



THE WOMAN WHO WANTED A BABY

About a thousand years before Jesus was born, a man called Elkanah was married to two wives, one was called Hannah and the other Peninnah. Peninnah had children, but Hannah had none and that made her sad. When she watched Peninnah cuddling her babies and playing with her toddlers she wished she had a baby of her own to cuddle, she wished she had a toddler to play with. But she didn't.

As if having no children wasn't bad enough, poor Hannah had to put up with Peninnah herself. It was difficult to share a husband, but Peninnah made it more difficult because she was very unkind.

'Elkanah loves me more than he loves you because I had his children,' she would boast to Hannah.

This went on and on and on. Every year Elkanah went with his wives to worship God at a place called Shiloh. That should have been a happy time for

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Hannah because she believed in God and worshipped him. But it wasn't a happy time at all because Peninnah could be particularly nasty on special occasions. In fact, she was so nasty that Hannah ended up in tears and unable to eat her dinner.

'Hannah, why are you weeping?' Elkanah asked. 'Why don't you eat your dinner?' And when Hannah explained what was wrong, he said, 'Don't I mean more to you than ten sons?'

The family lived at a time when it was important to have children, especially sons. Elkanah loved Hannah so much that he wanted her to be happy even if she never had a child.

One day, when they were at Shiloh, Hannah went on her own to pray to God about the problem. She was so upset that the tears ran down her face as she prayed. This is what she said:

'O Lord Almighty, if you will only look upon your servant's misery and remember me, and not forget your servant, but give her a son, then I will give him to the Lord for all the days of his life, and no razor will ever be used on his head.'

The priest at Shiloh was called Eli and he saw Hannah. He watched her carefully. She was so distressed that while she prayed silently to the Lord her lips moved as though she was speaking aloud. Eli was not happy. She was behaving so oddly he was sure she must be drunk!

'Get rid of your wine,' Eli said.

Hannah looked at the priest. 'Not so, my Lord,' she explained. 'I am deeply troubled. I have not been drinking wine or beer; I was pouring out my soul to the Lord.'

Eli listened carefully.

'Do not take your servant for a wicked woman,' Hannah begged. 'I have been praying out of great anguish and grief.'

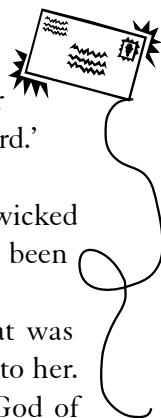
The priest didn't ask Hannah what was making her so sad but he spoke kindly to her. 'Go in peace,' he said, 'and may the God of Israel grant you what you have asked of him.'

Hannah stopped crying, joined the others and ate her meal. She had prayed to God and she believed that he would answer.

The next day Elkanah and his family worshipped God and then went back to Ramah. The Lord heard Hannah's prayers and a little later she realised that she was going to have a baby. How happy she must have been! There is a Hebrew word that means 'heard of God' and it sounds a bit like the name Samuel. When he was born Hannah called her baby Samuel. God had heard her prayer and answered her.

You would think that Hannah would have been a very over-protective mother but that wasn't the case. She meant the words she prayed when she said,

'If you will only look upon your servant's misery and remember me, and not forget your servant, but give her a son, then I will give him to the Lord for all the days of his life.'



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When Samuel was still quite young, he went with his parents to Shiloh to see Eli the priest.

‘I am the woman who stood here beside you praying to the Lord,’ she reminded Eli. ‘I prayed for this child, and the Lord has granted me what I asked of him. So now for his whole life he shall be given over to the Lord.’

When Hannah and Elkanah went home to Ramah, they left young Samuel there to serve God by helping the old priest.

Hannah didn’t forget her little boy. Each year she made him a robe and took it with her when the family went to Shiloh. Over the years Hannah had exciting news for her son because God gave her another three sons and two daughters. Samuel was a big brother to five!

We don’t know how long Hannah lived and when she died but we know, for it is told in the Bible, that while he was still a boy Samuel was called to serve the Lord in a special way. For many years he was the most important prophet in the land, leading and guiding God’s people. When the time came for Israel to have a king, Samuel was led by God to choose David to be the greatest king the Jewish people ever had.

When Hannah prayed asking God for a baby, she made a promise at the same time. We sometimes do that too. Like Hannah, we must be careful to keep the promises we make to God. He keeps all the promises he makes to us. You’ll find them in the Bible.