DISCOVERY SERIES

Ruth & Hannah

Learning To Walk By Faith

Alice Mathews

RUTH & HANNAH:
Learning To Walk By Faith

The women of the Bible tell us a lot about ourselves. Although times have changed, human nature has not. Women as different as Ruth and Hannah can still help us see how to walk by faith.

In the following pages, author, Bible teacher, and professor Alice Mathews shows us that women like Ruth and Hannah are especially important because of what they tell us about our God. She also explores the timeless truth that in the wisdom and grace of God none of us lives above the power of a decision or beyond the reach of our Lord.

Martin R. De Haan II

CONTENTS

Managing Editor: David Sper Cover Painting: "Ruth Gleaning" by James Tissot (1836–1902)
 Printed in USA

RUTH: How To See God In The Dailiness Of Life

Do you enjoy reading? It is my greatest joy and sometimes my besetting sin. I can lose myself in a good book when I should be doing other things. Most of us who enjoy reading know that a good story can take us out of the humdrum sameness of our lives and transport us into the tension and drama of someone else's experience.

I have a second question: Do you ever sneak a peak at the ending before you get there? If you're into a detective story and it's time to cook dinner, you may think you can't wait to find out who dunnit. So you look. Or if it's a great romance and you can't stand the thought that the wrong girl gets the boy, you may glance at the last page to see who ends up in his arms.

If you have ever sat down to read the little book of Ruth in the Old Testament, were you tempted to sneak a peak to see how the story ends? If you did, you were probably disappointed. The final verses of Ruth chapter 4—the climax of the whole story—seem anything but climactic. What we find there is a genealogy: "Perez was the father of Hezron, Hezron the father of Ram, Ram the father of Amminadab, Amminadab the father of Nahshon, Nahshon the father of Salmon," and so on. Can you imagine a duller ending for a story? An author would have to work hard to come up with something more boring and anti-climactic than that.

Yet, when we look at this little book of Ruth, we see a very good storyteller at

work. All the way through we watch the author dropping hints of things to come—clues that draw us in, that keep us aware that the plot is thickening. Things could turn out several different ways. Why would the writer want to blow a good story with a bad ending?

To understand that those dull verses at the end of the book really are the climax—and a stunning climax at that—we have to go back and look at the rest of the story. Then, suddenly, a boring genealogy comes alive and makes sense.

Our story is a play in four acts. The five principal actors on our stage are three women—Naomi, Ruth, and Orpah—and two men—Boaz and the nearer kinsman. The stage director is God.

Act One. When the curtain goes up on the first act, we find a bitter old woman on center stage. To listen to her, it is clear that the Stage Director does not know what He is doing. But that's getting ahead of the story. Begin with the description of the setting as we read it in the script in Ruth 1:1-5.

In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a man from Bethlehem in Judah, together with his wife and two sons, went to live for a while in the country of Moab.
The man's name was Elimelech, his wife's name Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Kilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem, Judah.
And they went to Moab and lived there. Now Elimelech, Naomi's husband, died, and she was left with her two sons. They married Moabite women, one named Orpah and the

other Ruth. After they had lived there about ten years, both Mahlon and Kilion also died, and Naomi was left without her two sons and her husband.

The setting is in the time of the judges. This period of Israel's history was one of barbaric oppression and bloodshed. Between violent invasions, tribal civil wars, and unchecked lawlessness, the Jews had to contend with constant trouble. Now a famine added to their misery. In Bethlehem—the House of Bread—there was no bread. Elimelech chose to take his family to neighboring Moab.

While the trip to Moab was not a long one—not much more than 30 miles east of Bethlehem—distance in the Bible, as H. W. Morton observed, is often measured not in miles but in distance from God. Moabites worshiped the god Chemosh, not Jehovah. Elimelech and his family left the familiar for the unfamiliar, the known for the unknown.

While in Moab, the family faced first the loss of the father, Elimelech. Then the sons who had both married Moabite women also died. The play begins with three widows in a gloomy, hopeless setting. Naomi, on center stage, has heard that once again Bethlehem is really the House of Bread. The famine has passed. Food is plentiful in Judah. She and her two daughters-in-law prepare to move to Bethlehem. The dialogue in our play begins in verse 8:

Then Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go back, each of you, to your mother's home. May the Lord show kindness to you, as you have shown to your dead and to me. May the Lord

grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband."

Naomi knew that Orpah and Ruth faced a bleak and uncertain future if they returned to Bethlehem with her. They must stay in Moab. She kissed them—a sign of release from any obligation to her. They had voluntarily stayed with Naomi after their husbands had died, but now they could not forfeit their own happiness just to care for her. Desperate, powerless to do anything for them, Naomi prayed that God would care for them and provide them with husbands who would care for them.

