

Wings

*“Those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength;
they shall mount up with wings like eagles.”
Isaiah 40:31*



January 29, 2012

Clueless Husbands

One of the greatest challenges facing every husband is knowing how to respond to the emotional needs of his wife. The story of Elkanah and Hannah illustrates that challenge.

“Then Elkanah her husband said to her, ‘Hannah, why do you weep? Why do you not eat? And why is your heart grieved? Am I not better to you than ten sons?’ . . . And she was in bitterness of soul, and prayed to the Lord and wept in anguish” (1 Sam. 1:8, 10).

In order to appreciate this exchange between Elkanah and Hannah, we need to understand the dynamics of this family. Elkanah was a good and decent man who took his faith seriously, as evidenced by his family’s pilgrimages to the tabernacle for the annual feast days (v. 3). Elkanah had two wives: Penninah was the more fertile of the two, providing her husband with multiple sons and daughters (v. 4); but Hannah was his favorite, and he made no effort to hide it, giving her a double portion of the sacrifices (v. 5).

Despite her favored position in the family, Hannah lived in perpetual grief. In a culture where a woman’s worth was measured by the number of children she bore, her barrenness was a cruel burden to bear—and her rival never missed an opportunity to remind her of it (v. 6).

(Side note: This is one of several examples in the Bible of the deleterious consequences of polygamy. The Bible records the fact of polygamy in ancient cultures, but consistently portrays it in a negative light.)

It was on one of their annual trips to the house of God that Elkanah tried to console Hannah. This was a feast day, a time of rejoicing and celebration; why be so gloomy? Besides, she had him, a decent husband who more than made up for her lack of children. Did he not show his affection by giving her a double portion of the sacrifices? So why was she so depressed all the time? Hannah just needed to snap out of it and enjoy the good things in her life.

For all his genuinely good qualities, Elkanah failed to grasp the nature and the depth of his wife’s emotional condition. His clumsy effort to console her only made matters worse. She fled to the door of the tabernacle to pour out the anguish of her heart to the Lord, a prayer that was so distraught, the high priest thought she was drunk (v. 12-13). Yet Elkanah was oblivious to her pain.

Elkanah is the poster boy for Clueless Husband Syndrome. There are millions of wives today who can point to Elkanah and declare, “That’s my husband!” Like Elkanah, when their wives are sad, these men have no idea how to *listen* and empathize. Like Elkanah, they think that physical gifts are adequate to show their love. And like Elkanah, as long as their own privileged place in the home is comfortable, everything is fine. Their wives must suffer in solitude, craving support from companions who are too blind to see the pain inside their own homes.

Hannah’s barrenness was not a problem Elkanah could fix. But he could have done a better job of sharing her sorrow. He should have been on his knees next to Hannah, pouring out his soul to God in her behalf. That simple gesture would have meant the world to her.

Husbands are commanded by the Lord to understand their wives (1 Pet. 3:7). It is by far the greatest challenge a man takes on when he marries a woman. But if he is successful, the reward in marital happiness will be priceless.

– David King