

Living With Courage and Resilience
Part 2: Hannah (Gratitude)

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Scripture: 1 Samuel 1:1-2:11

In 1969, a Montana State University professor named Jess Lair published a book called, *I Ain't Much Baby—But I'm All I've Got*. In it, Lair recounts how he made a practice of asking his students to write "some comment, question or feeling" on a three-by-five inch notecard and place it on a table in the front of the classroom. Lair read the short texts and made comments at the beginning of the class. One day, a student offered a piece of advice that struck Lair as being as wise as it was counter-intuitive:

If you want something very, very badly, let it go free. If it comes back to you, it's yours forever. If it doesn't, it was never yours to begin with.

This sage piece of advice was later turned into a hit single by Gordon Matthew Thomas Sumner, otherwise known as Sting. Likely you've heard it before: "If You Love Somebody Set Them Free."

Sting may have found inspiration from Lair's book, but the same wisdom can be traced back at least 3,000 years to a story about a woman named Hannah in the Hebrew Scriptures. (1 Samuel 1-2) Hannah serves as our model this morning for living with courage and resilience in troubled times.

According to the story, Hannah was the wife of a man from the Israelite tribe of Ephraim named Elkanah. Hannah was barren. Apparently it was because of Hannah's barrenness that Elkanah decided to marry an additional wife named Peninnah. Peninnah added two things to Elkanah's household: a bunch of children and a bunch of heartache and misery for Hannah. (I always wonder why people turn to the Bible as the source of "family values" when men could freely add additional women to their marriage!)

So, for instance, each year the whole family would travel to the village of Shiloh to make sacrifices to Yahweh in its renowned sanctuary. From the meat left over from the sacrifice, Elkanah would cut pieces for Peninnah and all her sons and daughters, but would reserve a double-portion for Hannah because he loved her best, according to the Bible. Elkanah's favoritism provoked Peninnah severely, especially since in her view Hannah was a freeloader for not producing children. So Peninnah took it upon herself to deride Hannah and make her life as miserable as possible.

Before moving further into our story, I want to tarry for a moment on the sacrifice to Yahweh that Elkanah made. You may be wondering how Elkanah was able to distribute portions of meat to his wives and children from an animal burnt as a sacrifice to Yahweh. Didn't it all go up in smoke?

In the modern world, we tend to know little about how sacrifices were made in ancient times even as we retain the use of the word "sacrifice" in our language. When we speak of sacrifice, we think of giving up something we value. We make a "sacrifice" of time when we spend an inordinate amount of it to help a person or volunteer for an organization. We make a financial "sacrifice" when we dig deep into our pockets to send a child to college or help a struggling friend or relative. A sacrifice is something lost to us that we cannot regain.

This idea of sacrifice shares little to nothing with the ancient concept. When you sacrificed an animal, you did not burn it whole. You offered it to God on the fire, usually as an act of thanksgiving, and kept it on the fire just long enough for the outer portion of the animal to be burned off – the skin, hair, and the outer layer of fat. When the animal stopped releasing billows of smoke (because the outer fat had been burnt away), it was a sign that God was giving the rest of the animal back to you.

By the time you carved out the burnt portion and shared some of the remaining meat with the priests, you had "lost" only about 10 percent of the animal. The remaining 90 percent was considered God's gift back to you. Only the meat God gave back wasn't the same meat. Yes, it was from the same animal, but now the meat had been made holy through being given over to God and returned. By consuming this sacrificial meat, you took God's holiness into yourself, making yourself holy in the process.

So ancient sacrifice wasn't actually a sacrifice as we understand it. Sacrifice wasn't primarily about losing something, but gaining something through an act of costly gratitude.

Tithing is based on the same principle, by the way. Most people think that tithing means "sacrificing" (or "losing" by modern definition) 10 percent of your income to God. But tithing is actually based on the principle of offering 100% of your income to God, expecting that God will give 90% of it back to you unless told otherwise. That 90%, however, is no longer the same money. It is now consecrated money because it has been devoted to God. It is holy money, meant to bless you.

Some people believe that tithing is just a relic of ancient superstition used in modern times to increase the wealth of the faith community. This belief is the surest sign that they've never actually tried doing it for themselves. Why is it that nearly everyone who begins to tithe never goes back, *even when no one is asking or expecting them to tithe?* Ponder that one! Like the line in Jess Laird's book, *"If you want something very, very badly [including money], let it go free."* If it comes back to you – and 90% of it usually does when given to God – it's not only yours forever, but yours with blessing and bonus, whether that bonus is financial or otherwise.

All this talk of sacrifice may seem like a major detour in our story, but it is essential if we are to understand precisely how Hannah acts with courage and resilience in response to Peninnah's constant badgering at the sacrificial meal.

Hannah heads straight for the sanctuary and, weeping bitterly over having been made to feel ashamed once again for her barrenness, she prays, "O Lord of hosts, if only you will look on the misery of your servant, and remember me, and not forget your servant, but will give to your servant a male child, then I will set him before you as a nazirite until the day of his death."

