

SEVEN MOTHERS PART THREE

Over the past two weeks we have looked at five of the seven mothers used by God to bring a blessing into the world:

Eve – the mother whose child was killed
Sarah - the mother who couldn't conceive
Rachel - the mother who died in childbirth
Rahab - the mother with a sordid past
Ruth – the mother who lost a husband

As we close out our study, there are two more women I want to look at: Hanna, the mother of Samuel, and Mary, the mother of Jesus.

We have on occasion watched a TV show called “Long Lost Family” where adopted children are seeking their birth mothers. The show has two hosts, both of whom were adopted and went on their own journey to discover their birth mothers. Because of their personal experience they express a lot of sympathy and personal empathy toward those seeking to discover their birth mothers.

No adopted child knows how they will feel when they hear the news of whether or not they were wanted. They try and prepare themselves for the answer but most are unprepared for the flood of emotions that assail them when they hear the news. In the few episodes we have watched all of the birth mothers were found, and all desired to be reunited with the child they gave up for adoption; so these have all had happy endings.

But life is not always this kind. I know some who have sought after their birth mother only to be rejected by them for a second time. This, of course, presents a different set of circumstances with which to deal. That is why the two hosts of this program express great kindness and care when they reveal to the adopted child what they have discovered. You never know what lies behind the secret of adoption.

For those whose birth mothers continue to desire anonymity these questions come to mind. Would it have been better to have never made the effort than to suffer a double rejection? Or is it somehow more comforting to know that you did not have to spend your life with someone who did not want you; that the adoption you experienced was absolutely the best choice that was made for you personally, because, by that choice, you grew up in a home where you were wanted, nurtured, and loved - where your physical, material, and emotional needs were met by parents committed to raising a secure and healthy adult. Only the rejected adoptee can answer that question.

But one thing I have seen that all adopted children have in common is their desire to know *why* they were given up. What were the circumstances that led to their adoption? Was their mother in trouble, unable to care for them, or just selfish? Did their mother even hold them after their birth or did they immediately shun them, having no desire to be part of their child's life? Did their mother regret her decision? Did she even once think about the child she gave up?

These seem to be the common questions expressed by those featured on this show. They may vary to one degree or another in importance but where all these questions stem from is the bond that was formed by the child with the mother in the womb. This bond did not diminish over time or even

because of separation. Forced separation may have actually increased the longing to be reunited because this bond is not founded on logic or formed by unanswered questions. This bond was God created. The very conception of a child in a mother's womb creates the bond.

You could consider the longing adopted children have long after being separated from their birth mothers as separation anxiety. What they knew in the womb they have not known since birth; for they were immediately separated from their birth mother and placed into the arms of someone else. So they instinctively know something has always been missing and they long to see it re-established.

This does not negate or any way diminish the love and respect adopted children have for their adopted parents. In fact, it is this very love that causes some adoptees to wait until their adopted parents have died before they begin their search. They do not want to hurt or appear ungrateful to those who have loved them for 50 years or more.

Some, as they became aware of the circumstances that caused their adoption, have even expressed how much more they respect and love their adopted parents for keeping many of these events from them when they were young. Some birth mothers were victims of abuse, some of rape, some were only 14 when they gave birth. Some gave the child up to protect it from the abusive father. Some simply had no resources to care for the child. And some merely did what they were told to do by their parents. Because of their shared experiences, each of these women had to make a life-changing decision that most of us will never have to make.

But there is one birth mother in the Bible who made the decision to give up her child before she even conceived. Her conception was not a matter of rape or incest or abuse but rather of prayer. This mother's name was Hannah.

HANNAH – The Mother Who Gave Up Her Child

Hanna was one of two wives married to a man named Elkanah. His other wife, Peninnah, had many sons and daughters, but Hannah was not able to provide him with any. As a result Peninnah became Hannah's rival and would provoke her bitterly to irritate her, because, she said, "the Lord has closed her womb."

This happened year after year, every time they would go up to Shiloh to worship and sacrifice to the Lord. At one of these yearly sacrifices Hannah was weeping over her lack of children and would not eat. So her husband said to her, "*Hanna, why do you weep and why do you not eat and why is your heart sad? Am I not better to you than ten sons?*" (1 Samuel 1:8). So, with a little encouragement Hannah had something to eat and drink for the sake of her husband. But the food did not alleviate her sorrow. Since she was still greatly distressed she prayed to the Lord, once again weeping bitterly, and asked the Lord for a son.

