiness and love. Ryle states, “The secret of being holy ourselves, is to know and feel that Christ has pardoned our sins.”³ With thanksgiving for God’s grace, Hannah’s “allowing Samuel to be brought up in the temple was seen by her not as a necessary but terrible sacrifice but rather as a deep joy,”⁴ in spite of the loss it involved to herself.

Hannah was not only grateful, but she also was *faithful* in fulfilling her vow. It is noteworthy that Hannah refused to go up again to the tabernacle until she was prepared to leave her young son. “The man Elkanah and all his house went up to offer to the LORD the yearly sacrifice and to pay his vow. But Hannah did not go up, for she said to her husband, ‘As soon as the child is weaned, I will bring him, so that he may appear in the presence of the LORD and dwell there forever’” (1 Sam. 1:21-22). Foremost in Hannah’s mind was her promise to the Lord and her obligation to see it through. William

² J.C. Ryle, *Luke*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1858, reprint, 1986), I:239-240.

³ *Ibid.*, 238.

⁴ Mary J. Evans, *The Message of Samuel* (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity, 2004), 29.

Blaikie explains: “Had she gone before her son was weaned she must have taken him with her, and brought him away with her, and that would have broken the solemnity of the transaction when at last she should take him for good and all... The very first time that she should present herself at that holy place where God had heard her prayer and her vow would be the time when she should fulfil her vow.”⁵ As people who rely on God’s promises, Christians should be careful to keep our own. Regardless of difficulties, our chief desire should be to be found faithful to our duties and obligations before the Lord.

Thirdly, Hannah showed great *generosity* in her manner of offering up her son. Instead of doing the minimal amount to justify keeping her vow she offered the most that she could manage: “when she had weaned him, she took him up with her, along with a three-year-old bull, an ephah of flour, and a skin of wine, and she brought him to the house of the LORD at Shiloh” (1 Sam. 1:24).

There is a translation issue with this verse that sheds some light on Hannah’s generosity. Most English versions say that Hannah brought “a three-year-old bull” (ESV, NIV, NASB). But the original Hebrew texts states that Hannah brought three young bulls (KJV). Scholars consider the original reading to be problematic, amending it to a single three-year-old bull, in part because verse 25 says that they “slaughtered the bull” (singular). But the main objection is the extreme economic sacrifice involved in such an offering. To such a primitive agricultural people, three bulls represented a staggering amount of wealth. Unable to imagine such generosity in giving to God, scholars have needlessly changed the text, following the example of influential ancient translations.⁶ But Hannah’s additional gift of an ephah of flour (an ephah amounting to about three fifths of a bushel or twenty-two liters) seems to fit the offering of three bulls, since the law prescribed that three tenths of an ephah of flour should be offered along with each bull, so that Hannah’s offering of a whole ephah was slightly more than required for three bulls (Num. 15:8-10).

⁵ William G. Blaikie, *Expository Lectures on the Book of First Samuel* (Birmingham, AL: Solid Ground, 1887, reprint 2005), 20.

⁶ In conflict with the MT’s “three bulls”, the LXX, Dead Sea Scrolls, and Peshitta all render this “a three-year old bull.”

In addition, Hannah brought “a skin of wine,” which is better understood to be a large vessel containing as many as twenty liters.⁷

Of course, Hannah’s greatest generosity was in offering her young son to the Lord. Thus after the bulls and the flour and wine are mentioned, we read: “And the child was young” (1 Sam. 1:24). Here was Hannah’s truly generous gift: “I have lent him to the LORD. As long as he lives, he is lent to the LORD” (1 Sam. 1:28).

It turns out that the same Hebrew word (*sa'al*) means either to ask or to lend, depending on the mode of the verb.⁸ Hannah makes use of this word play to acknowledge that the proper response to her answered prayer is the dedication of the child to the Lord’s service. The faith that receives God’s gifts also returns God’s gifts, using them to serve God’s cause and advance his kingdom. Samuel would always be Hannah’s child, but as she had received the boy in stewardship to God she was happy to make him God’s child and God’s servant forever. Those who use God’s gifts in this way are never losers but always gainers in the end. Kenneth Chafin notes that Hannah had gained “the blessing of God and the respect of both her husband and of Eli. Later she was to be given three sons and two daughters, but they were not necessary to her joy. In the gift of her son, God had given her a larger reason for living and much happiness.”⁹

REFLECTIONS ON THE HOME

A proper understanding of Hannah’s account will recognize the uniqueness of her situation. If it seems extreme for a mother to bring her young son to church and leave him to be raised by the minister, the reason is that Hannah was bound up in a singular work of God for the sake of his people. Nonetheless, the account of Hannah’s offering gives a good deal of insight into her marriage and home from which we should seek to profit. Hannah was obviously an extraordinary woman of faith, and the godly home out of which young Samuel springs provides a model for Christian homes today.