But note what Orpah and Ruth answered: "We will go back with you to your people." Whether out of loyalty to their dead husbands or out of love for their mother-in-law, Ruth and Orpah pushed on toward Bethlehem. But Naomi tried again:

Return home, my daughters. Why would you come with me? Am I going to have any more sons, who could become your husbands? Return home, my daughters; I am too old to have another husband. Even if I thought there was still hope for me—even if I had a husband tonight and then gave birth to sons—would you wait until they grew up? Would you remain unmarried for them? No, my daughters. It is more bitter for me than for you, because the Lord's hand has gone out against me! (1:11-13).

What is the tone of Naomi's argument to Orpah and Ruth? It isn't just another effort to persuade them not to stay with her. It is also a lament accusing God of botching up her life. It affirms God's direct involvement in her life and

His accountability for her situation. Basically Naomi told Orpah and Ruth that if God was "after" her, to stay with her was to court disaster.

The second effort to persuade them had its effect on Orpah, who kissed her mother-in-law and started back to Moab. But Ruth still wasn't persuaded. In the next verses we hear her unshakable decision to stay with Naomi:

> *Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go, I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if anything but death separates you and me (1:16-17).*

With that Naomi gave up trying to talk Ruth into returning to Moab.

Can we fault Orpah for going back to Moab? Not at all. Orpah did the expected thing. It is Ruth who did the unexpected. We understand the reasonableness of Orpah's decision. We don't understand the incredible loyalty Ruth displayed. Ruth demonstrated what the Hebrews called *hesed*.

Hesed is a Hebrew word we can translate "loyal love." It is a love that goes well beyond the expected. David's mighty men showed *hesed* for their beloved leader a hundred years later when they left the wilderness and fought their way into and out of Bethlehem to bring David a drink of water from the town well. God shows us *hesed* in sacrificing even His own Son to redeem us, to buy us back from sin. Ruth was a shining example of *hesed* as she stood at a crossroad between familiar Moab and

unfamiliar Judah.

Her loyal love made the choice—for Naomi's people and for Naomi's God. We see her making that choice with no husband and no prospect of marriage, devoting herself to an old woman. She might have wished for a crystal ball as she stood on that dusty road so many years ago. It would have been nice to see how her choice would work out. But she had none. She had to choose for God and Naomi with no guarantees.

The scene continues. In verse 19 we see the two women arriving in Bethlehem where everyone came out to greet them. "Can this be Naomi?" It had been more than 10 years since she had left. Suddenly hearing her name, *Naomi*, the old woman was reminded of the irony of that name. Naomi means "pleasant" or "lovely." "Lovely?" she exclaimed. "Don't call me Naomi [Lovely] . . . . Call me Mara [Bitter]" (1:20).

As Naomi continued speaking, her anger at God spilled over once again.

> *The Almighty has made my life very bitter. I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty (1:20-21).*

Throughout this first act we hear Naomi talking about God. She was conscious of His work in the universe and in her life. But as she talked about God, we see that she misjudged Him and she misjudged life. She stated that she went out of Judah *full*. But did she? The very thing that caused her family's migration to Moab was a famine. They went out empty. Life was tough or they would not have left Bethlehem in the first place.

Naomi also stated that God had brought her back empty. But had He? It was true that she had lost her

husband and both sons. But in their place God had given her the incredible devotion of Ruth, who pledged to stay with her to death's door and beyond.

Naomi misjudged her situation when she misjudged God. She focused on the negative and became bitter. Calling herself *Mara* (bitter), she looked at God and looked at life through dirty windows.

Like Naomi, we can be religious. We can talk about God. We can offer prayers to God. But if we misjudge Him and His work in our lives, we easily misjudge all that touches us.

As act one and chapter one end, the curtain slowly descends on two women: loyal Ruth and bitter Naomi. The last words of the last verse of this chapter give us a clue to what is to follow in the next act. Ruth and Naomi had arrived in Bethlehem as the barley harvest began. What did this presage for two poor widows newly arrived in town?

Act Two. As the curtain rises on act two, we discover that Naomi had a relative in town who was wealthy and influential. Was he destined for some crucial role in our play?

Meanwhile, Naomi and Ruth had nothing to eat. Ruth decided to glean, that is to follow the reapers during the harvest and to pick up from the ground any grains left behind. In this act, Naomi moves to the stage wing and Ruth moves to center stage.

In Ruth 2:3 we read that "as it turned out, she found herself working in a field belonging to Boaz." That statement makes it sound as if all that followed was purely accidental. But the author is actually hinting at a cause for this "chance" happening. Behind what

appears to be human luck lies divine purpose. Even in the "accidents" in life, the hand of God is at work on our behalf.

Now look at verse 4: "Just then Boaz arrived from Bethlehem."

Surprise! One more coincidence! The wealthy, influential relative of Naomi owned the field and happened on the scene while Ruth was there!

Noticing Ruth, he asked about her and learned that she was from Moab and had come back with Naomi. Now comes the moment of truth. "Chance" had thrown Ruth and Boaz together in the same field. What would Boaz do?

