

1 Samuel 1

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- [0 : 00] 136, sorry. Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good. His love endures forever. Give thanks to the God of gods.
- His love endures forever. Give thanks to the Lord of lords. His love endures forever. Let us pray.
- Our Lord God, we do want to praise you and bless you. That you indeed are the God of God and the King of kings. That you are the Lord of lords.
- And we praise you and bless you that you are good. That your love endures and that you show mercy, abounding mercy to us. And we pray that as we gather this evening, as we sing, pray that you would help us to lift our thoughts from things that are going on this day or to come this week.
- And we pray that you'd help us to be focused on yourself and all that you have done for us. We pray that you would thrill our hearts again with the wonderful realities of the gospel and all that you've done for us in Jesus Christ, our saviour.
- [1 : 17] And we pray, Lord God, as we hear your word, that you would give us ears that are ready to hear. Give us soft hearts, we pray. And may your word do us much good as you take it and work by your spirit in our midst to apply it to our hearts.
- We pray for your help as we gather. We look to you in all things. And we pray that you would do us good in our gathering this evening. And we ask this for Jesus' glory's sake.
- Amen. Amen. The whole of the first chapter. Before we begin, just say thank you for your warm welcome and hospitality today and yesterday evening.
- Good to be with you. And thank you for being so welcoming. And it's good to renew fellowship. I think it was about three years ago last year.
- So thank you for the invitation to come back. In C.S. Lewis' book, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, Lewis begins the book with this picture of the land of Narnia as a world without hope.
- [2 : 29] The White Witch is ruling. And she rules in such a way that she makes it always winter and never Christmas. But of course, as a story develops and as things move on, as the children come and things start to happen, there are hints of hope, glimmers of hope as the book progresses.
- And a number of the characters in the story say this phrase, Aslan, is on the move, don't they? Aslan is on the move. And of course, that then becomes to be reflected in the world around.
- The sun seems to be shining with greater warmth such that the ice starts to melt. The winter starts to cease and signs of life begin to emerge.
- And at the start of 1 Samuel, we find God's people in a similar kind of situation to how people were at the beginning of that book, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*.
- They were in a bleak time, a time of great difficulty. I'm sure you know the last phrase in the book of Judges, that there was no king and everyone did what was right in their own eyes.

[3 : 42] There was chaos among God's people. They were in a mess and they were under God's judgment because of their sin. But as the book of 1 Samuel begins, we begin to see that there are shoots and signs of hope right at the beginning of the book.

Signs that God is on the move. That God is going to do something. And the book as a whole charts the beginning of a change among God's people.

And that change will first come about by God raising up a godly prophet. The boy and then man Samuel. And that godly prophet will function in such a way as to anoint a king.

First Saul and then David. And that king will be a leader for God's people. So God will provide a leader for a people who have no leader.

A king who will guide them. In fact, he will raise up a prophet who in some ways Samuel will function as a priest. And join the people near to God and then ultimately providing a king.

[4 : 52] So the book begins with God moving to raise up this prophet Samuel. And in chapter 1 of 1 Samuel, we see that God does that by moving in another difficult, impossible situation.

We read about a barren woman, Hannah, who has no children but will become the mother of this new prophet.

Who will then anoint the king of God's people. Now it's often God's way, isn't it?

That when God is going to do a great thing, he often moves in another impossible situation to do that. It's almost as if God sometimes takes the difficult way of doing things.

Now God could have chosen to have anointed a man who was already living to be this prophet. But God doesn't do that. He takes a small situation, a sad situation and moves there.

[5 : 52] So that we might see hints and have hope that he is going to move in the larger situation of God's people in the book of 1 Samuel. So I think 1 Samuel is a book that as you begin to read it, it's a book that you should feel excited about.

Because there are signs of hope. Because God is on the move. Something is going to happen. Change is coming. Winter is coming to an end. Because whenever you read about a childless woman who seeks God and who has a child, that child is often used by God to do something really great.

Just think about the examples in the Bible where that happens. You know, Sarah and Isaac, Rachel and Joseph, Elizabeth and John the Baptist.

This is often God's way of working. So at the start of this book we should be excited because we're going to see that God is on the move. God is going to be at work in his people.

And we see it in the first instance in this lady's life, Hannah. So I want to look at three things from this chapter. Really take us through the chapter.

[7 : 01] And hopefully enter into something of Hannah's suffering. Something of Hannah's approach to that. And also particularly what gave Hannah strength. And we'll come to that at the end.

