

Defining MOMENTS

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When *Choices* Matter Most
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Dan Schaeffer



Discovery House Publishers

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Defining Moments
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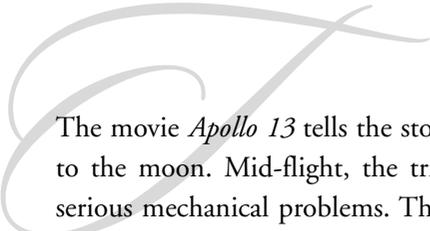
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Chapter One

ON THE EDGE OF FULFILLMENT



The movie *Apollo 13* tells the story of that spacecraft's ill-fated mission to the moon. Mid-flight, the trip was suddenly cut short because of serious mechanical problems. The crew's perilous attempt to get home makes for compelling viewing.

One of my favorite parts of the movie is the story of Ken Mattingly, an astronaut who was originally slated to take part in the mission. At the last minute Ken was scratched from the launch due to the fear that he had contracted measles. The mission he had worked so hard and long to be a part of was to go on without him. While the others would fly into space and fame, he would remain at home. The actor accurately portrays the agony and frustration of a dream that went unfulfilled.

Yet when the Apollo 13 capsule broke down in space, it was Ken Mattingly, left behind seemingly by fate, who solved the electrical prob-

lem essential to start the computers and get the crew home safely. In the final scene, the look of satisfaction on Ken's face reminds us that this was a defining moment for him, yet one he had not envisioned. This mission was appropriately dubbed "a successful failure."

We may experience our most defining moment in the midst of a great desire or heartrending struggle. Perhaps you were spurned by someone you had a crush on in school, or you didn't make the team. Maybe you think you've missed out on marrying the man or woman of your dreams, or you're still single when you want to be married. You may not have the career you've dreamed of. In these moments and others like them, our faithfulness to God will be severely tested because the thing we want most in life, God hasn't given us—and we know that He can.

So many defining moments emerge when we are on the edge of fulfillment and yet are denied the thing we want most. These trials determine whether we can become "successful failures."

This is what makes Hannah one of my heroes. She is a familiar Sunday-school character, perhaps too familiar. The power of her story gets lost in its apparent simplicity. But there was nothing simple about Hannah—or her defining moment.

On the edge of desire

One of the great mistakes we make is in assuming that we are the only one who has an unfulfilled desire. When we see others with the very thing we long for and dream of, we feel cheated. It doesn't seem fair that someone else should get so easily what we want so desperately. Yet, have you ever considered that what you want is often not a great passion for someone who has it? His or her heart's desire is something completely different.

How ironic that though we are blessed in one way, we sense a lack of blessing in other ways! A single person who is financially successful desires most to be married. And one who is married may want more than anything else to be financially successful. The straight-A student

On the Edge of Fulfillment

wishes he were more athletic, while the gifted athlete wishes she were a better student. The attractive person wishes he were more relationally secure, yet the friendly person wishes she were more attractive. Each of us is blessed in different areas, and each of us is unfulfilled in different areas. The experience of unfulfillment is universal, regardless of our social standing, financial situation, or marital status.

In Hannah's case, she had the absolute devotion of her husband Elkanah. Elkanah's second wife, Peninnah, understood she was second fiddle. But Peninnah could give children to Elkanah to carry on his name—a matter of crucial importance in the Hebrew culture. Hannah, on the other hand, could not.

It was common in that culture for a man to marry one woman for love and then, if she remained barren, to take another wife to bear his children. This was Hannah's pain—no children to love, no children to care for, no heir to give to the husband she loved. To make matters worse, Peninnah had not one child but many. Hannah was bleeding from multiple wounds.

Yet God had not withheld blessing from Hannah. When Hannah was in her deepest despair about being childless, her tenderhearted, devoted husband displayed the depth of his love for her. He gave her a double portion of the sacrificial meal as if to say, "I love you twice as much, even without children. I love you for you, Hannah, not for the children you can give me."

Most women would be overjoyed to have a husband so devoted to them, so tender and compassionate. Certainly Hannah was grateful for this. But she wanted a child. Until she had one, she would feel unfulfilled.

