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How To Want What We Want

I Samuel 1: 12 –18

We are born with eyes. That simple fact alone suggests that we designed to want. We see opportunities, things, and people that we believe might please us – and we want them. Advertisers, of course, know this: there's a commercial whose theme song is, "I want it all! I want it all! I want it all! I want it now!" Does that not sum up the fundamental urge that drives most of us? Why do you suppose grocery stores place a display rack of candy by the counter of check-out lines? Because they know that all little kids' eyes will fall instantly upon the goodies and go "I want!" The stores know that at 50% of all mamas (and 100% of all dads) will give in to junior's desires as the price of preserving the public peace. To be a conscious human being is to live aware of that insistent little voice inside our heads crying, "I want! I want!" I suspect that is why we have a day dedicated to the celebration of mothers, for mothers have often been the ones most attentive to those moments when we cry out, "I want! I want!" The best mothers teach us when is right time to want something, when is the time to want something else, and when is the time to accept the word No. The best mothers teach us how to want what we want.

So this morning we look to a mother named Hannah who can teach us a lesson in spiritual maturity. Her story ends happily, I confess, but if you leap too readily to her heart-warming ending, you will miss the searing trauma of her life that so frequently parallels our own. Leap too readily to the end of her tale and you will not appreciate the depth of her spiritual heroism. For you see, Hannah's husband Elkanah, while not a Mormon, was a polygamist, or at least a bigamist, though in that culture and era where women had no economic, social or legal protection, perhaps the system had something to commend it. One thing I am sure of, however neat it might have sounded in theory, Elkanah surely found that having more than one wife didn't do anything to make his home-life easier. Though he surely tried to be equitable in his dealings with both wives, his family had a built-in imbalance. His one wife, Peninniah, whom he surely called Penny, was as fertile as rabbit, producing child after child with assembly-line regularity. But Hannah was accounted barren, in that culture an abject failure. And every year, Hannah would necessarily accompany the family on its annual pilgrimage to Shiloh, where everyone would enjoy a great thanksgiving feast, and Elkanah would lavish gifts upon Penny because she had borne him so many children. Penny would thoughtfully describe Elkanah's generosity in great detail to Hannah for fear the young woman might not know what she was missing. What a miserable existence!

Hannah has eyes. She sees what Penny has and she wants it for herself. Not the material stuff that Elkanah has lavished on Penny, Hannah cares not a flip for that. But she sees the joy of bearing a child and wants to know that joy for herself. She has a plan and she has a prayer. One year, while the family is feasting in Shiloh, Hannah slips away to the holy place and utters the deepest prayer of her heart unto God: "Lord, having a baby boy is my sincerest ambition. I beg you, please give me what I want. For if you will do so, I will make a promise to you. Give him to me and I will give him back unto you, because I know that he is solely your blessing.

Grant me this baby and I will give him back to you to be raised in your house and to serve you the whole of his days.”

We must admit the hard truth that wanting what we want can foster a great bitterness within us. We can become so frustrated over the inability to make our dreams come true that our existence becomes a great weariness, a ceaseless nightmare of disappointment that filters out any experience of goodness. But Hannah can teach us here. She refuses to give into bitterness. She refuses to despair. She teaches us our first lesson in how to want what we want:

she turns the matter of her wanting over to God in complete and absolute trust.

One of the truly most enjoyable aspects of my sabbatical discipline has been the reading of D. H. Donald’s magisterial biography of Abraham Lincoln, immediately followed by a study of Douglas Southhall Freeman’s classic four-volume biography of Robert E. Lee.

Both Lincoln and Lee tried to put their participation in the Civil War in theological perspective.

Ironically, both men came to the identical conclusion: ultimately, God is sovereign, and ultimately God will lead and move history in accordance with God’s purpose and design.

Neither Lincoln nor Lee saw God’s sovereign will as absolving them of responsibility for their actions.

On the contrary, both saw themselves as agents of God’s will. Here’s the key point:

they saw themselves as agents of God’s will rather than seeing God as an agent of their wills.

They saw themselves as instruments of God, rather than God as an instrument of human desires.

Spiritual maturity starts with realizing that God is not a cosmic genie designed to grant us our wishes.

Pray though we might, implore God though we must, call upon God to grant us as our needs as we are bid by our Lord to do, we are always meant to couple our requests with the phrase that our Lord Jesus attached to his own earnest utterance in Gethsemane: “Not my will but Thine be done.”

To pray, “Not my will but Thine be done,” is a phrase of absolute surrender unto God’s purpose.

Hannah expresses the exact same sentiment when she says,

“Lord, grant me this child I want, not as an expression of my worthiness, but as expression of your goodness. And to show you that I really mean it when I say that I have turned this matter over to you completely, if you give me this child I will give him back up to you.”

Comedy intrudes. Old priest Eli sees Hannah slumped over in his empty church during a holiday and assumes that she is drunk, or at least sleeping off a hangover.

(He would not be the last preacher to look upon his congregation on occasion and wonder that!)

Hannah shares with him her prayer and her pain, and he assures her that he will intercede for her.

He sends her away in peace. The Scriptures add this comment, “Her countenance was no longer sad.”

