

“For Poorer”: Hannah and Elkanah Living Beyond Their Resources

I SAMUEL 1:1-2:11

In the Western world, poverty means substandard housing, poor clothing, and life without some of the gadgets pressed upon us by the advertising industry. But until recently, and even today in the developing world, the ultimate poverty is to be childless. We face this issue each year when we visit rural Kenya. In a late-night discussion with our theological students, we swallowed hard before answering some tough questions: “Mwalimu (this means ‘teacher’), how can you know whether your wife can have children unless you have a child by her before marriage? If you find you have only girls, is it really wrong to take a second wife in order to have a son?” But while we examined this fertility-oriented culture in the light of Scripture, our thoughts went from the “survival culture” of tribal Kenya, where marriage is for security and combined resources, to the “identity culture” of North America, where marriage is for happiness and personal fulfillment. In our country, marriage has become so idolatrous that we have as few children as

possible and destroy the ones we do not want. The story of Hannah and Elkanah's response to their poverty will help us cope with ours.

This marriage story is set at a hinge-point in biblical history (see "Bird's Eye View" at the beginning of this studyguide), just at the end of the period of the judges and at the beginning of the monarchy. Samuel, who was to be born to Hannah, would become the last judge and would appoint the first king. So it is almost impossible to overestimate the significance of what was happening in this marriage, though this was unknown to the husband and wife.

- ♣ 1. Recall a time as a couple when you had to do without, or you found yourselves unable to pay all your bills. What good thing, if any, came from that experience?

READ I SAMUEL 1:1-8.

2. Why was the annual feast of tithes particularly painful to Hannah?

3. In what ways did Elkanah attempt to minister to his wife in her pain?

- ♣ 4. How do you respond both positively and negatively to Elkanah's question: "Don't I mean more to you than ten sons?" (verse 8)?

READ I SAMUEL 1:9-20.

5. How did the priest Eli's reaction deepen Hannah's experience of personal poverty?

- ♣ 6. What is commendable about Hannah's approach to her problem (verse 11)? What are the dangers of making such vows? Is this standard procedure when we make a request of God?

7. What do we learn about God from his response to Hannah's initiatives?

8. Trace the stages of the Lord's answer to Hannah's prayer (verses 17-20). In what way did Hannah need faith at each stage?

READ I SAMUEL 1:21-28.

9. The *King James Version* translates the name *Samuel* as "lent to the Lord," though the name sounds like the Hebrew for "heard of God." What are the indications that Hannah did not merely "lend" her child to the Lord (while retaining ownership and control), but *gave* him?

I SAMUEL 2:1-11.

10. What difference could it now make to your marriage to say with Hannah, "The LORD sends poverty and wealth; he humbles and he exalts" (verse 7)?

FOR REFLECTION

"God whispers to us in our pleasures but shouts to us in our pain." —C. S. Lewis