So first of all I wanted to see in times of barrenness. Really there are three points of sermon. In times of barrenness, that's the first one. Find hope in God. That's the second one.

Cry out to God. And find strength in him. That's the third one. So in times of barrenness, cry out to God and find strength in him. So first of all let's look at this in times of barrenness in the first eight verses.

We need to understand Hannah's situation. And see how Hannah's situation is a picture of Israel's situation. So in verses one and two we are introduced to a family.

And it's a somewhat dysfunctional family. There's the husband, the man, Elkanah. And Elkanah has two wives, Hannah and Penina.

[7 : 59] Hannah is probably his first wife because she's listed first in the text. She's there in verse two here. Two wives, one called Hannah and the other Penina.

Hannah being the first wife, perhaps she wasn't able to, it seemed that she wasn't able to have children. And so Elkanah takes another wife in order to have children.

And that would be Penina. And she has many children. In fact, she has at least four. If you look at verse four, there's reference to all her sons and daughters.

So she has at least two sons, at least two daughters. So at least four children. And Penina lives up to her name because Penina means prolific. So her name fits with her experience.

And that's often the way in the Bible that someone's name is a reflection of their life. Now, maybe as we begin this chapter, you're not going to be wondering what's going on as a man married to two ladies. Is the Bible sanctioning polygamy, having multiple wives?

[8 : 56] And of course, the answer to that is no. The Bible doesn't say that that is God's desire. It's not God's plan from creation. But the way in which narrative works, biblical narrative works, is we're not often given a judgment statement about a situation.

We're just shown what it's like. And of course, when we look into this family and see what it's like, we see that it doesn't work well. And indeed, all the polygamous situations don't work well in the Bible.

And so the Bible's way of telling us that is by showing us how it works. And Hannah, Elkanah's first wife, is deeply distressed about her childlessness.

In the ancient world, to have male offspring was key because it was a male offspring who continued the family name. They could inherit the property.

And so in that world, if a woman did not have male children, she was judged as a failure. People maybe looked at her and wondered, why has God closed her womb?

[9 : 55] What has she done? This might be the case. What sin has she done? This might be the case. Indeed, one of the curses in the old covenant for disobedience was childlessness.

So when people look at Hannah and wonder, what is going on in her life that this should happen? And this great sadness of Hannah, which is not because she's sinned in any particular awful way, but this great sadness of Hannah comes into focus in the annual family trip to Shiloh.

The whole family go. Shiloh is a place where the tabernacle is situated in Israel at this time. And they will go once a year and Elkanah makes his offering. And he shares some of the meat from the offering with his family.

We read that he gives a full portion to Peninnah and to her sons and daughters. But in verse 5, we read that he gives a double portion to Hannah because he loved her and the Lord had closed her womb.

So Elkanah feels for his wife. He loves her and he feels for her loss. I guess we can imagine the scene here, can't we? There's a big family meal. There's Elkanah at the head of the table.

[11 : 07] There's Peninnah down one side with all her children. She's a busy mum. She's running around, getting them sat down, making sure they got food. Then Hannah's there, sat without any children.

And her double portion, even in Elkanah's love for her, he gives that. But in some ways that reminds her, doesn't it, the fact that she doesn't have any children. So she is deeply saddened by this.

And of course, what makes it even worse is that Peninnah, her rival, is her tormentor. Look at verse 6.

And because... Yeah, look at verse 6. And because the Lord had closed her womb, her rival kept provoking her in order to irritate her.

So Peninnah keeps on saying to her, provoking her. And we can just think of some of the words that she might have used and some of the things that she might have said. And this goes on for Hannah year after year.

[12 : 15] And Hannah must dread this annual trip to Shiloh. What should have been a joyous occasion. You know, going to sacrifice to God, having a wonderful family meal, wasn't anything like that.

It was a difficult time. It was a sad time. A deeply distressing time for her. Now maybe some of us have had experience at Mirror, Hannah's experience.

Maybe there's something that we don't have that we long for. Whether it be marriage or children or housing or job or a standard of living.

Something which we know is not a bad thing for us to long for as Christians, but God hasn't given it. And when we see that God has given it to others, we find that very hard.

Particularly perhaps when they're insensitive or even worse or unkind with how they speak to us. And Hannah gets no help from those around her.

