

# The Joy of Life

--As told by Hanna, mother of Samuel

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“A woman’s crown is the joy of seeing her children blossom and grow before her eyes. This is full womanhood. You will know it one day, and will be glad.” My mother told me, as I sat on the hill watching my brothers and small sister running in the afternoon’s soft sunlight.

I knew what it was like to care for others, for I was oft counted on to fill in for mother and care for not only my own family, but those who would come to us in need of aid. A loving heart my mother had, and deep within, when all childish dreams were brushed away, I wanted to be just like her.

I dreamed of the day when I too would raise my own, with a loving husband at my side. It seemed so perfect—I was sure my life would happen just as I thought.

I kept busy, not only with my given chores, but I wanted to learn all I could about being a mother. I often was with the women doing the washing, and heard the latest town happenings, who was doing what, and how many children so-and-so’s cousin had, and the like. I always paid close attention to the happenings in the social life of these women, for being a growing young lady I had much to learn.

I wondered oft of love, what it was, when it came to the bond between a man and his wife. I wondered what started it, or ended it, as I saw in some of the town’s women—though married, their hearts were cold.

My aunt, sister of my mother, never bore children. She was in her 40’s, when I was a teen. Her husband died when she was married but a decade. I saw the strain on her face as she carried about her chores. She seldom was in the company of others, for she found it a disgrace to have lived her life without what most women found fulfilment in.

My heart ached for her at times, but her world seemed so very different than mine. I had a future to look forward to, with dreams ready to be enjoyed. There was much I had not tasted yet, though I was sure all that would touch my life would bring me greater joy than I’d known as a child.

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I often woke with the sun shining on my face, as my cot was closest to the window. Being the eldest I was expected to be the first up, and to help prepare the younger ones for their day, dressing them, helping prepare food for the family, and all the many things that went into a day. When night fell I was always tired, for my days were full, and much was expected of me.

Some days I helped to take the clothing my mother had made to sell at the market, along with many others selling their goods and wares. We lived frugally, and often didn’t have the many things I wish we had. There were the new style dresses that the richer girls got to wear. But I was taught to be content, that what we had was all we

truly needed, and not to look on others with envy. I was taught that God was the one thing that was to be heeded to, with all one's heart—the rest, passing things that one could go without.

My one dream, and the embers of it caught flame as the years passed on, was to live in a beautiful house, near the sea, with many friends, and a family of my own—and a brood of children to be proud of. Children that were respectful—as we had been taught; that were wise in the skills needed in life; who were not lazy, but taught to work hard. I imagined so much. Oft on my walks before sundown I'd imagine the names I wanted to call my young ones. I thought of what kind of a man my husband would turn out to be. I wanted him to fear God, and to respect me and to give to our family the best he could.

It's important to note that one, of my age and gender, didn't have much say in whom I married, or what my life would be like. We were taught to respect and obey our husbands, and to do as they would have us do. The freedom I felt in my mind, of choosing how I wanted things to be, helped to relieve me from the bondage of the way I knew things would be in reality.

If I were to have know all that was to happen in my life, I think I would have made different decisions when starting out in my young adult life, as a maturing woman. But I thank God that the future was veiled, for then He was able to bring about His most peculiar plan and design. He truly does all things well.

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I first met the man I was to marry when I was just a young teen. He came for a large family gathering. There were so many there, I hardly would have remembered him, had the memory been allowed to fade. However, shortly afterwards, he asked for my hand in marriage, and in time I was given to him.

He was strong and wise, and had a peculiar knowledge of the ways and thoughts of women. An insight that could only have been God given. He'd say the most startling things at times, for I felt he knew what I was thinking.

In a way we married for love, but we were also an acceptable match—our class, relation and religion (being of the same religious strain). When I first saw him, I thought little more of him than I did the many others there. But I came to know him better, and in time found him acceptable, in my opinion.—Not that that would have changed things all that much, but I knew that somewhere in his heart, it meant a great deal to him to be loved, to be treated like he was found pleasing to someone.

After knowing him for some time, there was another side to him I had not been introduced to yet, the matter of Penninah, the one who in time would likewise be his wife, and with whom I would share this man.

