



HANNAH, A PROMISE KEEPER

by Kay Ward

IN GOOD COMPANY:
STORIES OF BIBLICAL WOMEN

BIBLE STUDY : SESSION 1

Theme verse

“For this child I prayed; and the LORD has granted me the petition that I made to him. Therefore I have lent him to the LORD; as long as he lives, he is given to the LORD. She left him there for the LORD.”
(1 Samuel 1:27–28)

Hymn

He’s Got the Whole World in His Hands

Overview

Hannah, a barren woman, prays to God for a son and makes a vow that if she is given a son, she will return him to God as a nazirite.

With a Psalm in our Hearts

READ PSALM 139:1–24.

In each of our Bible study sessions, we will begin our time together with a psalm, an ancient song. There are many different kinds of psalms, and these verses of Psalm 139 are a good example of a “well-being” psalm. It is a favorite of mine not only because it is so personal but because it mentions knitting, and there aren’t many knitting references in the Bible. As you read verses 1–6, what words or phrases seem most interesting to you?

1. **Make a list of all the verbs (the being or doing words).**

What kind of a person (or God) do such verbs describe?

Here, the words are directed to God. The writer or singer speaks to God about who God is and how God operates in the world. The first section speaks of a God

who knows everything. It speaks of omniscience.

I first heard about the *omnis* in confirmation class, and it was easy for me as a young girl to relate to a God that was omnipotent (all powerful), omnipresent (everywhere) and omniscient (knowing everything). It was a bit of a relief that at least someone was in charge of the

world. I was young and hadn’t begun to ask the hard questions of God and my life.

For more mature people, God’s omniscience leads to questions that believing people have struggled with generation after generation. These are not questions that have easy answers, and it is often living in the midst of such doubts and questions that our faith grows.

2. **What kinds of questions does the understanding of omniscience bring to mind for you?**

Verses 7–12 speak of God’s omnipresence. No matter where we go, God is present. Someone has said that when we feel far away from God, we should ask ourselves, “Who moved?” (See “Always With You,” p. 6.)

Verses 13–18 speak of our being created by God and the psalmist uses language familiar to women who create and weave and knit and sew. Whether we are giving birth to a child, weaving a rug, knitting a sweater, or sewing a jacket, we can relate to the idea of making something new. We participate in creation—not only in making an object to use and enjoy but making

a new start or a new life. At the end of this chapter we will turn to a parable in which Jesus uses a metaphor of this new creation.

We can feel at one with a God who makes things, including us. This section is so intimate—a God who knows us from the skin out is surely a God that we can trust and to whom we can bring all of our deepest longings.

The Bible Tells Us So—Extra Credit

If it has been a while since you have read the creation stories, turn to Genesis chapters 1 and 2.

What differences and similarities do you notice in the two creation stories?

You might like to have someone read a portion of *God's Trombones* called “The Creation” by James Weldon Johnson. It can be found at <http://suzyred.com/poemcreation.html>. How does the poem connect with Psalm 139?

If you didn't sing the old spiritual “He's Got the Whole World in his Hands” before you began this chapter, sing it now. It is reminiscent of Psalm 139. (When we sing an old song, we sometimes have to set aside our use of inclusive language for God.) The last verses of Psalm 139 seem to come from a darker place but they also speak of a solid trust and confidence in God.

A story from the Old Testament: Hannah

READ 1 SAMUEL 1:1—2:21.

At the beginning of the book of 1 Samuel, Hannah is mentioned as the first of Elkanah's wives. By being mentioned first, we could assume that she was the favored wife, but then we learn that Elkanah's second wife, Peninnah, though she is not mentioned first,

is in a superior position. Peninnah has provided her husband with children. Hannah has no children. In a culture where polygamy was accepted, the close association of the two wives was sure to lead to discord when one of the wives was childless, and such was the case with Hannah and Peninnah.

Barrenness was the most bitter misfortune in ancient times, and, for many, that stigma continues even today. There were years in my life when I hated reading those old familiar stories of barren Sarah and barren Hannah and barren Elizabeth. Was it just my imagination or did the Bible have more than its share of barren women stories? I am a barren woman, and when I first knew that to be true, I felt useless and empty. Questions flooded into my mind as I found reasons not to attend worship on Mother's Day and to avoid baby showers and the infant sections in department stores. (Our adoption of four children has more than overcome those feelings.) And as miserable as I was in those early married years, I never believed that my being barren had anything to do with my character or my faith.