Spiritual heroism is often manifested in the ability to summon the power of joy amidst circumstances that are not joyous.

Sometimes there is no better indicator that someone has their desires in perspective than their ability to maintain a cheerful countenance amidst their own pain.

Some people in their misery want everybody to know of their misery, and they want to make everybody else miserable, too.

But Hannah, having truly left this matter unto God, truly lives at peace.

Her countenance is no longer sad. She taps into the power of joy even amidst disappointment.

To be capable of such a feat one must remember the wisdom of an “old wives’ axiom.”

There are plenty of old wives’ axioms around, and they cannot all be wrong.

I am convinced that this one is absolutely right: “A watched pot never boils.”

Meaning: if you want something and spend all your time and energy focused only on getting whatever it is you want, you will turn your life into misery – for seldom does what we want come to us instantly.

Sometimes the way to look and hope for things to happen is stop looking and hoping they will happen.
Sometimes the best way to look and hope for things to happen is to lose yourself doing something else, simply trusting that God will take care of the matter in God's good time.

Hannah stops worrying about getting pregnant. She chooses to trust God and go home in peace.

Then she gets pregnant. My friends, life is often structured in that ironic fashion.

A watched pot never boils.

Often we find that we receive what we want only when we stop obsessing about what we want.

Of course, for many of us, it is not failure that undermines our spiritual maturity, it is success.

Hannah gives birth to Samuel – “Sam-u-el” – “asked of God,” and for an entire year she must wrestle with this question: “Did I really mean what I said? Must I really keep my end of the deal?” And then she does.

She travels to Shiloh on the next pilgrimage, hands her baby over to Eli, turns around and heads home, back to central Judah, back to obtuse Elkanah, back to smirking Penny, back to being childless.

Why? Why make a deal with God that gives you what you want, only to give it back to God? Why indeed!

Because in so doing Hannah, with clarity of vision, recognizes what are means and what are ends in her life.

To keep a clear vision of what are our means and what are our ends is one of life's greatest challenges.

Now what exactly do I mean by this statement?

Hannah has said that the purpose and end of her life is to glorify God.

Having a baby boy that she could give back to God would be a means of achieving that end.

If she had kept Samuel for herself she would have made her baby her end, and undermined the stated purpose of her life.

I think of a Birmingham construction owner who years ago said unto God, “Lord, my goal in life is to glorify you with this business.”

Plenty of young businessmen make similar claims. But he went one step further. He said, “Lord, since you and I are partners in this business, half of the profits this business makes are yours.”

Of course, first that was half of nothing. Then it became half of fifty thousand dollars, which was not much, but it was all he had. Then it became half of a hundred thousand dollars and then half of a million then half of a multi-million dollar business. Why?

Couldn't he have said, ‘Wait a second, I earned all this money through my effort, it's all mine.’”

But from his point of view, that was looking at the matter all wrong.

His stated purpose was to glorify God. Making money was simply a means to achieving that end.

To have kept his money for himself would have turned his means into an end.

In order to learn truly how to want what we want, we have to practice a holy carelessness.

What do I mean by that?

We have to realize that not all of our wants are equal.

Hannah wants a baby. That is important.

The businessman wants to make money. That is important.

But Hannah and the businessman also want to glorify God.

Both of them recognized that one want takes precedence over the others.

Not all of our wants are equal in importance

In satisfying their desire to serve and glorify God, Hannah and that businessman practiced the holy carelessness of giving that baby and surrendering half those profits up unto God.

They practice a holy carelessness about their lives and surrender what they value as a way of completely honoring God with the whole of their lives.

That is a costly type of faith.

Do you think it didn't hurt Hannah to hand that baby over to Eli?
It ripped out the heart of her being.
But she trusted that God would nurture her even in her despair.
Part of our going through life wanting what we want is allowing God to nurture us in our despair.
But then, once she reached home, she became pregnant again – and again – and again – and again – and again!
Finally Hannah had to ponder the wisdom of another old wives' axiom:
be careful for what you wish for, you just might get it.
Yet I suspect Hannah didn't mind too much. By the time her sixth child came along she realized that
to nurture and to be nurtured was the very purpose of her existence, the very purpose of her faith.

We are made to want . Our desires fuel our lives.
But we don't want to be one of those people who waste their lives discounting the value of their existence
because they don't get what they want in the way they want it.
That great hymnologist Mick Jagger put the matter succinctly:
"You can't always get what you want,
but if you try sometimes, you just might find, that you get what you need."
Mother's Day testifies to the importance of nurture in our lives,
whether that nurture is provided by a mother or by somebody else.
The best nurturers do not always give us what we want, but they give us what we need.
The best nurturers teach us when to want, when to want something else
and when to accept the word "No."
These are the lessons that the Spirit of the motherly God tries to impress upon us.
In the end, if we are fortunate, we learn the lesson that Hannah learned:
a dream given over to God is a dream that will be achieved.
It might be a dream achieved in a manner different from how we expected it,
It might be a dream that is achieved differently from how we desired it,
but a dream given over to God is a dream that will be achieved.
For in giving our dreams over to God, we find that in the end,
what we have ultimately given to God is ourselves.
And that, my friends, is what the pilgrimage of life and faith is all about.

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