A nazirite is a person who is specially dedicated to the service of God, thereby becoming a "holy person."

In other words, Hannah is promising that, in gratitude for fulfilling her prayer (in advance of it actually being fulfilled), she will offer her son to God's service at the Shiloh sanctuary as a living sacrifice, as opposed to a dead sacrifice the family had just offered.

Hannah's offer may seem a bit too over-the-top as a simple act of gratitude. Couldn't she just have promised God could have her son on weekends once-a-month, or that she'd put him through Confirmation or bring him to youth lock-ins in Shiloh? And is it fair of Hannah to make such a momentous decision on behalf of a child who had no say in the matter?

Actually, what Hannah did wasn't even legal. According to Israelite law, only a father could dedicate a child as a nazirite, not a mother. Apparently, Hannah either didn't care, or didn't get the memo and therefore didn't know how it worked. What she did know – and we forget – is how sacrifice worked. It worked like the line in Jess Lair's book: *"If you want something very, very badly, let it go free. If it comes back to you, it's yours forever. If it doesn't, it was never yours to begin with."*

Even though it was possible for a parent to offer their child to God as a nazirite, it was also entirely possible for God to give that child back to his family through releasing the child from the vow. If God didn't do it, the child could when he came of age. So the decision was ultimately in the child's hands, not that of the parent.

What this means is that Hannah knew that she might receive her child back, if not right away, then eventually. If she did receive him back, he would not be the same child, but a consecrated child. A holy child. A holy child whose presence would bless the whole family. So Hannah wasn't being as "selfless" as you may think. She knew that gratitude confers blessing upon both the receiver and the giver.

Yes, but what if her son didn't come back, you ask? What if she offered him to God for his entire life and that's exactly how long God took him for? Good question! For, in fact, Hannah's son never did come back – at least not as one who had been released of his nazirite vows. She did visit her son regularly, however. Oh, and according to the story, God gave her five additional children as an extra blessing for her sacrifice.

And what of this son she had "lost" to God? Her son – whose name was Samuel – became one of the greatest, most important prophets of all time. He is one of the very first major prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures. Samuel is the one whom God appointed to choose and anoint Israel's very first king. And it was therefore Samuel who became, *de facto*, the closest advisor and mentor to Israel's first king. And by helping Israel move from a fragile, loosely-organized, tribal society to one organized around a king and a government and a military that could defend Israel from the nations who were circling like wolves, Samuel became instrumental in the rise of his entire people to become a great and mighty nation through whom God promised to bless the world.

Eventually, Hannah herself would be revered through her act of gratitude by another courageous and resilient woman who is quite close to our hearts: Mary, the mother of Jesus. Mary's famous *Magnificat*, which she prays in advance of her own son's birth, is lifted directly from Hannah's prayer in 1 Samuel 2 after her son is born, much like Sting lifted his line about loving somebody and setting them free from Jess Lair's book.

So after all this talk of Hannah, we might ask what her story has to do with ours, and how she models how to live with courage and resilience in our day.

First, when Hannah's life gets too miserable to bear, she deals with her situation not by reading a dozen self-help books, or spending a little "me time" in the Hamptons, or engaging in a little "retail therapy." She heads to God's house, bearing her soul to her Creator, expecting a response.

Second, when Hannah makes her request to God in Shiloh, she does not simply consider what she wants, but what God wants. In other words, she does not act like a modern Christian – even a so-called “progressive” one. Christians today tend to think God’s sole purpose is to give us gifts without asking anything of us in return. We make our lists of requests and demands expecting God to act like some sort of cosmic Santa Claus, whose sole purpose is to bring us what we’ve asked for. Hannah does not just ask what she wants of God, but what God wants from her. In so doing, she links her story to God’s story, which brought blessing not only to her and her household, but to her whole people and, in fact, the world.

Third, Hannah knew the true meaning of gratitude. True gratitude is never cheap, though we continually try to make it so. True gratitude is sacrificial – in the ancient sense, not the modern one. We express our gratitude to God by offering God something we value – our time, our talent, our treasure, our hopes, our dreams, our vocations – with the expectation that it will be given back to us by a God who is even more generous than we are, or it will be transformed in a way that allows God to bless others.

Finally, living in troubled times as we do, in which many of our aspirations for ourselves, our children, and our society seem to be in greater jeopardy every day, Hannah reminds us that if we want something very, very badly, our best option is not to clutch to it for dear life, but to offer it into God’s hands. We say “Thy will be done, not mine.” When we do this, we discover something counterintuitive. We find that our fear of the worst-case-scenario happening is dissolved, allowing God to help us find a creative way forward. Rarely, of course, does the worst-case-scenario come to pass. But even during those rare times when it does, by surrendering our hopes, dreams, and desires to God we discover that God is even able transform greatest losses into something to be gained. For now we are connected to God’s story, not merely our own. And history shows that if you want to be truly resilient, you want to be connected to the right story.