Witnessing Elkanah's tenderness toward Hannah prompted jealousy in Peninnah. So she struck Hannah where it hurt the most—she taunted her for her inability to conceive. Although Hannah never retaliated in kind, how she must have dreaded going to the temple, for it exposed her deepest wounds! Few things are more painful than knowing God can remove our pain and fulfill our dream, but He chooses not to do so.

Was Hannah the only one with unfulfilled desires? No! Peninnah surely wanted Elkanah's devotion and love as much as Hannah wanted children. Our world is full of people who feel inadequate and incomplete. They're chasing an elusive dream. Our attitude in these moments is what will truly define us. We are tempted to blame or abandon God. But this is precisely where Hannah shines so brightly, and why the Holy Spirit chose her story for our encouragement.

Unfulfillment is not God's punishment

An unfulfilled desire can feel like a punishment. It's as if God has grounded us. Hannah must have struggled with this. In her Hebrew culture, barrenness was seen as a sign of personal failure and even as the punishment of God. When her family went to the tabernacle to give their peace offerings, a portion of the meat was given to each family member. Hannah had to sit and watch as Elkanah gave a portion to Peninnah and to each of her children. It was a constant reminder to Hannah of her perceived inadequacies as a woman, as a wife.

Are you feeling pangs of unfulfillment? Are you lacking what someone else has? Do you feel that somehow God is punishing you? If you are in continual financial distress or have seen others advancing in their careers while you stagnate; if you have never married, or you've had an unfaithful spouse; if you, like Hannah, are unable to have children, you might be tempted to assume it is God's punishment. The more acutely we feel the pain of our inadequacy, the greater will be our temptation to accuse God of unfairness and withhold our worship. These human tendencies make Hannah's actions all the more commendable.

Peninnah provides a stark contrast to Hannah's attitude. She seems to have concluded that her children were a personal accomplishment and not the blessing of the Lord. As she tormented Hannah over her predicament, Peninnah flaunted her own favorable situation and treated God's blessing as a personal triumph. Her taunts insinuated that she thought she was more loved by God than was Hannah.

Hannah understood that her dilemma was not God's punishment. We know this because of her prayer at the temple. She did not confess any sin to God but simply asked Him to give her what He had withheld. It was an uncomplicated, honest prayer. In it we clearly see Hannah's faith shining through, and we learn four valuable principles for similar moments in our own lives. First, we learn that we must:

Be willing to pray for a desire God may never fulfill

In verse eleven Hannah prayed an extraordinary prayer. She told God, "If Thou wilt . . . give Thy maidservant a son, then I will give him to the Lord all the days of his life, and a razor shall never come on his head."

It is difficult to appreciate fully what Hannah was promising. Hannah was preparing to give up the very thing she most wanted! If God would give her a son, Hannah promised to dedicate him as a Nazirite for life.

Hebrew women traditionally weaned their children at the age of three. This meant that Hannah would give up her three-year-old son forever if God would bless her with a male child.

She wasn't making a deal with God—"If you do this, then I'll do that." Hannah was committed to glorifying God with anything He gave her, including a son. She recognized that since it would take a supernatural act of God for her to have a child, God's purpose for such a child must be special. Isn't this precisely what God had in mind after all? But Hannah didn't make the commitment flippantly.

Have you ever had a three-year-old? I have, and it is one of my favorite times in their lives. At the age of three, my son found a black pen, and with his diaper as his only clothing proceeded to indulge his artistic flair on his stomach, legs, and arms. I can still remember him on the stairs, proudly displaying his "body art," grinning mischievously—and it endeared him to me all the more. Also at three, my eldest daughter Christi caught her first fish on her tiny Mickey Mouse pole. She couldn't wait to show Mommy. I lived for moments like those. My youngest, Katie, when she was three, would turn on the stereo and beg me to watch her dance

about the living room. When I applauded at the end, she wanted to do it again and again, and so did I. Never did I enjoy my children more.

Yet three years of age is when Hannah would have to give up her son, with no promise she would ever have another child. It's one thing to promise the unknown, quite another to let go of "Sammy," who might try to cling to you when you leave and reach out for Mommy with tears in his eyes. A simple story can get a lot more complicated, can't it?

This is what is so amazing about Hannah. In her most defining moment, after praying for a son that she must have prayed for hundreds of times before, at her lowest point, almost despairing, what does she do? She goes again to God. Just because He hasn't acted yet does not mean He won't.

