*DEVOTIONAL*

November 26 – December 1

*Hope*

**Monday, November 26 1 Samuel 1:1-8**

*“Peninnah had children, but Hannah had none”*

Hannah’s husband, Elkanah, is depicted as an upstanding Israelite who cares deeply for his family and carefully attends to his religious commitments. He loves Hannah deeply, despite her unenviable position as a barren wife. The concluding statement of verse 2 sets up the painful situation for Hannah: “Peninnah had children, but Hannah had none.” Children were gifts of God, but they were also important economically in the ancient social structure. They contributed to the family wealth through their work, they cared for their parents in old age, and they ensured the future of the family by inheriting the family wealth.

Hannah’s intense pain is exacerbated by the insufferable cruelty inflicted on her by her counterpart, Peninnah. This was a perpetual burden for Hannah, since it recurred every year at the time for the festival in Shiloh. Peninnah hurts her deeply, to the point of emotional depression (she weeps and cannot eat). Elkanah’s attempts to comfort Hannah, pointing out that she has him so why mourn the lack of children, fails to console her.

*We pray for those who desire children, Lord, but are unable to conceive. Amen.*

**Tuesday, November 27 1 Samuel 1:9-20**

*“Hannah prayed to the Lord”*

Hannah’s earnest prayer in the Shiloh sanctuary is the pivotal point of the story. After Eli blesses her, she is able to eat, and she is no longer sad. There is a telling contrast between the Hannah who is too despondent to eat and the Hannah who emerges from God’s presence full of hope and confidence. Though her circumstances have not yet changed, she has found peace with God, a peace that leaves her buoyant and capable of returning with her family. The way in which the story immediately turns to the birth of Samuel brings quick resolution to Hannah’s problem.

After their return trip home, Elkanah “knew” his wife which in this context means that he slept with her. God also “knew” Hannah in the sense that he created her, and God “remembered” her. This does not mean that he had subsequently forgotten her, only that his memory was consistent with his desire to answer her plea for a child. Such language emphasizes God’s faithfulness when confronted with the earnest need and prayer of his people.

*You hear my prayers, Lord, and answer them according to your goodness. Amen.*

**Wednesday, November 28 Luke 1:5-10**

*“Zechariah was serving God in the Temple”*

Luke begins his story by placing it in an established historical setting – the reign of King Herod the Great. Herod had done much building up of the nation, including the renovation of the temple in Jerusalem, receiving his commission from the Roman Mark Antony in 40bc and returning to Judea to rule under Roman oversight in 37bc.

In his goodness, God picked an important moment in the career of Zechariah to make his divine move. As a priest he served at the temple for two one-week periods a year. He was a member of one of twenty-four priestly divisions, and one of approximately 18,000 priests. A priest officiated at the sacrifice only once in his life, having been selected by lot.

Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth have lived with deep disappointment, never having the child they long for – what Elizabeth would later call a “disgrace” (verse 25). Both are “upright” people and their situation is not the result of sin. Sometimes righteous people have disappointments in life.

*I will serve you, Lord, even in the midst of disappointment. Amen.*

*DEVOTIONAL*

November 26 – December 1

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**Thursday, November 29 Luke 1:11-17**

*“An angel of the Lord appeared”*

The angel appears as Zechariah places the incense on the altar. At this high moment, God begins to work in a fresh way to redeem humankind by revealing his sending of the forerunner of the One who will take away the sin of the world. How appropriate to pick a moment of worship and a time when people recognized their need for cleansing from sin!

God’s plan in the Old Testament had Israel at its hub. She would be the “model people” through whom God would show his grace. The birth of John the Baptist is similar to other births to formerly barren wives or other announcements of the birth of a special child. Telling the story in this manner indicates that God has renewed his work among his people. The special place that John has in God’s plan is shown in the ascetic lifestyle he will live, like other special people of God who took vows to show their devotion to God. Gabriel notes that John will have the responsibility to “go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah” and will “bring back [the people of Israel] to the Lord their God.”

*As you were 2,000 years ago, Lord, you are still at work in the world today. Amen.*

**Friday, November 30 Luke 1:18-22**

*“How can I know this will happen?”*

For many years Zechariah and Elizabeth have prayed to God and asked for a child, a prayer that the angel Gabriel declared having been heard and answered by God (see verse 13). Thus, this promised child will answer two prayers at the same time: for a child in the house of Zechariah, and for God to work his plan of redemption in the world. God often works simultaneously at the personal and at the universal level.

But Zechariah raises doubts about the angel’s message, for the prospective parents are now beyond normal childbearing age. Sometimes even good people have doubts about God’s promises. The angel tells Zechariah in effect, “Just be quiet for awhile and watch God work.” So a sign of silence is given until God performs his word. Zechariah becomes temporarily mute until these things come to pass. This sign is a pointer to the major lesson of the passage: God will bring his promise to pass. He will perform his word. Zechariah must listen to God and trust that God will do what he has promised.

*You have always been faithful to your promises, Lord, and I trust you. Amen.*

**Saturday, December 1 Luke 1:23-25**

*“How kind the Lord is”*

In Zechariah and Elizabeth we see not just historical figures but representative personalities, and we can identify with their responses to their life experiences. We can sympathize with Elizabeth’s plight of childlessness. But she is also an example in how she responds. Despite her personal disappointment, she faithfully serves God. And, when her prayer is answered, she rejoices in what he has done to renew her.

One thing neither Zechariah nor Elizabeth succumbed to was bitterness, even though Elizabeth felt disgrace. Maybe that is one reason God called them upright and blameless. As God’s children we need to learn to rely even more on our heavenly Father, for sometimes the answer to our disappointment is not clear. God never guarantees that life will come without pain and distress. The central issue is how we handle it. Bitterness will yield the fruit of anger and frustration, sapping the joy from life. Trust and dependence will cause us to find fulfillment and God’s peace.

*Your timing, Lord, though sometimes different from mine, is infinitely wiser. Amen.*