

Peninnah KNEW her husband Elkanah did NOT love her as much as he loved Hannah. But because Peninnah had produced heirs for Elkanah, and Hannah had not, Peninnah had an edge over Hannah. And over the years Peninnah had sharpened and sharpened that edge as she both subtly and openly taunted and bullied Hannah. Since we don't know if Elkanah (perhaps in some misguided attempt to “keep the peace” within his household) chose to ignore Peninnah's ongoing belittling of Hannah, or if he was truly oblivious to what Peninnah was doing; we also don't know if Elkanah was sincere, self-centered, or simply clueless when he said, “Hannah, why are you crying and eating nothing? Why are you so miserable? Am I not more to you than ten sons?” . . . Seriously, for someone who claimed to deeply love Hannah, how could Elkanah not see how much the woman was suffering and that she was at a breaking point? After years of toxic verbal abuse from Peninnah it is a wonder that Hannah hadn't commit suicide. But instead of killing herself, Hannah chose to throw herself on the mercy of God. If God would just hear her prayer and remember her, she would dedicate to God what her heart had been longing for all these years: a child. Hannah vowed to give back to God the child, the son, if God would bless her with him. She vowed that her child would be a nazirite his whole life – that he would never drink wine or intoxicants, and no razor would touch his head. This up-front life-long consecration of her son to God's service reflected the depth and breadth of Hannah prayers to God.

And because Hannah just kept on praying, long and hard, but silently – the priest Eli kept his eye on her. From where he sat by the door of the temple it looked like Hannah was drunk because her lips were moving – but he heard no words, no psalms, no prayers. Finally Eli couldn't watch any more of this drunken display, and he told the woman to go away and sober up. I don't know about you, but I feel a little sorry for Eli because he so badly misread this situation. But when Hannah started gushing out how she'd been pouring out her misery and grief before the Lord, I think Eli was overwhelmed with embarrassment and didn't want to hear any more, so he just fobbed her off with a generic blessing: “Go in peace, and may the God of Israel grant what you have asked of him.”

I don't think Eli REALLY listened to Hannah. I think he just saw a distraught woman and wanted to move her along. But Hannah hung on to the hope that the God of Israel would grant what she had asked. She left the temple at Shiloh focused on the future. Focused on anticipating that God would grant what she had asked for.

But how do you prepare yourself to have the child you've always wanted – while also preparing yourself to give that child back to God? How do you go through that pregnancy

for nine months, deliver a son, and watch him grow from an infant to a toddler – and then hand this precious child over to the priest at Shiloh? From where we sit in time, we can already know that Eli’s own sons, Hophni and Phinehas, turned out to be rather ethically challenged priests. So to us it may seem that Hannah’s handing Samuel off to Eli wasn’t the right thing to do. But Hannah had already vowed to dedicate Samuel to God’s service, and so Hannah presented Samuel to Eli. And then Hannah went home to Ramah.

That must have been a hard trip. I know some of you have made hard trips after settling your own child in a dorm on a campus far from home. Or perhaps you drove home from a train station or airport after seeing your child off to report to boot camp or deployment. Or maybe you drove the U-haul truck back home after moving your child cross-country to start a new job. Every mile you had to keep telling yourself this was the way it had to be. And anyone who might have seen you driving home would have had no idea why you were gripping the steering wheel so tightly, or why you were wiping tears away from your eyes. Because we can’t always see what’s going on inside another person.

This week I came across a reflection that Joyce Rupp wrote called, “A Closer Look at Thanksgiving.” She begins with a quote from Anita Diamant’s book, *The Red Tent*:

*If you sit on the bank of a river, you see only a small part of its surface.
And yet, the water before your eyes is proof of unknowable depths.*

Rupp reflects on this quote:

*If you look at a sunset, you might see only the disappearance of daylight.
If you look beneath, you may see darkness opening the splendor of stars.*

*If you look at illness and disease, you might see only physical diminishment.
If you look beneath, you may see it as a teacher bringing you vital wisdom.*

*If you look at a broken relationship, you might see only a harsh ending.
If you look beneath you may see the courageous seeds of new growth.*

*If you look at lost dreams, you might see only disappointment and doubt.
If you look beneath, you may see the stuff that new dreams contain.*

*If you look at the death of a loved one, you might see only pervasive sorrow.
If you look beneath, you may see that love lives on forever in the heart.*

*If you look at the planet’s pain and creatures’ woe, you might see only despair.
If you look beneath, you may see hope woven in the compassionate care of many.*

*If you look at yourself, you might see only tarnished unfinishedness.
If you look beneath, you may see your basic goodness shining there.*

If you look for the divine being, you might see mostly unresolved questions.

If you look beneath, you may be astounded at the availability of divine love.

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If we look at Hannah the way Peninnah did for many years, or the way Elkanah did, or even the way Eli did when he first saw her praying, we only see a pitiful, sad, barren woman. But if we look beneath, we may see a strong-hearted woman with a tenacious faith who placed her full trust in God. We find the mother of Samuel. And Samuel would grow up listening to God and following God's guidance. And Samuel would help God's people move from the era of having judges over them, to the age of having a human king chosen by God to rule over them. And we would see that perhaps it was for such a time, and for such a purpose, that God heard and responded to Hannah's prayer.

Amen.