

SUNDAY July 20, 2025 “Spiritual and Mental Health: Hannah and Elijah”

Hannah: I Samuel 1-21 and 1 Samuel 2:1-10 which is 878 VU (on Screen)

Elijah I Kings 17-18 and 19:1-18

We continue our summer series “At Your Request” by focusing today and next week on Spiritual and Mental health with people from the Bible who experienced these struggles in their lives. Today we will hear the life stories and struggles of Hannah and Elijah and what they endured and acted upon in order to live a fuller life with God’s guidance and strength.

How might we define spiritual and mental health? It is one of the most misunderstood topics in the world and the church. People silently struggle with anxiety depression trauma and other challenges. But for some people the stigma of struggling can make them feel like they are alone or even somehow less spiritual. But we know God loves us even when we might think we are just depleted, drained or just being tired. God cares for us and wants us to enjoy being well and being whole and living life to its fullest. Our thoughts and emotions matter to God and God offers real hope and healing but we must take time to understand these and to do this we may look to those who lived faithful lives, struggled and yet had thoughts and situations which lead them to flee or not be is what is expressed.

Let us look to Hannah’s story. We know that Elkanah was well respected- because he is introduced being from Ramathaim. His father- Jeroham, grandfather- Elihu, great grandfather, Zuph from the hill country of Ephramite. Elkanah is a man who has two wives Penninah and Hannah. We don’t know the wives’ history but at that time women were often defined and named by the children they bore which would lead to future generations. Penninah has children and Hannah does not. Faithful followers of God, they would make the annual trip to worship at Shiloh, share food together stay together and then return home the next day.

As they all lived together, Penninah often provoked Hannah, irritated her and bothered her because Hannah could not have children. The text also states, “the lord had closed her womb”. This occurred over several years and also when they worshiped at Shiloh, too. Hannah would not eat and just wept. During one such trip Elkanah tried to console her by asking her questions. But this pained her even more as he seemed not to understand her suffering or why. She remains silent for a time. But then Hannah gets up and goes to the temple. Eli was there and heard Hannah’s prayer as she wept bitterly.

“O Lord of hosts, if only you will look on the misery of your servant, and remember me, and not forget your servant, but will give to your servant a male child, that I will set him before

you as a nazirite-- one who would serve the Lord-until his death. He will not drink wine or intoxicate and will not shave.”

Eli watched Hannah but as she prayed no voice was heard; in fact Eli thought she was drunk. He asked her how long she would make a spectacle of herself ? But Hannah pleaded with the priest and said, “I’m not drunk, but am deeply troubled... I have been pouring out my soul before the Lord. I have been speaking out of anxiety and vexation”

Eli answered, “Go in peace; God of Israel will grant the petition you have made to him. His response was that she would find favour in God’s sight. She left the temple and went to be with Elkanah and the others. The next morning they worshiped God and then went home. In due time, Elkanah ‘knew her’ and eventually she conceived and bore a son. Because she asked him of God she called him “Samuel”.

Let’s just take a moment to reflect on what Hannah endured- rivalry and bullying from Penninah; favouritism by Elkanah with preferential treatment of food which caused further animosity with Penninah; depression because she couldn’t get pregnant, misery, feeling forgotten, and she was very much alone. Eli thought she was medicating with alcohol- drunk, but this is not what she is doing-- she pours out her soul in prayer to God and for God to do something. She is seeing herself as worthless, anxious, vexed and difficult to understand. She is pleading in her prayer to God to help her. In many ways Hannah is struggling mentally due to her inability to have children and questions her role in life as a favoured wife to her husband. Her faith is strong so much so she pleads with God to do something. She even makes a deal with Eli the priest.

Hannah struggles spiritually as well because she questions where she stands in God’s plan. But she doesn’t stay there nor does she hide her pain. She feels it and so do those around her. She weeps as she acknowledges the loss. She cries out to God and vows that if God gives her a son, she would set her future child apart for God’s purposes. This is amazing since what she longs for most will be surrendered. This demonstrates her faith in not only asking, but trusting God.

And in Hannah’s prayer we read “there is no Rock like our God’. For Hannah God is what steadies her and defines her as an individual. God is what guides her life and out of faith she asks God to do something. Spiritually she is not sure what to do, but mentally she is depleted and seeking God’s desire and help.

How many of us have been this depleted? Maybe not for the same reason as Hannah, but because there is desperation and wonder and hope all mixed together and we wonder what is to come. But are we willing to do what Hannah did-- deeply and earnestly pray and plead to

God? Or maybe we are unsure of the relationship we have with God to even attempt this? There is no Rock like our God. God is knowledge. Hannah's prayer is a song of faith reminding us of God's qualities and characteristics. And is reflective of her faith and hope in God. And she believes. She also fulfills her promise to God that Samuel will serve God when old enough to do so.

Hannah struggled yet God heard her plea and cry and answered. Maybe when we struggle we need to remember that we are not alone- God hears and others will help, if we just ask.

Elijah's struggle with mental health seems surprising for readers of his story because he is a prophet of God respected by many. However, King Ahab and others do not believe in God and so when Elijah tells King Ahab that there will be a drought he is also challenging their Canaanite god, Baal who is responsible for rain, thunder, lightning and dew. And when he challenges the king he is also against the queen, priests and many of the people of Israel. After giving the news of the pending drought Elijah flees that area and goes to live by the Wadi Cherith (east of the Jordan River). There he was fed by ravens twice a day and drank from the well. But when the wadi dried up Elijah he is then told to go to the community of Zarephath and live there.

