

A Mother's Secret Weapon

Hannah was lost in the travails of life, until she discovered her true mission.

As a single African-American mother, Sonya Carson knew suffering and sorrow. Uneducated, poor and living in a cracker-box house she couldn't afford, she had two active boys to raise alone and no marketable skills to help her survive.

Her only resources were her own two hands, a fierce determination to do whatever it took to make a better life for her sons and her unbending faith in God.

Sonya took jobs as a household domestic to pay the bills and implemented an ambitious agenda for her sons. She turned off the television, enforced a rigorous reading program that opened up new worlds for her boys, and never let them off the hook when it came to doing their homework.

No one could have guessed—least of all Sonya—that through all her sufferings, God was preparing her to raise one of the world's finest neurosurgeons and a bright light for the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Her son Dr. Ben Carson, now a nationally recognized figure and the director of pediatric neurosurgery at Johns Hopkins Hospital, openly acknowledges his indebtedness to his mother. In his book *The Big Picture*, he wrote: "I not only saw and felt the difference my mother made in my life, I am still living out that difference as a man."

Suffering in Silence

Back when the nation of Israel was heading for a seismic shift in government—from the rule of the judges to the rule of kings—God raised up another young woman for a mission greater than she could have imagined.

Hannah's story, like Sonya's, is marked by suffering and sorrow. Yet it is also a story of a mother's unbending faith, sacrifice and ultimate triumph.

"[Elkanah] had two wives; one was called Hannah and the other Peninnah. Peninnah had children, but Hannah had none" (1 Sam. 1:2, NIV).

Hannah was infertile—a miserable circumstance made 100 times worse by the fact that Peninnah, the "other woman" in the family, was making up for Hannah's shortcomings in the sons-and-daughters department.

Women who suffer from infertility know what an emotional roller coaster it is. Hannah experienced all the normal sorrows of empty arms year after year. But her ordeal was also intensified—deliberately because Peninnah openly mocked her; inadvertently because her husband was insensitive to her anguish.

Hannah's torment finally peaked on the family's annual pilgrimage to Shiloh, where they went to offer sacrifices to celebrate God's goodness. Each year on the road to worship—a public parade of Hannah's failure to conceive—Peninnah escalated her taunts.

The harassment went well beyond mere insensitivity. Peninnah's jabs were aimed directly at Hannah's faith in God.

Twice the Bible states the fact that "the Lord had closed her womb" (1 Sam. 1:5-6, emphasis added). This explains why Peninnah's ridicule was so potent. Hannah trusted God, and the bitter payoff, it seemed, was barrenness.

We can understand how Hannah felt. As God's children, we assume we have the "insider's advantage" if we follow God's are taught that God cares especially for us.

So why do things sometimes only get worse? All our prayers and

pleadings seem to fall on deaf ears, while someone else—maybe someone who shows less interest in God—gets to send out the birth announcements.

Hannah's biggest struggle was with God—the God who had closed her womb, to whom she cried out countless times, all seemingly in vain. She was as yet unaware of how much God was doing in the silence.

God's Quiet Work

It's easy to forget that God often does His best work when, so far as we can tell, He doesn't seem to be doing anything at all. In Hannah's case, there was no physical evidence of God's activity. Yet God was doing a mighty work in her heart. The first sign of this came when, exhausted from Peninnah's ridicule and broken by her childlessness, Hannah dropped to her knees and poured out her heart to God in prayer.

Amazingly, her endless suffering, which threatened to destroy her faith in God, actually served the opposite purpose of driving her to Him in remarkably relentless faith (see 1 Sam. 1:10-14).

Hannah implored the Lord to look upon her misery and remember her. Fervently she prayed for a son. Although she felt that God may have abandoned her, her prayer indicates she had not abandoned God.

“‘O Lord Almighty, if you will...not forget your servant but give her a son, then I will give him to the Lord for all the days of his life,’” she vowed (1 Sam. 1:11).

Finally God ended Hannah's barrenness. After returning to Ramah, “Elkanah lay with Hannah his wife, and the Lord remembered her” (1 Sam. 1:19).

At long last, the God who had closed Hannah's womb blessed her with the conception of new life. Hannah gave birth to the

child for whom she had longed and prayed.

A Mother's Vow

Hannah didn't forget the vow she made to God. While Samuel was still a toddler, she took him to Shiloh, where she led him in sacrifice and worship. Her plan was to leave him there, so he could grow up under the care and tutelage of Eli the priest.

Considering the circumstances, her words are baffling. "'My heart rejoices in the Lord; in the Lord my [strength] is lifted high,'" she prayed (1 Sam. 2:1). With her little child nestled close against her side and their hearts about to be torn in two, Hannah continued with lofty words that send the mind soaring with a glorious vision of God!

