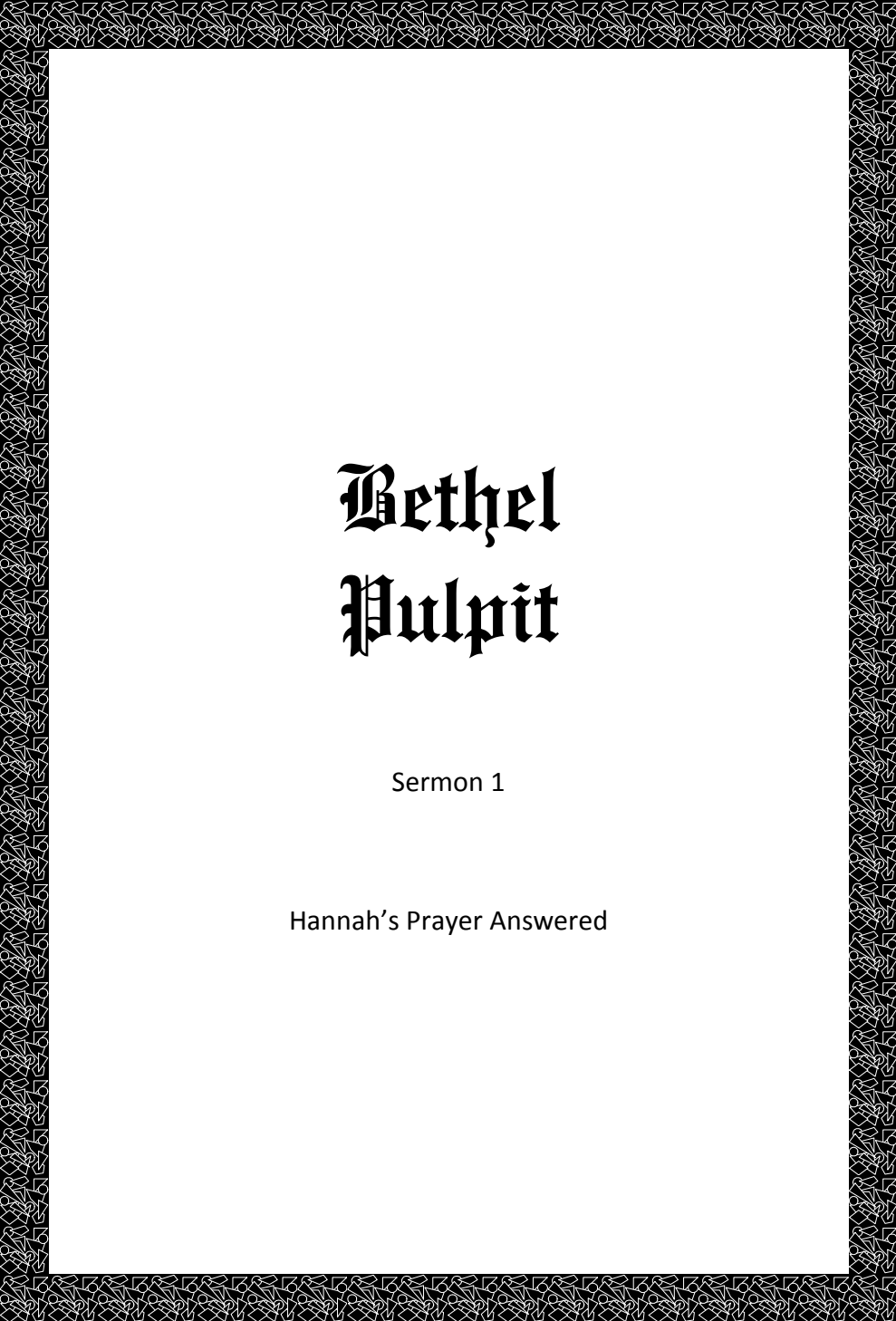




Bethel Pulpit

Sermon 1

Hannah's Prayer Answered

**Sermon preached at Bethel Chapel, Luton,
by Mr. B. A. Ramsbottom,
on Lord's day evening, 5th May, 1985**

Text: *"The Lord remembered her" (1 Samuel 1. 19).*

This is one of the beautiful chapters in Scripture showing the way in which the Lord deals with hard cases. Here was this godly woman, Hannah. She had a case that was too hard for her, and we read how the Lord so graciously dealt with her. Now let us be clear, I do not think I read of any person in all Scripture who was in deeper trouble than Hannah was, and yet many people would have counted it only a small trouble. You see, she had no children and in her case it completely prostrated her. The wonderful point is this, that the Lord completely understood Hannah's grief. He is possessed of "a spirit of a quick understanding." It would be a mercy if we had more of the spirit of Christ, if we were more possessed of "the spirit of a quick understanding." It is a solemn thing when a lot of God's people seem to have the spirit of a *slow* understanding, when there is a person in real trouble, and yet they do not seem to realise.