What is unusual about Hannah's request is that she tells the Lord that if He will grant her a son she will give him up; she will bring him to the house of the Lord to be raised by the high priest Eli. And she was true to her word. When God granted her request and her son Samuel was born she kept him until he was weaned and then brought him to Eli the high priest saying, "*For this boy I prayed and the Lord has given me my petition which I asked of Him. So I have also dedicated him to the Lord; as long as he lives He is dedicated to the Lord.*" When Hannah and her husband went home at Ramah they left their son Samuel in Shiloh to minister to the Lord before Eli the priest (1 Samuel 2:11).

Hannah would see her son every year when they came for the yearly sacrifice, bringing a little robe which she had made for him. Then Eli would bless Elkanah and Hannah and say, "*May the Lord*

give you children from this woman in place of the one she dedicated to the Lord” (1 Samuel 2:20). God granted Eli’s prayer and Hannah again conceived and gave birth to three sons and two daughters. Meanwhile, Scripture says, “Samuel was growing in stature and in favor both with the Lord and with men” (1 Samuel 2:21, 26).

We hear much of Samuel but no more of Hannah, the woman who cried out in desperation to the Lord for a son. Hannah’s desperation was not caused by a lack of love from her husband for Scripture tells us of Elkanah’s great love for Hannah. Rather she cried out because of the torment she was receiving from her husband’s other wife.

What makes a woman who has conceived many children and is secure in her husband’s home reach out to torment another woman who has not been so blessed? I can only surmise. But perhaps it was her insecurity that caused Peninnah to torment Hannah. Perhaps she was jealous of the love Elkanah poured out on Hannah. Perhaps it was not the same type of love that he showed to Peninnah. Whatever the reason the peer pressure Peninnah placed on Hannah caused her great heartache.

Yet Hannah bears some responsibility as well. Not content with the love of her husband alone she desired a child. Hannah is not unlike many women in this regard. God created a woman to conceive and to bear a child. Many barren women have longed for something which has been withheld from them through no fault of their own. Many women who have struggled to conceive can relate to Hannah’s bitter tears.

But what sets Hannah apart from other barren women is that when her request was granted she released her child unto the care of someone else. Hannah was a brave and dedicated woman who did not make her vow to the Lord foolishly or without prior thought. To conceive a child appears to be the biggest blessing she sought after. And when this blessing was granted, Hannah was willing to give the child back to the One who had blessed her. Though she was serious about her vow, it must have been heartbreaking for her to actually place her long prayed for child into the hands of another. When you receive an answer to prayer it is sometimes very difficult to let it go.

Though the circumstances are considerably different than normal, Hannah is an example of a birth-mother who had to make an immediate decision to give her child up for adoption. Even before conception she was willing to make that sacrifice. In today’s selfish world we constantly ask, what’s in it for me? What benefit do I receive for my actions? So we ask the same of Hannah. Was giving up her child the best thing for Hannah? Was it the best thing for the child Samuel? Until we can speak to them directly no one can be certain; but it appears the answer to both is yes.

One can never truly know the outcome of having children. In spite of our joy at their birth and all the effort we put into their education and understanding, we can never truly know in advance if our children will grow in the wisdom of God or maintain that relationship through obedience and personal sacrifice. God gives us instructions on how to raise children and promises that if we follow these we will have obedient children, even if they should stray for a period of time. But when you give your child up for adoption you do not have that influence. The only gauge you have to determine how your child will turn out is how you feel at the moment and what little you know about the adoptive parents

The high priest Eli, to whom Hannah gave her son, had two sons which Scripture says were “worthless men” (1 Samuel 2:12). They did things that were evil in the sight of the Lord. Eli spoke to them about this but did nothing to prevent them from doing evil. God was well aware of the house of Eli and the negative impact it was having on the holiness of God and His tabernacle at Shiloh.

The placement of Hannah's child into the house of Eli was not the best choice she could have made. As hopeful as she was that he would be raised up to be a righteous man in the house of the Lord she was taking a risk. If Eli would not rebuke his own son's evil behavior, what hope did she have that he would expect and require righteous behavior from her son? And growing up in this household, how could Samuel possibly find the strength of character to remain faithful to the Lord?

