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HOW BADLY DO YOU WANT IT?

Today's text: 1 Sam. 1: 1-28; Lk 18: 1-8

Extracts:

1. "Now there was a certain man of Ramathaimzophim ...and his name was Elkanah...And he had two wives; the name of the one was Hannah, and the name of the other Peninnah; and Peninnah had children, *but Hannah had no children...*[for] *the Lord had shut up her womb*. And her adversary also provoked her sore, for to make her fret,... *and she wept and did not eat... And she was in bitterness of soul, and prayed unto the Lord and wept sore*" [1 Sam. 1: 1,2,5,6,7,10]
2. "And He [Jesus] spake a parable unto them to this end, *that men ought always to pray, and not to faint*" [Lk 18:1]

When I was growing up as a kid in rural Nigeria in the early 1950's, there was a game we used to play with our family dog during the off-hunting season. In those days, the village hunters were assisted by dogs, which helped them to encircle wild game for the hunters' kill. However, during the off-hunting season, most of the dogs would be seen idling in their owners' compounds or in the village square. We had one such dog in our family compound. We the kids would obtain a fat bone with flesh [my uncle was a butcher] and attract the dog to a quiet corner of the compound where the elders would not catch us in our mischief. While dangling the bone before the dog, the rest of us would try to distract his attention by tickling his sensitive parts. However, no matter how hard we tried, this dog would remain focused on that bone. Wherever you moved your hand, up, down, right, left, there went his eyes. After a while, we would get tired and throw him the bone. He would grab it and run to a quiet corner to relish his prize.

That story came to my consciousness as I meditated on today's theme. That dog wanted the bone so badly that nothing could distract or stop him until he had received it. Have you ever found yourself in that situation? What is it that you are praying for right now? Have you prayed hard and long without any visible answer from God? Are you thinking of giving up? Are you determined to persist? How badly do you want it?

In today's lesson, we shall study the story of Hannah, the barren woman who prayed her way to become the mother of Samuel, the prophet, priest and judge who brought Israel to the era of kings.

1. For Hannah, “No!” was out of the question!

Hannah found herself in a polygynous [one man with multiple wives] marriage. While the other wife, Peninnah, had children, Hannah was barren. To demonstrate even-handedness, her husband, Elkanah, always ensured that she received as much care from him as he gave to Peninnah and her sons and daughters [1 Sam. 1: 1-5]. However, she wanted a child badly, and he could not provide her with one.

To make things worse for Hannah, Peninnah and her children taunted her on account of her barrenness. For those of us who grew up in such families, it can be hell for a barren woman. From the homes of the other wives who have children, you will hear songs, jokes and riddles, all aimed at making the barren woman feel worse. When their husband is away, some wives could even instigate their children to beat up the barren woman because she would not have her own children to defend her cause. You can then understand why Hannah “wept and did not eat” because “her adversary provoked her *sore*, for to make her fret” [vv. 6-7].

Each year, the whole family had to travel to Shiloh to worship God. You will recall that after the children of Israel had settled in the Promised Land, the tabernacle was set up in Shiloh [Josh. 18: 1]. It was a symbol of national unity. An altar was built there and the priests, the descendants of Aaron, were in charge. At the time of Hannah, Eli and his two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, were the priests in Shiloh [1 Sam. 1: 3]. Year by year, Hannah’s husband observed that when they went to the temple of God in Shiloh, his wife always wept and did not eat. He loved her very dearly and was not bothered that she did not have her own children. To comfort her, he said, “Hannah, why weepest thou? And why eatest thou not? And why is thy heart grieved? *Am I not better to thee than ten sons?*” [v. 8].

Perhaps to show respect to her husband, Hannah did eat and drink during their most recent visit but her soul remained starved. She went into the church and “in bitterness of soul,” she “*prayed unto the Lord and wept sore*” [vv. 9-10]. She made a *vow* to God as follows:

Oh Lord of hosts, if Thou wilt indeed look on the affliction of Thine handmaid, and remember me, and not forget Thine handmaid, but wilt give unto Thine handmaid a male child, then I will give him unto the Lord all the days of his life, and there shall no razor come upon his head [v. 11]

