

A Woman of a Sorrowful Spirit

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DELIVERED BY

C. H. SPURGEON,

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"Hannah answered and said, No, my lord, I am a woman of a sorrowful spirit." [1 Samuel 1:15](#).

The special cause of Hannah's sorrow arose from the institution of polygamy, which, although it was tolerated under the old Law, is always exhibited to us in practical action as a most fruitful source of sorrow and sin. In no one recorded instance in Holy Scripture is it set forth as admirable. In most cases the proofs of its evil effects lie open to the sun. We ought to be grateful that under the Christian religion that abomination has been wiped away, for even with such husbands as Abraham, Jacob, David and Solomon, it did not work towards happiness or righteousness. The husband found the system a heavy burden, grievous to be borne, for he soon found out the truth of the wise man's advice to the Sultan, "First learn to live with two tigresses and then expect to live happily with two wives."

The wife must, in nearly every case, have felt the wretchedness of sharing a love which ought to be all her own. What miseries Eastern women have suffered in the harem, none can tell, or perhaps imagine. In the case before us, Elkanah had trouble, enough, through wearing the double chain, but still the heaviest burden fell upon his beloved Hannah, the better of his two wives. The worse the woman, the better she could get on with the system of many wives, but the good woman, the true woman, was sure to smart under it.

Though dearly loved by her husband, the jealousy of the rival wife embittered Hannah's life and made her "a woman of a sorrowful spirit." We thank God that no longer is the altar of God covered with tears, with weeping and with crying out of those wives of youth who find their husbands' hearts estranged and divided by other wives. Because of the hardness of their hearts, the evil was tolerated for a while, but the many evils which sprang of it should suffice to put a ban upon it among all who seek the welfare of our race.

In the beginning the Lord made for man but one wife. And why only one? For He had the residue of the Spirit and could have breathed into as many as He pleased. Malachi answers, "That He might seek a godly Seed." As if it was quite clear that the children of polygamy would be ungodly and only in the house of one man and one wife would godliness be found. This witness is of the Lord and is true. But enough sources of grief remain—more than enough—and there is not in any household, I suppose, however joyous, the utter absence of the cross. The worldling says, "There is a skeleton in every house." I know little about such dead things, but I know that a cross of some sort or other must be borne by every child of God.

All the true-born heirs of Heaven must pass under the rod of the Covenant. What son is there whom the Father chastens not? The smoking furnace is part of the insignia of the heavenly family, without which a man may well question whether he stands in Covenant relationship to God at all. Probably some Hannah is now before me, smarting under the chastening hand of God; some child of Light walking in darkness; some daughter of Abraham bowed down by Satan and it may not be amiss to remind her that she is not the first of her kind, but that in years gone by there stood at the door of God's house one like she is, who said of herself, "No, my lord, I am a woman of a sorrowful spirit." May the ever-blessed Comforter, whose work lies mainly with the sorrowful, fill our meditation with consolation at this time.

In speaking of this, "woman of a sorrowful spirit," we shall make this first remark—much that is precious may be connected with a sorrowful spirit but, in itself, a sorrowful spirit is not to be desired. Give us the bright eye, the cheerful smile, the vivacious manner, the genial tone. If we do not desire mirth and merriment, yet give us, at least, that calm peace, that quiet composure, that restful happiness which makes home happy wherever it pervades the atmosphere. There are wives, mothers and daughters who should exhibit more of these cheerful graces than they now do and they are very blamable for being petulant, unkind and irritable.

But there are others, I doubt not, who labor to their utmost to be all that is delightful and yet fail in the attempt, because, like Hannah, they are of a sorrowful spirit and cannot shake off the grief which burdens their heart. Now, it is

idle to tell the night that it should be brilliant as the day, or bid the winter put on the flowers of summer! And equally vain is it to chide the broken heart. The bird of night cannot sing at Heaven's gate, nor can the crushed worm leap like a hart up on the mountains. It is of little use exhorting the willow whose branches weep by the river to lift up its head like the palm, or spread its branches like the cedar—everything must act according to its kind—each nature has its own appropriate ways, nor can it escape the bonds of its fashioning. There are circumstances of constitution, education and surroundings which render it difficult for some very excellent persons to be cheerful—they are predestined to be known by such a name as this—"A woman of a sorrowful spirit."