[13 : 14] Even her husband doesn't understand her. How he speaks with her in verse 8. Elkanah, her husband, would say to her, Why are you weeping?

Why don't you eat? Why are you downhearted? Don't I mean more to you than ten sons? Now he's genuinely concerned for his wife. But of course, as all men, he says the wrong thing at the wrong time.

And he doesn't get it completely right, does he? Surely he is enough for her. Well, he's a good man, Elkanah. He wants to worship God. He speaks about God.

He wants to fulfil vows to God. But he's not perfect. You could say that Hannah was not enough for him. Because he married Penina. And of course, like any man, he tries to fix the problem.

Sort out the difficulty. And says the wrong thing. Now God hones in on this family situation. And Hannah's sadness.

[14 : 18] Because Hannah's situation is a picture of what is going on in Israel at the time. The barrenness that she feels and experiences is the barrenness of Israel.

It's a picture of that. There was no king. There were no prophets. And there was a corrupt priesthood. And it looks really desperate for Israel.

Just like it looks really desperate for Hannah. And maybe, like Hannah this evening, you feel something of that sense of loss, of not having something which you long for.

Something that God hasn't given to you. Something that's not sinful. That's something that is a good thing to long for. And you wonder, why has God withheld that from me? Why has God not given me that thing?

Or maybe you feel a barrenness spiritually this evening. Like Israel had a barrenness. Maybe you feel that in your soul. That you feel far from God. You feel just dry spiritually. Like there's no life.

[15 : 24] Or maybe as you look at the world around you. Our nation. And you feel how barren it is. And that moves you. And you think, Lord, there's a barrenness. I wonder what you do in those kinds of situations when you feel that.

Those kind of desperate scenarios where you feel that kind of loss. Some people get angry with God when that happens.

Other people shut down spiritually. And want to forget the problem and do nothing about it. But that's not what Hannah does.

And that's why her example is so helpful to us. Because we see that Hannah in times of barrenness. Our second point. She cries out to God. She cries out to God.

Verses 9 to 18. Hannah knows that her situation is dire. And so she needs a big solution. And she seeks that in God. She doesn't get angry.

[16 : 25] She doesn't get bitter. But she does weep. Look at what we read in verse 10. In bitterness of soul, Hannah wept much and prayed to the Lord.

She's not afraid to show her emotions to God. To share her distress with God. She's real with God. And she shares her sadness.

And this is what we must do with our struggles. We must bring them to God. God desires that we would do this. That is what it means to live in a relationship with God.

Such that in those times of barrenness and difficulty. We draw near to God. Now what draws Hannah to God is what she knows about God. We know that from how she speaks of God in verse 11.

She makes a vow and says, O Lord Almighty, if you only look upon your servant's misery. And remember me and do not forget your servant. But give her a son. Then I will give him to the Lord for all the days of his life.

[17 : 30] And no razor will ever be used on his head. The word that Hannah used there of misery. There's another way of translating that. It's affliction. And she's calling on God to remember her in her situation.

Now that language is an echo of the exodus in Egypt. Same words are used of God's people when they were in Egypt. They were in misery. They were in affliction. And God remembered them.

He heard them. And so Hannah knows that God is a God who hears his people when they cry out to him. Her knowledge of God leads her to cry out to God.

And there's an important lesson in that for us. Because the knowledge of God, what we know about God, brings us hope. We need to know about God in troubles. Because that gives us strength.

Sometimes people say, well, you don't need theology as a Christian. You don't need to know about God. You just need that relationship. But there is no relationship without what we know about God. Without theology in that sense.

[18 : 30] Without knowledge of God. And that gives her hope. And it's very interesting. If you read through the Psalms, how often the psalmist starts downcast, remembers something about God, and then rises up.

Because it's the knowledge of God that gives them hope. That's what lifts her. And so she pleads to God to help in her situation. But notice that she is very careful not to make this child her idol.

Notice what she promises she will do if God gives her a son. She promises that she will give this child to God's service. She makes reference to no razor being ever used on his head.

And that's the Nazarite vow. And with Samson, that was the case with him. Normally the Nazarite vow is for a period of time. But in this case, it's a promise for all of his life.

So she's saying, God, I will give this child to you. Because she knows that God's people need help. And she knows that she wants to offer this child in the service of God.

[19 : 37] So she asks God to help. But then she promises to use whatever God gives for him. And that's very important.

Her bigger concern is God and God's kingdom. And when we long for something, we must not make that thing we long for our God.