Obviously, things are turning out well. Boaz, in short, gives Ruth "most favored gleaner" status in his fields. By following his instructions carefully, Ruth would be protected from young men who might try to bother her. She would also glean much more grain than would normally be the case.

Not only did Boaz make Ruth's gleaning easier, but he also invited her to eat with his harvesters and saw to it that she had an adequate meal. At the end of her first day of gleaning, she returned to Naomi with a shawl full of winnowed grain. The Bible tells us that she took home an ephah of barley—about 29 pounds of grain. Ruth's success on her first day of gleaning far exceeded her expectations when she set out that morning.

What happened when she returned to Naomi that evening? Of course, the older woman wanted a full recounting of all that had happened that day. Such a huge shawl-full of grain meant that she had gleaned in a good place. Where had she gone? In whose field had she gleaned?

Notice Naomi's reaction when Ruth answered her questions. Hearing about Boaz, she exclaimed, "The Lord bless him! . . . That man is our close relative; he is one of our kinsman-redeemers" (2:20).

What does that mean? Why is that important? The curtain descends slowly on our second act. But Naomi's statement about a kinsman-redeemer lets us know that the play is not over.

Act Three. Act three is about to begin. It turns out to be the turning point in the play. God has provided food for the two widows. But that is only a short-term solution to their needs. Ruth needs a husband. Naomi needs a son to preserve her inheritance and to carry on the family name. As the barley and wheat harvests end, Naomi cooks up a scheme that is bold, brash, and a little bit dangerous for Ruth. Read her plan in 3:1-4.

> *One day Naomi her mother-in-law said to her, "My daughter, should I not try to find a home for you, where you will be well provided for? Is not Boaz, with whose servant girls you have been, a kinsman of ours? Tonight he will be winnowing barley on the threshing floor. Wash and perfume yourself, and put on your best clothes. Then go down to the threshing floor, but don't let him know you are there until he has finished eating and drinking. When he lies down, note the place where he is lying. Then go and uncover his feet and lie down. He will tell you what to do."*

Thus Naomi began to answer her own prayer for Ruth back in Ruth 1:9—"May the Lord grant that each of you will find rest

in the home of another husband." In one way Naomi models for us the way God works through human actions. We are not to wait passively for events to happen. When an opportunity presents itself, we may need to seize the initiative. Naomi did just that. But we also recognize that in Naomi's plan lay real risk for Ruth.

Boaz and Ruth would be in a secluded spot where they could talk privately. In Old Testament times, however, threshing floors were associated with licentiousness. Naomi was gambling on the character of Boaz, that he would not take unfair advantage of Ruth. Naomi was asking Ruth to enter an uncertain, compromising situation with a great deal hanging in the balance.

What was hanging in the balance? Was Ruth being asked to seduce Boaz there on the threshing floor?

The Levirate Law required that if a man died without an heir, his brother was to marry the widow. The first son born to them then became the legal heir of the deceased husband and continued his name, inheriting his property. If no brother were available to marry the widow, she could ask a more distant relative to do so. Here we see Ruth using a strange old custom to propose marriage to Boaz. The meaning of what she did was to ask for Boaz's total protection.

I've always been glad for many reasons that I was born a woman. One reason is that as a woman in our culture, I never had to risk rejection by having to propose marriage to a man! But Ruth lived in a different time and place. She had to take that risk.

She didn't propose as someone might today.

Rather, she asked Boaz to spread his garment over her as a kinsman-redeemer. That act symbolized his intention to protect her. It was like giving and receiving an engagement ring today.

Did he do it? Yes and no. He replied, "Mmmm, yes. I'd like to do that. But I'm not your nearest kinsman-redeemer. There is another man who is closer to Naomi by family ties. He has first choice. It's up to him" (see 3:12-13).

So, no. They were not engaged that night. But Ruth knew that Boaz would marry her if the nearer kinsman reneged. Boaz would settle things properly and leave the outcome to God.

Ruth remained quietly at Boaz's feet throughout the night, then just as quietly went back to Bethlehem before dawn. The curtain descends on our third act as Ruth tells Naomi everything that happened.

Even the schemes of men and women can be used by God to accomplish His purposes. This scheme did not turn sour, not because the circumstances were not right for hanky-panky, but because of the character of Ruth and Boaz. Boaz was concerned for Ruth's reputation. She was safe. Naomi staked the scheme on Boaz's integrity. He proved to be a man of honor. But the question now in the air is, Which guy will get the girl?

Act Four. The curtain rises on act four. We see Boaz at the city gate, where he knew he would find the nearer kinsman. It was certain that Ruth would soon have a husband. What was not certain was who it would be. What up to this point had been a private matter between Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz now had to become public. This was a family matter to be worked

out between the kinsmen in a public meeting.

Assembling 10 witnesses, Boaz addressed the nearer kinsman about redeeming the property of Elimelech. The kinsman must have thought, *Sure. That looks easy enough,* so he replied, "I will redeem it" (4:4). He knew he would have to marry the widow to do that, but he assumed that Naomi was too old to have children and he would end up with the property with no heir to claim it. Financially the investment was a bargain without risk. How could he lose?