Note well the precious things which went in Hannah's case with a sorrowful spirit. The first was true godliness. She was a godly woman. As we read the chapter, we are thoroughly convinced that her heart was right with God. We cannot raise any question about the sincerity of her prayer, or the prevalence of it. We do not doubt, for a moment, the truthfulness of her consecration. She was one that feared God above many, an eminently gracious woman and yet, "a woman of a sorrowful spirit." Never draw the inference from sorrow that the subject of it is not beloved of God. You might more safely reason in the opposite way, though

it would not be always safe to do so, for outward circumstances are poor tests of a man's spiritual state.

Certainly Dives, in his scarlet and fine linen, was not beloved of God, while Lazarus, with the dogs licking his sores, was a favorite of Heaven. And yet it is not every rich man that is cast away, or every beggar that will be borne aloft by angels. Outward condition can lead us to no determination one way or the other. Hearts must be judged, conduct and action must be weighed and a verdict given otherwise than by the outward appearance. Many persons feel very happy, but they must not, therefore, infer that God loves them! And while certain others are sadly depressed, it would be most cruel to suggest to them that God is angry with them. It is never said, "whom the Lord loves He enriches," but it is said, "whom the Lord loves He chastens."

Affliction and suffering are not proofs of sonship, for "many sorrows shall be to the wicked" and yet, where there are great tribulations, it often happens that there are great manifestations of the Divine favor. There is a sorrow of the world that works death—a sorrow which springs from self-will and is nurtured in rebellion and is, therefore, an evil thing because it is opposed to the Divine will. There is a sorrow which eats as does a canker and breeds yet greater sorrows, so that such mourners descend with their sorrowful spirits down to the place where sorrow reigns supreme and hope shall never come. Think of this, but never doubt the fact that a sorrowful spirit is in perfect consistency with the love of God and the possession of true godliness.

It is freely admitted that godliness ought to cheer many a sorrowful spirit more than it does. It is also admitted that much of the experience of Christians is not Christian experience, but a mournful departure from what true Believers ought to be and feel. There is very much of Christians' experience which they never ought to experience. Half the troubles of life are homemade and utterly unnecessary. We afflict ourselves, perhaps, 10 times more than God afflicts us! We add many things to God's whip—when there would be but one—we must make nine! God sends one cloud by His Providence and we raise a score by our unbelief!

But taking all that off and making the still further abatement that the Gospel commands us to rejoice in the Lord always and that it would never bid us do so if there were not abundant causes and arguments for it, yet, for all that, a sorrowful spirit may be possessed by one who most truly and deeply fears the Lord. Never judge those whom you see sad and write them down as under Divine anger, for you might err most grievously and most cruelly in making so rash a judgment! Fools despise the afflicted, but wise men prize them! Many of the sweetest flowers in the garden of Grace grow in the shade and flourish in the damp.

I am persuaded that He "who feeds among the lilies" has rare plants in His garden, fair and fragrant, choice and comely, which are more at home in the damps of mourning than in the glaring sun of joy. I have known such who have been a living lesson to us all from their broken-hearted penitence, their solemn earnestness, their jealous watchfulness, their

sweet humility and their gentle love. These are lilies of the valley bearing a wealth of beauty, pleasant even to the King Himself! Feeble as to assurance and to be pitied for their timidity, yet have they been lovely in their despondencies and graceful in their holy anxieties.

Hannah, then, possessed godliness despite her sorrow. In connection with this sorrowful spirit of hers Hannah was a lovable woman. Her husband greatly delighted in her. That she had no children was to him no depreciation of her value.