Hannah had feelings just like ours. Yes, she languished in her longing for a child. Yes, she felt every sting of Peninnah's barbs. And she prayed relentlessly that God would give her a son.

But somewhere along the line Hannah realized that Peninnah was laughing at God. Suddenly, as much as Hannah longed for a child, she wanted God to vindicate Himself as the God who hears and answers the prayers of those who trust in Him.

In prayer, she raised her sword in the battle for God's glory. She willingly offered up her most priceless treasure to shut the mouth of the one who dared to mock her God.

Hannah would return home to Ramah childless once again. She would always feel the enormity of her sacrifice; any mother would. Her separation from Samuel would leave a permanent hole in her heart.

Yet her prayer was joyful. What could possibly explain such joy?

Standing on the Rock

The first time I heard Joni Eareckson Tada speak to an audience, her message was unexpectedly powerful. Joni spoke about the faithfulness of God and of the wisdom of trusting Him, no matter what.

But the impact of her message was more potent because her words—which were both personal and profoundly theological—were framed in her long history of paralysis. Pain, suffering and frailty remained in her body, yet she radiated joy and strength.

When Hannah took a very young Samuel to Shiloh and knelt with him in worship before leaving him behind to serve the Lord all the days of his life, the frame around her words was her long history of infertility, suffering and persecution for her faith in God. Her heart, though doubled up with pain at the prospect of parting with Samuel, was nevertheless at peace and overflowed with praise and thanksgiving.

Understand, Hannah lived in a world that was just as uncertain and frightening as the one we know. Righteousness was in decline, and wickedness was on the rise. The nation of Israel was entering a tumultuous phase as God's people transitioned from the judges to the kings.

Moreover, Hannah was being severed from the child she had longed for and loved with every fiber of her being. And, at the end of the day, she would have to go home to Elkanah and Peninnah—the same two people who had broken her heart 100 times before by their words and actions.

Yet Hannah was secure and uncharacteristically confident. Why? She had come to understand that God is on His throne; and the one who trusts in Him, though she is hurting, is standing on a solid rock.

Hannah was under no illusion that because she was God's child, she would be spared the painful side of life. Like the rest of us, she still had to contend with the fact that suffering

knocked her off her feet.

By her life and her words, Hannah shows us that the struggles that humble us are important, regardless of the outcome. God uses the hard places of life to make us strong.

“‘Those who stumbled are armed with strength,’” Hannah prayed in 1 Samuel 2:4. Hannah was strong because she had stumbled and fallen flat on her face!

Like us, Hannah had moments when she wondered if her faith would last. That’s how she discovered that God will “‘guard the feet of His saints’” (1 Sam. 2:9).

Hannah realized she wasn’t holding onto God so much as He was holding onto her. He was gripping her by the ankles, keeping her from falling over the edge of her spiritual cliff. She could stumble and still be victorious because her strength was in the Lord.

A Mother’s Theology

One of the wonderful things about prayer is that God isn’t the only one who listens. Prayer is also a way of talking to ourselves.

By giving thanks to God, Hannah reminded herself that God was in control, that He was at work in her pain. She reminded herself that He was holding her tightly, and He was not about to let her go.

Hannah’s child was also listening to her prayer. The whole time she was speaking, Samuel was listening to every word.

As a result, Hannah’s theology lodged in Samuel’s young heart, preparing him for the road ahead. Later, as an adult, Samuel could easily have spoken the words of Sonya Carson’s illustrious son: “I not only saw and felt the difference my mother made in my life, I am still living out that difference as a man.”

The impact of Hannah's theology didn't stop with Samuel. Hannah arrived on the scene when Israel was spiritually and politically adrift. Her son grew up serving the Lord during a perilous time—through the rise and fall of Eli, King Saul, and King David.

Thankfully, the same theology that helped Hannah through her barrenness guided and fortified Samuel to walk with God during this difficult period. In this way Hannah became a major theological influence and a shaper of the nation's character—all as a result of the theology she learned when the Lord closed her womb. God's purposes were advanced through a mother who trusted God, even as she struggled to understand Him!

Things haven't changed much since Hannah's day. Life remains unpredictable. We still struggle to understand the God who holds our lives in His hands and who, at times, withholds the blessings we crave.

Women—moms, grandmothers, mentors and friends—still pray and contend for the souls of the next generation and still, no doubt, underestimate the enormity of their influence on these young lives.

Hannah is proof that a mother is a force to be reckoned with when she herself is a sword in God's hand. The spirit of Hannah lives on in us when we courageously fight for the lives of those God entrusts to us—and when we point a new generation of kingdom warriors to the God who is worthy of their trust.

Read a companion devotional.

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