

Peninnah

Text: I Samuel 1:6-7

Speaker: Rev. Angus Stewart

Peninnah held honourable positions – she was a citizen in Israel, the one church of the Old Testament, and she was a wife and a mother. But “they are not all Israel who are of Israel” (Rom. 9:6). Though her name meant “pearl” or “coral,” and sounded beautiful both in English and Hebrew, she was far from beautiful in character. The text describes her as an enemy of godly Hannah. “Her adversary also provoked her sore, for to make her fret, because the Lord had shut up her womb” (I Sam. 1:6). This passage is the only explicit mention in Scripture of enmity from an *ungodly* woman against a *godly* woman. Other major biblical conflicts are between brothers (Cain and Abel, Jacob and Esau) or between men in public office (Saul and David). But here, the conflict is between two women, centered on family, covenant, worship, and suffering.

Let us consider Peninnah under three points: her sins, the effects of those sins, and the abiding principles Hannah draws from the entire painful experience. This is not merely a story about a harsh woman, but a lesson for God’s people in every age, especially in the church, about how God brings good out of evil and how pride, jealousy, and cruelty operate even under the guise of religion.

The Sins

Two foundational sins lie at the root of her grief: first, bigamy. Elkanah had two wives, which was contrary to God’s design in Genesis 2:24, where He ordained that one man and one woman become one flesh. Bigamy brings misery and strife, and it was never condoned by God, even though it appeared in the darker days of the Old Testament. Hannah was evidently the first wife, and after her barrenness, Elkanah took Peninnah to gain children. Yet the result was not peace but jealousy and provocation. Though Elkanah bore the greater guilt, Peninnah still sinned by agreeing to the arrangement.

From this arose Peninnah’s jealousy. The text and surrounding details point to this. Elkanah loved Hannah, gave her a worthy portion of the peace offering, and even asked, “Am I not better to thee than ten sons?” (v. 8). Though there’s no comment about his love for Peninnah, it is clearly Hannah who had his heart. Such partiality was itself a sin on Elkanah’s part, but it fostered envy in

Peninnah. She envied the superior marriage bond between Hannah and their shared husband.

Jealousy grew into taunting. Verse 6 says, “Her adversary also provoked her sore for to make her fret.” This wasn’t accidental. It was deliberate cruelty, aimed at Hannah’s weakest point: her *childlessness*. Peninnah likely said things like, “God is judging you. You have no children, because He loves me more. You must be under His displeasure.” Peninnah’s reasoning reflected a theological error—believing that grace is found in things. That is, the more children you have, the more God loves you. This is the doctrine of “common grace,” wrongly assuming that earthly prosperity proves divine favour. It isn’t so simple.

Out of this came pride. Hannah rebukes it in her prayer: “Talk no more so exceeding proudly; let not arrogancy come out of your mouth” (2:3). Peninnah had sons and daughters, so at least four children, and probably more. Her boasting was of the worst sort: spiritual pride clothed in providence. She hurt Hannah deliberately. Not behind her back, but face to face. Her intent was not simply to feel superior but to cause misery, and she enjoyed it. She looked for the most painful moment—Hannah’s barrenness—and pressed into it like someone prodding a wound.

Peninnah’s cruelty had aggravating features. First, it was continual—year after year. Not a temporary outburst, but habitual torment. Second, it happened at holy times. Her scorn came especially during pilgrimage feasts, when all Israel was commanded to rejoice before the Lord. Third, it took place in the Tabernacle setting, where worship was to be pure. Peninnah’s aim was to ruin Hannah’s ability to worship God.

Her sin resulted in persecution. She was a malicious church member who used her words to destroy the spiritual life of a godly woman. She pretended piety—joining in worship and sacrifice—but was in fact poison to the fellowship of saints.

The Effects

Peninnah’s cruelty brought great sorrow to Hannah. She was already grieved at the corruption in the church: Eli’s sons, Hophni and Phinehas, were fornicating with women at the Tabernacle and stealing sacrificial portions meant for God and the people. They were sons of the high priest, and yet utterly depraved. No wonder Hannah’s soul was burdened by the visible church’s condition.