There is a Scripture that covers this, covers Hannah's case: "The heart knoweth his own bitterness." You see, some people might have told Hannah not to bother. Other people might have told her to pull herself together. Other people might have said that she had a good home and a good husband. But to Hannah this was a hard case which well nigh prostrated her, and the wonderful mercy is that the Lord completely understood her case. You see, what is a trouble to one is not a trouble to another. Also the opposite is true: what is a joy to one is not a joy to another. You find one person and something happens in his life, and it does not mean anything. It happens in another person's life and he is overwhelmed with joy. It is the same with joy and it is the same with sorrow. "The heart knoweth his own bitterness."

With Hannah this was real trouble. We are told that she was "a woman of a sorrowful spirit." We read also of "the abundance of her complaint and grief." We are told that in the "bitterness of her soul" she poured out her soul and prayed to the Lord. We also read that she "wept sore." Here, then, is a woman in trouble, in the depths of trouble. The Word of God deals so lovingly and so kindly and so tenderly. You know

one thing, “the end of a thing is better than the beginning.” How often we have proved it, and didn’t Hannah prove it here, that the end of her thing was better than the beginning? You see that beautiful Scripture exemplified in the case of Hannah: “He that goeth forth and weepeth, bearing precious seed, shall doubtless come again with rejoicing, bringing his sheaves with him.” She knew what it was to sow in tears and to reap in joy.

Now it is only the Lord that can turn sorrow into joy, whether it is providential sorrow, or whether it is spiritual sorrow. The world can turn many things into other things, but it cannot turn sorrow into joy. I do not suppose in all the Bible there are two chapters that present a greater contrast than the first book of Samuel, the first chapter and the second chapter, the one a chapter of deep grief and bitter sorrow, the other chapter one of joy and thanksgiving and delight. The point is this: it is the same person, the identical person.

I wonder if there are any Hannahs here tonight. You have come to the house of God like Hannah did, bearing your burden. O may you be able to cast it on the Lord. You have come in the bitterness of your soul. You have come with that hard cause. O may you hear the Lord saying, “The cause that is too hard for you, bring it unto Me, and I will hear it.” You have come with all your cares. O may you hear that word, “Casting all your care upon Him; for He careth for you.”

You may say that Hannah’s case was providential. Well, it was, but it was not only providential. But speaking first of all on providential things, do not let Satan keep you away from the mercy seat by saying it is only providence. This was providence, but Hannah took it to the throne of grace, and the Lord heard her, the Lord answered her. You girls and boys, you have your things at home and at school and with your friends, and with the people you have to deal with. There is nothing too small to take to the Lord, and there is nothing too great to take to the Lord. O how the Lord delights to see us come and that is why we have these things in our life. You might say, “Why has the Lord allowed this bitter thing to come into my life?”

“He bids affliction drive me home,
To anchor on His grace.”

That is the reason why these bitter things come, and they are sanctified when we take them to the Lord in prayer. So often we do not. So often we try to bottle them up ourselves, or there is that whisper, “It is only providence,” or, “It is too small for the Lord to take notice of.” “What a privilege to carry everything” – *everything* – “to God in prayer.” I believe that is what the Lord means when He says, “Pray without ceasing.” You cannot always be in the attitude of prayer. You cannot always be shut aside in secret. You cannot always be on your knees. But day by day it is that upward glancing of the eye, when there is hardly time to speak, that looking upwards. “I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills., from whence cometh my help.”

So it was providence, but Hannah took it to the Lord and she received a blessed answer. There is no more blessed answer in the Old Testament. But I do believe this, that with a child of God providence and grace are always intertwined. I believe it was with Hannah. Hannah’s prayer of thanksgiving was not just providence. It was almost entirely spiritual. We learn so many lessons. We have some providential trouble like Hannah did; we would take it to the Lord. There is a whisper in our conscience of our unworthiness, our sin. We cannot pray, yet we must pray, we have to pray. Then there is a little sense of our unworthiness, our sin, and a little sense of the wonderful mercy of God that we can plead, and a little sense of the precious blood as the way of access, and Jesus the Intercessor. So providence and grace are bound up together.