But Hannah had made a vow and I do not think the Lord would have honored her vow if there was a chance that her son would fall prey to the same evil that Hophni and Phinehas did. For God is a Holy God and would not allow the priesthood to be maintained in such an unholy manner. Even before Samuel arrived God had made plans to punish Eli and his sons and while Samuel was still a little boy He put these plans in motion. God would soon remove the entire house of Eli from the priesthood.

So God called out to Samuel in the night and told him that He was about to judge the house of Eli because Eli knew of his sons constant sinning and he did not rebuke them. This prophecy was fulfilled when, through a series of events, the two sons of Eli were killed in battle and Eli, upon hearing of their deaths, fell off his seat backwards, broke his neck and died. As for Samuel, here is what the Scriptures say:

1 SAMUEL 3:19-21

“Samuel grew and the Lord was with him and let none of his words fail. All Israel from Dan to Beersheba knew that Samuel was confirmed as a prophet of the Lord. And the Lord appeared again at Shiloh, because the Lord revealed Himself to Samuel at Shiloh by the word of The Lord.”

Can a child who is abandoned by his mother ever amount to anything? Can a barren mother who finally conceives make an impact in the world when she gives her child up for adoption? The answer to both is yes. Samuel grew up to be a great prophet and judge in Israel. During his lifetime he would go annually to Bethel, Gilgal, and Mizpah and judge Israel in all these places.

Even when he was old God used Samuel to anoint Saul as Israel's first king. Then, when Saul rebelled against God's commands, He used him to rebuke and warn Saul that God was taking His favor off him and placing it upon someone whose heart was seeking wholly after the Lord. God then sent Samuel to anoint David as the next king.

When Hannah handed over her son to Eli she had no idea how he would turn out. She had her hopes but she had no guarantees. But God heard her prayers and He was in the midst of them. For when she conceived Samuel God created within her the last judge of Israel, one whose ministry had a profound effect on the future of Israel. Hannah's son Samuel was the one chosen by God to anoint David as the second king of Israel. It was through David that a future descendant would come to rule eternally over all the nations of the world.

Would Samuel have accomplished all this if he had stayed in the home of Elkanah and Hannah? Most likely not. It was in the home of Eli that God awoke the prophet within Samuel and Eli taught Samuel how to minister before the Lord to the benefit of all Israel. It was in Hannah's choice to give up her son that Samuel was able to grow into the man God had destined him to be.

The greatest gift Hannah gave to Israel and to the world was the giving up of her son into the care of the high priest. It was through this upbringing that Samuel became a priest and judge over Israel. And through the future anointing of David as Israel's second king, Samuel initiated the reign of the Highest Priest who would come to reign over us all. There can be no higher gift that a mother can give to her son. Even if she had to give him up in order to see it come to pass.

Hanna is the example of an unselfish mother who wanted the best for her child even at the expense of giving him up. She is also an example of a mother who, through her sacrifice, ushered in a change in the spiritual and governmental powers of a nation. Who would have thought that someone who gave her child up for adoption would have such a profound impact on the world? It proves once again that God's providence is not hindered by the circumstances of our birth. The ruler of heaven is able to make lemonade out of our lemons.

Another woman that seemed to have been given a lemon was Mary. An innocent young virgin engaged to be married who suddenly finds herself in a quandary, a Catch-22 if you will. She has done nothing wrong but all the evidence proves otherwise.

MARY – The Mother Who Got Pregnant Out Of Wedlock

There's probably not much that could be said of Mary that has not already been said. Scholars have looked at her life for centuries now and I don't pretend to know more than they. But I want to look at Mary from a different perspective than most scholars have. I want to look at her as someone who had to face pregnancy without intimacy. I want to look at her as someone facing the stigma of shame for something for which she was not responsible.

It is unknown how old Mary was when she gave birth to Jesus. But most scholars agree that she could have been betrothed to Joseph as early as age 12. So she was most likely just a teenager when she got pregnant; and to all who knew her it happened "out of wedlock". She was betrothed to her fiancé Joseph, but this betrothal was just a commitment of marriage to be actualized in the near future. So to have supposed pre-marital sex with your fiancé and become pregnant would have been a shameful thing for her, her family, and for Joseph. But God had other plans.