No fuzzy prayers

Hannah did not offer up the kind of fuzzy prayers we so often do: "Help me God in my need." She wanted a baby, a son who would remove her shame and feelings of inadequacy and incompleteness. She wanted to hug and love and nurse her own child, to laugh and play with him and care for him. She wanted this so much it was tearing her up inside.

If we pray for a million dollars, or for someone else's husband or wife, or instant beauty or talent transformation, we are committing the sin James derided so strongly. "You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures" (James 4:3). Our motivation in these prayers is not the glory of God, but luxury and pleasure. But the natural desire of a married woman is a child; there is nothing sinful in that prayer. We're often afraid to pray too specifically because we leave ourselves open to disappointment. God may say "No." But in Hannah's defining moment she was willing to receive "No."

She gave God the option of saying no and still being her God, still being the One she would worship. Can you pray in the same way?

"Lord, "I pray with all my heart for _____, but if I don't get it, You will still be my God, and I will still love and serve you."

What if God had not given Hannah the answer she wanted? Would she have remained faithful? Yes, she would have! How do we know? Because that's exactly what had been happening year after year. Yearly she had asked the same thing and every year God said "No." Yet she returned again and again, her faith strong enough to believe He could do this thing for her, her love for Him strong enough to accept a "no."

A strong faith carried Hannah in her darkest days. Even when she failed to get her request, she did not blame God.

The second principle Hannah teaches us is that we must:

Never give God an ultimatum

Hannah never gave God an ultimatum, either consciously or unwittingly. Notice in her prayer she said, "*If thou wilt ...*" (emphasis added). She recognized that God was under no obligation to provide her with a son. He would still be a God of love, mercy, and righteousness even if she did not receive her deepest desire.

Though Hannah still had no baby, nor even a promise of one, her appetite returned and she was encouraged. Eli offered only a general prayer, requesting God to bless her with children. It was hardly a prophecy. Hannah's faith had been strengthened by the smallest token, and she again put her life in God's hand to do with as He would.

Sometimes that's when our greatest peace comes—not when we get what we most want, but when we finally and completely place the issue in God's care and are fully prepared to accept any answer He may give.

When we place God under an obligation to give us what we most desire, we create a situation in which God must become our servant. We treat Him as our personal Santa Claus, who exists to serve our every wish and whim so long as we're "good." Hannah didn't do that. She treated God always as her sovereign Lord whom she would love and serve wholeheartedly, with or without a child.

The third lesson we learn from Hannah's life is this:

Let nothing come between yourself and God

When God doesn't answer our prayers in the time or way that we want, we tend to move away from Him in disappointment. We may ultimately learn to accept the answer to our prayer, but often a cynicism sets in. We stop asking God for anything important. A subtle wound develops in our relationship with Him. We conclude that He does not really have our best at heart. Disappointment becomes the sand in the engine of our souls.

Hannah's unfulfilled desire, which was a daily burden, drew her closer to God. Look again at 1 Samuel 1:10. "And she, greatly distressed, prayed to the LORD and wept bitterly." Hannah simply did that which she had been in the habit of doing. This prepared her for her defining moment. She resisted the urge to trade her devotion to God for an aching desire. She refused to grow bitter toward the Lord, though she must have been sorely tempted to do so. When she prayed and asked God for her answer to prayer and He remained silent, she drew nearer to Him, not further away.

Years ago, a youth pastor at a church I attended was caught in an immoral situation with a member of the youth group. It was devastating for the church, the youth pastor, and his family. But as we talked with the man, who had served the Lord faithfully for years, a painful story emerged. In a moment of tears and transparency, he shared how years earlier he had gone into the ministry and had been encouraged by those around him. They told him that he was "going places" in his work for God. This expectation became a cancer in his heart. Although his ministry was by every account successful, one day he realized that he wasn't going to attain the level of success he had expected. His ministry, though genuine in many respects, had been tainted with selfish ambition in the belief that somewhere down the road there was a payoff.

This youth minister's relationship with God had drifted from a true loving servant-relationship to a business/customer relationship. When he realized he had spent so many years working for something that

wasn't going to come about, he became disillusioned, and his relationship with God suffered. His defection wasn't sudden, it was a slow, gradual shifting of focus. Disappointment with God had eroded his devotion to Him.

In contrast, this is where Hannah is such a shining example. Hidden deep within her soul was the key to her greatest defining moment—she allowed nothing to come between her and God.