Boaz sprang the clincher: Ruth comes with the property. If the nearer kinsman bought it, he bought her as well. The kinsman would be obliged to father a son by Ruth to perpetuate Elimelech's name over his inheritance. In other words, the kinsman would not be allowed to keep the property when the son was old enough to claim his inheritance.

Suddenly the picture changed for the nearer kinsman. He quickly waived his prior rights of redemption. Boaz would get Ruth! The crowd cheered and Boaz took his bride home.

What follows in this act ties up all the loose ends in our story. It isn't enough that the guy gets the girl or the girl gets the guy. All of that is for a larger purpose.

One purpose lies in perpetuating Elimelech's name over his inheritance. For that Naomi must have a son. But she's too old for that! Not by Jewish law. When her kinsman Boaz and Ruth, her daughter-in-law, produce a son, we see an interesting procession winding through the streets of Bethlehem. The women of the town are carrying this tiny baby and placing him in

the arms of Naomi. Naomi now has a son. The bitter woman who complained in the first act about being empty is now full. Not only is she well fed. She has a son to carry on her husband's name. This son is Elimelech's legal heir.

Does our story end here? No. We still have that strange genealogy as the climax of our story. What do we learn from it? Pick up reading where I left off (on page 2): "Salmon the father of Boaz, Boaz the father of Obed, Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of David" (4:21-22).

David! Suddenly the simple, clever human story of two struggling widows takes on a new dimension. This bitter old woman and this foreign Moabitess become bright threads woven into the fabric of Israel's national history.

God provided bread through Ruth's gleaning. God provided security through Ruth's marriage to Boaz. God provided posterity for Elimelech and Naomi. Even more, God provided a great king for the nation Israel through a foreign woman. God used the faithfulness of ordinary people to accomplish great things.

We find the same genealogy in Matthew 1:3-6.

> *Perez the father of Hezron, Hezron the father of Ram, Ram the father of Amminadab, Amminadab the father of Nahshon, Nahshon the father of Salmon, Salmon the father of Boaz, whose mother was Rahab, Boaz the father of Obed, whose mother was Ruth, Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of King David.*

This genealogy does not stop with David. After many more unpronounceable names, we read in verse 16:

. . . and Jacob the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary, of whom was born Jesus, who is called Christ.

Not only did the faithful Ruth and the upright Boaz serve as great-grandparents of Israel's greatest king. They also stand in the line of those through whom God chose to send His Son into the world to bring us salvation.

Many times on a dreary Tuesday afternoon we may find it hard to believe that God is really at work in our lives. God seems hidden from us. Like Naomi in the first act, we can misjudge life because we are not sure God is actively involved in our lives.

Things happen that look like accidents—like Ruth gleaning in the fields of Boaz. Life can seem haphazard and accidental. But over all the seeming accidents in our lives God is at work, making divine appointments with us through the things that happen to us. God is the stage manager in control of all the players on the stage. In the midst of what seems terribly ordinary, He is doing something extraordinary.

It has been said that what we are determines what we see. We may look for God and miss Him because we confuse Him with shining angels. God is found not just in the miraculous and the extraordinary. He is at work in us and through us in the dailiness of life. On a dreary Tuesday afternoon we can get the idea that life is all up to us. But if we belong to God, even when we don't see Him at work, we can be sure that God is moving events on our behalf.

Ruth made a choice on a dusty road between Moab and Bethlehem. She chose to give her loyalty to God

and His people. That choice may have seemed insignificant, but it changed Naomi and it changed history.

When you and I choose God and His people, we may hear no bells ringing. But the silence does not mean the choice is not life-changing. As Christians, we are involved in an incredible drama. There are no ordinary days. There are no insignificant choices. If we saw our life as God sees it, we'd be overwhelmed. On a dreary Tuesday afternoon we can remind ourselves that as we choose for God and His people, God will use that choice in ways that exceed our imagination.

HANNAH: How To Deal With Depression

Depression. It happens to the best of people.

In her book *Some Run With Feet Of Clay*, actress Jeannette Clift tells of a conversation she had with a good friend:

> The other day I called one of the most productive Christians I know. "How are you," I asked, thinking it was a somewhat needless question. She was always fine, and had 19 Scripture verses to prove it! I didn't get her usual answer, though. Instead I got a long pause, and then words all capsulated in one breath.
>
> "Oh, Jeannette, I'm awful! I've been so depressed I don't know what to do. I've had to quit teaching my Bible

classes. I'm not doing anything. I don't go out, I don't see anybody. It's all I can do just to get up in the morning, and some days I can't even do that. I'm so ashamed of myself I don't think I can stand it!"

Jeannette explains:

> This was no erratic spiritual novice; this was a mighty Christian soldier! I had seen her in action and praised God for her accuracy as she taught or counseled. My heart hurt for her. This dear friend was not only down in the depths, but ashamed of herself for being there . . . . Any Christian who is truly shocked by another Christian's depression has not dealt honestly with the possibility of her own.