Scripture does not reveal to us whether Mary immediately told Joseph the details of what the angel Gabriel revealed to her - that she would become pregnant with a male child. All we are told is that before Joseph and she came together she was found to be with child by the Holy Spirit (Matthew 1:18). But Luke tells us that after her visit by the angel she went in a hurry to visit her cousin Elizabeth whom she was told was also pregnant. So she may not have told Joseph what had happened to her immediately but rather waited about three months until she returned and could no longer hide the child growing inside her. But we don't truly know when she told him. What we do know is how Joseph responded once he found out.

In Joseph's day entering into an engagement was much more serious than it is today. Joseph could not break off his engagement by simply saying he had changed his mind and taking back whatever symbol of engagement he had given to her. In Joseph's day his betrothal to Mary constituted a permanent relationship that could only be broken by legal process. When he and Mary got engaged they entered into an unconsummated marriage. Mary was considered Joseph's wife and he her husband even though they had not had sexual relations.

As a man who obeyed the Law, upon hearing of her pregnancy, Joseph could not take Mary as his wife because she was a suspected adulteress. Under the Law he had only two options – he could exonerate himself by publicly having Mary put to death, or pay a fine and break the engagement by sending her away, which in his day was literally a divorce. Luckily for Mary, Joseph was only considering the latter. But then he also got a visit from an angel, and after that Joseph reconsidered.

MATTHEW 1:19-25 (NLT)

“And Joseph her husband, being a righteous man and not wanting to disgrace her, planned to send her away secretly. But when he had considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him

in a dream, saying, ... 'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife; for the Child who has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. She will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins.'

"Now all his took place to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet; 'Behold, the virgin shall be with child and shall bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel', which translated means, 'God with us'. And Joseph awoke from his sleep and did as the angel of the Lord commanded him, and took Mary as his wife, but kept her a virgin until she gave birth to a Son; and he called His name Jesus."

It's amazing how decisions can change once you have all the facts. Joseph now understood that Mary had not brought shame upon herself or upon him. What had happened to Mary was a direct result of God's intervention in both of their lives. Mary and Joseph had been chosen to raise God's promised Messiah. And Joseph, like Mary, was willing to suffer whatever humiliation was necessary in order to be an obedient servant of the Lord.

Like Mary and Joseph, once you know your innocence, once you know the Lord's will for your life, you do not care what others think. You only seek to be true to the calling God has placed upon your life, no matter what the cost.

Now I grant that Mary's out-of-wedlock pregnancy does not compare to others who find themselves in similar situations today. There will never be another virgin who conceives a child who is the Redeemer of Israel. But there are hundreds of girls who find themselves unexpectedly pregnant every day. Whether through choice, rape, or ignorance, these women face the same stigma that Mary faced, though perhaps with less drama today since the morals of our society are severely less than in Mary's day. And I will also grant that the evil options that are so easily available today allow women to make choices that Mary would never have considered.

But putting aside the differences and concentrating on the similarities, what we see in Mary is someone who made the decision to honor God above her personal shame, to place her child before herself, and to embrace the future with hope and confidence, even while acknowledging she did not understand all that had happened to her or why. These are the same decisions facing unwed mothers today.

So we come to our final questions. Can an unplanned pregnancy result in a hopeful future? Can a woman who gets pregnant out of wedlock rise above the shame? And can an unwanted child ever be loved? The answer to all these questions is yes. It was certainly true of Jesus. But it is equally true of others as well.

Wendy and I have personal knowledge of two women who got pregnant out of wedlock – one by deception and one, shall we say "by surprise". In both instances these women had to face the uncertainty of their parent's reactions and the uncertainty of their future. These women were believers who attended church, just like Mary, and had friends who were believers. They also faced the questions of how much they should reveal to others of what had happened to them, how long they could hide their pregnancy, and what were they going to do now that their future had taken a sudden and sharp detour.

Thankfully both of these stories have happy endings. Both found men like Joseph who were willing to marry them and raise another man's child. Both understood the woman's shame and desired to turn that shame into joy. Both paid no heed to how the pregnancy occurred, only that there was an

innocent child that needed a father. To the best of my knowledge none of these men were visited by angels, but I do believe that both were guided by the Holy Spirit to do what they did. These Mary's found their Joseph, someone who would not dismiss them but rather embrace them. And they both raised children who were loved and who are even now living productive and fruitful lives for the Lord.