He had been promised to marry another. He had known this for many years. It was just what was to happen. Though he felt no real attraction, he knew that love wasn't always what it was made up to be. He felt that hard work, loyalty, and doing one's best for a family is what gave it quality. He was determined to keep these qualities foremost, and would do his best to provide a good home and environment for his wife and children that he looked forward to having.

Knowing that he had a promise to keep didn't make it all that much easier. I would share him with another, who he might find more appealing, more beautiful, and be a better wife. What did I know? I was younger in years. There was no choice but to go on with the plan.

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With my dreams shattered, of being a wonderful and only wife, having the say in the matters of home that were mine to speak of, knowing that would be treated as the youngest, I was left with one hope. Children. I would bear him many, beautiful and handsome children. Mine would be his joy, and through this I would gain his favour—or so I thought.

We talked deeply, Elkanah and I. Me sharing my hopes, and he sensing my feelings, and trying to allay my worries—those worries that he seemed to read and see as if I had said them clearly myself.

Oh, I so wanted to believe him, I so wanted to trust. But my heart and soul churned, for some how I sensed things would be more challenging than I'd expected.

The days past slowly, as I pondered what my now-changed future prospects would bring. I had some good talks with my mother. She confided in me, heard me out, prayed for me, and I know it was her help and prayers that put my feet more stably down on the path I was to take. She reminded me how God was always with us, always there when we needed Him, and this change in my life would only enhance my relationship with Him, if I were to keep my heart turned to Him. His love would be more than enough for the rest of my life.

The day came when I was wed to this man, thus embracing my future. There was much to learn in those few months. We spent much time together. Though we worked most of the time, building a home and life, we took time off to enjoy building a friendship as well.

Elkanah wanted our bond to grow firm, before we embraced the more complete marriage that we knew was in store for us. It was in these days and months, when he and I were for the most part alone together, that I learned what it was to be wed, to keep house, to serve and yield to a man who had authority over me. I learned to love his heart, as well as to respect the things he cherished. I was to never speak hurtful words about his decision to marry Penninah, nor allow myself to lift myself above her. We were to be as equals. He considered us so, and desired that we do the same.

The day came when we were as a family. She was already with child the day we lived close with one another, and I could see their joy, for their first young one. I could see the light in his eyes when he thought of the little one, his very first offspring. I knew he was glad to be a father. There is something special about a first born, and Penninah had gained that reward. But I knew in time the joy would be ours as well. I would bear him the most beautiful son he'd ever seen, and nothing else would matter. I had many dreams of what our son would be like. He would add sparkle to our days, warmth to our home, and would be the one I knew I would love more than any.

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Each month that passed by that I saw I was, yet once again, not with child, was a crushing blow. Sometimes I would hide the pain, and act as if it was not all that hard for me, and I would busy myself in the many things there was to do. Other times, I would ache and weep many hours, for I knew this was one thing I could not make happen, no matter how much I desired it. It was only a gift, and I had to be patient. The waiting was hard.

Once when I had been out on my own, praying and seeking my God for relief, hoping to find something joyful to live for, to do, something that could take the place of this very empty void in my heart, I came back to be

greeted by Penninah's eyes meeting mine. The look could only mean one thing. Another child. Another gift from God to her. Another joy she could share with our husband. Another loss for me.

I could not even look at her. We were going to have a family gathering, as her family was going to visit. We would have lamb cooked in spiced broth, baked goods, and treats only rarely enjoyed. I could not even bear to be in the same room with her, to prepare the meal. I left to a quiet place. I knew my heart's cries were heard, for when I spoke softly I could feel these words come to me, "Your time is not yet. Though you hurt, and are torn with grief, this will only make your joy more full. Trust in Me, your Lord and God. For I see and I know."

I felt His peace come into my soul. I knew, though the way was hard, He would walk me through it.

I stayed away for the whole of the family celebration, for I thought if I were to attend, my heart would be torn once again. I stayed still and quiet, remembering these words to me. Later in the evening I ate some of what was left of the feast, before retiring for the night.

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God truly grants to those who reach for Him, the grace that they need in the times of deepest pain. Sometimes an inexplicable peace would be mine—Their son's first birthday was one time such as this.

