

## Sermon: My Horn is Exalted in the Lord

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, Ottawa, Nov. 17, 2024)

Last week, I shared with you the theme of God's remembrance. The Lord God whom we worship is a God who does not forget nor forsake. God delivers from misery those who are faithful to the Lord. This deliverance of God could sometimes be delayed, but never be denied. God accompanies deliverance often with blessings, and such blessings overwhelm us, any one of us. We have seen this in the stories of Noah, of Job, of Abraham, of Joseph, and countless other biblical characters. All of them have one thing in common: they seek to be righteous and faithful before God.

Today, we are looking at Hannah, specifically at her response, her prayer, after she had received God's deliverance and blessing. Hannah was the favoured wife of Elkanah during the time of Judges when Israel had no king. She was without a child because, according to the Scripture, that God had closed her womb.

Hannah was not Elkanah's only wife. His other wife, Peninah, had several sons and daughters and had tormented Hannah over this inequality. This torment went on years after years, until in her deep anguish Hannah prayed to God and made a vow, as in 1 Samuel 1:11, "*O Lord of hosts, if You will indeed look on the affliction of Your maidservant and remember me, and not forget Your maidservant, but will give Your maidservant a male child, then I will give him to the Lord all the days of his life, and no razor shall come upon his head.*"

The last part of 'no razor shall come upon his head', is drawn from Numbers 6:5, as part of the vow of Nazirite, indicating what Hannah had in mind was a dedication of her child to the Lord, to be separated and consecrated.

God heard Hannah's prayer and blessed her with a son. Hannah named the child 'Samuel', which means 'God has heard'. Subsequently, Hannah did fulfil her vow. Soon after the child was weaned, she dedicated Samuel to God, to live in the temple of the Lord, under the care of Eli the priest.

This brings us to our Scripture reading today: in 1 Samuel 2:1, Hannah prays: "*My heart rejoices in the Lord; My horn is exalted in the Lord. I smile at my enemies, because I rejoice in Your salvation.*" Notice what Hannah says in her prayer. Prayer is a personal communication with

God. We should be praying, talking to God, building relationship, building intimacy all the time—not just when we need something from God. Hannah prayed while giving thanks to God for His deliverance rejoicing over finally having a child. Notice also the term she uses that “**My horn is exalted in the Lord**”. Horns in animals are used for both offence and defence. Metaphorically speaking, it is a symbol of strength. In Hannah case, it means that she can finally hold her head up high, finally not be ashamed. Hold on to this term ‘my horn is exalted’ for now, because we will come back to that a bit later.

Let us continue to listen in on Hannah’s prayer, focusing on her description of God: in verse 2, “*No one is holy like the Lord, for there is none besides You, nor is there any rock like our God.*” In verse 3, “*Talk no more so very proudly; let no arrogance come from your mouth, for the Lord is the God of knowledge; and by Him actions are weighed.*” Hannah proclaimed that God is holy and all-knowing. There is nothing that God does not see; there is nothing that God does not know. All our actions, all our thoughts are weighed and measured by God.

She continues to proclaim that God is also all-powerful. In verse 6-7, “*The Lord kills and makes alive; He brings down to the grave and brings up. The Lord makes poor and makes rich; He brings low and lifts up.*” God can pretty do anything that God pleases, but not without principle or purpose. God has a preference, and His chooses to lift up the humble and to bring down the proud.

In a complete reversal of worldly values, in verse 4-5, “*The bows of the mighty men are broken, and those who stumbled are girded with strength. Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread, and the hungry have ceased to hunger. Even the barren has borne seven, and she who has many children has become feeble.*” Hannah’s prayer is personal, grounded in her anguish of bareness, in how God turned the table up-side-down in her own situation. However, her prayer is also far-reaching, touching on issues of military might and economic prosperity—issues that in a traditionally patriarchal society do not usually belong to the concerns of women.

