



One of the toughest things in life is living with unfulfilled desire. To experience desire is a normal part of life. It's as natural as an infant crying for milk. All of us are born with desires. Some desires are good, like the desire to help someone in need. Some desires are bad, like the desire to possess something that doesn't belong to us. Some desires are just a result of being human, like the desire for food and friendship. But even these normal desires can become twisted when they're not surrendered to God. If you're a single person in your 20's and you have a deep desire to be married, that's not a bad thing; that's a human thing. That's a desire God hard-wired into your humanity. But that desire can take over your life; it can cast a shadow over everything you do; it can become an obsession, and that obsession can lead you into all kinds of evil.

The Bible says, *"Hope deferred makes the heart sick"* (Prov. 13:12). Unfulfilled desire can be painful to live with. Some people deal with this by trying to eliminate desire altogether from their life. We pretend it's not there or we manage to push it aside. We bury it beneath our busyness or our cynicism or our sense of humor. But when we do that we lose something. To desire at all is to open our hearts to the possibility of pain, but to shut down our desires is to die altogether.

But this also opens up a baffling question. Why would God give us desires and then leave us to live with these desires unfulfilled? Why would God make us live so often with hope deferred? It doesn't really seem to make sense.

Hannah's story is an example of living with unfulfilled desire

The story of Hannah found in 1 Samuel 1 is a story of a woman living with unfulfilled desire. Her story can help us understand and overcome this problem.

Hannah is introduced to us as one who had every reason to be unhappy. In v.1 we're told about *"a certain man...from the hill country of Ephraim, and his name was Elkanah."*

He had two wives: the name of one was Hannah and the name of the other Peninnah; and Peninnah had children, but Hannah had no children (v.2).

You don't have to be a marriage family therapist to see this wasn't an ideal situation. Polygamy was never God's ideal, but it was a fact of life in ancient Israel. Wives were at least in part a means of securing children. Children were essential to ensure the family

name would carry on. A woman unable to have children would feel worthless. In Hannah's case, it's likely she was Elkanah's first wife. But because she was infertile, he took a second wife to ensure his name wouldn't be snuffed out. To make matters worse, Peninnah was a baby factory! It was bad enough to have to share her husband with another woman, but to have to stand by and watch that woman pop out babies year after year had to be unbearable. I can just see Peninnah doting on her children with a smirking grin and saying to Hannah, "Oh Hannah, I know how hard it is that you haven't been able to have children. But really dear, it's a blessing in disguise. I mean, after all, I have so many. I just don't know how we'll feed them!"

The worst time of the year was supposed to be the happiest—holidays and vacations. In Hannah's case, it was the annual pilgrimage they all made to Shiloh.

Now this man would go up from his city yearly to worship and to sacrifice to the LORD of hosts in Shiloh. (v.3a).

This was supposed to be a celebration, but it had to be torture for Hannah. Imagine having to walk ten miles with someone who never stops with her subtle jabs. Meanwhile, her children bump into you, wipe their noses on your skirt and whine until you carry them. No wonder Hannah arrived in Shiloh depressed.

Then when they got there Hannah had to sit and watch as her husband served Peninnah and her children first. The custom of the Jews was that part of the sacrifice would go to the priest and part would be eaten in the presence of God with much rejoicing by the family who gave the sacrifice. But when you're living with unfulfilled desire, what are supposed to be the best times can be the most painful times.

When the day came that Elkanah sacrificed, he would give portions to Peninnah his wife and to all her sons and her daughters; but to Hannah he would give a double portion, for he loved Hannah, but the LORD had closed her womb (verses 4–5).

Maybe it was because he felt guilty. Or maybe he felt sorry for Hannah, sitting there all alone so depressed. Maybe it was because he wanted to show Hannah that she was his favorite. Whatever the reason, it didn't make her feel any better. As a matter of fact, it seemed to backfire.

Her rival, however, would provoke her bitterly to irritate her, because the LORD had closed her womb. It happened year after year, as often as she

went up to the house of the LORD, she would provoke her; so she wept and would not eat (verses 6–7).