As I looked at him playing with some stones he'd found, I saw his curls, looked into his little eyes. He was beautiful indeed. *My pain shouldn't rob the joy of loving a child.* After all he was the son of my husband. I decided I would make room in my heart for him, and any others Penninah would bear, I would love them and let them be a part of my heart, in some way.

I left him then, for he was being looked after by a friend. I wanted to make something special for the evening meal, for it was a joyous event, and I wanted to be a part of it. There were things that Elkana and Penninah only shared, and things that he and I shared alone. But why should my grief cause me to miss joys that could be shared together?

The evening was a beautiful one. I was given such a sweet peace. God never lets things be too hard, and He granted a measure of joy for this evening.

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Oh, that the joy could have remained, and lasted on till my time was at hand. But as surely as the sunsets, no matter how bright a day it was, so do trials come, though one has known joy.

I had finished the washing when Elkanah came to talk with me. He said he'd need to go away for a month, there were business deals and other things that needed to be tended to. What was hard was not merely his absence, and the fact that we'd be without his help for that time, but knowing that when he was gone things were much harder on the personal front. With him, at least I knew there was someone who belonged to me, even in part, and to whom I belonged. There was also the way that Penninah acted that seemed to amplify things for the worse, and without him there to help set things straight, things could get more emotional and difficult between us.

I cried a bit when he bid me farewell, not knowing how I'd fare in the next few weeks. He wiped my tears with his thumb and said, "I love you, more than any sons you could, and will yet bear me." With a kiss on the lips he was on his way. And oh the tears flowed so much more now. His love was dear to me, but the pain and feeling of loss, of not being able to be all I dreamed I could be, hurt me so very deeply. I had to learn to trust.

There were times when trust came easy. Times when I knew I was fulfilling what He had for me. It's easy to trust when you feel good about life, or that you are in the place you are supposed to be, and things are following the chosen path. But for the most part the clouds lingered in the way before me. I could not see the reason for the way things had turned out.

I had to make a choice however, how I was to react and fare over this next while. A sense of peace could be mine if I were to put my mind to it, and let our God give it to me. I went and sat down under the shade of a tree, taking in the beauty of the nature around. A small bird came up close and sang its cheery song. It was as if our Lord had sent him with the message that I was not forgotten, and my life, as small or low as it may seem, was in everyway beautiful to Him.

I prayed with a determination to hide all grief under the blanket of His peace. I prayed to be kept so busy helping others that my own life would not be a concern. I prayed to be given joy amidst the rain clouds that seemed to so often pour out onto my heart.

I got up, and decided that I was going to do with my life whatever I could, and I would not think of myself as having received less in life. I knew I was loved by many, no matter how things had turned out for me. This I needed to dwell on.

The night came and as I lay in bed I saw visions of children playing, laughing and smiling. There was a choice to make with each thought that came to me—I had to choose the way my feelings went when thinking on these things. When I chose to be glad for others, or for the children that I had come to know, and for the times I was allowed to be a part of their life, then my heart rested contentedly. If I allowed the darker thoughts to prevail as I thought on these things, then I was torn, and my grief could not even be expressed to the degree it was felt, and the path back to the place of sunshine was harder to find.

I had to learn to direct my thoughts and my heart's concerns to things that brought peace and joy to others; I could not allow my own feelings to take me to the depths. I learned that to have a beautiful life it doesn't take having all one's heart's desires lived out, and have many wonderful things to show for it. It simply takes being what one was made to be, and discovering what that is, moment by moment. It's often so very different than what one has dreamed of.

If we were to all live the dreams we had as young children, this world would lack the depth that can be found in the hearts of men. It would lack knowing the joys of receiving after being in want. It would be filled with more selfishness than already exists. When men's hearts are broken, their dreams laid to waste, their ambitions crumble before their eyes, they are in essence in need. Incomplete souls who need Someone make this world more open to love, to our Lord, to His ability to fill the many holes our lives contain. This brings a much richer quality to the nature of this world's people.

There is so much that can be gained when in want, when humbled, when not seeing all one's dreams played out before one's eyes. There is a richness that comes into one's soul as they see things happen differently than hoped for, and they learn to take what comes in stride, and bend with the wind that blows on them. Many new qualities are gained than ever would have, were things to go according to their plan.

