



## Form and Essence

### 1 Samuel 2:1-10; John 4:19-30; Galatians 3:1-14

How often we hear messages that our strength, wealth, intelligence and initiative are the things that will take us forward in life! The world around us is very determined to focus on the self above all else. It is said that we should live life according to our own way. We are told that our desires, plans and dreams are of supreme importance in life. One's personal decision is the decision is said to be the important one. The freedom to choose our own way is the larger direction of society, almost without restriction. Many times we bring the same concept to our service of worship and our religious activities. Without realizing it we often confuse the forms of worship with the essence of offering worship and praise to God. How do we distinguish between forms and essence in religious concerns?

Hannah's prayer in 1<sup>st</sup> Samuel is exemplary in many ways. She had experienced a very difficult time in her life. She had been married for years, but had no children. Her husband had another wife as well, according to the custom of the day. The other wife had conceived and borne children to present her husband. That was OK as far as it went, though it hurt Hannah that she had no son of her own. The issue was that the other wife, Peninnah, ridiculed for having a barren womb. She would laugh at Hannah and make fun of her. She insulted and reproached her. Her life was made difficult because of Peninnah's jealousy towards her and their husband. The biggest problem between the two was that their husband loved Hannah more than Peninnah, and Peninnah sought opportunities to make Hannah feel bad.

It was already difficult for a woman to live without having children. The situation with Peninnah, meanwhile, wore down Hannah's energies and weakened her emotionally even more than normal. Her husband tried to cheer her and affirm his love for Hannah, but his words fell into the void of her depression. Hannah accepted his words, but they did not have the effect of being able to cheer her. She was drawn into the conflict with the other wife and the recognition that in the eyes of society there was some aspect of inferiority surrounding her for want of children.

Hannah came routinely with her husband and Peninnah to Shiloh every year to bring offerings to *Yahweh*, worshiping in the tabernacle of God. Enmeshed in her difficulties and problems, Hannah only thought of her problems on reaching God's tent. In her despair, she came to pray to God for a solution with the promise that if God were to give her a son, she would offer him back to God, that he might serve in the tabernacle for life. It was a rather desperate promise, yet it marked a change in her position before God. It marked the beginning of a shift of focus on herself to a focus on God.

Perhaps such a change is not immediately apparent, but Hannah was now ready to have a child without having him under her control and proximity. She was ready for God to solve her lack of a son, even if she could not have the son with her. She was giving up the most valuable thing she did not yet have into God's hand, recognizing that everything depended on God, regardless. It is in her prayer of rejoicing that we can better appreciate this change.

Her son being born, she named him Samuel in recognition that she had asked him of God. When she had weaned him, she returned again to Shiloh, but now not as a routine. She came to bring offerings to God in gratitude for God's faithfulness and in recognition that God had been faithful in answering her request to give her a child. She came to deliver the baby already dedicated to God, that he might serve all his life, just as she had already promised to do. On this trip to Shiloh, her central reason for

worshiping God had no focus on Hannah. The center of her worship was the character, action and identity of God.

This can be seen in the words and meaning of her prayer. She did not so much look at her condition, as she expressed the uniqueness of God above the human condition. She appreciated that God was above the situation that had seemed so important before, as God was also above the situations of all. She recognized that what was once the highest priority in her life was now a simple matter in the hands of God. God had changed to Hannah on introducing his presence into her life. The worship Hannah now rendered to God was not a summarizing of her needs, but an exalting the nature and action of God.

Although she felt pain at Peninnah's hands and expectations of hers people, now all the pain was dissipating. She recognized that God was above all that and that life was not defined by such classifications. She could come into God's presence in full worship, without the obstacles of the preoccupations of before. Focused on God, had another appreciation of life, even amid all her problems. Nothing changed in the form of her worship. Her internal essence had changed. Her worship was different, for now she came to render worship differently.

Her clothing was the same as always. The offerings she brought not changed much. The music she sang was not different, either. The liturgies, actions and format for approaching God's tabernacle and sanctuary were those of tradition. On arriving to praise God, however, her motivations and attitudes had been turned on end. She came in gratitude, not focused on her blessings, but on God's greatness and power to alter those conditions of life that seem impossible to us.

Everything her society said of human endeavor, human effort, and the human forms we have to manipulate life was left useless and empty. Hannah had recognized the fact that the variables of life depended on God and not so much on human considerations. From this vantage point, she could come to worship God without the intervention of so many human concerns and presuppositions. She arrived at Shiloh not focused on her particular circumstances and anxieties. She arrived focused on the character and action of God. That was what changed in her rendering worship from a focus on forms and formulas toward an essence that focused on God.

The Galatian believers had the question of form and essence mixed-up. They had come to God through grace, but wanted to live their faith through rituals and legislative formulas coming from another source. Paul had to call them back to the essence of God's grace, through which had come to relationship with God through faith. On mixing their approach on religious forms, they lost sight Hannah's inner change that focused on the essence of God's character and concerns. They looked more to their heritage and traditions than to the God they had supposedly come to worship. When they focused on every aspect of formulas, rituals, traditions, and procedures, they lost sight of God and his identity as revealed in Jesus Christ.

Today we have the same problem. It's so easy to look not to God as we gather to worship, but to our own various issues. Focusing on our forms and formulas for worshiping God, we do not recognize that we sideline God. Musical traditions have changed drastically through the centuries, as in their turn have clothing, liturgies and translations of the Bible. As experienced Ana, however, the essential thing is to enter the presence of God according to God's identity. He is the essence of true worship.

—*Christopher B. Harbin*