In the past year, I have spent many hours with each of two close friends trapped in the web of paralyzing depression. One woman is the college friend whose faith and commitment to Christ brought me into a personal relationship with God. She and her husband have ministered effectively in Christ's name in East Africa for more than 30 years. During this furlough, however, she has been plunged into severe depression.

My second friend was a colleague in ministry in France. Gifted with a splendid mind, she has not always found doors open to the use of her gifts. Focusing her energies on her family, she and her husband have successfully parented two model sons. Now that the boys are grown, she has not been able to find outlets for all that she has to give. She has lived for several years now in a miasma of depression.

Cynthia Swindoll,

executive director of *Insight For Living*, looked back over the 15 years in which her life was darkened by depression. In the preface to Don Baker's book, *Depression*, she described her experience:

> [It was] black as a thousand midnights in a cypress swamp.
>
> [It was] loneliness that is indescribable.
>
> [It brought] confusion regarding God.
>
> [I experienced] frustration with life and circumstances.
>
> [It was] the feeling that you have been abandoned, that you are worthless.
>
> [I felt] unlovable.
>
> The pain was excruciating.

Depression. Did you notice the feelings Cynthia Swindoll had? She felt lonely, confused, frustrated, worthless, unlovable. The pain, she said, was excruciating.

Depression comes in many forms with many symptoms. Perhaps you experience some of them right now. Dr. Timothy Foster lists seven main symptoms of depression in his helpful book, *How To Deal With Depression*.

1. We lose emotional feeling and call it "the blahs." This is that drop in mood in which we say, "I don't feel particularly bad; I don't feel particularly good. I just don't feel much of anything." (Foster reminds us that every emotionally-caused depression starts with a case of the blahs that hangs on and gradually deteriorates.)
2. We become overly self-conscious. Most of the time we do scores of things "on automatic pilot"—we drive the car, cross our legs, scratch

our noses, or eat dinner with no conscious thought about our actions. But suddenly we have to think about what are usually unconscious decisions. We become self-conscious.

3. Our sleep patterns change. If we normally sleep through the night, we may experience sleeplessness. If we usually function well on 7 or 8 hours of sleep at night, we may find that we want to sleep all the time.
4. Our eating patterns change. If we have always kept our weight under control with disciplined eating, we may find ourselves reaching for food constantly. Or we may lose our normal appetite and cannot force ourselves to eat.
5. Our crying patterns change. This too can take two forms. If we cry regularly, we may find something holding back normal tears. We can't cry. Something blocks the flow of our emotions. Or we may constantly feel that we need to cry. The tears are always only an inch below the surface.
6. We lose confidence in our ability to function. With this we may experience a loss of energy or a lack of initiative.
7. Our mood drops. We feel sad. Depression often starts with feeling "nothing" or the blahs, but eventually the mood drops and a combination of sadness and not caring sets in.

Foster states that the presence of only one or two of these symptoms should not alarm us. But if we experience three or more of these symptoms, we may be in depression.

Where does depression come from? In most cases it can be traced to the way we think about ourselves.

Some depressions—about 5 percent of them—are due to a biochemical imbalance and must be treated with medications for life. It is estimated that the other 95 percent of depressions are rooted in emotional factors.

Depression is one way of handling stress. Some people handle stress by becoming physically ill. Others handle stress by over-achieving. Still others handle stress with a drop in mood, by checking out from full participation in life.

Many depressions are caused by some traumatic event in our lives. We can point to those events and explain why we are depressed. Perhaps we feel rejected by someone we value. Or we've just come through a devastating divorce. Or perhaps someone close to us has recently died. Maybe it's a job loss with the threat of losing our house. Depression from loss is the easiest kind to understand.

Other depressions can't be tied to anything specific that has happened to us. We feel down "for no reason at all."

Stress often moves in with us when we focus on ourselves negatively. It comes when we feel powerless to change our situation. We see no alternatives from which to choose. Wherever we turn, we see closed doors or roadblocks shutting us off from happiness. What is merely a minor barrier for one person becomes an insurmountable obstacle for another.

For many women in their middle years, depression comes when they realize that they will never become

what once they dreamed of being. Psychologists call this *involutional melancholia*. Helplessness gradually becomes both a cause and an effect of depression.

All depressed people experience a decrease in self-confidence. If I have low self-esteem, I am much more vulnerable to depression. Something happens to me that confirms my idea that I'm no good. The scenario might look like this:

I'm a professor at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. Suppose the department head stops by my office and asks me if I have finished a project he gave me to do. I haven't. So I feel his disappointment in me. I begin to translate that into all kinds of feelings he, in reality, isn't having. If my self-esteem is low, I may conclude that he is disgusted with me for not getting my work done. In fact, I assume, he is getting so disgusted that he will probably fire me. I believe that I deserve whatever he throws at me because I am not a capable person. I am really a failure. Because I am so worthless and really am a handicap to my students, the best thing I can do is to quit my job so my boss can hire someone else who will do the job correctly.

