

“ Can we Sing with Hannah? ”

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Second in the series *A King for God's People*

1st Samuel 2.1-10

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My heart is bursting in the LORD.
My horn is lifted high in the LORD.
My mouth mocks my enemies.
For I delight in Your salvation.

Nothing is holy like the LORD.
No one is beside You.
No rock is like our God. Stop talking so proudly.

Stop the arrogance that's been coming from your mouth.
For the LORD is the God who knows, and who weights every action.

The bows of the mighty warriors are smashed,
but the weak put on strength.
Those who were full now hire themselves out for food,
but those who were hungry have plenty to eat.
The barren woman now has birthed seven children,
but she who has many children is grieving.

The LORD kills, and brings life.
The LORD brings down to the grave, and raises up.
The LORD makes poor and makes rich.
The LORD brings low, and lifts up high.
He raises up the poor from the dirt.
He lifts up the needy from the garbage heap.
He gives them seats with princes and has them inherit seats of honor.

For the pillars of the earth are the LORD's,
and on them he has set the world.
He will guard the feet of his faithful ones,
but the wicked shall be cut off in darkness,
for not by might shall a person prevail.

The enemies of the LORD shall be smashed to pieces.
He will thunder against them from in heaven.
The LORD will judge the whole of the earth.

Hannah does great theology. It does not drop down from some lofty tower. Her theology comes up from the stuff of life. Hannah has been squeezed and pressed, like wet laundry cranked through an old-style wringer. She's been wrung out by infertility; she could not bear children. She's been wrung out by a lie, that a woman who could not have children was good for nothing. She's been wrung out by bullying; her husband's second wife birthed many children and taunted Hannah because of it. She's been wrung out by isolation. Her husband could not understand. Her religious community let her down.

Hannah has persevered. She has prayed.

Now, she has a child. "*Shem-u-el*" she named him. It means, "God has heard." Now, she has just given Samuel, still a preschooler, over to be raised in God's house, in a life dedicated to God. And Hannah celebrates! To learn from Hannah, let's see **who** she celebrates, and **what** she celebrates, and **when** she celebrates.

II

Who does Hannah celebrate?

She has waited for a baby. A baby to secure her place. A baby to prove her. A baby to complete her. A baby is all she's every wanted. Now, her Samuel has come.

But her celebration does not mention him. Surely her heart leaps for him. Certainly she delights in him. But her celebration is not about Samuel.

Hannah raises her "horn." (It's a word-picture. An animal horn signified strength.) She raises her horn, her heart, her voice to celebrate . . . God.

She has traced the trail from her child back to its beginning, followed the river from its mouth back to its spring. Her son—every daughter and son, young and old—is God's gift.

Hannah realizes a danger. She realizes that anything important, including anything good, including her baby, can become her god. The more we yearn after it, the more we race to get it, the more we promise ourselves, "if only I had that, then I'll be fine!," the more god-like it becomes to us.

But only the Lord is God. Everything else we try to make ultimate, everything else we give ourselves to, everything else we trust in, everything else we follow, . . . especially those most precious to us . . . even Hannah's Samuel . . . can lead us astray. For none is God.

God is gloriously holy, entirely different. Nothing else is. God is rock-stable. Nothing else is. God knows what no one else knows. God measures the merits of our actions, determines the rightness of our causes, gives a verdict on the value of our lives. Only God.

Mother Hannah has just let go of the hand of her Samuel. And she celebrates God.

Can we sing with Hannah?

III

Now, see **what** about God Hannah celebrates.

God takes sides. That should make us nervous.

Back then, every group had its own gods. And those who had made it, the few folks at the top of the heap, the boys with the most toys, had the best gods. Obviously. Things don't change. Athletes celebrating victory, troops firing across trenches, presidents praying for blessing or we who simply assume God thinks pretty much as we do . . . we drag God onto our stage, to wave spiritual pompoms for us.

We know better. God does not take sides.

Hannah disagrees. She celebrates God who is very partisan.

What is astonishing is which side God takes. Weak folks. Hungry folks. Childless folks. Poor folks. Needy folks. God exalts them. God raises them.

It gets better . . . or worse, depending where we sit. God is not just lifting up the weak. God is knocking down the strong. God is not just feeding the hungry. God is sending the stuffed to beg on the streets. God sides with those who have nothing, against those who have everything.

That should make us nervous.

We prefer to have our god like our tea: warm, comforting, contained in a cup, and served with manners. Then I meet minister colleagues from Zambia, Zimbabwe and South Africa. They are now serving in congregations in Burin Bay Arm (Newfoundland), Happy Valley (Labrador), and downtown Montreal. They have no problem with God's power. They trust God. They know God sides with those beaten, downtrodden, and broken. They've experienced God. Can we sing with them?

Can we sing with Hannah?

IV

Hannah celebrates God. Hannah celebrates that God takes sides. Now, look at **when** Hannah celebrates.

On a first look, it is not surprising. She has had a baby. Her prayer has been answered. Things have turned out fine. Celebration is easy!

Then I remembered something from when we began Hannah's story, last Sunday. It was after she had prayed. But before her pregnancy. She poured out her broken heart to God. Then it says *"her face was no longer sad."* Her sorrow had turned before her baby was born. Nothing had changed. Except, she'd turned to God. And she'd remembered, or maybe discovered for the first time, who God is.

She started celebrating while she was still waiting.

I also notice something strange in this song she writes. It's how she finishes it. "*The LORD . . . will give strength to his king and lift up the horn of his anointed.*" But at this point in the sequence of unfolding events, there is no king. Soon. Little Samuel will grow to be a big part of that. King David will be God's anointed, God's servant, God's messiah. But not yet.

Hannah celebrates while she is still waiting.

She already knows who God is. She already knows what God does. She already knows the sides God takes. She knows God, and that is the rock she stands on and sings from.

Walter Brueggemann is a Bible scholar who wonderfully gets to the heart of things. Listen! *Hannah and Israel sing of the One who 'brings life,' who breaks the power of death. It does not matter if [death's] power is experienced as barrenness, as despair, or as oppression. Hannah flings this song buoyantly in the face of the power of death. Her act is an act of daring hope, rooted in a concrete gift [her Samuel], waiting for more of life yet to be given.*¹

V

Later in the Bible, there is another song, by another woman about to bear a child.

*"My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior. . . ."*²

I think Mary learned to sing from Hannah.

In Mary's Jesus, we encounter this God of whom these women sang. God who alone is gloriously holy . . . has come to us. God who alone is rock-steady . . . walks beside us. God who alone knows us . . . gives himself for us. God who alone can measure the merits of our actions, determine the rightness of our causes, give a verdict on the value of our lives . . . Jesus judges, and forgives, restores, and resurrects us.

Jesus sides with those beaten, downtrodden, and broken. And says to us, "Follow me." He sides against those mighty, proud, full and satisfied. And says to us, "Follow me."

Jesus . . . our King has come.

Let's celebrate with Hannah!

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel* (Louisville, KY: John Knox, 1990), 21.

² The beginning lines of Mary's Song (*The Magnificat*) in Luke 1.46-55 (NRSV)