

Today I want to direct your attention to the account of Hannah found in 1 Samuel because when we look at this moment from Hannah's life we have a remarkable picture of our own vulnerability and the power of God's grace.

Vulnerability is a word and concept that you may be familiar with. To be vulnerable is to be open and transparent in a way that means taking a risk with those around you, and even a risk within yourself. But, as I talk to you today, I want you to also consider how vulnerability is a risk we can take in our relationship with God.

Why am I emphasizing this as a risk? Well, we live in a world of sin and brokenness. Vulnerability means we aren't hiding from that reality. It means not hiding who you are from yourself, others, or God. So, to be open about our emotions or situation in life can also mean being open to criticism or harsh reactions from the people around us. We certainly see this in what happens to Hannah in this book of the Bible.

Hannah is married to a man named El-Cana who also has another wife named Peninnah. (So, there Facebook relationships status would have been, "It's complicated").

Peninnah has children, but Hannah is suffering through the experience of being unable to have children. Hannah's experiences show us how one particular person dealt with a painful life experience, and we might relate to this out of our own particular pain whatever it might be.

So, let's take a closer look at Hannah's story from 1 Samuel.

Every year Hannah goes with her husband El-Cana, his other wife Peninnah, and their family to Shiloh to sacrifice to the Lord at the temple.

What happens on these trips, which should ideally be holy and refreshing times for this family to connect with one another and God, is actually extremely painful. At a time when the family should be especially turning to God, they instead turn on one another in different ways.

More than likely trying to help Hannah feel better in his own misguided way, on these trips her husband El-Cana gives Hannah a double portion of meat. Yet, it is obvious to Peninnah and everyone else, as the text says, that El-Cana is giving Hannah this special treatment because he loves her more, and he wants to make up for the emotional pain she is in.

Can you imagine being singled out like that every year in such an obvious show of pity? Your family is indulging in their yearly feast and everyone knows, “You’re getting extra because I love you more.” Just picture that happening next week at your family’s Thanksgiving dinner!

As we might imagine, Peninnah, the other wife, is less than gracious about this. In fact, she is merciless. She chooses to react every year in a sinful show of bullying and cruelty toward Hanna. In fact, 1 Samuel calls Peninnah Hannah’s rival and says,

“Her rival used to provoke her severely, to irritate her. So, it went on year by year; as often as she went up to the house of the Lord, she used to provoke her.”

Oh the pain hidden in that simple phrase, “So it went on year by year.” Every year at this feast, Hannah has to face the emotional tension and stress of being with her family.

Hannah, in her vulnerability and need responds by weeping openly and refusing to eat. Her husband, once again in a misguided effort fails to comfort her. In a detail that just makes this so real and all the more painful, he says to Hannah,

“Hannah, why do you weep? Why do you not eat? Why is your heart sad? Am I not more to you than ten sons?”

Can you just picture this: There they are seated on blankets wherever they are staying in Shiloh with a lavish meal spread out at the center. While everyone else makes merry, Penninah takes every opportunity to stab Hannah with her words.

I don’t know about you, but this sounds like the most terrible yearly family dinner, maybe you have experienced something like this, an uncomfortable dinner that drags on and on. In fact, we are headed toward Thanksgiving. A time when we will meet together for maybe several different family feasts and tensions can really run high this time of year.

So, sad to say, I am sure that there is something in this account that you and I can relate to.

Hannah is taking a risk, she is vulnerable and open with her feelings, but her pain is compounded by the terrible way the people around her react. She isn’t getting much grace from the people in her life. It isn’t Hannah’s fault these people make the choices that they do, but it certainly makes vulnerability appear like a risk not worth taking.

We might think,

“Yeah, look at what her openness gets her!”

We might relate it to our own experiences of being open with others and then rejected.

Perhaps, you shared something with a family member and got an unexpectedly harsh reaction. You opened up to your mother-in-law about some private pain, and she ended up telling the whole extended family what was going on. Suddenly, your business is all over Facebook. Now, you just feel embarrassed and unwilling to talk about it.

Or maybe, you have tried to reach out to a friend to unburden yourself about a painful experience and in return your friend stopped taking your calls or started mysteriously cancelling plans. The rejection hurts and is confusing. You were just reaching out to get closer.

In a broken, sinful world, vulnerability can look like a scary, poor choice. Look at how people can hurt us in return for our honesty.