There are some people who say, if I just had this one thing, I'd be happy. And when they get it, they forget God. Because that's become their God. They're not fulfilled if they don't have it.

They're fulfilled when they have it. And it's become their God. But Hannah's big concern is God's kingdom. It's God. And so she offers Samuel to God. Because the most important thing to Hannah was God, not this child.

But also, in seeing that, what we see is that it's not wrong for us as Christians to have longings for good things. Like in Hannah's case, children. Or the good things that God's word commends that we should long for.

[20 : 45] But we have to have longings for those things in the context of loving God first and more than those things. We have to want God more than the things that we're asking God for.

So there might be good things that we can ask God for as long as they're in a context of loving God first. But also, in Hannah's example here, I think it's an important lesson in parenting.

As a father of three young children, I have lots of desires for them. Aspirations for their lives. But Hannah's great desire for her son was that he should serve God.

You know, we can have so many desires for our children, can't we? Academic success. Health. A good life. Not having difficulty.

But our greatest desire for our children should be that they know God. Our greatest desire. Things we pray for. Maybe grandparents. That our grandchildren would know God.

[21 : 48] And sometimes we can put all of our effort into education and health and forget the spiritual side of raising our children to know and love God and to make that the priority.

Do we have a concern for the spiritual state of our children? Do we teach them about God? Do we pray for them? Do we want them to know about Jesus and about serving God?

Do we pray for them?

And she's moving her lips, but she has nothing coming out of them. And her conclusion is that she is drunk. Now that says something about Eli. That's his first conclusion when he sees a woman doing something silently in a temple like that.

It should worry us about Eli. And what are being shown here, of course, is the weakness of Eli's priesthood. He doesn't first of all think well of Hannah. He thinks badly of her. And the sad thing is later in the book, we see that Eli has neglected his role as a father.

[23 : 11] He's allowed his sons to sin greatly as priests. And this is another sign of that barrenness that's going on in Israel. But even Eli's insensitive words don't discourage Hannah.

She knows what she needs to do. She needs to seek God. And even a deeply flawed servant of God won't derail her. Sometimes we can blame our problems on the fact that we didn't get the right pastoral help at the right time.

Or that someone said something to us in the wrong way at a difficult time. And that was unhelpful. And because of that, we explain sometimes our sin and say we're in this sin because of that.

I've heard someone say that. They said that their daughter was going through a difficult time. She asked to see the pastor. The pastor didn't come for three weeks. And when he'd come, it was too late and she didn't care about God.

Now that's really sad that the pastor didn't come. It shouldn't have been the case. But at the same time, someone hardening their heart to God in that discouragement is a personal choice, isn't it?

[24 : 25] We can't blame our problems on other people. We can't blame our sin upon other people. It's becoming bitter is a personal choice. We have to remember, don't we, in churches that we are sinners and we're surrounded by sinners.

People will hurt us. Sometimes by being unthoughtful. Sometimes by being unkind. And we must not let that stop us from seeking God.

From drawing near to God. From meeting with God's people. So when you feel burden like this, in that barrenness, whatever it might be, this passage calls us to cry out to God.

To pray to him. To call upon him. And then we find, thirdly, that we find strength in God. Finding strength in him.

When we seek God, he gives grace and strength. In verse 18, we are shown what happens to Hannah after her prayer.

[25 : 34] Having spoken with Eli, we read that, Then she went on her way and ate something, and her face was no longer downcast.

Do you remember what Hannah was like before she prayed? Discouraged, downcast, and would not eat. And so there's a complete reversal in Hannah.

No longer downcast, and she'll eat food. There's a complete turnaround in her. And that's as a result of her praying and God giving strength as she's prayed.

And the lesson here for us is that God gives us prayer as a means of help. Prayer changes things because God works through the prayers of his people to work in this world.

But also, prayer changes us. Because it's God's means of building us up and strengthening our faith. I've certainly had that experience personally in my Christian life.

[26 : 36] When something's really weighing heavily on me, I often wake early in the morning. I don't know if that ever happens to you. 3, 4am in the morning, something's weighing on me, and I wake up.

I can't get back to sleep. I've tried staying in bed. Doesn't work. Don't get off again. But if I get up, and I read scripture, and I pray, I find that really helps.

Because in praying, what have I done? In praying, I've acknowledged that I can't solve that thing that's weighing on me. I've acknowledged that I can't be the solution. I need to offer it to God. I need to acknowledge that he needs to act.