The final wrench of agony was that Peninnah wouldn't keep quiet about her fertility. She found a thousand ways to remind Hannah of her barrenness. She taunted her and mocked her. Every word must have been like an arrow in Hannah's heart.

Perhaps the most difficult thing that Hannah faced was to come to grips with what it says twice: **"the Lord had closed her womb."** Twice we're told her problem came from the Lord. This is one of the hardest things to accept; our limitations, our unfulfilled desires, difficult as they may be and no matter how much we struggle with them, are ordained by the Lord himself. We don't like to believe that. We'd rather believe this is all coming from the devil or even just by chance. But God is in charge of the circumstances of our lives. It was God who made Hannah a woman in the first place. He gave her the capacity for motherhood. He put within her the hunger for a baby, the yearning to be a mother. But as this tells us so plainly, God was also involved in her infertility.

That must have made her feel worse. It says **"she wept and would not eat."** Then when things got real bad Elkanah would step in in his typical male way and try to fix things.

Then Elkanah her husband said to her, "Hannah, why do you weep and why do you not eat and why is your heart sad? Am I not better to you than ten sons?" (v.8).

Talk about making things worse! She didn't say it but in her heart she's thinking, "No, you're not better to me than ten sons. I'd love to have just one son." But it's a reminder that there's a place in our hearts that no one, not even a well-meaning husband or wife, can touch.

What would you say to Hannah at this point. "Look on the bright side, Hannah. Kids can be a real pain. You have a lot more freedom." Or, "Maybe you have some kind of unconfessed sin in your life, Hannah. Maybe you need to get right with the Lord." A better friend might tell her not to lose hope; keep trying. Or maybe you'd buy her a book on infertility. Sometimes the best thing is to just say nothing at all. To just be there and listen.

You might also want to ask yourself what you would do if you were Hannah. How do you handle unfulfilled desires? Do you complain about it? Do you lash out at your husband or wife? Do you retreat behind a wall of silence? Do you become more religious, trying to somehow appease this God who keeps your desire from being fulfilled? Look what she did.

Then Hannah rose after eating and drinking in Shiloh. Now Eli the priest was sitting on the seat by the doorpost of the temple of the LORD. She, greatly distressed, prayed to the LORD and wept bitterly. She made a vow and said, "O LORD of

hosts, if You will indeed look on the affliction of Your maidservant and remember me, and not forget Your maidservant, but will give Your maidservant a son, then I will give him to the LORD all the days of his life, and a razor shall never come on his head" (verses 9–11).

Hannah was greatly distressed. She was beside herself. She wept bitterly. But that didn't keep her from God; rather it drove her to God in prayer. She barks her requests: "Look at my affliction! Remember me! Do not forget me! Give me a son!" But she does this with humility. She recognized God's greatness, calling him **"the Lord of Hosts."** Twice she refers to herself as **"your maidservant."**

At the heart of this prayer is a vow. Jews believed anything that hadn't been cut belonged to the Lord. Nazarites didn't cut their hair to show they were set apart to the Lord. Hannah vowed to set apart her son to the Lord all the days of his life. It sounds a bit like she's bargaining with God. "If you do this, I'll do that." Have you ever bargained with God? "God, if you do this for me I'll give away half my salary." The misconception behind that is to think we really have something to bargain with; something God wants but can't have. That's foolishness. Hannah was simply acknowledging that if God gave her a son that son would belong to him. Perhaps she was even coming to the realization that having children wasn't for her but for Him. Her offering him was a recognition of that.

But her prayer didn't stop there. This was not a fast "drive-through" prayer. Look what happens next.

Now it came about, as she continued praying before the LORD, that Eli was watching her mouth. As for Hannah, she was speaking in her heart, only her lips were moving, but her voice was not heard. So Eli thought she was drunk (verses 12–13).

How is that for pastoral compassion! Poor Hannah! First, she has to deal with Peninnah's jibes. Then with her husband's bumbling effort to comfort her. Now she has to deal with a spiritual leader who misjudges her broken heart and says, "Go home and sober up!" Do you ever feel like no one gets it?

I wouldn't blame her for curling up like a ball and checking out. But she defends herself, not in an angry or proud way, but in a very respectful and humble way.

