

Follow This Biblical Example and Move From Bitter to Sweet

All professionals live to achieve. The story of Hannah is a beloved Bible narrative, but it also illustrates to the professional just how potent the need for a sense of positive achievement is. According to the writer of Proverbs, “The desire accomplished is sweet to the soul” (Prov. 13:19a). The need to achieve is powerful when achievement is fulfilled. It can be equally powerful when it is not. Unfulfilled desire can breed bitterness, which in Scripture not only means “bad-tasting,” but also “poison.” When we encounter Hannah in 1 Samuel 1, she is carrying an ever-increasing bitterness of soul. There are factors in Hannah’s journey and ours that lead us from the bitter anxieties of unfulfilled dreams to the sweetness of productivity.

The first concern was Hannah’s, and it was practical. Scripture does not inform us of Hannah’s in-house or out-of-house profession, though certainly she was a worker. However, we are reading an ancient Hebrew, that is, an Eastern story, so we should not attempt to filter it through a modern Western lens. In that world, she did have a supreme “job”—an essential function in her mind and her culture—and that was to produce a baby for her husband, particularly a son or sons. It was vital pragmatically because in such a male-dominated culture as hers, women were economically dependent. They were almost totally dependent upon their fathers and brothers for food, clothing, shelter, protection and other needs. Then, having married, they became likewise dependent upon their husbands and hopefully, if they had them, their sons. (Remember that this story is set in the historical era of the Judges, chronicled in the books of Judges, Ruth and 1 Samuel up through Chapter 10. We recall the precarious situation Naomi, Orpah and Ruth faced when all their men died within a 10-year

span. There were no sons: these women were left in utter poverty with no real expectations for their shared future. Therefore, elderly Naomi had urged the other two women who were still of marrying, child-bearing age to return to their family homes where they could yet possibly start over. Interestingly, Naomi called herself then what Hannah called herself later: “bitter.”)

The second factor is Hannah’s other motivation for wanting a child, and it was personal. In addition to childbearing for practical reasons, Hannah wanted to be a mother for a symbolic one as well. Hannah was being harassed by her counterpart, Peninnah. Peninnah was not the “other woman” in the illicit sense: She was Hannah’s co-worker, Elkanah’s wife as well. They had the same supervisor and the same position in the company. However, Peninnah appears to have conceived and birthed babies with ease. And she was not charitable toward Hannah: Peninnah provoked Hannah and “made her fret from day to day” (see 1 Sam. 1:6). What an uncomfortable work environment in which one professional taunts the other about the latter’s seeming inability to be productive in a certain business area! Badgering can make one bitter.

The third factor was relational, in this case spousal. Elkanah, the husband of both women, apparently loved Hannah and was overly generous toward her. He seemed earnest but clueless. He could not understand what Hannah’s fuss was all about. “Hannah, why weepest thou? and why eatest thou not? and why is thy heart grieved? am I not better to thee than ten sons?” (1 Sam. 1:8b). Hannah ate, but her heart—and her womb—was still empty. It is possible to have wonderful, loving, well-meaning loved ones in our lives who don’t understand why we can’t simply “be happy” with the status quo. This inadvertently becomes another embittering factor.

Graciously, the fourth and most crucial factor is the eternal. God was the one responsible for Hannah not bearing children. There was nothing wrong with her Fallopian tubes, her uterus,

her ovaries—the Scripture does cite barrenness as her plight. “The Lord had shut up her womb” (1 Sam. 1:5b). The Lord? The one who said, “Be fruitful and multiply” was preventing her from bearing? Yes.

What becomes apparent is that God’s design for Hannah was infinitely greater than Hannah’s desire. What Hannah wanted was a social safety net and bragging rights. What God wanted was a prophet who would judge the nation and navigate that nation from a theocracy to a theo-monarchy. He wanted a prophet who would anoint kings. He wanted a prophet who would identify and mentor one of the greatest progenitors and prefigures of the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. She wanted to give birth to temporal security. God wanted her to give birth to eternal destiny. Therefore, He shut up her womb until her purpose was submitted to His.

Moreover, God used Hannah’s frustration to bring her around to a place of surrender. She “poured out [her] soul before the Lord” (1 Sam. 1:15c). In a prayer of consecration, she emptied herself of the bitterness that had filled her earlier. We notice that soon after her soul was emptied of bitterness, her womb was filled with a son. Her desire was accomplished; her soul experienced sweetness.

How many professionals are serving in bitterness (toxicity, poison) because they want the right thing but for the wrong reason? God, in His providential mercy, will sometimes cause a delay in success because if the goal were to be achieved in bitterness, the attainment itself would be contaminated and fall short of God’s purpose and the individual’s healthy sense of personal gratification. If you are carrying bitterness within, for whatever reason, just know that God awaits you—He will allow you and help you to pour out that poison in His presence. Then He will lead you to fulfillment of His purpose. This is the ultimate sweetness for your soul and every aspect of your life. {eoa}

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