Have you ever played that kind of scenario in your head? I have. What happens is that I file this incident away in my memory where I have already filed many other incidents of "rejection." My level of self-confidence sinks a bit lower each time under the weight of this heavy file-drawer full of my failures.

As my self-confidence drains away, I withdraw from people around me, from life in general, and often from God. I'm

probably not conscious of my reasons for withdrawing. But the more I withdraw, the more I blame myself. This merely increases the problem. Each time I do this, my self-confidence hits a new low. A vicious cycle begins to spin, leading me into more withdrawal and more feelings of guilt and worthlessness.

Caught in the cycle, I feel totally helpless. Nothing that I do is worth anything. I'm at the mercy of forces that overwhelm me in my inadequacy. I feel myself being sucked down, down in a spiraling whirlpool of depression.

Negative thoughts about ourselves quickly become automatic. We don't have to work at thinking negative thoughts. They become well-ingrained habits strengthened by years of practice. We do not arrive at negative thoughts through logic. We reach most of them with no objective evidence at all. But that doesn't stop us.

Depression creates a frame of mind in which almost everything we experience reminds us of our miserable, helpless condition. This is one reason depression is so painful. We really believe we are to blame for whatever we think is wrong. We hold ourselves responsible for everything bad that happens around us. We emphasize failures and we ignore successes or brush

Depression creates a frame of mind in which almost everything we experience reminds us of our miserable, helpless condition.

them aside as accidental.

Most of the time, depressed people anchor their sense of self-worth to a very narrow idea of what success is. Unrealistic expectations and impossibly high goals lead us to an overwhelming sense of failure and worthlessness. We set ourselves up to fail. The mental habit of inflating others and deflating ourselves is typical of depression. We end up with distorted perceptions of other people that leave us feeling hopelessly inferior. We see ourselves as stupid, unattractive, untalented, or unspiritual.

So much for a clinical description of depression. It can be helpful to review symptoms and the syndrome. But this isn't a medical journal and depression is not a virus. It is always personal. It happens to real people. We may understand it better if we look at a biblical case study in depression.

Our case study is a woman named Hannah. Her story can help us as we walk with her through and out of her depression. We meet her in 1 Samuel 1. As we get acquainted with her, we discover that she had several sources of stress.

First, she lived at a stressful time in Israel's history. The nation was merely a loose confederacy of tribes united around the worship of Jehovah at the shrine at Shiloh. Invaders harassed one tribe, then another. Over a period of several hundred years one or another strong leader called a judge would deliver God's people from foreign rule, only to find another Israeli tribe oppressed by a different group of outsiders.

As we flip on the news or pick up *Time* or *Newsweek*, we can understand how the tensions in the world and

in our town can affect the way we feel. Not only was Hannah's nation oppressed by neighbor nations, but the religious life of the people was being corrupted by bad priests. The two sons of the high priest made a mockery of the sacrifices, and to make bad matters worse, they were sleeping with the women who served at the entrance to the tabernacle. It was not a time to inspire faith and devotion to God.

Yet, in the midst of religious hypocrisy we find a pious family living in Ramah in the hill country allotted to the tribe of Ephraim. Elkanah, the husband in our story, was a Levite, or a priest. Every year he and his family made the 10-mile journey on foot to the tabernacle or shrine at Shiloh to worship.

Hannah lived at a stressful time both politically and religiously. But she also had to live with stress in her family. In 1 Samuel 1:2 we learn that Elkanah had two wives—Hannah, who was beloved but barren, and Peninnah, who was less loved but very fertile. Some of Hannah's stress came from living in a polygamous marriage.

Polygamy was a fact of life in ancient Israel. Wives were a means of securing children. In Hannah's case it is likely that she was Elkanah's first wife. But because she was infertile, he took a second wife to insure that the family name would not be lost because he had no children.

In Hannah's day, a woman who failed to produce children was considered to be a useless link in the chain leading to the promised Messiah. Hannah's situation was depressing. Year after year Peninnah produced children. Year after year Hannah suffered emotionally from

her infertility, her hopes for a pregnancy receding with every menstrual period. Hannah's stress in the family came not only from being in a polygamous marriage. It also came from her infertility as she lived next to a co-wife who had no trouble conceiving and bearing children.

Hannah's stress, however, was compounded by the fact that Peninnah never stopped needling her about her childlessness. In verse 6 we read that her rival, Peninnah, "kept provoking her in order to irritate her." We know from verse 7 that this had been going on for a long time—"year after year."

One of the most trying times for Hannah appears to have been the annual pilgrimage to Shiloh. Imagine having to walk for 10 miles with someone who never stops picking at your inadequacy all the while her children keep bumping into you, wiping their noses on your skirt, or asking you to carry them. No wonder Hannah arrived at Shiloh under a black cloud of depression.