These things are hard to see, difficult to understand, and take great faith to yield to them, knowing things will turn out for good in the end. I wasn't that submissive a student when learning in this grade. I balked, fought against it—though nothing changed the way things were. It wasn't till I learned that all was in His hands, and He indeed does all things well, that I was allowed to pass on to the next step in my learning—and to the joys that were awaiting me.

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“Sarah!” I heard her mother calling, she was 7, and liked to run free, though it was now time to help with the supper. There was much that needed to be tended to for this large family. Ruben was 5, and was often getting into things that were troublesome to us all, being the most rascally of the family. Oden was nearly 2, and then there was the eldest, 8 ½ Connor. He often helped the men with the fieldwork, and was thought of as older than his age. He had to grow up fast.

When I saw him for the first time, those shining eyes and dark hair, I thought he was the dearest child I'd ever seen. I would have given anything at that time to have been the one to hold him proudly, showing I had born a son, to be the mother of this treasure.

So much had happened since then. Times of want and times of joy. Times of plenty, and times of giving. When the sun was nearly set, I went to pray in a quiet spot. I'd learned the strength of these times in prayer. Each time I chose to give my thoughts to our Lord, I always noticed changes—in my heart, in the way I reacted, in the way others acted in response to me.

Prayer had worked its way into my life as something I knew I could draw strength from. There wasn't always great change, but I always was given something from His hand, and I learned to accept His help, however He gave it, knowing that it would be enough.

I learned to be content, though I felt hurt or in want. When I looked at all that my life had, the many things others longed for that were mine, I felt very rich. I learned I had to think only on what was given, not what had been withheld. I learned, through my quiet times of prayer, that what was not present in my life was not a show of a lack of God's love, or Him playing favourites, for I felt His love so strong in my times of deepest pain. I knew it was but my lot in life, and I was to learn through it, and reach out to others who knew greater suffering.

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When the time for the yearly passover came, there was much to do. We were busy for over a week making preparations, as well as trying to keep up with the many other daily duties and situations. This time, like other times, I was emotional. It was a special time of connecting with the Lord, of showing Him our reverence, our thanks, our submission, our desire to follow Him more closely. It was somewhat like what many people feel when the year ends. They look over the past year, what they went through, and what they wish for the year ahead to bring. In some ways I responded much the same way. I looked over my life, my deeds, my heart's wishes, and prayed fervent prayers.

Two weeks before the trip was to be made, I was told that Penninah was with child again. I saw that look in her eye, I heard her unfeeling comments to me. Not only was it hard for her emotions to be calm, being that one gets rather short tempered, emotional, irritable and so forth when with child, but she generally carried a “I know he must love me more than you” attitude about her.

The truth was she was brought up feeling the lowest in her family, never was thought of much before. For the first time she felt of great worth. She was loved and cared for by a man, and was able to be what any woman would have wished to be—a fruitful mother, bearing their young.

Coping with her inferior feelings had been a painful one, most of her youth, so now, in her womanhood she well tried to over-compensate. Her way of expressing herself, and carrying herself was difficult at best to cope with, and left me miserable most of the time. I had to keep my heart on the Lord—which I didn’t always do so good at, being but a fallible woman.

I learned that only by lifting up the Lord, by choosing to see others and ourselves through His eyes, can we feel complete. Distaining others, making them feel lower so that we might feel satisfied with our stature is a poor and hurtful way to live. It brings no real satisfaction to the one seeking respect, but merely serves to separate them from others, leaving them with the empty substance of one’s self.

As we walked the road, traveling with friends and relatives, there was much catching up to do, stories to tell, gossip to hear. I tried to keep my spirit up engaging in conversations, or just enjoying the beauty of the land. It was tiresome, I was tired, hungry, and the children whined along the way. But we knew we’d so enjoy being at the temple once there.

When we arrived, there was lots of commotion, so many people were there for the purpose of worshipping our God. At least we had lots in common, and it was easy to interact with strangers. It gave us a brotherhood amongst ourselves. Penninah and I watching the children, while Elkannah worked out the duties of our sacrifice.

When it was time to feast, and to partake of the meat of our sacrifice, my heart could not take it any longer. The time I’d spent with the children and their mother was so very difficult. There was no love spoken to me, only harsh words, making me feel so low I could have cried a million tears right then. But I choose to hold it in—for the children’s sake. I wanted to be strong, to hold on to the love I knew our Lord had for me—and for Penninah as well.