But Hannah replied, "No, my lord, I am a woman oppressed in spirit; I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink, but I have poured out my soul before the LORD. Do not consider your maidservant as a worthless woman, for I have spoken until now out of my great concern and provocation" (verses 15–16).

Look how she describes herself and her actions: She's oppressed in spirit. She's been pouring out her soul (not wine!) before the Lord. She's spoken out of her great concern and provocation.

And she does all of this without saying a word. There are times when our desperate longing is so great we can't even get the words out. The New Testament says there are times we pray *"with groanings too deep for words"* (Rom 8:26).

Then Eli answered and said, "Go in peace; and may the God of Israel grant your petition that you have asked of Him." She said, "Let your maidservant find favor in your sight." So the woman went her way and ate, and her face was no longer sad (verses 17–18).

Then finally Hannah heard the first encouraging word in a long, long time. Eli adds his own prayer to hers. He didn't even know what she had asked the Lord for, but he asks that the Lord would grant her petition. And it seems that's all Hannah needed to hear. She went home, got pregnant and had a son named Samuel, who would become the next great leader of Israel.

God uses unfulfilled desire in our lives

God uses unfulfilled desire to drive us to pray

So what does Hannah's story teach us about living with unfulfilled desire? The most obvious thing is God uses our unfulfilled desire to drive us to pray. And God answers prayer. Verse 19 says, *"the Lord remembered her."* Verse 20 says the very name "Samuel" would remind her that she asked the Lord for him. It would be wrong to miss that simple lesson. Hannah learned that no one or nothing could fulfill her desire but God and so she brought it to him. Maybe that's part of why God gives us unfulfilled desires in the first place—so we'll pray. Otherwise we might not.

Sometimes we hesitate to bring before the Lord things we would classify as personal needs. It would have been far more "spiritual" for Hannah to pray something like this: "Dear Lord, I know that you know what is best for me. I would love to have a son but most of all I want to glorify you so whatever you think is best I'll accept." That sounds so good, but that's not how she prays. She doesn't think through the proper thing to pray; this isn't a prepared speech. This is a desperate cry. Hannah's story gives us permission to bring our personal desires to the Lord. We can be very direct and very specific with him.

This is where we need to be more childlike. Have you ever noticed that children ask? They ask for stuff, all day long. They don't filter out their requests. A four-year-old doesn't think to himself, "I have this need but I really shouldn't ask because daddy and mommy have bigger things on their mind and they don't have time for this." They don't rank their desires in terms of legitimacy. They just ask and so should we.

Two verses in the New Testament come to mind. 1 Peter 5:7, *"Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you."* You don't have to be selective. Whatever your heart aches for bring it to him because you matter to him. And you know Phil. 4:6, *"Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with*

thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God." Bring everything to him; all your desires and all your requests. Our God is the One who clothes the lillies and feeds the sparrows. How much more will he take care of you? There is nothing too small for him. Although he won't always give us exactly what we ask for, he does care about what's on our heart and he does answer. God uses unfulfilled desire to drive us to pray.

God uses unfulfilled desire to deepen our walk of faith

But I doubt that's anything new to you. "Okay, I'm supposed to pray. I really didn't need a sermon to know that." But Hannah's story isn't quite so simple. God also used Hannah's unfulfilled desire to deepen her walk of faith. There's something that's easy to miss in this story. The answer to Hannah's prayer (the birth of her son Samuel) was **not** what brought her out of depression. Did you notice that? It's not like she was desperate and depressed, and then she prayed, and then God answered her prayer and she became happy. Look again at v.18. After Eli prayed for God to grant her petition the narrator says, *"And she went her way and ate, and her face was no longer sad."* Before she wouldn't eat, but now she eats; she joins the celebration. Before she wept bitterly and her heart was sad, but not any more. It's like the whole matter was settled for her, inwardly. And all of this happened **before** her prayer was answered. Why?

In some ways it's unexplainable. It's a "God-thing." This is what the Paul was talking about in the verse I mentioned earlier: *"Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God."* But that's not all. He goes on, *"And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, shall guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."* That's what Hannah experienced and that's what we can experience. Notice this peace is *"beyond comprehension."* It's not humanly explainable. It comes from God. My own experience is this doesn't happen by waving some kind of magic wand. This is not a formula. It's not like we put a prayer nickel in and out comes peace. It comes out of a process of working things through in the presence of God and coming to a place where we know he gets it and we can just leave it with him and he'll take care of it.