Added to this was her own barrenness. Like Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, and Elizabeth, she longed for a child. This desire was unmet for years, and the shame and pain deepened. But on top of that came Peninnah's cruel provocations—vicious, deliberate, and spiritually timed. Her grief compounded until she could neither eat nor rejoice at the feasts.

This emotional and spiritual weight drove Hannah to her knees. She wept sore, and in bitterness of soul, prayed to the Lord. She vowed a vow: if God would give her a son, she would dedicate him to the Lord all his days. She made this vow with understanding—no razor would touch his head, for he would be a Nazarite. She poured out her heart with fasting and prayer.

The Lord heard her, and granted her a son: Samuel. Her childlessness ended; and later, she bore three more sons and two daughters. Peninnah's taunts ceased. No longer could she accuse Hannah of being unloved by God.

But more than that—Samuel became a mighty figure in Israel. He was the answer to each of Hannah's griefs. First, he removed the shame of barrenness. Second, he was a sign of God's favour, not His judgment. And third, Samuel reformed the church. He judged Israel, rebuked sin, and cleansed worship. He anointed the first two kings: Saul, and then David, God's chosen. David would become the great type of Christ.

Samuel was a Levite, a prophet, a judge, a Nazarite from birth, and a kingmaker. Between Joshua and David, no one played a more pivotal role in the Kingdom of God. Some even argue that between Moses and David, Samuel was the greatest. God used him to shift Israel from the chaos of the judges to the stability of kingship. And Hannah knew this: in her prayer she speaks of a coming king: "The Lord shall give strength unto His king and exalt the horn of His anointed" (2:10).

And thus we see: God used even wicked Peninnah to bring about this outcome. Just as He used Joseph's brothers, Saul, Shimei, Judas, and Caiaphas. They meant it for evil—God meant it for good. Peninnah's cruel taunts were used by God to press Hannah into fervent prayer. The result was Samuel, and through Samuel, the establishment of the monarchy that led to David and finally to Jesus Christ.

The Principles

The final section of Hannah's story is her prayer. No longer weeping and unable to eat, she now rejoices in the Lord. "My heart rejoiceth in the Lord... my mouth

is enlarged over mine enemies" (2:1). Her first principle is this: God is holy, and He knows. "The Lord is a God of knowledge, and by Him actions are weighed" (2:3). He saw every cruel word and every bitter tear. Pride, especially spiritual pride, has no place in His kingdom. God weighs motives, not merely outward acts.

Then comes the great theme of divine reversal. The proud are brought low. The humble are lifted up. "The bows of the mighty men are broken, and they that stumbled are girded with strength" (2:4). The full are now hungry; the hungry are now full. "The barren hath born seven" (2:5) – a poetic number for Hannah's fullness. "She that hath many children is waxed feeble" (2:5) – Peninnah fades into irrelevance.

God reverses things for His people. "The Lord killeth and maketh alive: he bringeth down to the grave, and bringeth up" (2:6). This is how He converts and sanctifies. He humbles the proud and raises the poor from the dust. He sets them among princes, makes them inherit the throne of glory (2:8). Why? Because He is sovereign: "The pillars of the earth are the Lord's." And He does this not only for Israel in the past, but also for the church in every age.

"The Lord will keep the feet of His saints" – He upholds the humble – "but the wicked shall be silent in darkness: for by strength shall no man prevail" (2:9). The kingdom of God operates on opposite principles to the world's. The first are last; the last are first. The humble are exalted; the proud are cast down.

And this is the way of the Kingdom of Heaven—for men and women, for children too. Hannah, once weeping, is now worshiping. Once empty, now full. Once mocked, now singing. This is what God does. And He does it through prayer, through suffering, and through providence—even the cruel provocations of a rival like Peninnah. Let all the Peninnahs of this world take heed. Let every Hannah press on in hope, prayer, and joy in God.

Our Father in Heaven, bless to us Thy word, that we may learn from the warning examples of people in the Bible, and that we may humble ourselves under Thy mighty hand, that in due time Thou mayest lift us up. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.