We are told, “she continued praying” [v. 12] but the priest, Eli, who was close by her did not know what she was saying for “she spake in her heart, *only her lips moved, but her voice was not heard; therefore Eli thought that she had been drunken*” [v. 13]. How does a drunken person behave? When the Holy Spirit descended on the disciples on Pentecost Sunday, some onlookers mocked them saying, “these men are full of new wine.” Peter responded saying, “these are not

drunken, as ye suppose, seeing it is but the third hour of the day” [Acts 2: 13, 15]. We can infer from there that Hannah prayed without paying attention to anything around her. A drunken person does not know or care that you are laughing at him/her. She was desperate; she was focused like our family dog in our opening story! Nothing and nobody would distract her attention. As if to ensure that she was praying to God and not to men, she prayed *silently*. A prayer must be said; otherwise, it is mere meditation [Ps. 19: 14]. Her lips moved. Therefore, she was praying. And she continued praying for, as Jesus put it in the Parable of the Unjust Judge, “men ought always to pray and not to faint” [Lk 18:1].

Her persistence drew the attention of the priest to whom Hannah replied, “I am a woman of a sorrowful spirit. I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink but *have poured out my soul before the Lord...for out of the abundance of my complaint and grief have I spoken hitherto*” [vv. 15-16]. Then, the priest added the grace to her prayers as follows: “*Go in peace; and the God of Israel grant thee thy request that thou hast asked of Him*”[v. 17]. We know that God “confirmeth the word of His servant and performeth the counsel of His messengers” [Is. 44: 26]. There and then, Hannah “went her way, and did eat, and *her countenance was no more sad.*” The following year, she became the proud mother of a son, Samuel, which means “asked of God.” [1 Sam. 19-20]. After handing over Samuel to the service of God, in accordance with her vow, Hannah went on to have three sons and two daughters [1 Sam. 2: 20-21]!

2. Lessons for us

Hannah’s blessings can be ours if we can learn the right lessons from her story. The good news is that nothing is impossible before God. What we require is how to present our cases before Him in prayers. Here are some guidelines that we can copy from Hannah’s story:

a) *Determine that your request is in God’s will*

We can know God’s will if we have the mind of Christ [1 Cor. 2: 16], that is, that we no longer conform to this world and we have been transformed by the renewing of our minds, “that ye may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God” [Rom. 12: 2].

Therefore, our requests should be in line with the word of God in the scriptures or by prophecy. In the case of Hannah, her request was in line with God’s will because God promised the children of Israel, “Thou shalt be blessed above all people: *there shall not be male or female barren among you or among your cattle*” [Deut. 7: 14].

We must first learn to ask, for “ye receive not because ye ask not” [Jam. 4: 2]. Some people will say, “but the Bible also says that before I ask, God already knows. So, why do I still need to ask?” The answer is simple. First, what you are asking for is not yours; it belongs to God. Is

it not appropriate to ask the owner? Second, even for our own money in the bank, don't we ask before the bank gives it back to us? If your signature on your cheque is irregular or you put the wrong PIN number for ATM withdrawals, you will be denied access to your own funds! Therefore, we must first ascertain that our requests are clear and precise and in the will of God. If it is for our self-aggrandizement, we ask "amiss that ye may consume it upon your lusts" [**Jam. 4: 3**]. Hannah determined, even before her prayer was answered, that she would give her son back to God for His service. We must be satisfied that the blessings we are going to pray for will be used to glorify Him [**Deut. 8: 17-18**].

b) *The process: for how long should I pray?*

The difficult question that an average believer asks is "when should I stop praying?" My answer is also a question: *how badly do you want it?* Until Eli the priest assured Hannah that her prayer had been answered, she did not stop praying. Year after year, she kept up her prayers when she came to the church in Shiloh. Moses told the children of Israel, "And I fell down before the Lord, as at the first, forty days and forty nights. I did neither eat bread nor drink water, because of all your sins which ye sinned, in doing wickedly in the sight of the Lord, to provoke Him to anger.... *But the Lord hearkened unto me at that time also*" [**Deut. 9: 18-19**].

Let us examine this statement of Jesus from the Sermon on the Mount [**Matt. 7: 7-8**]:

Ask and it shall be given you; seek and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you; for every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened.

