

ANSWERED!

1 Samuel 1:10-18, 26-28

Several election cycles ago, a question was asked regarding what was the most important issue in the election and the answer was “It’s the economy, stupid.” It was almost as if the answer implied that everyone ought to know that the economy is the major consideration that goes into most decision making for a majority of the world. If we concede that the economy is very important, then we need to ask “What are some major factors that influence how well our economy is doing?”

It is well known that one of the major influences that economists consider is consumer spending. So we might ask, what drives consumer spending? Three significant items that impact consumer spending are related to what it takes to survive. That could include housing, clothing, and food. Even these things are highly variable when we get beyond the minimal basics. The things that influence this variability are cultural and societal norms, pride that may include reputation, and available resources. Cultural and societal norms are sometime driven by advertisements and other media influences or just traditional expectations.

What happens if we are not where we think we should be with regard to housing, clothing, food, and we could toss in transportation, the kind of job we have, and a host of other things? The disparity of “where we are” and “where we think we should be” can create motivation to change things to eliminate the disparity. Assuming that resources are not limiting, then we will make such changes in spite of what it costs. In some cases this motivation can become obsessive and will influence our whole outlook on life. We may not say it or even consciously spend a lot of time thinking about it; however, we may have a subtle understanding that our houses, our clothes, or our cars either are or are not complementary to who we are and our socioeconomic status. When we delve into the question, then we may find that the most significant influences in our lives are not economic but are related to what others might think about us.

Do we need further proof that it is really NOT the economy? Just think of the number of people who go into substantial debt to have the right kind clothes, the right kind of house, or the right kind of car. Very few of us are exempt from such influences. Even more subtle and perhaps even stronger influences have to do with what WE think about ourselves.

Now the question that begs to be answered is what can we do when we don’t have the resources or the capability to accomplish or acquire what it would take to satisfy the disparity that we sense in our lives? One possibility is that we learn to live with the disparity. Sometimes a simple answer is just go into debt and pay off the commitment at some time in the future.

What can we do, if money won’t solve the problem? We’ve often said that the Bible is about relationship and how people deal with real-life issues. As we begin this study of the historical account of the transition of the nation of Israel from being a loose federation of tribal clans to a more centralized government with a king, we encounter a central figure that God prepared to help with this transition. This person was Samuel and he was set apart and used by God by an unusual set of circumstances.

As was evident in some of the studies of the early days of the church as recorded in the book of Acts, God brought things about in an orderly, well-planned and deliberate way which involved things that happened over a number of years so that His plans could be implemented to accomplish His purposes.

We see the plan unfolding in the life of a Levite family who lived in the Israelite territory

of Ephraim. This family consisted of Elkanah and his two wives Hannah and Peninnah. We immediately learn that Peninnah had children but Hannah did not have any children. This bit of information turned out to be very significant in the life of this family.

Having children was considered to be a sign that the family was blessed by God and it was especially important that the family have sons who were to be inheritors of the family's earthly possessions and would carry on the family name. In a sense they believed that they continued to live through their children and grandchildren. Although it was legal to have multiple wives, it was not God's ideal situation. It was often the case that if a man's wife could not bear children that he would take a second wife to make sure that he had descendants to perpetuate his name. This is likely the reason that Elkanah had two wives.

The Chinese language symbol for trouble or discord was literally a simple picture of two women under one roof. As we might image, Hannah's barrenness created a disparity in her life since she could not measure up to what that culture expected of a good wife. She was not happy in spite of the fact that Elkanah favored her and treated her more graciously than he did Peninnah. Of course, his preferential treatment of Hannah caused animosity in the mind of Peninnah and she tried to compensate by disparaging and taunting Hannah because she did not have children. This certainly is not the only example in Scripture involving two wives that had the same sort of relationship. The first example was Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar. That situation did not work out very well for Hagar and her son Ishmael. As we know the long term consequences of that disparity is still plaguing the world. The other example is of Jacob, Leah, and Rachel. While we don't know of any strife between Leah and Rachel, there was a lot of grief on the part of Rachel who was barren for a long time.

Getting back to Elkanah's family, Hannah did not know of anything that she could do to change the situation in her life that would eliminate the disparity of what she wanted to be and what others thought about her and what she thought about herself. In desperation, she did what people do today when they really want something that they don't have the resources to buy what they want. They go into debt and ask for help from someone with resources and make a promise to repay the loan. Let's see what Hannah actually did in her desperation.

Hannah's Prayer – 1:10-11

¹⁰ She, greatly distressed, prayed to the LORD and wept bitterly. ¹¹ 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." 1 Samuel 1:10-11 (NASB95)

Sometimes we want something so much that we are willing to make what might seem to be a really significant sacrifice to have that "something" for even a little while. We might say that Hannah was totally absorbed by the fact that she had not been able to have a son for Elkanah. One could argue that what Hannah simply wanted was to please Elkanah whom she thought really wanted a son. There was, perhaps, an additional incentive for her since sons were expected to care for their widowed mother in her old age. Another incentive was that she had what might be considered normal maternal desires to have children. We can add to these incentives the considerations of reputation and self-esteem. It might seem that the situation was to the point that she willing to promise anything to have this "lack" or disparity in her life satisfied.

Many of the things just mentioned seem to have somewhat of a tinge of self-interest or selfishness associated with them. That may have bothered her and lead her to make the vow that she did make which would be as close to being selfless as she could imagine. It was as if she

was saying “Lord if you will give me the desire of my heart, then I will give or dedicate the desire of my heart to you to be used in your service.”