There is another thing, you see. The Lord has said that all men should pray. “Men ought always to pray, and not to faint.” It is the duty of all men as God’s creatures to pray to God. Worldly people sometimes pray in trouble but as soon as they are out of it, they forget about God. It is like the doctor. We send for him when we are ill, and forget about him when we are better. But if your religion is real, you will know something like this. You will take some matter to the Lord in providence, some natural thing, great or small. The Lord will hear and answer, and your heart is full of gratitude. Now this is the difference: you are not satisfied with it. The world, having that answer, is satisfied. You are not satisfied. You are so grateful for the kindness of God in hearing and answering your prayer, but it does not satisfy. You say,

“These can never satisfy;
Give me Christ, or else I die.”

You say,

“Were I possessor of the earth,
And called the stars my own,
Without Thy graces and Thyself,
I were a wretch undone!”

So providence and grace unite.

There is another way in which providence and grace unite. You see, Hannah had this trouble. She was burdened with it, bowed down under it. She had no children, and her husband had another wife, and she proved to be an adversary. Let us be clear, this polygamy in the Old Testament is a mystery, a mystery why God permitted it. But from the beginning it was not so, and you will find that it always brought trouble. It was introduced by Abraham and it brought him trouble. Look at Solomon and the trouble it caused him. Many of David’s troubles were caused because he had more wives than one. And Elkanah here, look at the trouble that it brought.

But you see, Hannah had this providential burden, this natural care, and she was sorely tempted in it. She was much troubled in it by the other wife, Peninnah. She found her a rival; she found her an adversary. In your providential cares you will find the temptation. You may find the hard, prayerless heart. There will be the temptation of Satan; there will be the alluring of the world. I think you will find especially that when your heart is sad, Satan will show you no mercy. He likes to see someone down, and likes to put his foot on that one that is down. But the Lord says, “Call upon Me in the day of trouble: I will deliver thee.” Now may that be a word in season to some of you here this evening.

Hannah “prayed to the Lord.” Sometimes this is our only, our sure retreat. Hannah prayed unto the Lord. She was in bitterness of soul; she wept sore. But Hannah “prayed unto the Lord.” You may say, “Why did she need to wait until she got to the tabernacle at Shiloh before she prayed?” Always remember this, with the saints of the Old Testament this was a dark dispensation. There was not the clear gospel light that we have. “The way into the holiest was not yet made manifest.” They were so

bound up with outward things. There was not the same liberty, the same access in prayer.

Even Daniel, when he prayed, had to think of the temple at Jerusalem. Even Jonah in the whale's belly, said, "I will look again toward Thy holy temple." This was the place where the blood was shed, the sacrifice was offered, where atonement was made, where in its dim measure the gospel was revealed to the Old Testament saints. You and I in this much more favoured day are not tied to any time or spot or place. We are bidden to come boldly to the throne of grace. Yet what a good religion these Old Testament saints had! How their prayers condemn our prayers!

Hannah "prayed unto the Lord." Really, her prayer was this: "O Lord of hosts." She knew that He was mighty, that He was almighty. "O Lord of hosts, if Thou wilt indeed look on the affliction of Thine handmaid." Is there anyone here who can say that tonight: "If Thou wilt indeed look on the affliction of Thine handmaid"? "And remember me, and not forget Thine handmaid." May you pray like that tonight: "And remember me."

Often I refer to Eli's complete misunderstanding of her. The best of men are only men at best. You will have to prove that. Do not rest your dependence on anyone here below. They may be good friends to you, loving friends, a great help. O but do not lean on them. You will find that they fail. This godly man Eli – and he was a godly man – he completely misunderstood Hannah and he rebuked her. He thought she was drunk. Beloved friends, we need to beware of misunderstanding one another. Do not come to hasty conclusions. Do not judge rash judgments.

Don't you find this, those of you who are older, that you live and learn? There has perhaps been a person and you completely misunderstood him. It was a good thing you did not say anything. The very thing you misunderstood was the effect of gracious exercise and the tender fear of God. We have all got the Eli in us. We make hasty conclusions and our own judgments. May the Lord deliver us from it. Eli completely misunderstood Hannah. Hannah's God did not misunderstand her. Eli rebuked her. Hannah's God did not rebuke her.

There is a solemn point here. Look at Eli's own sons. He passed them by. He is very ready to go to this poor woman in her grief and rebuke her. What about his own sons, his own family? Don't we need to watch that

point as well, overlooking things in the ones we love, making excuses, tolerating these things and yet being ready to see faults in others?