Ask-Seek-Knock draws a line of prayer intensity, from the routine to the desperate! If you can ask once and receive it, you don't need to seek. But when you seek and you cannot find, then you knock loudly on God's door! Therefore, if you want it badly, get ready to break down God's door for "from the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent take it by force" [**Matt. 11:12**]. We have seen how Hannah got her prayer answered. There are many other cases in the Bible. Here is a sample:

- 1) Elisha wanted a double portion of Elijah's power but this was not a prayer to be said on his knees. It would require physical energy to walk long distances with his master who was going to be taken up to heaven in a whirlwind that day [**2 Kgs 2: 1**]. From Gilgah,

they came to Bethel. There, Elijah asked his servant to “tarry here, I pray thee, for the Lord hath sent me to Bethel.” Elisha replied “As the Lord liveth, and as thy soul liveth, I will not leave thee” [v.2]. Even when the sons of the prophets ridiculed him, that he was pursuing the elusive, Elisha persisted. From Bethel, he followed Elijah to Jericho. Then, they crossed the Jordan River (which parted into two when Elijah smote the water with his mantle). Along the way, the jeers increased but Elisha was not deterred. Finally, after crossing the Jordan, Elijah asked him, “Ask what I shall do for thee before I be taken away from thee.” He replied, “I pray thee, let a double portion of thy spirit be upon me.” Elijah told him that his request was hard. However, if he saw him Elijah being taken away, then his prayer had been answered. In deed, when the chariots of God from heaven came and took away Elijah, Elisha saw everything and grabbed his master’s mantle [vv. 3-13]. His prayer was answered. With the exception of Jesus Christ, Elisha will arguably rank as the leading miracle worker recorded in the Bible. He wanted it badly. He worked for it and he got it.

- 2) The daughter of a Gentile woman from Canaan was badly troubled by a demon. Her mother came to Jesus “and cried unto Him, saying, have mercy on me, O Lord, Thou Son of David; my daughter is grievously vexed with a devil. *But He answered her not a word.*” The woman was not discouraged. She raised her voice and followed Jesus wherever He went! Disturbed by her conduct, His disciples asked Jesus, “Send her away; *for she crieth after us.*” Jesus answered the disciples, “I am not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel,” which of course excluded the Gentiles at the time. Was she discouraged? No way! She surged forward and fell at the feet of Jesus saying, “Lord, help me.” He answered her, “It is not meet to take the children’s bread and to cast it to dogs.” That woman could not be out done! She fired back, “Truth, Lord; yet the dogs eat of the crumbs which fall from their master’s table.” At that point, Jesus gave up! He said to the woman, “O woman, *great is thy faith: be it unto thee even as thou wilt.*” Her daughter was made well that very moment [Matt. 15: 21-28]. She wanted it badly and she did not stop until she had been answered.

3. Conclusion

In the Parable of the Unjust Judge [Lk 18: 1-8], Jesus tells the story of a judge who neither feared God nor respected people. A widow with a just case came to him to seek his help against her enemies, but he would not oblige. She kept troubling him. Finally, the judge said, “Though I fear not God, nor regard man,

yet because this widow troubleth me, I will avenge her lest by her continual coming she weary me” [vv. 4-5]. Jesus drew the following conclusion from that story: “Shall not God avenge His own elect, which cry day and night unto Him, though He bear long with them?” [v. 7].

That is the challenge for us all. Yes, you are now approaching the age of 40 and you have still not met the right person to be your spouse, in spite of frequent praying and fasting. Or, you have been married for ten years and you have not been blessed with a child in spite of consistent and persistent prayers. Or, you have been praying for your marriage to be restored after fifteen years of divorce and there is as yet no respite. Or, you have prayed for your ministry to finally take off and each time a breakthrough appears, it turns out to be a mirage. Or, your country’s economic problems appear getting worse in spite of persistent prayers by the Christian community for God to heal their land. The examples of prayer points are endless.

Are you asking amiss? Has your God become too deaf to hear? The answer to both questions is “No!” God does not owe you any explanation, just as clay cannot question the potter how it should be used [**Is. 45: 9; Jer. 18: 6**]. Even when you lose patience and give up, your problem may not give up but may instead gather speed. Be assured that God will certainly answer, “though He bear long.” So, like my family dog in those days, focus on what you want very badly from God. Don’t be distracted by delays or jeers from your detractors. In due season, at God’s best time, you will get it. Then, like Hannah, you will be able to say when it is all over, “My heart rejoiceth in the Lord, mine horn is exalted in the Lord; my mouth is enlarged over mine enemies; because I rejoice in Thy salvation” [**1 Sam. 2: 1**].

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