Let’s put that idea into the context of OUR relationship with God. Is this not the “bargain” that God makes with us? We could argue that mortal humanity has an ultimate desire for immortality. So instead of praying as Hannah did for a son, we pray for immortality or eternal life. The deal we make with God is similar to Hannah’s promise in that we promise that in return for eternal life we will live this new life that God gives to us in service to and worship of God. We don’t formally take the vow of a Nazerite but we realize that there is an expectation that we will walk in paths of righteousness because of who we are in our new life and our love for God.

In some ways this interchange between Hannah and God (that she proposed) is somewhat like or similar to God’s directive to Abraham to take the “desire of his heart” (his son Isaac) and give him back to God as a sacrifice. In the case of Abraham, God initiated the action to give Abraham a multitude of descendants which would require a son and God also initiated the test to see if Abraham would give his son back to God. In the case of Hannah, the request for a son and the promise to give him back to God were both initiated by Hannah.

Eli’s Affirmation – 1:12-18

¹² Now it came about, as she continued praying before the LORD, that Eli was watching her mouth. ¹³ 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. ¹⁴ Then Eli said to her, “How long will you make yourself drunk? Put away your wine from you.” ¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ “Do not consider your maidservant as a worthless woman, for I have spoken until now out of my great concern and provocation.” ¹⁷ Then Eli answered and said, “Go in peace; and may the God of Israel grant your petition that you have asked of Him.” ¹⁸ 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*. 1 Samuel 1:12-18 (NASB95)

There is a lot of information in these verses that give us some ideas of the cultural and religious practices of that time. There was an expectation that Israelite men would present themselves and their sacrifices before the Lord three times a year at the major festival times such as Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles. Apparently, as it was convenient, they involved their family members at these gatherings that were times of great celebration and feasting as well as giving people an opportunity to draw nearer to God in the designated places of worship.

After the sacrifice was made, the family would be given a portion of the meat for a meal and there were other food and wine available. We note the availability of good food and wine since there is a connection to what was going on in Hannah’s life. In the early verses of this account, we read that Elkanah received a portion of the food and shared it with his wives and children. However, he picked out the best cuts of the meat for Hannah (a double portion) because he was partial to her. This graciousness was somewhat wasted on Hannah since she was so distraught over her barrenness that she had no desire to eat. Instead she went to the tabernacle area and that is where she was found by Eli as she was praying.

Apparently, people prayed aloud. If everyone did that, then most of us could appreciate going into our closet to pray. I can imagine that such a situation where people are talking aloud during their prayers would be very distracting. It could be that people of that time took the phrase “Hear our prayer O Lord” quite literally and they may have thought that prayers should be audible so God could “hear” them. In our understanding, we know that God looks on the thoughts and intents of the heart rather than the words we speak. Hannah was not speaking but she was mouthing the words of her heart’s petition to God. We might think that she was not interested in everyone else there knowing what she was going through.

Apparently, Eli had never seen anyone do this before and he assumed that Hannah had partaken a bit too freely of the wine that was available. Her response to him was somewhat telling of another cultural idea regarding the value of women. In some parts of the world, women are considered (even today) to be unimportant, worthless and of no consequence. In certain Islamic areas women are not thought to have souls and are not included in any of their religious observances.

In Nik Ripken's *The Insanity of Obedience*, he wrote about a man who had converted from Islam to Christianity and was boldly active in sharing his new found faith with others he knew. Nik asked him how his wife had responded to his conversion and if he had led her to the Lord. His response was very telling when he said "Of course not, she is just an ignorant old village woman."

Hannah's remarks to Eli were that she had poured out her soul before the Lord and asked that he not consider her to be a worthless woman. Eli was sensitive enough to realize her sincerity and, apparently, without knowing what her petition was, he asked God to grant her wish. The affirmation that Eli gave her was taken by Hannah as confirmation that God would answer her prayers. The burden that she had been carrying for years was lifted and she was immediately transformed in her outlook on life. She believed that God had already answered her prayers and that it would happen. She went immediately to join in the festive celebration and feast.

Elkanah and his family returned to Ramah and God did answer Hannah's prayer. After the child was born, she named him Samuel because, in her words in verse 20, "I have asked him of the Lord." While Samuel literally (technically) means "his name is God," the Hebrew word for "heard" is "sama" which when combined with the "el" designation for God gives a name that is close in its sound to Samuel.

In that culture, weaning of a child took about three years. After Samuel was weaned, Hannah followed through on her promise. She brought Samuel to Shiloh and presented him to Eli. The Bible Knowledge Commentary has a comment to the effect that since Samuel was three years old "the lad Samuel would be no unusual burden for Eli and the priestly staff at Shiloh. Also, Samuel would be old enough to learn the rudiments of tabernacle service."

Hannah's Presentation – 1:26-28

²⁶ She said, "Oh, my lord! As your soul lives, my lord, I am the woman who stood here beside you, praying to the LORD. ²⁷ "For this boy I prayed, and the LORD has given me my petition which I asked of Him. ²⁸ "So I have also dedicated him to the LORD; as long as he lives he is dedicated to the LORD." And he worshiped the LORD there. 1 Samuel 1:26-28 (NASB95)

If we step back and look at this account in the light of how God eventually used Samuel as a judge, a prophet and a priest, we might conclude that what had happened in the lives of Elkanah and his two wives were part of God's overall plan to get Samuel into the position of influence in the nation of Israel so that he would be able to provide guidance during the transition that resulted in Israel having a king.

The concluding remark in verse 28 was that "he worshiped the Lord there." That could be a commentary on the life of Samuel as he grew up and was trained to be a priest and as he served as the last judge of Israel and as a new prophet to the nation. All of us should have the perspective that as we live our lives in service to God that everything we do is an act of worship. Paul advised the church at Colosse "And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him."