And there's a genuine release that comes in offering our petitions to God. In praying to God. Because we're no longer carrying the load you want to carry.

It's no longer weighing us in the same way. Because we're saying, Lord, we need you to help. And having lifted it up to him, we can leave it with him. And then return to our rest. Now in Hannah's life, God answers this prayer by giving her a son.

[27 : 48] She returns home in verses 19 and 20. Now I was not supposed to understand by 1 Samuel chapter 1, the example here, that God will always answer the prayer of a childless couple by giving them a child.

Nor are we supposed to widen it out and say that God will always answer that prayer for something we've longed for by giving us that thing that we're seeking. There were many other women, I'm sure, in Israel who did not have children, who prayed to God and were not granted children.

But there is another way in which God answers this prayer for Hannah. Because not only does God give Hannah a son, but rather he also moves in her to work in her such that Hannah finds God to be more important to her than this child.

You know, it's one thing, isn't it, to say, Lord, I love you more than that thing I'm praying for. But then when God gives you that thing, the temptation is very great, isn't it?

That thing that you've now received would become the most important thing. Now, how do we know that?

[29 : 33] Well, she fulfills her vow. Now, Samuel would have been nursed until he was about three.

So he's probably four, maybe five years old when she takes him. Now, as a father of young children, you think, how could anyone do that? How could you leave your child with the priest miles away, a very young age?

Now, just think about this a bit more. This was the child she'd waited for for years. The child who was the answer to her prayers. The child who had brought an end to the taunts of Penina.

Who had made that annual trip to Shiloh. Bearable. But God is more to her than her child.

And she knows that even though leaving him will be hard, God will be more precious to her than her child. And so she can bring him to the temple and leave him there.

[30 : 51] Sometimes God answers these prayers for unfulfilled longings by granting our requests. But he always answers these prayers in making himself more precious than the things that we're longing for.

When we seek him and we find strength in him. Whenever I see this principle in the scriptures, I always think of the life of Gladys Aylwood as a wonderful example of that.

She was a missionary in China for many years. And near the end of the life, she looked back on her years of service and said this. I have not done what I wanted to do.

I have not eaten what I wanted to. Nor worn what I might have chosen. I've lived in houses I would not have looked at twice. I long for a husband and for babies. For security and love.

But God never gave me those things. Instead, he left me alone for 17 years with one book. A Chinese Bible.

[31 : 55] I don't know about the latest novels, cinema or theatre. I live in a rather outdated world. And I suppose you would say it's rather miserable, isn't it? Friend, I have been one of the happiest women who has stepped on this earth.

I've known heaven opening and the blessings of God tumbling out. Wonderful example there of this principle.

That as we seek God and we lift our requests to God, we cry out to God in that barrenness. For though God may not always answer by granting us that thing that we're asking for.

He always answers by making himself enough. By making himself better than that thing that we were longing for. It's good to remind ourselves, isn't it, that when we read the Old Testament, these aren't just stories.

They're true things that happened, but not even just true things that happened. They're God's means of building our faith in him. And drawing us to Jesus Christ.

[33 : 10] And finding our strength in him. So may we be those who follow Hannah's pattern. That in times of barrenness, we cry out to God and find strength in him.

Let's pray. Amen. Amen. Our Lord God, how we praise you and bless you.

That you are an unchanging God. That as we see your character and your ways revealed in your word. We find strength and we find hope.

Knowing that you do not change. That you continue. To deal with your people. In the ways that you've shown in your word.

And so we pray that in our lives. As we walk with you. That by your grace, this pattern that we see in Hannah may be seen in us. That in our sadness and disappointment, we may not become hardened to you.

[34 : 29] Or angry to you. Or shut down spiritually. But rather we pray that you would make us those who cry out to you. That lift our petitions to you. And that by your grace, you would give strength and help.

As you answer those prayers. In making yourself the most precious thing to us. Thank you that in your word, we see so many reasons why you are the most precious thing.

Help us, we ask, to really make those truths about you and what you've done for us. Those reasons to treasure you. A part of who we are as people.

That they may not be just something we think of on a Sunday. Or think of at moments through the day. But they may be something deep down in us that drives us in all that we do.

That we would find our hope and our strength in you. So use your word. Strengthen us by it and through it. And we pray that you would seal it to our hearts and use it for your glory.

[35 : 37] In Jesus name. Amen. Amen.