How do we know she was depressed? What were some of her symptoms? Elkanah's questions to his wife in verse 8 give us some clues:

Why are you weeping? Why don't you eat? Why are you downhearted?

Think back to Foster's seven major symptoms of depression (pp.18-19). He said that any three indicated depression. Hannah was depressed. Elkanah's well-intentioned effort to console her did not succeed. Nothing seemed to make any difference. Her despair was overpowering. She withdrew from the comfort of her husband. She withdrew from the family circle.

If you have ever been in the black hole of depression, you can sympathize with Hannah. She was depressed, and she had much in her life to cause her depression. In the midst of it all, however, Hannah had not lost her grip on God. Watch what happens next. In verses 9 and 10 we read:

> *Once when they had finished eating and drinking in Shiloh, Hannah stood up. Now Eli the priest was sitting on a chair by the doorpost of the Lord's temple* [tabernacle]. *In bitterness of soul Hannah wept much and prayed to the Lord.*

Note that while we have learned a lot about Hannah in the Bible story up to this point, we only now hear Hannah herself speak. We have had no indication whether she answered Peninnah's jeers or whether she tried to help Elkanah understand her misery when he attempted to console her. Until she speaks in verse 11, she has been a silent suffering figure, very much like many women suffering from depression today. Depression has a way of robbing us of the ability to communicate with the important people around us. We may feel that no one will understand.

In bitterness of soul she wept. But she did something else. She prayed to the Lord. The first time we hear her speak, we hear her addressing God:

> *She made a vow, saying, "O Lord Almighty, if You will only look upon Your servant's misery and remember me, and not forget Your servant but give her a son, then I will give him to the Lord for all the days of his life, and no razor will*

ever be used on his head."

Hannah's vow was called a Nazirite vow. Samson, an earlier judge of Israel, was also a Nazirite, "set apart to God from birth," one who would "begin the deliverance of Israel from the hands of the Philistines" (Jud. 13:5). Jews believed that anything that had not been touched, plowed, or cut belonged to the Lord. A field was the Lord's until it was plowed. Once a farmer dug it up, it was his and not the Lord's. A person dedicated to the Lord from his birth could not have his hair cut. Once it was cut, he no longer had the same relationship to the Lord. This explains what happened to Samson when Delilah wheedled the secret of his strength from him and a razor was used on his head.

Listen to Hannah as she bargained for a son. Feel her desperation and the urgency of her petition. "Look at my misery! Remember me! Don't forget me! Give me a son!" We hear the heaviness in the words she prays. We see it in the way she prays. Read verses 12 through 16:

> *As she kept on praying to the Lord, Eli observed her mouth. Hannah was praying in her heart, and her lips were moving but her voice was not heard. Eli thought she was drunk and said to her, "How long will you keep on getting drunk? Get rid of your wine." "Not so, my lord," Hannah replied, "I am a woman who is deeply troubled. I have not been drinking wine or beer; I was pouring out my soul to the Lord. Do not take your servant for a wicked woman; I have been praying here out of my great anguish and grief."*

Added to Peninnah's jibes and Elkanah's ineffective

effort at consolation came a sharp rebuke from the high priest. In the midst of her misery, Hannah also had to deal with unjustified criticism from one who misunderstood her.

In the prayer in verse 11 she made a vow that if the Lord gave her the desire of her heart, she would give that son back to Him to serve Him all the days of his life. But that vow and her pleas do not account for all the time Hannah stood praying. In verse 10 we read that "in bitterness of soul Hannah wept much and prayed," and in verse 12, "she kept on praying."

Sympathetic to Hannah's words, Eli told her in verse 17 to "go in peace, and may the God of Israel grant you what you have asked of Him." Notice that Eli did not know what Hannah had asked God to do. He merely added his prayer to hers to the God of Israel. Yet something happened to Hannah as she stood there praying. Whatever it was, it produced the result we see in verse 18:

> *Then she went her way and ate something, and her face was no longer downcast.*

Hannah joined in the worship of the Lord the next morning, went back to Ramah with Elkanah, and *voila*!—before long she was pregnant and gave birth to Samuel whose name means "heard of God." She asked, and God heard her and answered her prayer. No wonder her depression lifted! She had the baby she asked for.

Is that really what happened? If our story ended with 1 Samuel chapter 1, we might think that the only way out of depression is to have God intervene in some miraculous way to fill up the empty places in our

lives. But the story doesn't end with chapter 1. The key to understanding Hannah's dramatic turn-around in verse 18 lies in her song, or psalm, that we find in 1 Samuel 2:1-10.

Hannah's depression lifted when she took her focus from herself and her situation and put her focus on God. In the midst of her misery she was able to focus on three important facts about God. She underlined these three facts in her song.

The first thing she knew about God is found in 1 Samuel 2:2,

> *There is no one holy like the Lord; there is no one besides You; there is no Rock like our God.*

She recognized God's holiness. What could the fact of God's holiness mean to a woman in depression? Far from being consoling, that could only intensify the feelings of worthlessness and guilt that are often part of depression.