By the time we sat down, and the meal was portioned out, I could hold it in no longer. I slowly drew myself away, my heart churning inside, my tears building up. I walked away and the tears began to flow. My husband was there by my side. Knowing my heart, the hurt I felt, and knew there were hardly words to express what I was feeling. He put into words what he knew I was aching for inside.

Reassuring me of his love, letting me know that he loved me for who I was, with or without children, was a comfort. But my heart had to connect once again with its maker. I motioned I was going to go to the temple, with a gentle squeeze of the hand and a tender look, almost feeling my pain, he nodding his consent.

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As I wept I felt the very heart of my soul being poured out. No audible words could describe the depths I felt at that moment. But it’s in the most desperate moments, when the soul reaches out for divine intervention

that brings change in the most beautiful ways. In my heart of hearts I did only want God's will to be performed—though in times past this was clouded with my deep cravings for what I felt I missed so terribly in life.

When our desires are within His will, and our will is to fulfil His desires, then is true satisfaction known. I expressed to the Maker of our lives that the child He saw fit to give to me would not be hoarded, but in gratitude would be offered for use in His service, devoted completely to Him. How could I withhold that which He saw fit to freely give to me? I committed to Him all that I had and all that I would yet have—should He see fit to give children to me.

I could feel the words my heart was ringing out enter the courts of Heaven. So deep in prayer was I that I wasn't too aware of anyone else around me. I was before the Lord of Hosts, and I knew my heart was in His hands.

The silence was broken by Eli the priest's voice. He'd been watching from a short ways off, not knowing quite what to make of this blubbing woman, whose words he could not make out. Thinking I perhaps had too much to drink, he spoke to me. He would not have someone using this place of worship to display their drunkenness. Though upon hearing my heart's cry and seeing that I was indeed a woman filled with deep grief, he encouraged me that the Lord was with me and would care for my heart's deepest yearnings.

I had been told many times before that in His timing, God would see fit to give me a child. But something told me, as Eli spoke those words that that time was closer than ever. My heart felt a certainty that the days of being childless were nigh ended. Deep within I could sense that it was my solemn pledge and devotion to the Lord of all, the full commitment of my soul, that had changed things. When all I wanted was to live a life of beauty, to live a life where I felt all would look upon me with honor, and consider me blessed, that was not the time for this desire to be fulfilled. Our Lord had to first break down my selfish interests, cast down my pride to the ground, give me the desire to give everything to Him, to then work the best things out for me.

With a smile in my heart I returned to my family, who had now finished the united meal. When it was time to journey home, I didn't say much. I was communicating with the Lord in Heaven. Silence was for the most part on my lips, and a special peace was in my heart that I'd never felt before. The kind of peace that only comes when it knows for certain that their life is going according to their Maker's perfect plan. I had fully committed all to Him, and I knew all that would now happen would only lead to better and more wonderful days.

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"I'm with child" I said to myself over and over again as I gazed out my window over looking our field of corn. "God has looked upon me and blessed me with a child!"

Though I suffered a difficult pregnancy, and my body very weakened, still my heart was filled with joy. He had granted me my heart's desire, as I promised to grant Him His.

Those first few months of pregnancy were very taxing. Often all I could do was rest and pray. There was plenty of time for contemplation and quiet communion.

A second miracle took place—in Penninah. One day I was lying, feverish and very uncomfortable. It had been over 3 days that I hadn't been able to hold much down. Penninah came in to see how I fared. She brought a drink of herbs and a cloth to wipe my brow. I tried to speak, but she put her finger on my lips to quiet me.



“I owe you this service, for you have done much for our family. You’ve given though you have not received the fulfilment of being a mother yourself. I have always been jealous of you, in many ways. But I felt that being able to bear children for our husband was something I had that you had not. I put you down in an effort make myself feel better. But all I was left with was bitterness and a lack of true joy. To feel true joy in desires fulfilled, it must be mixed with genuine love and giving again of what one has gained. All that is hoarded and selfishly clung to will in the end only seem as ashes, nothing of true value. While it still shines, while the receiver yet feels the pleasure of holding a desired treasure, it is then that they must choose to share it with another. Only then will the shine of it remain.”