⁷ See David Toshio Tsumura, *The First Book of Samuel*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 129-131, for an extended discussion.

⁸ Qal, *ask*; Hiphil, *lend*.

⁹ Kenneth L. Chafin, *1 & 2 Samuel*, The Preacher’s Commentary, vol. 8 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1989), 28.

The first thing that stands out about Elkanah's household is their commitment to worship. Theirs was a church-going family, present at the house of God for stated times of worship, regardless of the difficulty or expense. The law of Moses dictated that Israelites were to make pilgrimages to worship before the Lord:

You shall seek the place that the LORD your God will choose out of all your tribes to put his name and make his habitation there. There you shall go, and there you shall bring your burnt offerings and your sacrifices, your tithes and the contribution that you present, your vow offerings, your freewill offerings, and the firstborn of your herd and of your flock. And there you shall eat before the LORD your God, and you shall rejoice, you and your households, in all that you undertake, in which the LORD your God has blessed you" (Dt. 12:5-7).

The failure to observe this command contributed to the widespread idolatry in that generation and all through the centuries that followed. But despite the difficulty of travel in that ancient day, and the great expense involved in making sacrifices to the Lord, Elkanah faithfully brought his family to Shiloh each year: "The man Elkanah and all his house went up to offer to the LORD the yearly sacrifice and to pay his vow" (1 Sam. 1:21). He reminds us that above all other motives for attendance in worship is the simple fact that God is worthy to receive our praise. Moreover, the making of costly sacrifices underscored the Lord's greatness and his incomparable blessings to his people.

Secondly, we can perceive the spiritual unity that joined the hearts of Elkanah and Hannah as husband and wife. This is revealed when Elkanah prepared to depart for Shiloh but Hannah declined to join him: "Hannah did not go up, for she said to her husband, 'As soon as the child is weaned, I will bring him, so that he may appear in the presence of the LORD and dwell there forever'" (1 Sam. 1:22). Elkanah understood Hannah's motives and supported her understanding of what was required to fulfill her vow. Under the law, a vow made by a wife needed to be confirmed by her husband (Num. 30:10-15). Elkanah was glad to do this: "Do what seems best to you; wait until you have weaned him; only, may the LORD establish his word" (1 Sam. 1:22-23). It is unclear what he meant by asking the Lord to "establish his word". Most likely, Elkanah joined Hannah in taking the high priest's benediction as divine confirmation of

Hannah's prayer (1 Sam. 1:17), and he generally agreed with her in seeing God's sovereign purpose in Hannah's circumstances.

In like manner, any home is blessed when the husband and wife live in spiritual companionship. Couples should seek a shared sense of purpose in their worship and Christian service. As either is led to undertake special giving or ministry, the two should collaborate in their family's service to God. This is only possible when husband and wife join together in the Word of God and in prayer, being evenly yoked in their spiritual walk and providing mutual support for the sanctification and service of each.

Husbands, having received headship in the family, should be especially keen to perceive the gifts and ministry callings of their wives. The Bible's mandate for male leadership in the church and home does not limit the full partnership of women in the work of both (1 Cor. 11:3; Eph. 5:22-24; 1 Tim. 2:11). The Bible is filled with Spirit-filled and gifted women who make vital contributions to God's work, Hannah herself providing an eminent example. Elkanah seems to have understood the extraordinary role Hannah was playing, and rather than being defensive or resentful, he accommodated himself to support her fully. Christian men today should likewise be keen to foster important Christian service from women, in accordance with the gender pattern given in God's Word, and to look upon our daughters and wives as vital partners in the work of the Lord.