You see, Eli was the high priest of Israel. We read in Hebrews 5 that every high priest had to be one who could feel for them who had infirmities. Well, Eli did not. But, “we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore” – because we shall not be misunderstood, because we shall not fail to receive compassion – “Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need,” with your natural things and with your spiritual things, your troubles and your sorrows, the burdens of your soul, your sins and eternity. Am I right? Am I ready? Am I His, or am I not?

One thing I have noticed more than ever before, the grace that reigned in Hannah in the way in which she replied: “No, my lord, I am a woman of a sorrowful spirit.” She did not go into a rage, she was not angry. She might have been. It would have been righteous anger, righteous indignation. You notice how respectfully she still speaks to Israel’s high priest, even after the awful way in which he had spoken to her, the awful way in which he treated her. She said, “Let thine handmaid find grace in thy sight.” That is grace in Hannah and you find years later when she brings Samuel to the temple she does not turn to Eli in any way of rebuke as one specially favoured by the Lord, but she says, “O my lord, as thy soul liveth, my lord, I am the woman that stood by thee here, praying unto the Lord. For this child I prayed; and the Lord hath given me my petition which I asked of Him; Therefore also I have lent him to the Lord; as long as he liveth he shall be lent to the Lord.” She humbles herself. O that there were more of this, “that meek and quiet spirit which in the sight of God is an ornament of great price.” It is a point that the Lord specially calls for in women who profess His name, a meek and quiet spirit which in the sight of God – and that is what matters – in the sight of God is an ornament of great price.

I also see grace in Eli here. As soon as he was convinced that he was wrong, he spoke so kindly and graciously. He said, “Go in peace: and the God of Israel grant thee thy petition that thou hast asked of Him.” It is very easy if we have made a mistake to try to justify it. We do need much grace when we have made a mistake and we are told about it to acknowledge that we are wrong, and Eli did. Beloved friends, he spoke as

more than just a mere man here. I believe he spoke by divine authority, as Israel's high priest. "Go in peace: and the God of Israel grant thee thy petition that thou hast asked of Him." What a wonderful thing it is when a venturing sinner has poured out his heart to the Lord in prayer, and our great High Priest whispers, "Go in peace: and the God of Israel grant thee thy petition that thou hast asked of Him."

"So the woman went her way, and did eat, and her countenance was no more sad." This is an interesting point, isn't it? What was the difference in her circumstances? Nothing whatsoever. She still had no children; she was still barren. But now she is happy instead of sad. She has got access to God Himself. She has got the witness in her own soul that her prayer has entered into the Lord's ears, into the Lord's heart, and she has that sweet assurance that her prayer will be answered.

Perhaps some of you have known that at times. You have known what it is completely to unburden yourself. You have been in the depths of trouble and have gone to the Lord and poured out your heart, poured out your trouble, to the Lord, and you have gone on your way, and your countenance has been no more sad. The trouble is still there, the difficulty is still there, but it is no longer in your hands. You can see that it is in the Lord's hands. He has "engaged to manage all, by the way and to the end." It is a wonderful experience to be able to "commit thy way unto the Lord; trust also in Him; and He shall bring it to pass." Then may you go on your way and may your countenance be no more sad.

Then we read, "And the Lord remembered her." He remembered her in this, that she was now expecting a child. This was what she prayed for: "If Thou wilt indeed look on the affliction of thine handmaid, and remember me," and then we read, "and the Lord remembered her." He remembered her by hearing and answering her prayer. He remembered her by sympathising, by taking notice of her case. He remembered her by blessing her. He remembered her by commanding complete deliverance for her. He remembered her by doing exceeding and far abundantly above all that she could ask or think. "And the Lord remembered her." What a wonderful thing if there might be many here this evening and the Lord in love and mercy remembers us! O can you pray that prayer: "If Thou wilt ... remember me"? "If Thou wilt ... remember me, and not forget Thine handmaid."

We often have this expression in Scripture, of God remembering someone, and really there are two sides to it. One side of it is this: “the Lord is mindful of His own.” “The Lord hath been mindful of us: He will bless us.” The Lord does not forget His people. “O Israel, thou shalt not be forgotten of Me.” Other people may ignore you, may pass you by, may forget you. “O Israel, thou shalt not be forgotten of Me.” Hannah says, “If Thou wilt ... remember me, and not forget Thine handmaid.”

“Forget thee I will not, I cannot; thy name
Engraved on My heart does for ever remain.”

“And the Lord remembered her.”

“But Zion said, The Lord hath forsaken me, and my Lord hath forgotten me.” It was Zion who said it. “Can a woman forget her sucking child, that she should not have compassion on the son of her womb?” Is it possible? “Yea, they may forget, yet will I not forget thee. Behold, I have graven thee upon the palms of My hands.” “And the Lord remembered her.”