Hannah's faithfulness to God would not go unrewarded—and neither will yours. This does not mean you will get everything you desperately want. It may mean that He will change your heart's desire rather than fulfill it—but you will bless Him for doing so.

Fourthly, and above all else:

Love God more than you love personal desire

This is the cause of Hannah's remarkable defining moment—she loved God even more than she loved Samuel. This love led to the ultimate act of trust, something that could never have been accomplished otherwise. Do not hurry past this lesson—linger, and ponder it carefully.

In chapter two, we read Hannah's prayer of thanksgiving. We cannot fully appreciate this song of praise from Hannah until we remember that she spoke these words before she had any other children, and after she had given up her baby to Eli. Having just left her precious son in Eli's hands, having just given away the most precious possession she had, she wrote this praise to God.

Hannah's love for God was greater than her love for the gifts He gave her. That is why this is such a marvelous and touching defining moment.

I remember one young woman in a singles group I pastored years ago. She had led an immoral lifestyle, but I had the opportunity of leading her to Christ. Her conversion was complete and transforming.

Her most obvious asset was her striking beauty. In the past she had used it selfishly, to satisfy her own desires. However, when she became a Christian she began to use that gift and dedicate it to God. She attracted

men the way dogs attract fleas, but instead of abusing the gift God had given her, she used it for Him. She was continually bringing men to our group, several of whom later accepted Christ. She never led them on, nor acted inappropriately toward them, but since they wanted to be where she was, she went to church and they followed. She had surrendered her whole being to Christ, and He used it to glorify Himself.

What helped Hannah make the right choice in her defining moment? It was very simply her love for God. It is only when we love God that we are able to accept any answer from Him in regard to the things we pray for.

Right now you may be on the very edge of fulfillment or unfulfillment. You are not alone. Unfulfillment is part and parcel of life. Heaven is the only place where every desire will be totally fulfilled.

Being without something you desperately want is not God's punishment. In fact, it may be His blessing. Are you willing to pray for a desire God may choose never to fulfill, and still consider Him worthy of your love and worship? Will you refuse the temptation to place Him under an obligation to meet your every whim? If you can keep your unfulfilled desire from coming between you and the Lord, you will be demonstrating that you love God even more than your own desire. This is the ultimate act of worship, and the perfect prelude to your grandest hour.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Read 1 Samuel 1:1–2:21

1. On a scale of 1-10, ten being highest, where would you place yourself in terms of your own fulfilled desire?

1—2—3—4—5—6—7—8—9—10

2. If you feel free to share, what is the main source of unfulfillment in your life at present?
3. In which areas of your life do you feel most fulfilled? Compare your areas of fulfillment with others in your group. Are some weak where others are strong? What spiritual lesson can you draw from this?
4. Although Hannah was unfulfilled by not having children, God still blessed her through her husband's devotion. In spite of your own unfulfillment, how has God blessed you? (List at least 3 major areas. Ask others in the group to help you).
5. Can being unfulfilled feel like punishment from God, and yet not be? What other purpose could God have through your unfulfillment?

6. When you don't immediately get the answer to your prayers, are you tempted to stop praying, or to stop praying for the specific issue you feel the strongest about? Why do you think this might happen, and what does it reveal about our attitude towards God?
7. It was stated that disappointment is "sand in the engine of our souls." If God doesn't give us what we want, we tend to move away from Him in disappointment. How could you use that same unfulfilled desire to draw closer to God, as Hannah did?

Personal Reflection

Unfulfillment is part and parcel of our existence. The only place we will be totally fulfilled is in heaven. You may not receive the answer to some of your most heartfelt desires, but how that affects your relationship to God is up to you. Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane that He wouldn't have to go to the cross. He didn't want to go, yet He did. The question is: Can we still love, trust, and serve God with our whole heart, even if He doesn't give us what we most desire? Has our desire for a certain thing become an ultimatum to God, "Serve me, or I'll leave you"?

Follow-through

Write down your greatest area of unfulfillment. Ask God to strengthen your faith and give you wisdom as you commit to the following prayer.

"Lord, I pray with all my heart for _____, but if I don't receive it, You will still be my God, and I will still love and serve You. I ask only that You grant me the grace to trust that you have a different plan for my life, and that Your love for me is greater than ever."