Such was not the case for Hannah. In the Old Testament, barrenness was considered to be a curse and it was an affliction that was sent by God. The people in Israel believed that God had given the gift of procreation, as a commandment and a blessing, and it was only natural to assume that God had a hand in withdrawing that gift. (See “Hannah's Hope, Our Hope,” p. 26.)

3. Adoption can be such an expensive and difficult process these days and many couples do not feel able to adopt for a variety of reasons. Also, given the fact that many single mothers now keep their children with little stigma, the demand for adoptable babies far outstrips the supply. Do you know couples that still suffer from infertility? How has your congregation responded to them? What might a congregation do to ease some of their suffering? Do you know couples that do not want to have children and hence feel left out of many activities? What might your congregation do to make them feel comfortable and welcome?

READ 1 SAMUEL 1:3–6, PILGRIMAGE TO SHILOH.

It was the tradition of Elkanah to make a pilgrimage to the sanctuary at Shiloh each year. Shiloh was an important sacred place and it was the scene of the fall grape harvest festival. Elkanah, a pious man, as the head of his household, packed up the entire household and headed to Shiloh. The highlight of the festival was a sacrificial meal. It was the responsibility of the head of the household to divide up the sacrificial meal for all the members of his family. The women and children would have kept in the background during the sacrifice for the feast as they waited to be served their portions.

Elkanah always gave Hannah a double share of the feast, but she was so distraught that she couldn't enjoy it. In fact, she couldn't eat at all. Though the text says that Elkanah wondered why she couldn't eat, he must have known why. The pilgrimage would have been an especially difficult time for Hannah as she mingled with all the mothers and their babies and suffered the taunts that Peninnah continually threw at Hannah.

READ 1 SAMUEL 1:7–11, HANNAH PRAYS TO GOD.

Elkanah continued to take his family to Shiloh each year and Hannah continued to be distraught and not able to eat at the feast. Because Elkanah loved Hannah, on this particular pilgrimage he asked her why she wasn't eating and why his love wasn't enough. He asked, "Isn't my love worth more than 10 sons?" The text doesn't tell us how Hannah answered, but I think the answer would have been "no, it wasn't enough." Not this time. Not ever. Hannah slips away from the feast and goes to the sanctuary, weeping. As she pours out her sadness, she makes a deal with the Lord. She asks God for a son, not just a child, but a son and promises that if she is able to bear a son, she will present him to the Lord as a nazirite.

Making deals is how we function with other people: "If you do this for me, I will do this for you in return." So it is not surprising for us to try making deals

with God. "God, if you will spare my husband, I will never take anything for granted again." (See "Please, God," p. 18.)

4. **What kind of deals have you been tempted to make with God in your own life?**

READ 1 SAMUEL 1:12–20, HANNAH IS ACCUSED OF BEING DRUNK.

Eli, the priest at Shiloh, was sitting in the doorway, apparently unseen by Hannah as she rushed into the sanctuary to weep and pray. And Eli was watching her and noticed that her lips were moving but she wasn't saying anything out loud. Eli assumes that she is drunk, perhaps because there was a lot of partying going on at the feast. It would have been expected that Hannah would have joined the others in their festival drinking.

Eli tells Hannah to "put away her wine" and refrain from making a drunken spectacle of herself. Hannah corrects him, and uses a possible play on words. She has not been drinking but, rather, pouring out her soul. Eli responds pastorally by blessing Hannah, praying that she depart in peace, and entreating God to answer Hannah's prayer. Hannah felt better. She went back to her room, ate and drank with her husband, and in the morning returned to their home. In due time, Hannah bore a son and called him Samuel, meaning "he over whom the name of God has been said."

READ 1 SAMUEL 1:21–28, HANNAH TAKES SAMUEL TO SHILOH.

The next year when it was time to go to Shiloh, one could imagine the anticipation that Hannah would have felt to join the others and show off her baby son, Samuel. She could finally join in the festivities and words from Peninnah could no longer hurt her. But Hannah did not go. Her reason was sound: Samuel was still nursing so it wouldn't make sense for her to take him to Shiloh. Perhaps Hannah also wanted to

keep Samuel with her as long as possible. She knew what she had promised to do, and she would keep her promise but there was no harm in postponing that decision as long as possible.