Lastly, Hannah and Elkanah provide a valuable model in the attitude that Christian parents should have towards their children. Too many believing parents are driven by fleshly motivations concerning their boys and girls. One of the reasons young people raised in the church go on to abandon their faith is that their Christian parents directed them onto worldly paths. They grew up being taught to dream of making a great success in the world or attaining to great wealth, becoming famous or being adored for beauty and talent. Meanwhile, the sad reality is that when young people feel God's calling to ministry or missionary service, their believing parents often present the greatest obstacle, urging them to callings of greater ease, prestige, or proximity rather than rejoicing in the consecration of a child to serve the Lord.

The duty of Christian parents is to fit their children for service to God, whether in formal ministry or as productive members of the church. The reason Hannah could “lend” her young son to the Lord was her awareness that Samuel belonged to the Lord before he belonged to her. Parents are stewards of children’s upbringing on behalf of the Lord, and godly parents will make it their chief ambition and prayer that their children will serve the Lord to the greatest extent possible and with the utmost faithfulness. Believing parents who truly love their children will raise them with Jesus’ promise firmly in view: “There is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life” (Mk. 10:29-30).

HOW TO MAKE AN OFFERING TO GOD

Hannah provides an outstanding example in her attitude of gratitude, faithfulness, and generosity, in her spiritual partnership with her husband, and in her zeal to offer her son to God’s service. Recognizing the unique features of her calling and service, we also realize that every believer is called to give to the Lord and serve in the cause of his gospel. So how do we go about offering our gifts and service to the Lord? Hannah models three principles: she acknowledged that what she offered came from the Lord and rightly belonged to him; her offering involved considerable preparation and effort; and she presented herself and her offering not in light of her own merits but on the basis of God’s mercy and grace.

First, what Hannah offered to God came from him in the first place. When Hannah brought young Samuel to Eli, the high priest, she told him: “Oh, my lord! As you live, my lord, I am the woman who was standing here in your presence, praying to the LORD. For this child I prayed, and the LORD has granted me my petition that I made to him” (1 Sam. 1:26-27). The only reason Hannah had something valuable to offer the Lord was that God had given her the treasure in the first place. Paul rightly asks, “Who has given a gift to [God], that he might be repaid?” (Rom. 11:35). Anything we might give to God is something that he made and enabled us to possess, including our

talents, our wealth, and even our lives. This was the logic in the firstfruit offerings of Israel's worship, just as it provides the logic of tithes offered today: the first portion is brought to the Lord to show that the whole comes from and belongs to him.

This understanding will greatly restrain our pride, which is always a temptation to those making gifts to the Lord. Do you devote your intellect to studying God's Word? This is only appropriate, since your intelligence was given to you by God. Do you offer your tithe to God? It was God who gave you the ability and the opportunity to earn your money, so it is only right that you acknowledge his right to it. We are not performing some extraordinary and praiseworthy service when we obey God's Word and live as God calls us to do, offering our talents, time, and money to the Lord. As Paul reminded the boastful Corinthians: "What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?" (1 Cor. 4:7). There is not one of us who can claim to be rendering to God a true profit on his investment in us; the truth is that all that God may gain through our work is merely the fruit of his own gifting and labor, coupled with many failures and sins for him to forgive.

Secondly, a truly significant offering to God usually requires considerable preparation and effort. When Hannah brought Samuel to live in Shiloh, she had invested a great deal of effort in the boy. She did not bring him until he would be able to stay without being a burden to the high priest: "she said to her husband, 'As soon as the child is weaned, I will bring him, so that he may appear in the presence of the LORD and dwell there forever'" (1 Sam. 1:22). According to extra-biblical sources, Jewish children would be breastfed for as long as three years, and perhaps even longer.¹⁰ It is hard to imagine how Hannah could have safely left Samuel until he was departing his toddler years, which means that she carefully prepared him during the vital first few years for the calling she had vowed for his life.

¹⁰ See 2 Macc. 7:27. As Robert Bergen points out, "no Israelite homes had running water, and most villages did not have access to a reliable supply of safe drinking water," which likely extended breastfeeding beyond what is normal today (Robert D. Bergen, *I, 2 Samuel*, New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996, 72).