One of the things that happens in this process is we deepen in our understanding of who God is. Our focus switches from us to Him. Robert Browning penned a phrase in one of his poems, "tis looking downward that makes one dizzy." It's when we look up at God that things can change. Later on in chapter 2 when Hannah sang a song of praise she looked up and said, *"There is no one holy like the Lord...nor is there any rock like our God...for the Lord is a God of knowledge"* (2:2, 3). I believe she came to that realization before her prayer was answered. She looked up and saw this was a God she could trust. And he hasn't changed.

There is still is no one holy like the Lord, nor is there any rock like our God.

She also learned something about the way God works. In that same song she says *“The bows of the mighty are shattered, but the feeble gird on strength”* (2:4). She learned the life-changing secret that God’s power is demonstrated in our weakness. Human strength is shattered. In v.5 she adds, *“Even the barren gives birth to seven, but she who has many children languishes.”* You see, she learned God had a purpose for her unfulfilled desire: to bring her to a place of utter helplessness. That’s a hard place to be, but it’s only when we come to that place we can begin to rely on and experience the strength of God. What brings you to that place? God says to us as he said to Paul, *“My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness”* (2 Cor. 12:9).

This can be our experience as well. Our unfulfilled desires can deepen our own walk of faith. We look up and see God and how he works in a new way, and that brings peace even before our desire is fulfilled.

God uses unfulfilled desire to accomplish purposes beyond our wildest dreams

But there’s one more thing I want you to see here about Hannah’s unfulfilled desire. God used Hannah’s unfulfilled desire to accomplish purposes beyond her wildest dreams. Hannah’s vow represents a turning point in Israel’s history. The birth of her son was a crucial hinge on which Israel’s future swung. In his lifetime, her son Samuel would cleanse Israel of idolatry and establish David as king. But for that to happen Samuel would need to grow up in the unique environment of the house of God at Shiloh, mentored by Eli the priest. Here’s the deal: if Hannah hadn’t been brought to that place of desperation through her unfulfilled desire, she never would have made the vow to give her son to the Lord. You see, in the midst of unfulfilled desire, we don’t always see the bigger picture of what God is doing. But make no mistake, God is always doing something. God is fulfilling his purposes and his purposes are good.

This was the realization that Paul came to in Romans 11:33. Paul himself was struggling to understand God’s ways, and finally he cries out, *“Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways!”* We can’t always see what God is doing but we can be sure that in the plan of God our pain will not be wasted. As Hannah watched her son become the great leader Israel needed, she must have realized that. And just as he did with Hannah, he’ll use our pain as part of his grand purpose.

Conclusion

Let me ask you, what is that one thing in your life that year after year remains an unfulfilled desire? That one place where your soul could easily become bitter? I don’t think there is anything more dear in all the Bible than to know our unfulfilled desires are given to us of the Lord; our circumstances come from his hand. He gives them to us, not for us to be angry, resentful, bitter and despairing, but that we might bring them to him as Hannah did, put them in his hands and let him lead us through to the greater solution that he’s had in mind all along, so that we too will have a song of praise on our lips. Will you do that? Will you bring that to him?

Sometimes I hear worship leaders start the service by telling us to leave our troubles outside. I disagree—bring them in with you. Bring them with you and bring them right to God. Pour out your heart to him. Come to him in bitterness of soul. You won’t shock him. Plead with him to intervene for you. And while you’re at it, ask for his grace as you wait for the answer. Ask for grace to deal with the Peninnahs who provoke you, and the Elkanahs who can’t understand you, and the Elis who accuse you. Because sometimes the wait can be long.

Some of us are wrestling with great unfulfilled desires today. I know that I am. This story of Hannah has been a great blessing to my own heart. I hope it is to yours too, as we learn from her to bring our unfulfilled desires to the Lord in prayer and allow a fresh vision of him and his purposes bring us peace.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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