Time passes and when Samuel is weaned, she prepares him for the trip to Shiloh. The text says that she brought him to the house of the Lord and the child was young. When Hannah's family had made their sacrifice to the Lord, Hannah reminds Eli that she is the woman who had promised to give her son to the Lord for the rest of his life. And the chapter ends "she left him there for the Lord."

Whew! I cannot imagine myself being able to do that. He was a little boy. And I can see him crying out for his mother as she leaves him. How could she ever turn and leave him there in the sanctuary? (See "Mother as Steward," p. 22.)

5. **As a mother or an aunt or a grandma or a friend, what circumstances would enable you to carry out this promise?**
6. **There is something powerful happening in this story that enables Hannah to rise above her human needs and bring her son to God. Share what you think that might be.**

READ 1 SAMUEL 2:1-10, HANNAH'S SONG.

At this point in the middle of the story, we read a psalm that has been attributed to Hannah. The psalm itself answers the question we have asked. Hannah is a woman of faith and her song begins as a song of praise. It is utterly personal. She rejoices in her victory and we can only imagine who she is thinking of when she mentions her enemies. Then she begins a long list of things God can do—everything from breaking the bows of the mighty to enabling the barren one who then bears seven children. She also sings that God is in charge of everything (that *omni* again). And the song ends with the assurance that God is good and that God will continue to guard the feet of the faithful. Hannah

has trusted in God and God has heard her prayers.

7. **When we hear about the loss of a child, we might be tempted to say, "O, how fortunate for them that they have other children." How might such a statement be heard by a grieving parent?**
8. **There is a direct connection between Hannah's Prayer and Mary's Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55). See if you can find the similarities.**

READ 1 SAMUEL 2:11-21, SONS OF ELI.

The details of the behavior of the sons of Eli is curious. First they are declared to be scoundrels, and then we are given the details of what they are doing that is so awful. This is difficult to understand because we don't know all the nuances of sacrificial practice. Suffice it to say that they were not behaving properly. And it was doubly troubling that the misdeeds were done during the high religious sacrificial rite on God's altar.

Unlike many of the stories that we will read, this story of Hannah has a happy ending. Hannah and Elkanah have three more sons and two daughters, but, for Hannah, five other children did not erase the loss of Samuel. Even with three sons and two daughters, Hannah continued to have her firstborn on her mind. We read that each year when she returned to Shiloh, she brought with her a robe that she had sewn for Samuel. I can imagine her dreaming of him as she made each stitch. She was able to see him once a year, and that surely was a blessing. But she also experienced the loss of Samuel's growing into a man. As confident as she was in keeping her promise to God, it seems to me that she always remained a mom.

A Story from the New Testament: New Wine in Old Wineskins

READ LUKE 5:33-39.

Jesus is trying to convey to his listeners that following him will require a change of heart, a new way of being. And he tells them two short parables. First there is a

parable for those who know about making and storing wine. Then he includes a parable about the proper way to mend and sew, tasks often assigned to the busy hands of women.

I think I have always misunderstood this parable because I was paying attention to the old garment that needed patching. I imagined trying to put a patch on the knees of old blue jeans and the fabric being so thin that it wouldn't hold a stitch.

As I read the parable again, I have had it all wrong. This parable is about the new, good wine and a perfectly good garment. You don't take a lovely blouse and cut a chunk out of the front of it to mend an old nightgown. That wouldn't make sense. He says it wouldn't match in the first place but in the case of the old nightgown, that might not matter so much but what are you going to do with the new blouse with a patch-shaped piece of fabric cut out of the front? This kingdom that Jesus is referring to is his new creation and some old ways of doing things may have to be let go. We must use new wineskins to put our new best religious practices in. You can't live a new creation kind of life with the same old bad habits of the past. It just won't work, says Jesus. (See a different take in "The Value of Old and New," p. 12. What do you think?)

9. **What might new wine and new wineskins mean for your own life of faith?**

10. **Are there habits that get in the way of your becoming a new creature in Christ? In worship? In your prayer life? In how you see others?**

A Story from Today: My Sewing Sister from Namibia

The snow is blowing in horizontal blasts against the window. This old house does not give into the wind easily, but moans and groans in response to the raging blizzard. I sit in my favorite chair, a cup of coffee at my side, all warm and content. In my hand lies a beautiful

jacket, a sewing project for the evening. It is a jacket that I bought in Namibia in southern Africa several weeks ago. It was made by a Namibian woman in a handsome African print fabric, but the sleeves are too long. My project for the night is to shorten the sleeves.