This need for preparation extends to all kinds of offerings we make to God. If a man believes himself called into the ministry, the years devoted to seminary training are not a pointless hindrance but a vital time of study for rightly handling God's Word (see 2 Tim. 2:15). Those devoting themselves to long-term missionary service will need to gain proper skills, learn languages, and raise financial support. The preparation is an essential part of the offering. Likewise, Christians desiring to be faithful in tithing to the church will often need to prepare by removing debts and simplifying their lifestyle. This only makes the offering to God more valuable and precious to him. In fact, a good deal of any meaningful offering to God will consist of preparing to give: undertaking evangelism training so as to be able to communicate the gospel effectively; biblical training to be effective as Christian parents; and even the organization and forethought that is essential to any fruitful ministry of intercessory prayer. Mature and serious Christians, like Hannah, realize that few things of real value can be offered to God without extensive preparation and effort.

Thirdly, it is absolutely essential that Christians realize that any offering we make to God can only be brought on the basis of his mercy and grace. This was the purpose for at least one of the bulls Hannah brought, to offer a blood sacrifice for hers and Samuel's sins. First, they "slaughtered the bull," and then "they brought the child to Eli" (1 Sam. 1:25). They remembered that even to approach the Lord required a cleansing of their sins; how much more for whatever they offered for his service.

William Blaikie advises all who come with offerings to God: "Remember how unworthy you are to stand before him. Remember how stained your garments are with sin and worldliness, how distracted your heart is with other thoughts and feelings, how poor the service is you are capable of rendering." How, then, can we ever give to the Lord? The answer is through the cleansing blood of Christ. Blaikie says, "When you give yourselves to Him, or ask to be allowed to take your place among His servants, seek as you do so to be sprinkled with the blood of cleansing, own your personal

unworthiness, and pray to be accepted through the merit of His sacrifice.”¹¹

The good news is that not only must we come to God only through the atoning blood of Christ, but that however bad we are or have been we *are always accepted* by God through the sprinkled blood. While it is necessary that we come to God by Christ’s blood, it is also certain that we will be received in God’s grace. The apostle John stated, “the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin” (1 Jn. 1:7). So when we come to God, presenting our gifts for his service, we come only through the merit and blood of the Savior Jesus Christ, and we come certain of God’s acceptance, favor, and spiritual enabling. As Paul put it, Christ has “qualified” even sinners like us to enter God’s beloved family, participate in the work of his glorious kingdom, and “to share in the inheritance of the saints in light” (Col. 1:12).

LIVING WORSHIP

The final words of the chapter provide a fitting conclusion: “And he worshiped the LORD there” (1 Sam. 1:28). This was the great purpose in all that Hannah had desired and performed: that her son might worship and serve the Lord in his house. The purpose for our lives is no different. Paul writes, “I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship” (Rom. 12:1). Paul’s “therefore” refers to the whole gospel teaching that precedes his exhortation. Just as Hannah responded to God’s gift of a son by bringing little Samuel to serve all his days in the tabernacle, we are to respond to God’s grace in Jesus Christ by offering ourselves as living sacrifices for the sake of his praise.

Realizing this, we see that while Samuel would fulfill a unique and vital role in Israel’s history, there is just as much value in one who serves God faithfully in the home as in one called to serve God in the church. Christian ministry is not the pre-emptive of a small number of prominent religious professionals, but is the calling and privilege of every Christian regardless of their vocational setting. Many believers

¹¹ Blaikie, 22.

will be called to offer to God their full-time labors in ministry. But many more will serve God in secular vocations, while still offering their time, effort, money, prayers, and spiritual gifts to the service of the Lord. Really, what God wants from us is our whole lives, which he gave to us in the first place, and which he has purchased with the precious blood of his Son, Jesus (1 Cor. 6:19-20). Jesus said, “Whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it” (Mt. 16:25).

So whatever plans our parents had for our lives, we should present ourselves to God in the manner that Hannah presented young Samuel. Hannah acknowledged that God had given Samuel to her, so now it was right for her to give him to God in return. Likewise, let each of us say to God: “Lord, you made me, and you have redeemed me from my sin through the death of your own Son. I now belong to you, so I offer my whole life for your praise and for service to your glorious kingdom.” As Hannah offered Samuel, offer yourself to God gratefully, faithfully, and generously. And when you make your offering to the Lord, really hand it over, as John Wesley prayed when he offered himself to the service of Christ and the gospel:

I am no longer my own but yours. Put me to what you will. Put me to doing, put me to suffering. Let me be employed for you or laid aside for you. Let me be full, let me be empty. Let me have all things, let me have nothing. I freely and wholeheartedly yield all things to Your pleasure and disposal.