In Psalm 30 we read the following:

PSALM 30:11-12 (NLT)

“You have turned my mourning into joyful dancing. You have taken away my clothes of mourning and clothed me with joy, that I might sing praises to You and not be silent. O Lord, my God, I will give You thanks forever.”

Over the last two weeks we have looked at the lives of seven women. All of these women experienced mourning – some for the life they could not conceive and some for the life that was taken from them. But when they gave their sorrows to the Lord He removed their clothes of mourning and clothed them with joy. God turned their mourning into joyful dancing.

And who of these women would not rejoice? Eve conceived the child through whom a future descendant would crush the head of Satan. Sarah conceived the child promised to Abraham through whom the whole world would be blessed. Rachael conceived the child who would rescue the twelve tribes of Israel from famine. Rahab and Ruth both became the great and great-great grandmothers of King David through whose line the Messiah would come. Hannah conceived the child who would anoint Rahab and Ruth's descendant as the future king of Israel. And Mary conceived the child whom God ordained as the One through whom forgiveness of sins would come.

A barren woman, a woman who lost her child to murder, a woman who died in childbirth, a woman with a sordid past, a woman who lost her husband, a woman who gave up her child to another to raise, and a woman who got pregnant out of wedlock. All these women have one thing in common. They were all used by God to bring a blessing into the world. All were parts of a chain which formed the link from creation to Revelation.

From these examples we can see that a woman's life is never unredeemable, a woman's offspring is never unusable, and a woman's destiny is never undermined by her past. In all these things – murder, death, sin, disappointment, loss, adoption, and scandal – these women were more than conqueror's because of the One who loved them and promised to bless their obedience.

And this is what God promises to us all. Nothing will be able to prevent God's love and forgiveness from reaching us. We may suffer humiliation, shame, loss, disappointment, and regret but God's love is able to penetrate into the darkest corners of our past and our fears. No Christian need ever remain a loser in life. No Christian need ever remain shackled to the past. No Christian need ever remain the product of all the evil they have done. The potential to conquer the past, to create a future free from the things that hold us captive, and to embrace a power that overcomes all that threatens our security and faith is readily available to any believer who places their trust in Him.

ROMANS 8:37-39

“But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the

love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

These seven women – Eve, Sarah, Rachael, Rahab, Ruth, Hanna, and Mary - were able to overcome many obstacles that stood in the way of their happiness. Their lives were not without sorrow and frustration, some of which lingered for decades. But their lives were also not devoid of purpose. Through it all - through the loss, the heartache, the disappointment and the shame - these women overwhelmingly conquered all the challenges that life threw their way. They found their tomorrows while sifting through the ashes of their past. And they fulfilled their destiny by clinging persistently to their faith.

They chose not to be defined by what they had done or by what had been done to them. They chose instead to embrace the person which God was working within them to become. Nothing they had done, nothing they had experienced was unredeemable. God took who they were and all they had experienced and worked it all out for good. And they knew that whatever good work God had begun in them He could be counted on to bring it to completion.

This same promise is available to all believers today. If you find yourself in a circumstance that seems insurmountable, if you are dealing with a past that you feel is unredeemable, if you find yourself defined by your sin, then take a lesson from these women. God can take the shame, the struggle and the hurt of the past and use it to bring honor and glory to His name. What He begins at the moment of your belief in Him, He is able to finish. All He seeks are those willing to put their trust in Him and His redemptive power.

Give Him your sorrows, your disappointments, and your shame. I guarantee you that, like Eve, Sarah, Rachael, Rahab, Ruth, Hannah and Mary before you, God will turn your mourning into dancing and make even you a blessing to the world.

HE WHO BEGAN A GOOD WORK IN YOU

He who began a good work in you
He who began a good work in you
Will be faithful to complete it
Will be faithful to complete it
He who started the work will be faithful to complete it in you

If the struggle you're facing
Is slowly replacing your hope with despair
Or the process is long and you're losing your song in the night

You can be sure that the Lord has His hand on you
Safe and secure, He will ever abandon you
You are His treasure and He finds His pleasure in you

Unless otherwise noted all scriptures have been taken from the New American Standard Bible®, Copyright © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.

Scriptures taken from the Holy Bible, New Living Translation (NLT), copyright ©1996, 2004, 2007 by Tyndale House Foundation. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc. Carol Stream, Illinois 60188. All rights reserved.