Her prayer is surprising similar to that of Mary’s prayer, after Mary realized that she was to be with a child, a child who is the begotten Son of God, as recorded in Luke 1:46, “*My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit has rejoiced in God my Saviour. For He has regarded the lowly state of His maidservant; for behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed.*”

Both of these prayers talk about God who lifts up the humble and brings down the proud. Both prayers were uttered from women who are humble, they are lowly yet faithful to the Lord. The difference in Mary's case is that she wasn't hoping for child. In fact, for her to be pregnant as a yet-to-be-wed maiden was trouble. May even be considered adulterous by some, punishable by stoning-to-death in accordance to the Law. Mary's faithfulness to God is demonstrated through her obedience. When she was informed by Gabriel the angel that it was God's will for her to be a vessel of God's plan of salvation. She humbly accepted that her fate is in God's hand.

Let us come back to Hannah's prayer. She also understands that God will bless those who remain faithful. In verse 9, "*He will guard the feet of His saints, but the wicked shall be silent in darkness.*" And if we jump to the ending of her prayer, in verse 10, "*God will give strength to His king, and exalt the horn of His anointed.*" I consider this sentence to be the most important part in Hannah's prayer. There are a couple of notable points.

First, Hannah had lived at a time when Israel had no king. For those who are familiar with the Bible, it was Hannah's son Samuel, who many years later had to face Israelites' request to have a king. It was an act of rebellion against God, because at that time, God was Israel's only and rightful king. But the people looked elsewhere and saw that other nations have kings who fought wars for the people. They wanted the same thing, so they took their rebellion to Samuel, their leader.

Samuel, heart broken, brought that demand to God, probably thinking God would rain down fire and brimstone on those rebellious people. But God, in His surprising mercy, actually gave the people what they demanded, with a warning that earthly kings would take from the people to enrich themselves. Those earthly kings will oppress the people and lead them further from God. And when the Israelites will inevitably call out to God for help, God will ignore them, letting them face consequences of their own rebellion.

The second notable thing about Hannah's prophetic prayer was the 'exalted horn'. Remember we have earlier talked about the horn as being a symbol of power and strength. In Leviticus, horns were also an integral part of temple worship. Horns were cut out and attached to the four corners of an altar. When animal sacrifices were made for the cleansing of sins, blood was smeared on the four horns.

Elsewhere in the Scripture, horn is a symbol of salvation. When an Israelite commits a grave sin punishable by death (for example accidentally taking another life), he can run, if fast enough, to the temple, and grab on to a horn on a corner of the alter, then his life would be spared. This salvation quality of the horn is why psalmist sings, *“The Lord is my rock, my fortress, and my deliverer, my God, my rock in whom I take refuge, my shield, and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold.”* (Psalm 18:2) In the same way, the yet un-born Jesus was lifted up by the priest Zechariah in Luke 1:69, who happens to be a distant uncle of our Lord, saying: *“He has raised up a mighty saviour for us in the house of his child David,”*

We have come a full circle in Hannah’s prayer. She starts by talking about God lifting high her horn, she concludes by proclaiming God, exalting the horn of an yet-un-born king, an anointed servant of God, who we would later understand as Jesus, the messiah, the Christ. This king is to be given to us by God, so that all who believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, what I learn from Hannah’s prayer, and hopefully shared by you, is that in life, especially in trying to serve God faithfully, there are many ups and downs. We often start by thinking ‘what is God’s will for us individually?’ , ‘where do I fit in God’s grand scheme of things?’ We may encounter challenges along the way, or we may be comforted by God’s abundant blessings (and believe me when I say that God’s blessings are abundant and amazing). In this journey of faith, it doesn’t matter where we start or where we travel, it always ends in the same way—by lifting up the horn of God’s anointed—by glorifying Jesus Christ. He is our goal, our Lord, our king, and our friend. Thanks be to God.

Allow me to end my reflection today with these words of Gregory of Nazianzus, an early Church Father and a noted Trinitarian theologian: “Christ is born, glorify Him. Christ from heaven, go out to meet Him. Christ on earth; be exalted. Sing unto the Lord all the whole earth; and that I may join both in one word, Let the heavens rejoice, and let the earth be glad, for Him Who is of heaven and then of earth. Christ in the flesh, rejoice with trembling and with joy; with trembling because of your sins, with joy because of your hope.” (opening of Oration 38)

In the name of the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**