I pierce into the tightly sewn seam, and I am aware that the woman who made this jacket was scrupulously tidy and skillful in her work. I can see where she has carefully reinforced the stitching so there would be no loose ends to unravel. My seam ripper takes each stitch out until I'm left with the raw edge but even here, my sewing sister has carefully made an extra row of stitching.

When I cut the sleeve, I feel a gentle tug at my heart and I am connected with that other place and time as if I had been beamed up in some magical way. I can feel this other woman also cutting this same piece of fabric. She has made the first cut. I make the second. My scissors separate a narrow strip of cloth from the jacket sleeve, and I am back in the heat of a Namibian day. The noonday heat makes her scissors sticky and the fabric sticks to her arm as she leans on the table. Just the binding on the sleeve to finish and she will have another warm, quilted jacket for tourists to buy. Where would such warmth be needed? Very far away, she muses and wipes her sweaty brow. She wonders who will buy this one.

There, I have removed the binding on the first sleeve. I replace it in exactly the same spot only two inches higher. I leave her original stitches because they are so small and perfect. As I try the jacket on once more to check to see if the length is right, I can feel her also trying on the jacket. We both have pulled it around us for comfort. We have both smoothed the seams and straightened the collar. We are sewing sisters.

The Work of our Hands

I was raised by a mother who believed that handwork cured almost anything. It certainly cured boredom or that malady of addiction to television. So if my sister or

I watched television, we were working on something. I still do “handwork.” As I am writing this chapter, I am knitting a little blue-and-white sweater for a baby boy who was born last week to one of our young pastors. As I knit, I pray for the little boy, his family and the congregation who has welcomed him. Each row is a prayer.

11. What objects of love and faith have you offered to those you love?

Several times in this chapter we have spoken of sewing and creating with our hands. Spend a few minutes offering up the kinds of activities that you do with your hands that give God glory.

12. Think about Hannah sewing those little garments for her son, Samuel.

As the years passed, the sizes of the garments must have grown too.

What do you think she was thinking as she stitched?

Praying Hands

As little girls, we may have been taught to fold our hands as we prayed. As grown up women, that still may feel like the natural thing to do. I would like to offer a new wineskin for the closing prayer. Because what we do with our hands is so important to us, there will be a different hand gesture for each chapter. (See them on p. 36.)

As God knit us in creation, as Hannah and my sewing sister sewed the tiny stitches to bring two pieces of fabric together, I invite you to fold your hands together. Keep your fingers hanging down inside of your hands. (It’s the “here’s the church” posture before the steeple.) As you look at your first knuckles all lined up, you can almost see the knitting stitches that God used. Two pieces of fabric are now one, woven together.

Take a few moments before you begin your prayer time to think about being knit together by God. Offer thanks to God for taking the torn fabric of our lives and putting us back together.

Let Us Pray

Holy God, you have searched us and you do know us in our inward parts. We thank you for your servant Hannah and for all those people who inspire us. Make of our study time together a blessing that will reach out from this circle of friends into our world so that others may know you. Remind us daily of the gift to us of your son so that we too might know the newness of life that he has promised. We ask these things in the name of your son and our savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Hands to Work and Hearts to God

“Hands to work and hearts to God” is a saying from our sisters and brothers the Shakers and it reminds us that we have been given hearts and heads and hands with which to serve. Does it also remind you of the ELCA tagline: God’s Work, Our Hands? In the coming month, you might want to try something new as you continue to grow in your faith:

- In your daily devotions, try using the “upside down” praying hands gesture to remind you of what you have learned in this chapter.
- Be mindful of your hands this month—we sometimes take them for granted. Maybe they need to be cared for with a new gentle soap or lotion.
- If you are a crafty sort, think of something that you could make with your hands to give to someone who needs encouragement. Remember writing uses your hands when you write a note or card.
- You might like to try your hand at writing a psalm of your own. Having a journal handy for this Bible study will be a helpful tool. There will always be a writing assignment. 🌸

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