

A BIBLE PORTRAIT OF CHRISTIAN MOTHERHOOD

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"When Elkanah and all his household went up to make the annual sacrifice and his vow offering to the Lord, Hannah did not go and explained to her husband, 'After the child is weaned, I'll take him to appear in the Lord's presence and to stay there permanently.' Her husband Elkanah replied, 'Do what you think is best, and stay here until you have weaned him. May the Lord confirm your word.' So Hannah stayed there and nursed her son until she weaned him." 1 Samuel 1:21-23

It is the picture of a mother of the olden times, that is before us. The story of Hannah is invested with rare interest. It is one of those narratives whose charm is their unadorned simplicity. Though living so long since, when the world was so young—this mother stands yet, in the radiant spirit of her life—in the clearness of her faith, in the devotion of her motherhood, as a model for Christian mothers in these newest ages. There are some things that grow old and out of date—but motherhood does not. It is ever the same in its duties, its responsibilities, its sacred privileges, and its possibilities of influence. The old picture is new and fresh, therefore, in every age, to every true-hearted mother who looks upon it.

For one thing, Hannah, as a mother, was enthusiastic. She was not one of those women who think children undesirable encumbrances. She did not consider herself, in her earlier married years, particularly fortunate in being free from the cares and responsibilities of motherhood. She believed that children were blessings from the Lord, that motherhood was the highest honor possible to a woman; and she sought, reverently and very earnestly, from God—the privilege of pressing a little child to her bosom, and calling it her own. This line in the ancient picture we must not overlook in these days, when children are not always regarded as blessings from the Lord, nor even always welcomed.

For another thing, when Hannah's child came, she considered it a part of her pious duty, to nurture and care for it. Instead, therefore, of going up to Shiloh to attend all the great feasts, as she had done before—she stayed at home for some time, to give personal attention to the little one that God had given her, and that was still too young to be taken with safety and comfort on such long journeys. No doubt she supposed that she was worshiping God just as acceptably in doing this, as if she had gone up to all the great religious meetings. And who will say that she was not right?

A mother's first obligations—are to her children; she can have no holier or more sacred duties than those which relate to them. No amount of public religious service will atone for neglect of these. She may run to social and missionary meetings, and abound in all kinds of charitable activities, and may do very much good among the poor, carrying blessings to many other homes, and being a blessing to other people's children, through the Sunday school or mission school; but if she fails, meanwhile, to care for her own children—she can scarcely be commended as a faithful Christian mother! She has overlooked her first and most sacred duties, while she gives her hand and heart to those that are but secondary to her.

Hannah's way evidently was the true one. A mother had better be missed in the church, and at the public meetings—than be missed in her own household. Some things must be crowded out of every earnest life—but the last thing to be crowded out of a mother's life, should be the faithful and loving care of her children. The preacher may urge that everyone should do something in the general work of the church, and may appeal for teachers for the Sunday school; but the mother herself must decide whether the Master wants her to take up any religious work outside her own home. For the work there—she surely is responsible; for that outside—she is not responsible until her responsibility to her children is well done, and she has time and strength for new duties.

Another thing about Hannah was, that she looked after her own baby. She did the nursing herself. She did not hire any kind of 'baby-sitter'—and then commit her tender child to her care, that she herself might have a "free foot" for parties and visits and operas, and social and religious duties. She was old-fashioned enough, to prefer to nurse her own child. She does not seem to have felt it any great personal deprivation, to be kept rather closely at home for a year or two on that account. She even appears to have thought it a high honor, and a distinguished privilege—to be a mother, and to do with her own hands—a mother's duties. And when we think what this child that she nursed became in after-years, what the outcome was of all her pains, self-denials and toils—it certainly looks as if Hannah was right!