If we define holiness negatively—as a separation from all that is unclean—that may make us feel worse about ourselves. But God's holiness is much more.

Charles Ryrie suggests an analogy that may help us understand this word *holy*. Ryrie asks, "What does it mean to be healthy?" It means the absence of illness. But we all know that being healthy is a lot more than simply not being sick. It also means having energy, being physically able to meet the demands of our daily lives.

Holiness is not merely the absence of evil. It is also the presence of positive right. It is God at work doing what is positively right for us. It is the part of God's nature that keeps Him from doing anything in our lives that is not in our best interest. His love is a holy and pure love that is

committed to our best good.

The second thing Hannah knew about God is found in 1 Samuel 2:3,

> *For the Lord is a God who knows, and by Him deeds are weighed.*

The New American Standard Bible translates this verse, "For the Lord is a God of knowledge." Not only does God's holiness keep Him committed to our best good; His perfect knowledge keeps Him from doing anything in our lives that is not perfectly right for us.

Someone has said that "God does not waste His strokes in our lives." That is true. It is true because God knows what is best for us. No trial and error. No foul balls or strikeouts. The Lord is a God of knowledge. That gives us confidence in His actions in our lives.

The third thing Hannah knew occupies much of her song. God has power. We see this in 1 Samuel 2:6-7 and at the end of verse 8:

> *The Lord brings death and makes alive; He brings down to the grave and raises up. The Lord sends poverty and wealth; He humbles and He exalts. . . . For the foundations of the earth are the Lord's; upon them He has set the world.*

The Lord of creation has all power. He can do whatever He wants to do.

That fact without the first two facts might terrify us. If God had all power and we did not know anything else about Him, we'd have reason for a massive depression. We'd all cower in dark corners to escape His wrath or His caprice. But God tempers His power with His commitment to our welfare. He controls His power with His knowledge of what is best for us.

My husband, Randy, and I have four adult children.

We have always wanted the best for our children. But often we didn't know what was best for them. Which schools would be best? Which activities would be most wholesome? Which church would nurture them? As our children grew up, we made thousands of decisions with their interests at heart. But we were not always sure that our choices were wise.

Not only have Randy and I often lacked knowledge of what was best for our children; there were times when we knew what was best but didn't have the power to make that decision stick. We're finite, fallible parents who have made lots of mistakes along the way. We wanted what was best for our children, but we lacked the knowledge and the power we needed.

God is not finite. God is not fallible. He not only *wants* what is best for us and *knows* with perfect knowledge what is best, He also has the power to make the best happen in our lives. God's holy commitment to us, God's knowledge of what is best for us, and God's power to make the right things happen in our lives are all linked together for our good.

What brought Hannah out of her depression? She saw God as He really is. God backed His commitment to her welfare with His knowledge and His power to do what needed to be done in her life.

Hannah's story had a happy ending. Samuel was born. She gave him to the Lord, and God gave her three more sons and two daughters. Yet in 1 Samuel 1:18, when she stopped praying, ate some food, and stopped looking sad, she didn't know at that moment how the story would end. She was able to do that because she had met with

God and understood who He was and what He could do.

At the beginning of this section, I mentioned that psychologists believe depression is related to the way we think about ourselves. It is also true that depression is related to the way we think—or fail to think—about God. Once we bind ourselves to a God-sized God, we have a resource for dealing with depression. We can focus on God—His holiness, His knowledge, His power. We can face our fears and anxieties in the light of His character and His commitment to us.

If depression results from the way we think about ourselves, then it can be lifted by the way we think about ourselves in relation to a holy, knowledgeable, and powerful God who is committed to us.

Robert Browning reminds us that "looking downward that makes one dizzy." I'm an acrophobe. I don't like being up high on the top of things like fire towers or monuments or skyscrapers. Looking down terrifies me.

Spiritually speaking, the downward look is the one that leads to depression. The upward look takes away our fear. Look to the God of Hannah, the One who dispelled her depression with a new understanding of His love, His knowledge, and His power.

This booklet is excerpted from *A Woman God Can Lead* by Alice Mathews, published by Discovery House Publishers © 1998. Alice is a regular participant on the RBC daily radio program *Discover The Word.*

Discovery Series®

Our mission is to make the life-changing wisdom of the Bible understandable and accessible to all.

Discovery Series presents the truth of Jesus Christ to the world in balanced, engaging, and accessible resources that show the relevance of Scripture for all areas of life. All Discovery Series booklets are available at no cost and can be used in personal study, small groups, or ministry outreach.

To partner with us in sharing God's Word, click this link to donate. Thank you for your support of Discovery Series resources and Our Daily Bread Ministries.

Many people, making even the smallest of donations, enable Our Daily Bread Ministries to reach others with the life-changing wisdom of the Bible. We are not funded or endowed by any group or denomination.

CLICK TO DONATE