He said, "Am I not better to you than 10 sons?" He evidently felt that he would do anything in his power to lift up the gloom from her spirit. This fact is worth noting, for it does so happen that many sorrowful people are far from being lovable people. In too many instances their griefs have soured them. Their affliction has generated acid in their hearts and with that acid they bite into everything they touch—their temper has more of the oil of vitriol in it than of the oil of brotherly love. Nobody ever had any trouble except themselves! They declare no rival in the realm of suffering, but persecute their fellow sufferers with a kind of jealousy, as if they, alone, were the brides of suffering and others were mere intruders.

They think every other person's sorrow is a mere fancy or make-believe compared with theirs. They sit alone and keep silent. When they speak, their silence would have been preferable. It is a pity it should be so and yet so it is that men and women of a sorrowful spirit are frequently to be met with those who are unloving and unlovable. The more heartily, therefore, do I admire in true Christian people the Grace which sweetens them so that the more they suffer, the more gentle and patient they become with other sufferers and the more ready to bear whatever trouble may be involved in the necessities of compassion. Beloved, if you are much tried and troubled and if you are much depressed in spirit, entreat the Lord to prevent your becoming a killjoy to others. Remember your Master's rule, "And you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, that you appear not unto men to fast."

I say not that our Lord spoke the word with the exact meaning I am now giving to it, but it is a kindred sense. Be cheerful even when your heart is sad. It is not necessary that every heart should be heavy because I am burdened—of what use would that be to me or to anyone else? No, let us try to be cheerful that we may be lovable, even if we still remain of a sorrowful spirit. Self and our own personal woes must not be our life psalm, nor our daily discourse. Others must be thought of and in their joys we must try to sympathize. In Hannah's case, too, the woman of a sorrowful spirit was a very gentle woman. Peninnah, with her harsh, haughty and arrogant speech, sorely vexed her to make her fret, but we do not find that she answered her.

At the annual festival, when Peninnah had provoked her the most, she stole away to the sanctuary to weep alone, for she was very tender and submissive. When Eli said, "How long will you be drunken? Put away your wine from you," she did not answer him tartly, as she might well have done. Her answer to the aged priest is a model of submissiveness. Her answer

to the aged priest is a model of gentleness. She most effectually cleared herself and plainly refuted the harsh imputation, but she made no retort and murmured no charge of injustice. She did not tell him that he was ungenerous in having thought so harshly, nor was there anger in her grief. She excused his mistake. He was an old man. It was his duty to see that worship was fitly conducted and, if he judged her to be in a wrong state, it was but faithfulness on his part to make the remark. And she took it, therefore, in the spirit in which she thought he offered it. At any rate, she bore the rebuke without resentment or repining.

Now, some sad people are very tart, very sharp, very severe and, if you misjudge them at all, they inveigh against your cruelty with the utmost bitterness. You are the unkindest of men if you think them less than perfect! With what an air and tone of injured innocence will they vindicate themselves! You have committed worse than blasphemy if you have ventured to hint a fault. I am not about to blame them, for we might be as ungentle as they if we were to be too severe in our criticism on the sharpness which springs of sorrow. But it is very beautiful when the afflicted are full of sweetness and light and, like the sycamore figs, are ripened by their bruising. When their own bleeding wound makes them tender of wounding others and their own hurt makes them more ready to bear what hurt may come through the mistakes of others, then have we a lovely proof that "sweet are the uses of adversity."

Look at your Lord. Oh that we all would look at Him, who, when He was reviled, reviled not again and who, when they mocked Him, had not a word of upbraiding, but answered by His prayers, saying, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." Don't you see much that is precious may go with a sorrowful spirit? There was more, however, than I have shown you, for Hannah was a thoughtful woman. Her sorrow drove her, first, within herself and next into much communion with her God. That she was a highly thoughtful woman appears in everything she says. She does not pour out that which first comes to hand. The product of her mind is evidently that which only a cultivated soil could yield.

