

# Thank God for the harvest

1 Samuel 1.4-20; 2.1-10

Rev Dr Jos M. Strengholt

It is wonderful to focus on the blessings that God bestows upon us. We thank God for the harvests, and for all good things he has given us to enjoy.

But when others are glad for the blessings of God, you may feel singled out and lonely.

Blessings? No-one knows about the struggles that you have; the problems you face. So when others are extra glad, you feel extra bad.

## 1. Annual Harvest Feast

In the book of Samuel, we have read how Elkanah, a good man, took his wives Hannah and Peninnah, to worship God in the 'city' of Shiloh.

If you want to see Shiloh today, you have to go 30 kilometers north of Jerusalem. You will find a heap of ruins only. But in the days before Israel had a king, it was an important place.

At the time of our story, around 1025 BC, the Ark of the Covenant - the place where God was intensely present, was in Shiloh. So there Elkanah went, to meet with God and to celebrate.

They celebrated, most probably, according to biblical scholars, their own annual harvest feast. They were joyous, they were eating; they were drinking.

Drinking too... That is probably why the priest Eli thought, when he saw Hannah mumble in the temple, that she was drunk. Because at the feast, that was sort of expected. The harvest feast was the feast of abundance. Had God not blessed the land, again?

For most of us, the concept of harvest is purely theoretical. We hardly notice what goes on in the world of agriculture, except when the climate is dry for a long time. This summer as churches in Western Europe we prayed for rain, because the land was so dry.

But our food does not come from the land, but from the supermarket, does it not? We do not wait for the harvest to come in - the shops make sure that throughout the year we have enough.

Today we thank God for the harvest, and for the shops, and for the distribution systems. We are amazingly blessed.



My mother would tell me how during World War II she would go hungry in our Hunger Winter of 1944-1945, and that she would eat the tulip bulbs from the garden.

But for the past 73 years, we have lived in peace and in ever increasing abundance. And also, we grow older than people did in the past. And we grow older, in general, in better health as well. Thank God.

But not all is well. This Monday, the Central Bureau for Statistics (CBS) here in The Netherlands published a report that the percentage of households with a low income increased a bit, to 8.2% of all households. That means, almost 600.000 households in our small country.



If you live alone with an income of 1.040 euro per month, or if you are a family with two kids and your total income is below 1.960 euro per month, you are in the danger zone - the group that might actually become truly impoverished. Especially people between 50 and 65 are in this category.

For most people things go well, so we praise God for his blessings. But what about those people who do not have enough. It is tough for them.

Elkanah took his wives to Shiloh to celebrate. But Hannah was not celebrating.

‘But sweetheart’ Elkanah told her, ‘do you not realise that I love you? You have me! Is that not enough for you? Why are you so upset because you have no children...’

I think Elkanah really loved his wife. And I think Hannah thanked God for that. But still, there was the sadness; her heart was torn apart. All people were okay, all people celebrated. But she could not enjoy. Because she had no joy.

I imagine there was also an aspect of jealousy at play. ‘God, I have no kids. But why did you give children to Peninnah...’.

This sort of jealousy can burn, it can eat you up inside.

‘Lord, all people are so happy. All people do well. Why not me.’

Wait a moment, Hannah. Do not be too jealous of Peninnah. It seems that she has it all, she is blessed with children. But Peninnah knows that Elkana only married her for the sake of having children. Not because he loved her.

Hannah was jealous of Peninnah and she was sad - she had no children.

Peninnah was jealous and so she humiliated Hannah... - because she felt pushed down by Elkanah’s love for Hannah.

Everyone was celebrating, but these two women again realised their own need, and that made the celebrations painful for both of them.

The story makes clear - the blessing of God for someone else, can increase my own pain. But that's not good. We should not allow this to happen, because it hurts us inside.

## 2. Prayer

Hannah chose the only response she could think of. She bared her heart to God.



Let us not read this story as a simple promise of God that when you have a problem, you pray to him and he will give you what you need. That is much too simplistic.

First, notice that Elkanah and his wives went to Shiloh year by year. And each time Elkanah showed his abundant love for Hannah; each year she felt the pain of being childless; each year Peninnah would tease her; each year Hannah prayed to God in Shiloh. And throughout the year as well, I reckon.

So God did, for many years, not answer her prayers. It is possible to suffer for many years, even if you are a good person. A God-fearing person. A prayerful Christian. And often we just pray on and on and nothing changes.