Penninah was referring to what she had learned in her life, and in her attitudes towards me and her family, but I knew that through her God was also speaking to me, confirming His will for me to give that which I most treasured. She continued to nurse me back to strength, and had her children tend to me in the times she couldn’t.

A special new friendship was formed between us. I was given glimpses into her heart and life that I hadn’t know before. Her kindness in those days helped to heal the hurts I had felt from her in times past. I felt her love melting away my pain and anger towards her, and the bitterness I had harboured. As my heart and spirit healed, so did my body.

This could have been a time when she grew more jealous of me, and in truth it was not easy for her to see the love lavished on me from our husband. Her fears of being treated of lesser value haunted her at times. But as we learned to love one another more the fears were pushed aside. There was much to talk about, much to understand. Some days we didn’t have the compassion that was needed. But we knew that we could not go back to the way things had been in the past. We sought to understand one another, and this pulled us through the difficult times.

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Hearing Samuel, my newborn, cry, I couldn’t contain my own tears. The wonder of what our Lord had done for me was deeply felt. A party was held in his honor. Music, dancing, feasting! I sat close by, holding this bundle of joy in my grateful embrace, how I loved the very soul of him. He was not only a long awaited child, but a personal gift from our loving Lord. I knew His love with one look at this tender child.

All knew of my decision and commitment to give this child back in thankfulness to the One who had graciously loaned him to me. In the times when my heart ached at the thought of fulfilling my promise, not wishing to ever part from him, those around me helped to comfort me, reminding me of God’s promises to fully repay. I was to be but an instrument, but a vessel, to bring a special child into this world. A child whose destiny was fore-ordained, and whose calling was a unique one. It was not my choice what he was to do with his life. He belonged to his Creator.

Samuel was strong willed from the start. When he set his mind to something there wasn’t much that could be said or done that could turn him away from it. But like all us children of God, we all have to learn that submitting to His will above our own, is what will bring the greatest joy in end.

Being the first child, I was able to give him more attention than normally would have been afforded. I was grateful for the time we could spend together, both because our time together would be short, and I wanted him brought up to know our God in a real and close way. Every moment that I could I spent teaching him, or seeing that his care was the best. He was given more care than the rest, that was plain. But because of his mission and calling

in life—which he mysteriously seemed to know deep within—it wasn't looked on with jealousy, the care he was given. He was here but for a time. He needed to be made ready.

Sometimes as he slept, I wept and prayed that he be given all that would be needed for the calling and plan for his life. I knew his childish instincts. I knew it would be hard to leave his family and to follow what he was ordained to do. I knew it would leave a great empty spot in my heart when the time came for him to be given up. But with all my heart I desired—even more than having a child with me—for a child of mine to please our Lord. This is the desire that grew within my heart as the days of his time with us came to a close.

We held a solemn feast, with songs and weeping, dancing and prayers—for both the joy and the sacrifice that it was to give this deeply loved treasure, back to the One whom in His love had loaned him to us.

I had to be brave for Samuel's sake. I tried to tell him of the new and special things that he would be able to do, that most children his age never would get to. I wanted him to know how special he was, to hold to his calling with reverence, and to never seek to follow elsewhere. I knew that the battles he would face as a growing young man would be hard, but I wanted to help to instil in his heart and mind that the best comes to those who give their all to our Lord and God. My prayer was that he would desire God's will above all.

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I sought to have time alone to pray, while the rest of the family ate the customary Passover meal, which was attended yearly. This was the first time I had been here since Samuel was given to me. I could not eat. I didn't feel the strength to do what I knew and was committed to doing. I went into the Temple to pray. I prayed for full yieldedness. I prayed for a deeper love for God that would give me a burning passion to fulfil what I knew to be His highest will. As I prayed I felt invisible arms of loving warmth around me. I wept at the tenderness I felt through that Heavenly embrace. As I basked in the love of Heaven I knew a supernatural courage. With renewed devotion in my heart I rose to fulfil what I came to do.