It is not likely she ever regretted that she had missed a few parties and other social privileges—in order to nurse and care for Samuel in his tender infancy—when she saw her son in the prime and splendor of his power and usefulness. If anything even half so good comes ordinarily out of faithful mothering, there are

certainly few occupations open to women, even in these 'advanced' nineteenth-century days, which will yield such satisfactory results in the endâ€”as the wise and true bringing up of children. Many women are sighing for distinction in the professions, or as authors, or artists, or singers; but, after allâ€”is there any distinction so noble, so honorable, so worthy, and so enduringâ€”as that which a true mother wins when she has brought up a son who takes his place in the ranks of godly men?

Could Mary, the mother of Jesus, have found any mission, in any century, greater than that of nursing and caring for the holy child that was laid in her arms? Or, if that example be too high, could the mothers of Moses, of Samuel, of Augustine, of Washington, have done more for the worldâ€”if they had devoted themselves to art, or poetry, or music, or any kind of 'profession'?

Perhaps Hannah was right; and, if so, the old-fashioned motherhood is better than the new, and the mother herself is her own child's best nurse. A hired woman may be very skillful; but surely she cannot be the best one to mold the soul of the child, and awaken and draw out its latent powers and affections. The mother may, by employing such a substitute, be left free to pursue the fashionable round of dining and dressing, of amusement and social engagements; but meanwhile, what is becoming of the tender, immortal life at home in the nursery, thus left practically motherless, to be nurtured and trained by a hireling stranger? And besides, what becomes of the holy mission of motherhood, which the birth of every child lays upon her who gave it life?

A recent writer, referring to this subject, asks, "Is there any malpractice of office, like unto this? Our women crowd the churches, to draw the inspiration from religion for their daily duties, and then prove recreant to the first of all fidelities, the most solemn of all responsibilities! We hear fashionable young mothers boast that they are not tied down to their nurseriesâ€”but are free to meander in the old mirthful life, as though there were no shame to the soul of womanhood therein."

Such a boast is one of the saddest confessions a mother could make. The great need of this age, is mothers who will live with their own children, and throw over their tender lives all the mighty power of their own rich, warm, loving natures. If we can have a generation of Hannahs, we shall then have a generation of Samuels growing up under their wise, devoted nurture.

There is one other feature in this old-time mother that should not be overlooked. She nursed her child for the Lord. From the very first she looked upon him as God's child, not hersâ€”and considered herself as only God's nurse, whose duty it was to bring up the child for a holy life and service. It is easy to see what a dignity and splendor this gave to the whole toilsome round of motherly tasks and duties, which the successive days brought to her hand. This was God's child that she was nursing, and she was bringing him up for the Lord's service in two worlds. Nothing ever seemed drudgery; no duty to her little one was hard or distastefulâ€”with this thought ever glowing in her heart. Need any woman have loftier or more powerful inspiration for toil and self-forgetfulness, than this?

And is there any mother who may not have the same inspiration, as she goes through her round of commonplace nursery tasks? Was Samuel God's child, in any higher sense when Hannah was nursing himâ€”than are the little ones that lie in the arms of thousands of mothers today? In every mother's ears, when a baby is laid in her bosom, there is spoken by the breath of the Lord the holy whisper, if she but had ears to hear the divine voice, "Take this childâ€”and nurse it for Me!" God wants Christian mothers to bring up their children for pure and noble lives, and for holy missions. Every mother is, by the very lot of motherhood when it falls upon her, consecrated to the sacred service of nursing, molding, and training an infant life for God. Hannah understood this, and found her task full of glory. But how many, even among Christian mothers, fail to understand it, and, unsustained by a consciousness of the dignity and blessedness of their high calling, look upon its duties and self-denialsâ€”as painful tasks, a round of toilsome, wearisome drudgery?

It will be well worth while for every mother to sit down quietly beside Hannah, and try to learn her secret. It will change the humblest nursery into a holy sanctuary, and transform the commonest, lowliest duties of motherhood, into services as splendid as those the radiant angels perform before the Father's face.