

At the end of the worship service in a busy congregation, a desperate woman stayed behind to pray. With hands clenched tightly together and tears streaming down her face, she poured out the bitter contents of her soul before the altar of her God. Her prayer was so intense that even though she was praying *silently*, her lips moved with each new heart-broken syllable. Her pleading was interrupted by her priest: “How long will you go on being drunk? Put your wine away from you.” (1 Samuel chapter 1, verse 14)

1. No one understood Hannah. Her smile was a distant memory, and she refused to eat. Her husband loved her, but his words of comfort had no effect. When he tempted her with delicious food, she’d push the plate away and use the napkin to dry her steady stream of tears. No one understood Hannah.

It is hard to understand people sometimes, even ourselves. No matter how faithful, we are always being pulled in different directions by an inner struggle that others can’t see. No, Hannah’s depression wasn’t caused by too many glasses of wine; she wanted a child of her own. She’d been married for years but remained childless. That’s not the only reason for her tears. At that time, people sinfully ostracized married women who were childless, as if they were not favored by God, or some other such nonsense. And as if that weren’t enough, her husband “fixed” the problem by taking a second wife to give him children. This solution *always* resulted in strife and jealousy. His second wife never missed an opportunity to remind Hannah who was more important. Her clueless husband made it worse: “Cheer up, Hannah,” he said. “Am I not worth more to you than ten sons?” (see 1:8).

Although the Bible doesn’t tell us, it’s not hard to imagine the mess of conflicting emotions pulling at Hannah: disappointment, anger, jealousy, maybe a desire for pay-back. Whatever she was feeling, Hannah didn’t try to sort through the mess. She dumped the whole pile on God’s doorstep. And she made a vow that day, a solemn promise: “O Lord of hosts, if you will indeed look on the affliction of your servant and remember me and not forget your servant, but will give to your servant a son, then I will give him to the Lord all the days of his life” (1:11).

No one understood Hannah. It was easy to see she was sad. She never smiled, and she refused to eat. But what could anyone do or say to make her smile return?

2. Hannah is an example of faith and faithfulness. We are all, each of us, at the same time saints and sinners, and because we live in a sinful world, our minds are a battleground of conflicting emotions and desires. Hannah shows us what it means to be faithful in the *midst* of these struggles.

What happens in your mind when someone either carelessly or deliberately stomps on your foot, or cuts you off in traffic? Jesus says, “Turn the other cheek.” But there are other voices inside that want you to scream out in rage or even hurt the one who hurt you. What if this happened on the day you lost your job and your health insurance? What if there was a pile of bills on your desk that you had no way of paying? What if you knew your spouse had been cheating on you, and then you spilled hot coffee in your lap when that person cut you off in traffic or stomped on your foot?

Despite it all, Hannah had faith. She sought comfort from God at His house in Shiloh. She didn’t paint a happy mask over her face when she went to worship; she let the tears flow. When her priest added insult to injury by accusing her of being drunk, she confessed what actually caused the tears. When he spoke a word of blessing, she received it as a word from God. She left that day believing the Lord’s face was shining on her and that He would be gracious to her. In the midst of her inner battles, she found peace at the Lord’s house. The burdens lifted from her shoulders; her smile and her appetite finally returned!

In all these things Hannah is a role model. But the greatest test of her faith was when she *kept* her vow. Promises are *easy* to make but often hard to keep. Despite whatever desires and emotions were pulling her in the other direction, when the time came, Hannah gathered up a bull to sacrifice and some flour and wine as an offering, took the hand of the answer to her prayer—her son Samuel—and headed up the road to the Lord’s house. As hard as it was, she kept her vow. She let go of his little hand and trusted the Lord to care for him, protect him, and use him for a great purpose.

Hannah is an example of faith and faithfulness. When we trust God’s promises and manage to do His will when we’re being pulled in different directions by our sinful flesh, that’s what it means to be faithful.