Now that is one side of it. There is another side which goes further. When the Lord remembers a sinner, it means much more than just not forgetting that one. I have thought about it like this. Sometimes a wealthy person dies. That person leaves a very large estate, and perhaps we read that he remembered one of his aged servants, or he remembered someone well. What do we mean? Not just that that one was in his thoughts, but that there was a very large and handsome bequest. It is an expression that we use, that someone was remembered in a person’s will, or that he remembered such a person. When the Lord remembers a person, there is everything in it. There is salvation in it. There is heaven in it. That is why we pray, “Remember me, O Lord, with the favour that Thou bearest unto Thy people,” because if the Lord does remember us, we shall get to heaven. Is there not a Hannah tonight praying that prayer? It is a personal request. It is an urgent, pressing case. “Remember me, O Lord, with the favour that Thou bearest unto Thy people: O visit me with Thy salvation.”

We read that the Lord remembered Noah. What did that mean? That when the human race perished, Noah was safe in the ark. The Lord remembered him: it meant everything. Here the Lord remembered

Hannah. You can go through the various people in Scripture. The Lord remembered them and it meant everything to them. O can you pray that prayer, “And remember me”? Thou didst remember Noah, Thou didst remember Hannah, Thou dost remember Thy people, *and remember me*. And this is the Lord’s answer: “And the Lord remembered her.” The dying thief entered heaven with that prayer, “Lord, remember me when Thou comest into Thy kingdom.” What did he want? Forgiveness, mercy, salvation, everything, and the Lord did remember him. “Verily I say unto thee, To day shalt thou be with Me in paradise.”

It is a wonderful thing to be remembered. In the Book of Nehemiah, Nehemiah, amidst all his cares and all his concerns, continually looked upwards and said, “Remember me, O Lord, for good.” It is a very suitable prayer. May the Lord teach us to pray it. “Lord, remember me.” As Hannah did here, “If Thou wilt indeed look on the affliction of Thine handmaid, and remember me.” “And the Lord remembered her.” It is an answer to prayer. It is deliverance granted. With Hannah her barrenness was gone. It was life instead of death. It was liberty instead of bondage. It was light instead of darkness. It was joy instead of sorrow. Why, she sowed in tears when she said, “And remember me.” And she reaped in joy when the Lord remembered her, and she reaped in joy when she came again rejoicing bringing her sheaves with her, when she stood with her Samuel in her arms on the very spot, the identical spot, where in the bitterness of her soul she poured out her heart to God. “For this child I prayed; and the Lord hath given me my petition which I asked of Him.”

Have any of you got a Samuel? It may literally be a child, or it may just be an answer to your prayer. It means, “asked of God,” something you have asked for and the Lord has given it to you. Perhaps some of you know this experience, to return to the very spot and place where once in the bitterness of your heart you poured out your soul to God, and the substance of it was, “Remember me,” and now you can go back there bearing your sheaves with you, carrying the answer to your prayers in your arms, and you can say, “The Lord hath given me my petition which I asked of Him.” You can bear witness that the Lord did not forget you, did not fail to answer your prayer, the Lord did remember you.

Now what is the burden that you carry as you come to the house of God tonight? May you be able to take it to the Lord and leave it there.

May you be able from a full heart to pray, “And remember me.” And may it be, “Go in peace: and the God of Israel grant thee thy petition.” May the Lord remember you as you have prayed and as He has promised. May you stand with your Samuel in your arms, “For this child I prayed; and the Lord hath given me my petition which I asked of Him.” “And the Lord remembered her.”

Now just one last word, concerning the gratitude of Hannah’s heart. This is a place where we so often fall short. May we never fail to render to the Lord according to the benefit. May there be that true thanksgiving. But I do believe that Hannah’s answer to her prayer was much more than providence. I venture even to say – I hope I am not mistaken – that when she held Samuel in her arms, she had a little view by faith of Christ. You may say, “That is exaggerated language.” I have only one ground for saying it, that the language of Hannah’s thanksgiving in 1 Samuel 2 is very, very similar, almost identical in places, to the song of thanksgiving of the virgin Mary in Luke chapter 1. Hannah and Mary spoke the same language. It seems that it is very prophetic, as if she looked beyond everything to Christ Himself.

Well, as you seek that the Lord will remember you, as you pray, as you come with the answers to your prayers in your arms, may it be above everything else to look to Christ and may it be with a little sweet assurance that you have Christ in your arms and Christ in your heart. Then you will reap in joy. Then you will come again with rejoicing, bringing your sheaves with you. “And the Lord remembered her.”