When he arrived there a widow was gathering sticks. He asked her to bring water and something to drink. But the widow told him that she had nothing baked and only a bit of food left. She needed what was left to feed her son and herself which was not very much. Elijah tells her that she will have plenty of food until such time the rains return. So she did as he asked and so Elijah continued to stay with this woman and her son. Not too long after his arriving, the child dies. Elijah pleads with God to revive him. And he is alive again. The widow now knows for sure that Elijah is a man from God. Three years pass and then Elijah returns to Ahab to announce the end of the drought.

In a series of encounters with Ahab about whose God is real, Elijah proposes a direct test. Each of the prophets will take a bull and prepare it for sacrifice, lay it on wood but no fire. They are then to pray for fire to light the sacrifice. They pray from morning to noon- nothing; Elijah mocks then, they pray again until evening- nothing. After the day has passed, Elijah prepares the altar with 12 stones, digs a trench and prepares the bull as needed. He then orders the sacrifice to be drenched with water 3 times. He prays to God. Fire falls from the sky, consumes the bull as well as the stones, the earth and water. Upon seeing this, the people

declare- The Lord he is God, The Lord He is God! Elijah orders the prophets of Baal to be seized and slayed. They are taken to the Kishon River and the rain begins.

Queen Jezebel hears what has happened to the priests of Baal and threatens Elijah and so he flees to Beersheba- alone in the wilderness. He sits down under a shrub, prays for death and then falls asleep. An angel of God rouses him tells him to eat; he does and then falls back to sleep. The angel comes again and wakens him, tells him to eat and drink again because he has a long journey ahead of him.

Elijah travels to where Moses received the 10 Commandments at Mount Horeb. He seeks shelter in a cave on the mountainside. While there a great wind was splitting mountains and breaking rocks nearby. But God was not in the wind. An earthquake then occurs- but God was not in this. A fire was also present but God was not in this either. Then after all of this there was silence. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his cloak, and stood at the entrance of the cave. He heard a question from God, "What are you doing here?" "I have been zealous for the Lord- the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, killed your prophets and I am alone." God hears these words and then tells Elijah to go back and anoint a new king of Israel as well as the prophet Elisha who would succeed him. Eventually these tasks are completed and the story of Elijah ends with him being carried up into heaven in a whirlwind.

What a story filled with moments of exhilaration, despair, as well as shock, fear and isolation. There are times of exhaustion, and just being depleted and wondering what God would have him do next!

After telling Ahab about the drought he leaves the area to be fed by ravens and drink from an oasis. Elijah's faith strong and so he does what God asks. When the wadi or oasis dries up he moves on to live with a widow and her son in a small community. He ensures her that she will have food for all until the drought ends. But during this time he pleads with God to revive her son from death. The child lives again and the mother is convinced he is a man of God.

When the 3 years is almost up, Elijah goes back to see Ahab and with prophets of both Baal and God present Elijah challenges them to see which God is real. Elijah achieves a stunning victory in the prime of his strength and peak of success. He leads people back to God and it is a personal vindication by God of who Elijah is. Yet as the rains begin, Jezebel threatens his life. He is in shock-- how could God allow this to happen? He is also afraid which we don't think Elijah could ever be fearful. But Elijah the one who walked into the palace of Ahab and Jezebel, announced God's judgement on them. He also survived isolation and yet he was afraid and ran for his life.

Elijah has had enough. He did everything he could and nothing changed for God's people to return to him. He sees the worst of what happened and not the full story. He remembers the people shouting "The Lord - he is God!" but he wonders if it really happened or whether they meant it. Elijah is down, depressed and lost in his life. So what does God ask him to do?

God tells him to sleep eat and drink. He meets him with his most pressing and urgent need. God doesn't ask him about a serious spiritual counselling session, or rebuke him. He lets Elijah rest eat and drink. God provides an angel to tend to his needs- bread and water and rest. Rested Elijah then goes to Mount Horeb because this is where God had revealed himself to people of Israel with Moses. And it is in this place where Elijah needs to have a new beginning. In James 5:17 it states, "Elijah was a human being and he prayed."

Some of you use computers on a regular basis. At some point you may be waiting for an email to come in and it seems to take forever to do so. What do you do? You close down a program, open it up again thus refreshing where the program and hopefully it refreshes itself with what you need.

Have you ever felt this way? Where you needed a refresh button to start again? Based upon the emotions of your heart, what is stirring in your mind and what you see as possible challenges and changes in your life in the days to come, this refresh is needed.

As we think about Spiritual and Mental health we may reflect on the question God asks Elijah at the cave entrance. What are you doing here Elijah? Elijah answers the same words twice but when he says what God wants him to say, the second time, Elijah realizes he is saying the same thing over and over again. And God sees this in Elijah just as he sees our spiritual and mental health needs. God encourages Elijah and reassures him of what to do for His sake.

What about your spiritual and mental health needs? Yes we need to have the time to slow down- to stop, breathe, reflect and listen for God's voice. Yes we need to seek the Spirit's guidance for strength of what to do next. And in all of this, we need to find the pieces of the puzzle that make us who we are.. What are our spiritual needs in this moment? How is God tending to our needs? How are we serving God? What are the crises/ situations/ and understandings of living today calls us to sit in the cave? What are you doing here, Elijah?

What is God calling you to do? Start with meeting your physical needs first- eat, drink and sleep. Then discern your spiritual needs and mental health needs. We read in James 5 Are any of you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. Are any among you sick? -- call for the elders and have them pray over you? And pray.

As we reflect on Hannah and Elijah's stories our stories may not be the same- but similar we need to take the time to refresh ourselves, by talking to God and finding that place where hope may enter again. We need to take the silence and assess who we are and what God needs us to do as we strive to put the pieces together again. And God will find us and free us anew because God's love is enduring. Thanks be to God.

SING 374 COME AND FIND as a prayer.

.