"Samuel, darling, the time has come to begin your service for God." I said with a gentle but firm voice. His eyes began to water, and he wrapped his arms around me tightly. I felt a wave of emotion stirring me, but I would not let anything stop me from caring out the commission I had. Looking into his eyes I said, "Remember, all that is given to God will come back again many more times over. Let us go and do what our Lord requires, for only then will we have full joy." I took him by the hand, and with my husband following a few paces behind, we walked to the Temple.

I had given my son a small gift pack to present to priest Eli, as well as some necessary items for his care. A supernatural surrender had come over Samuel. He walked up to Eli and said with a tone of a grown man, "I'm here to serve the Lord. I'm at your service." With this Eli bent down to look into the little boy's eyes, and with a tear in his own, took him by the hand to show him to his room.

I gave a wave, till he was out of sight. Elkanah put his arm around me and led me back to where the family was waiting. One of the other children ran up and took my hand and wanted to show me a little animal they had discovered, another gave me a hug, and another held up a piece of fruit to me. Our loving Lord's angels were surrounding me through these children.

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The year came and went more slowly than any year I'd ever known. Every day I prayed for my son to grow and mature in spirit and body, according to His plan. There was so much I wanted to see him do. I played the part that is most essential to a child's well being—the prayers that helped to hold him when my arms could not. The prayers that helped to cheer him where my smile was not seen. The prayers that taught him to obey, where my training could not be experienced. His true Father in Heaven would see to his every need, and answer my heartfelt prayers.

In my spare time I worked on prepared clothing and gifts that he would need. I made a sheep's wool coat, sandals, and a leather bag to carry his belongings in. I packed these up tenderly as we prepared for the annual journey.

So many questions flooded my mind as we neared our destination. "Was he angry with me for leaving him for so long? Would he remember me and the bond that we shared? What was he now like? Had he been treated well and had his needs met?"

One look into his awaiting eyes, as I walked in with reverence to the place I left him a year before, told me all was well. Our Lord had more than cared for him. I spoke with the priest and thanked him for the part he played in my son's life. He assured me that this child was a special one, and would do wonderful things for God. He told me that my giving was like planting a seed, that would grow into a wonderful vine, reaching far and wide, bearing much fruit. As I watered this seed with my daily prayers, I would never be disappointed at the results.

Samuel joined us all for our time there. We talked, laughed, cried and played. He had so much to show me. Seeing his joy and satisfaction in his new life gave my heart a deep peace. I had made the right choice, and I renewed my commitment to give him to God's service—for another next year, and for the rest of his life.

I cried when it was time to return home. I knew I would miss him terribly. Though somehow I felt that our Lord, too, cried tears of gratefulness for these, his humble and yielded vessels, wanting only to be used for His glory. I would reap the benefits of His gratitude in time. I faced the road ahead and called to Heaven for the joy of life to be born in me anew.

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Samuel wasn't the only child I was blessed with. Our Lord saw fit to bless me with several more from His loving hand. I was busier than ever with the many new ones He send to me. Each one special, each one unique, each one a treasure. He did not ask me to give up the others, as it was with Samuel. But in my heart I committed each one to Him, to be used according to His plan.

Every year I took that long awaited for trip. With clothing and gifts I visited my darling son—this boy who was becoming more and more a young man of God by the year. Each year I was able to get glimpses into the effects my prayers had on his life. Though there was much evil in the world around him, his desire was on following his calling. His health was sustained. He learned how to hear God's words. He was a prophet, a called out one, and used to bring God's treasured words to those who needed them.

Life didn't treat him with kid gloves. He had his share of heartache, sorrow and loneliness, sickness and pain. But through the prayers of his family, his desire to follow his calling and to fulfil his mission for his Lord, prevailed in the face of all that sought to pull him down.

It was a living sacrifice—the kind our Lord is most pleased with. I gave of my very flesh, my heart, the thing most desired and treasured; and Samuel he gave his all. Because of it, the rewards have been more than can be numbered. In new and abundant ways have we been blessed, every day of our lives. Words can't express all that has been poured out to us from our loving Lord's grateful heart. It is us that should weep in gratitude at having the privilege of serving a God of such love and mercy—but He makes us feel as if it is us who have done Him the honor.

There is no joy that can be matched to the joy given to those who with an unreserved passion, give to Him their all. This is the joy of life!