I will not, just now, speak of her son further than to say that for loftiness of majesty and fullness of true poetry it is equal to anything from the pen of that sweet Psalmist of Israel, David himself. The Virgin Mary evidently followed in the

wake of this great poetess, this mistress of the lyric are. Remember, also, that though she was a woman of a sorrowful spirit, she was a blessed woman. I might fitly say of her, "Hail, you that are highly favored! The Lord is with you. Blessed are you among women." The daughters of Belial could laugh and make merry and regard her as the dust beneath their feet, but yet she had, with her sorrowful spirit, found Grace in the sight of the Lord! There was Peninnah, with her quiver full of children, exulting over the barren mourner, yet Peninnah was not blessed, while Hannah, with all her griefs, was dear unto the Lord.

She seems to be somewhat like he of another age, of whom we read that Jabez was more honorable than his brethren because his mother bore him with sorrow. Sorrow brings a

wealth of blessing with it when the Lord consecrates it. And if one had to take his position with the merry or with the mournful, he would do well to take counsel of Solomon, who said, "It is better to go to the house of mourning than to the house of feasting." A present flash is seen in the mirth of the world, but there is vastly more true light to be found in the griefs of Christians. When you see how the Lord sustains and sanctifies His people by their afflictions, the darkness glows into noonday!

We come now to a second remark which is that much that is precious may come out of a sorrowful spirit—it is not only to be found with it—but may even grow out of it. Observe, first, that through her sorrowful spirit Hannah had learned to pray. I will not say but what she prayed before this great sorrow struck her, but this I know, she prayed with more intensity than before when she heard her rival talk so exceeding proudly and saw herself to be utterly despised. Oh, Brothers and Sisters, if you have a secret grief, learn where to carry it and delay not to take it there! Learn from Hannah! Her appeal was to the Lord. She poured not out the secret of her soul into mortal ears, but spread her grief before God in His own house and in His own appointed manner!

She was in bitterness of soul and prayed to the Lord! Bitterness of soul should always be thus sweetened. Many are in bitterness of soul, but they do not pray and, therefore, the taste of the wormwood remains. O that they were wise and looked upon their sorrows as the Divine call for prayer, the cloud which brings a shower of supplication! Our troubles should be steeds upon which we ride to God—rough winds which hurry our boat into the haven of all-prayer! When the heart is merry we may sing Psalms, but concerning the afflicted it is written, "Let him pray." Thus, bitterness of spirit may be an index of our need of prayer and an incentive to that holy exercise. O daughter of sorrow, if in your darkened chamber you shall learn the art of prevailing with the Well-Beloved, yon bright-eyed maidens, down whose cheeks no tears have ever rushed, may well envy you, for to be proficient in the art and mystery of prayer is to be as a prince with God! May God grant that if we are of a sorrowful spirit, we may in the same proportion be of a prayerful spirit and we need scarcely desire a change.

In the next place, Hannah had learned self-denial. This is clear since the very prayer by which she hoped to escape out of her great grief was a self-denying one. She desired a son, that her reproach might be removed. But if her eyes might be blessed with such a sight she would cheerfully resign her darling to be the Lord's as long as he lived! Mothers wish to keep their children about them. It is natural that they should wish to see them often. But Hannah, when most eager for a man-child, asking but for one and that one as the special gift of God, yet does not seek him for herself, but for her God! She has it on her heart that as soon as she has weaned him, she will take him up to the house of God and leave him there as a dedicated child whom she can only see at certain festivals.

Read her own words—"O Lord of Hosts, if You will, indeed, look on the affliction of Your handmaid and remember me and not forget Your handmaid, but will give unto Your handmaid a man-child, then I will give him unto the Lord all the days of his life and there shall no razor come upon his head." Her heart longs not to see her boy at home—his father's daily pride and her own hourly solace—but to see him serving as a Levite in the house of the Lord! She thus proved that she had learned self-denial. Brothers and Sisters, this is one of our hardest lessons—to learn to give up what we most prize at the command of God and to do so cheerfully. This is real self-denial when we, ourselves, make the proposition and offer the sacrifice freely as she did.