Not all prayer leads to the impact we desire. But to bare your heart before God; to discuss your needs with God; to allow him into your pain and problems, that in itself has great value and meaning.

Because when we pray, we invite God to act and to speak to us. And often we have to accept that he says what Elkanah told Hannah: 'Am I now more to you than 10 sons? Is being with me, with God, not greater than any imaginable blessing?'

"For a day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere", we read in the Psalms. (Psalm 84.10)

But Hannah prayed on and on. She wanted her problem solved. Nowadays she would go from doctor to doctor, and use, I do not know what sort of IVF treatments. In those days, the only solution was God.

Do not think that in those days, people were simple and we are more developed in their religious views. If today IVF treatment works, it is still God who creates the new life. If you get your bread from the supermarket, it is still God who made the wheat grow.

And in those days, people were also quite aware that if God wanted to give you a baby, you had to also do your own job. After Eli promised a child to Hannah, we read that Elkanah and Hannah "knew each other" and the Lord remembered her, and she became pregnant.

When we pray, we want God to act but that does not mean we must not be active.

When my grandparents prayed to God for food in the Hunger Winter, so that my mother and her brothers and sisters did not have to eat tulip bulbs only, they sent my mother and her two sisters on a 150 kilometer walk from Beverwijk to Groningen, to stay there in a farm where there was food.

So the faith that it is God who creates pregnancy; that God creates food; that God gives us health, is not a pre-modern belief. It is our belief today. We depend on him. We thank him for all we have. And we pray for what we need.

But you wonder, why does He not make things easier for us. Why do we all have these areas in our life - areas of stress and tension. And it seems not to go away. It takes so long.

In the case of Hannah, if she had been pregnant according to her own plans, she would have had a baby 9 months after her marriage with Elkanah. Then Samuel had been very welcome, I am sure, but he would have become a well-to-do farmer in the hills of Ephraim, but he would not have become the amazing leader that Israel needed.

Because then Hannah would not have given the boy to work in the service of the tabernacle.

And if Hannah, instead of praying to God year upon year upon year, had tried a few other gods in Kanaan, or some magic, she would not have conceived of this leader of Israel.

And if Hannah had stopped praying; if she had not insisted, all the time, then God's plans with Israel would have had to be fulfilled without his servant Samuel.

With her problem, Hannah had to keep knocking on heaven's doors, for many years, and she had to trust in God alone.

### 3. God is God

And then, when Hannah was able to give her son Samuel to the service of God, she prayed a prayer that shows that she had learned some important lessons from her ordeal.

By the way, I assume you noticed the similarity between this Song of Hannah, a woman who conceived in a miraculous way, and the Song of Mary, that other miraculous mother.

Both women stressed the same joyful realities about who God is.

Hannah is praising God and by doing this, she teaches us some theology. Not the theology of books; it is the theology of experience.

God created our world in the beginning, and he will judge the world in the end. He is the one who knows all things and life and death are in his hands, and he is holy.



That is what Hannah prays.

And because God is like that, we can rest securely in how he rules the world. And what he allows to happen in our lives.

Sometimes we are really down, but we know that God breaks the bow of the mighty, but he gives strength to the feeble.

He gives food to the hungry.

He gives children to the woman who could not bear a child.

He raises the poor from the dust.

He will guard the feet of those who trust in him.

We praise God for all his blessings.

But what about the people in Yemen who now suffer a dreadful famine? What about those women whose prayer for a child is never answered? What about the poor families here in The Netherlands who cannot make ends meet?

God does not need to be justified by me in a short sermon. He is God; He is holy. We cannot easily trace his works in this world.

What we do know, and what we have seen in Jesus Christ, is that God cares so much for his world, that he suffers with those who suffer. God is hurting when you feel pain.

## **Conclusion**

And we saw in the story of Hannah, she had also her own responsibility to receive the blessings that God had promised.

We, as the people of God, have our own responsibility; we are the body of Christ - the mouth of Christ, the hands of Christ.

We are so blessed, and other people go hungry. Guess what. Do not blame God for the fact that we keep our hands closed and that others go hungry.

God has given us a great harvest. We are lucky, blessed people. And that is why we give from our abundance.

By doing that, more people can praise God.

So we have a great responsibility. You are the shoulder of God; the hands of God; the mouth of God. As an expression of your abundance, use your words, your hands, your shoulder, to help people in their need.

So that with Hannah, more people can praise our Lord, because he lifts up the needy from the ash heap.

**+ Amen**