Yet, if we look deeper we know that there are reasons why people react the way they do. Maybe your mother-in-law, decades ago suffered through the same problem and rather than dealing with her own unresolved feelings, turns outward to gossip about you and forget about her own troubles.

Your friend that you confided in, feels scared and unsure how to help, and starts to get stand-offish.

Then, what about the times when we are Peninnah? When we are harsh to those around us who have something extra that we want?

What about when we are El-Cana, and we try to help by just giving someone gifts or money to try to cheer them up or assuming that just knowing us has to be enough to help?

This is where it comes down to the fact that everyone of us is fighting our own private battles, and I think we can see this even when we go back to the account of Hannah and her rival Peninnah. It's obvious that the husband, El-Cana, favors Hannah and loves her more. She even gets a double portion of food, while Peninnah and ALL of her children, we are told, just get a small portion. Peninnah acts the way she does out of a place of pain, the same way that people in our own lives can react to us in our vulnerable moments.

It doesn't make it any less upsetting, but it is just the reality of how sin and brokenness can become a cycle that just keeps going.

So, what is to be done about this? What do we make of vulnerability in this complex reality of sin and pain?

This is where we have to switch the question and ask, "What has God done and what is God doing?" What does God make of vulnerability? And, this is where grace steps in.

God's grace.

Grace starts for us, when we are aware that the negative ways that people react to our vulnerability is due to the system of sin that we are all caught up in and due to things in a person's own life that we may know nothing about.

We can see Hannah give grace to those around her in the way she doesn't lash out in return.

But this kind of grace is not up to us; it is first given to us by God and we are empowered by God to give this grace to others. God is always present, moving in our lives and was moving in Hannah's life.

And you might ask, how do we know this?

Well, after one of the awful family dinners that Hannah wept through, she stood up and went to pray. The priest Eli was there and watches Hannah in the temple.

It says in 1 Samuel, "Now Eli the priest was sitting on the seat beside the doorpost of the temple of the Lord. Hannah was deeply distressed and prayed to the Lord, and wept bitterly. As she continued praying before the Lord, Eli observed her mouth. Hannah was praying silently; only her lips moved, but her voice was not heard; therefore Eli thought she was drunk. So Eli said to her, "How long will you make a drunken spectacle of yourself? Put away your wine."

Here Hannah is, pouring her heart out to God and the priest who should be coming to her side to care for her, reacts just as harshly to her as her family did.

What does Hannah do? Does she run away? Does she lash out? No.

The text says: Hannah answered, “No, my lord, I am a woman deeply troubled; I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink, but I have been pouring out my soul before the Lord. Do not regard your servant as a worthless woman, for I have been speaking out of my great anxiety and vexation all this time.”

Hannah explains the context; she keeps being vulnerable and sharing her heart. Eli responds with,

“Go in peace; the God of Israel grant the petition you have made to him.”

God uses Eli’s simple words, even with all of his missteps in pastoral care and his imperfect response, to minister to Hannah.

And an amazing thing happens next. Hannah, having been seen and cared for, however poorly it may seem to be, goes back to her quarters and eats and drinks with her husband. Her inability to eat because of her great sorrow is lifted! What’s more, she later gives birth to Samuel, the very person that this book of the Old Testament is named for, and he goes on to be a great prophet, while Hannah has three more sons and two daughters.

In Hannah’s life, we can see how God moves with great grace. Even in the hard years of Hannah being tormented, God is present giving Hannah the grace to keep going and to not become hardened by her pain.

And it is at this point that I want to tell you what the name Hannah means; it means grace.

Hannah's life shows us the incredible power that God's grace really is.

And God's grace is something we need all the time, every day. We might be feeling in need of it even more right now as we head into the stress and tension of getting together for Thanksgiving and preparing for the holiday season. No matter, what we are going through, God's Grace is there for us.

Like Hannah, pouring out her heart in prayer, we don't need to be afraid to be vulnerable with God and tell God what is really going on in our lives. Unlike the way the people in our life can hurt or reject us, God will never turn away from our vulnerability. Instead, God will pour out lavish grace on us.

We don't have to worry about getting a harsh reaction from God to our vulnerability. Instead, we can count on getting God's grace. God has already done all the work for us, pouring out Grace through the death and resurrection of Jesus and is now working in our lives, empowering us through the Holy Spirit to keep going, even if like Hannah we experience those hard years of pain.

So, I invite you to like Hannah, be open to God in your prayer life. Don't hide. Be vulnerable with our Lord. You are safe. God hears you; God loves you, and has freedom and grace for you.

Amen.