

## **Striking a Desperate Bargain with God**

I Samuel 1:4-20; Hebrews 10:11-14, 19-25

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Have you ever read “the appalling crime of the Benjaminites?” That’s how my study Bible describes this incident, and I think you will agree that it is an appalling crime. We can detest almost every part of this story. Every time I read it, I find myself wondering, “Why is such a horrible story even in the Bible?”

Don’t confuse this with Sodom and Gomorrah. That was back in the book of Genesis. The appalling crime of the Benjaminites occurs in the book of the Judges, chapter nineteen, during a time of moral crisis for the people of Israel. They had not yet formed a unified nation of Israel. They had no king, no centralized authority. They were twelve loosely connected tribes, and each tribe had its own judge or governor. As this story shows, it was a form of governance that wasn’t working.

Here’s the story. A certain Jewish priest took a concubine. A concubine was a female slave who bore children for her owner. I know this is a violation of our moral sensitivities, but this was not considered immoral at this time in Jewish history. According to the story, the priest and his concubine had a lover’s spat, and she ran away and went back to her father’s house in Bethlehem. After about four months, the priest cooled off and traveled to Bethlehem “to speak tenderly to her” and to bring her back home. The woman’s father was overjoyed to see the priest. He stayed several days, and his “father-in-law” prevailed upon him to stay even longer. The priest finally insisted that they leave, and they began the journey home.

Along the way, they stopped in the town of Gibeah for the night. Gibeah belonged to the tribe of Benjamin. The priest and his concubine waited at the town square for someone to take them in for the evening, but no one offered. Finally an “old man” coming in from his fields saw them and offered them food and lodging for the night. It was perfect. They ate, drank, and enjoyed themselves throughout the evening.

Some time in the night, though, a group of men surrounded the house. They were the Benjaminites, men from the tribe of Benjamin. The text calls them “a perverse lot.” Some translations call them simply “worthless.” These worthless men pounded on the door of the house and demanded that the old man release the priest to them so that they might rape him.

The old man responded, “No, my brothers, do not act so wickedly. Since this man is my guest, do not do this vile thing.”

Lest you think he was heroic, listen to what the old man said next: “Here are my virgin daughters and his concubine.... Ravish them and do whatever you want to them; but against this man do not do such a vile thing.”

When it became clear that the Benjaminites would not take no for an answer, the priest “seized” his concubine and shoved her out the door. Here’s what the text says happened, “They wantonly raped her, and abused her all through the night until the morning.”

At some point, the Benjaminites finally released the poor woman and went away. She fell at the doorway of the house where she remained until daylight. No one let her in. No one even checked to see if she was okay. The next morning the priest, now called “her master,” discovered her lying in the doorway and told her to get up, that it was time to go home. She didn’t move. She was dead. It was an act of cruelty beyond words. What happened next is equally unconscionable. The priest placed her body on his donkey and took her to his home, where he cut her body into twelve pieces and scattered them across the land of Israel.

Did you know that horrible story is in the Bible? That is the appalling crime of the Benjaminites, and I found myself wondering, “Why is this even in here? What purpose does this despicable text serve?” I’ve concluded that it actually serves an important purpose, and the number twelve is a key to understanding it. And the more I studied our text for today, the story about Hannah, and felt her sense of desperation the more I realized that the appalling crime of the Benjaminites set the stage for her story. Remember the number twelve.

The Old Testament theologian Walter Breuggeman says that Hannah’s story in I Samuel is a parable about the people of Israel during a

dark, dark period. It was a time of moral crisis, such that appalling atrocities were commonplace. The loosely connected twelve tribes of Israel were losing their soul. They were losing their relationship with Yahweh their God. The people had no godly leadership, no one to stand before them and say, “Thus saith the Lord...” The result was this appalling crime of the Benjaminites and a people who accepted it.

The message of Hannah was one of hope, hope borne in a barren woman, whose name meant “charming” or “attractive.” Hannah so yearned for a son that she struck a desperate bargain with God. Give me a son, she begged. Just give me a son, and I’ll...I’ll give him back to you.

She was married to a man named Elkanah. He had two wives, Hannah and Pininnah, whose name meant “fertile” or “prolific.” Pininnah gave Elkanah many children, while Hannah gave him none. It was a very painful reality for Hannah. The pain was made acute every year when they went to the temple in Shiloh to offer sacrifices. Each woman was due a portion of meat from the sacrifices. The portions were determined by the number of children they had borne. Pininnah, of course, received many portions of meat because she had given Elkanah many sons and daughters. Hannah had given him none, so she was entitled to no portion. However, the text says that Elkanah loved Hannah, and he gave her a double portion even though “the Lord had closed her womb.” To make things worse, Pininnah was not at all gracious toward Hannah. She taunted Hannah because of her infertility, made fun of her, ridiculed her. Year after year Hannah endured this ridicule.

One year during the visit to Shiloh, Hannah retreated to the temple to pray. It’s one of those intensely personal scenes where I feel like we shouldn’t be watching. It’s just too personal. The text says that Hannah wept bitterly, uncontrollably, and poured out her heart to God. She made the vow to God that day. *Remember* me, Lord, she pleaded. *Remember* me and give me a son. If God would but give her a son, she vowed to give him back to God.

The priest, Eli, was standing nearby. When he observed the intensity of Hannah’s prayer, he mistook it for drunkenness. He accused her of being a “drunken spectacle.” So she pleaded her case before him too, saying that she wasn’t drunk. No, she was desperate. And she urged him not to think of

her as “worthless.” Ironically, that’s the same Hebrew word used to describe the Benjaminites.

Eli finally understood. She was desperate. She was bringing her cause to God and leaving it in the hands of the Almighty One. So Eli blessed Hannah, saying may “the God of Israel grant the petition you have made to him.” And you probably know the rest of the story. It says that the Lord did *remember* Hannah. She conceived and bore a son. She named him Samuel, and in due time she gave him back to God. He grew up in the temple with Eli and became a great leader, a godly leader. He was the last of the judges. He didn’t rule over only one tribe of Israel. He judged for all Israel, all *twelve* tribes. Samuel was the bridge, the transition, to a new era for the people of Israel. He would lead them from being twelve loosely connected tribes to being one nation. And Samuel would begin to lead the people out of moral crisis, appalling atrocities, and into a life giving relationship with their God.

It finally dawned on me that this parable is a salvation story. The number twelve represented all that was wrong in the land of Israel, the twelve tribes and the resulting corruption, debauchery, and unrighteousness. The people of Israel were barren, with no hope of a future. They were taunted by their neighbors, ridiculed. The message here is that during this dark, dark period God *remembered* them. In Hannah, God began the salvation of Israel. It began not with great men and heroic events but with the distress and despair of a barren woman. Hannah poured out her heart to God and left her prayer and her vow in the hands of the Almighty One. She opened the way for salvation to come to the people of Israel.

That’s where this story bears upon our lives. It is a salvation story for us too, for those of us who feel desperate, no future, no hope. It’s for those of us who are ready to strike a desperate bargain with God. It may be an addiction you just cannot conquer. It may be a broken relationship you cannot mend. It may be...what? This text is an invitation to pour your heart out before God, to weep bitterly, uncontrollably. It is an invitation to place your prayers and your vow in the hands of the Almighty One. Leave them there and trust that God will *remember* you too.

## Closing Prayer

O God, do remember us, especially those who feel the most desperate. Remember us and bring us salvation. Amen.