To desire a blessing that we may have the opportunity of parting with it—this is self-conquest—have we reached it? O you of a sorrowful spirit, if you have learned to crucify the flesh; if you have learned to keep under the body; if you have learned to cast all your desires and wills at His feet, you have gained what a thousand times repays you for all the losses and crosses you have suffered! Personally, I bless God for joy. I think I could sometimes do with a little more of it, but I fear, when I take stock of my whole life, that I have very seldom made any real growth in Grace except as the result

of being dug about and fed by the stern husbandry of pain. My leaf is greenest in showery weather. My fruit is sweetest when it has been frosted by a winter's night.

Another precious thing had come to this woman and that was she had learned faith. She had become proficient in believing promises. It is very beautiful to note how, at one moment she was in bitterness, but as soon as Eli had said, "Go in peace and the God of Israel grant you your petition that you have asked of Him," "the woman went her way and did eat and her countenance was no more sad." She had not yet obtained the blessing, but she was persuaded of the promise and embraced it—after that Christly fashion which our Lord taught us when He said, "Believe that you have the petitions which you have asked and you shall have them." She wiped her tears and smoothed the wrinkles from her brow knowing that she was heard! By faith she held a man-child in her arms and presented it to the Lord.

This is no small virtue to attain. When a sorrowful spirit has learned to believe God, to roll its burden upon Him and to bravely expect succor and help from Him, it has learned by its losses how to make its best gains—by its griefs how to unfold its richest joys. Hannah is one of the honored band who, through faith, "received promises," therefore, O you who are of a sorrowful spirit, there is no reason why you should not, also, be of a believing spirit, even as she was! Still more of preciousness this woman of a sorrowful spirit found growing out of her sorrow, but with one invaluable item I shall close the list—she had evidently learned much of God. Driven from common family joys she had been drawn near to God and, in that heavenly fellowship, she had remained a humble waiter and watcher.

In seasons of sacred nearness to the Lord she had made many heavenly discoveries of His name and Nature, as her son makes us perceive. First, she now knew that the heart's

truest joy is not in children, nor even in mercies given in answer to prayer, for she began to sing, "My heart rejoices in the Lord"—not, "in Samuel"—but in Jehovah her chief delight was found. "My horn is exalted in the Lord"—not, "in that little one whom I have so gladly brought up to the sanctuary." No. She says in the first verse, "I rejoice in Your salvation," and it was even so. God was her exceeding joy and His salvation her delight. Oh, it is a great thing to be taught to put earthly things in their proper places and when they make you glad, yet to feel, "My gladness is in God; not in corn and wine and oil, but in the Lord Himself; all my fresh springs are in Him."

Next, she had also discovered the Lord's glorious holiness, for she sang, "There is none holy as the Lord." The wholeness of His perfect Character charmed and impressed her and she sang of Him as far above all others in His goodness. She had perceived His all-sufficiency. She saw that He is All in All, for she sang, "There is none beside You; neither is there any rock like our God." She had found out God's method in Providence, for how sweetly she sings, "The bows of the mighty men are broken and they that stumbled are girded with strength." She knew that this was always God's way—to overturn those who are strong in self and to set up those who are weak. It is God's way to unite the strong with weakness and to bless the weak with strength. It is God's peculiar way and He abides by it. The full He empties and the empty He fills. Those who boast of the power to live, He slays and those who faint before Him as dead, He makes alive.

She had also been taught the way and method of His Grace as well as of His Providence, for never did a woman show more acquaintance with the wonders of Divine Grace than she did when she sang, "He raises up the poor out of the dust and lifts up the beggar from the dunghill, to set them among princes and to make them inherit the Throne of Glory." This, too, is another of those ways of the Lord which are only understood by His people. She had also seen the Lord's faithfulness to His people. Some Christians, even in these Gospel days, do not believe in the doctrine of the Final Perseverance of the Saints, but she did! She sang, "He will keep the feet of His saints" and, Beloved, so He will, or none of them will ever stand! She had foreseen, also, somewhat of His kingdom and of the Glory of it. Her prophetic eyes, made brighter and clearer by her holy tears, enabled her to look into the future and looking, her joyful heart made her sing, "He shall give strength unto His King and exalt the horn of His Anointed."