3. Through Hannah, God poured out blessings on all His people. Her son Samuel grew to become a faithful priest, a fair judge, and a true prophet who would call people to repentance and faith. Even more, God used Samuel to institute the eternal kingdom of David, through whom God would provide us a Prophet, Priest, and King.

There was great need; those were dark days, and it seemed they would only get darker. Instead of looking to God’s law for guidance, most people were following the desires of their sinful hearts. As a result, the book of Judges in the Bible reports news that is every bit as shocking and awful as anything we see in the news today. Now a man named Eli was supposed to be Israel’s priest and judge, but he had grown old and lazy. And his sons, who would inherit those roles, were faithless and wicked.

It was a dark time, but like those candles burning on our altar, there was a flickering light in the heart of Hannah. In faith, she came to God's house and prayed for a son whom she promised to give back to God to become His servant. Her prayer of faith was powerful and effective. God used her faithfulness to provide for all.

That's the way God worked in the Old Testament. In the darkest of times, there was always a faithful remnant of believers. Hannah is just one link in a long chain that stretches all the way back to Eve and all the way forward to Mary. Samuel grew to be a priest, judge, and a true prophet who would anoint David as king over the people. And from David came the Son of David, the Son of Mary, the Son of God. It's clear to see how God used Hannah's faith and faithfulness for her son to provide for all people through *His* Son.

4. Hannah had faith, and she was faithful. But faith doesn't exist by itself; faith always has an object. Hannah kept her vow to God believing God would keep His vow to us. God made a promise. Hannah's faith received that promise, and it guided the way she thought and lived in the world. She had faith, and therefore she was faithful.

After Adam and Eve allowed sin to corrupt God's perfect creation, God vowed that from the womb of a woman a son would be born who would undo all the damage they caused. Then, right before the gates of paradise slammed shut behind them, and right before they set foot on cursed ground for the first time, God covered their flesh with the skin of innocent animals. Those garments would be a reminder, not only of their sinfulness but also of the terrible price God would pay to keep His vow. For those same reasons, Hannah took a bull to be slaughtered when she brought her boy to live in God's house. All the blood of all the sacrifices of all the faithful of Israel served that same purpose—to remind them of their sinfulness and of the price God would pay to keep His promise.

As Hannah gave her little boy to live in God's house, God gave His eternal Son to dwell in human flesh. God kept His vow when His innocent Lamb of God was slaughtered by sinful men and His precious blood fell on the cursed ground. By His death, the sins of the world are taken away; by His resurrection, the gates to paradise are open to all who believe.

When you were baptized into the death of Christ, (like *baby* Hannah Lee Raduenz was this morning,) God forgave your sins, covered your sinful flesh with the robe of Christ's righteousness, and lit the spark of faith in your heart by the Holy Spirit. Faith receives the precious gifts of God. Faith says, "God kept His promise to me. Jesus died and rose for me. The gate to paradise is now open to me."

Hannah kept her vow to God believing God would keep His vow to us. That's what faith is all about. Faith receives the promise from God and guides the way we

think and live in the world. God's people have faith, and that's the reason we are faithful.

5. And God *still* provides for others through His people. The need is great, even greater today than in Hannah's day. The world is just as dark, but the need is more urgent. We are that much closer to the day of judgment. The world desperately needs people of faith to be faithful.

When we bring our burdens to God's house, when pastors speak the words God has given, when children are brought to be baptized, when parents and sponsors keep their vow to pray for them and raise them in the faith, when we remember our sin and the awful price God paid to forgive us, when our faith is nourished by the fruits of the cross, when we go out into the world and let the light within us shine by turning the other cheek and explaining the hope within us, when we pray for all people according to their needs, when we support the work of the church with our offerings, then, like Hannah, we are being faithful. None of those things will save you or make you worthy to live in God's house—Jesus did that—but God does use them to bless all people through you.

When you are faithful, you too, like Hannah, become a link in a long chain that stretches from the cross to God's eternal paradise. Amen!