And now, lastly, much that is precious will yet be given to those who are truly the Lord's, even though they have a sorrowful spirit. For, first, Hannah had her prayers answered. Ah, little could she have imagined, when Eli was rebuking her for drunkenness, that within a short time she should be there and the same priest would look at her with deep respect and delight because the Lord had favored her. And you, my dear Friend of a sorrowful spirit, would not weep so much, tonight, if you knew what is in store for you. You would not weep at all if you guessed how soon all will change and, like Sarah, you will laugh for very joy!

You are very poor; you scarcely know where you will place your head tonight; but if you knew in how short a time you will be among the angels, your penury would not cause you much distress!

You are sickening and pining away and will soon go to your last Home. You would not be so depressed if you remembered how bright, around your head, will shine the starry diadem and how sweetly your tongue shall pour forth heavenly sonnets such as none can sing but those who, like you, have tasted of the bitter waters of grief! It is better than before! It is better than before! Let these things cheer you if you are of a sorrowful spirit. There shall be a fulfillment of the things which God has promised to you. Eye has not seen, nor ear heard the things He has laid up for you, but His Spirit reveals them to you at this hour!

Not only did there come to Hannah, after her sorrow, an answered prayer, but Grace to use that answer. I do not think that Hannah would have been a fit mother for Samuel if she had not, first of all, been of a sorrowful spirit. It is not everybody that can be trusted to educate a young Prophet. Many a fool of a woman has made a fool of her child. He was so much her "duck" that he grew up to be a goose! It needs a wise woman to train up a wise son and, therefore, I regard Samuel's eminent character and career as largely the fruit of his mother's sorrow and as a reward for her griefs. Hannah was a thoughtful mother which was something and her thought induced diligence. She had slender space in which to educate her boy, for he left her early to wear the little coat and minister before the Lord. But in that space her work was effectually done, for the child Samuel worshiped the very day she took him up to the Temple.

In many of our homes we have a well-drawn picture of a child at prayer and such, I doubt not, was the very image of the youthful Samuel. I like to think of him with that little coat on—that linen ephod—coming forth in solemn style, as a child-servant of God to help in the services of the Temple. Hannah had acquired another blessing and that was the power to magnify the Lord. Those sweet songs of hers, especially that precious one which we have been reading—where did she get it from? I will tell you! You have picked up a shell, have you not, by the seaside and you have put it to your ear and heard it sing of the wild waves? Where did it learn this music? In the deeps! It had been tossed to and fro in the rough sea until it learned to talk with a deep, soft meaning of mysterious things which only the salt sea caves can communicate. Hannah's poetry was born of her sorrow and if everyone here that is of a sorrowful spirit can but learn to tune his harp as sweetly as she tuned hers, he may be right glad to have passed through such griefs as she endured.

Moreover, her sorrow prepared her to receive further blessings, for after the birth of Samuel she had three more sons and two daughters—God thus giving her five for the one that she had dedicated to Him! This was grand interest for her loan—500 percent! Parting with Samuel was the necessary preface to the reception of other little ones. God cannot bless some of us till, first of all, He has tried us. Many of us are not fit to receive a great blessing

till we have gone through the fire. Half the men that have been ruined by popularity have been so ruined because they did not undergo a preparatory course of opprobrium and shame! Half the men who perish by riches do so because they had not toiled to earn them but made a lucky hit and became wealthy in an hour.

Passing through the fire anneals the weapon which afterwards is to be used in the conflict! And Hannah gained Divine Grace to be greatly favored by being greatly sorrowing. Her name stands among the highly-favored women because she was deeply sorrowing. Last of all, it was by suffering in patience that she became so brave a witness for the Lord and could so sweetly sing, "There is none holy as the Lord, neither is there any rock like our God." We cannot bear testimony unless we test the promise and, therefore, happy is the man whom the Lord tests and qualifies to leave a testimony to the world that God is true. To that witness I would set my own personal seal.