

1 Samuel 1: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 0 0] 1 Samuel chapter 1. There was a certain man of Ramathaim Zophim, of the hill country of Ephraim, whose name was Elcana the son of Jeroham, son of Elihu, son of Tohu, son of Zoph, and Ephrathite.

He had two wives. The name of the one was Hannah, and the name of the other Peninnah. And Peninnah had children, but Hannah had no children. Now this man used to go up year by year from his city to worship and to sacrifice to the Lord of Hosts at Shiloh, where the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were priests of the Lord. On the day when Elcana sacrificed, he would give portions to Peninnah his wife and to all her sons and daughters. But to Hannah he gave a double portion, because he loved her, though the Lord had closed her womb. And her rival used to provoke her grievously to irritate her, because the Lord had closed her womb. So it went on year by year. As often as she went up to the house of the Lord, she used to provoke her. Therefore Hannah wept and would not eat. And Elkanah her husband said to her, Hannah, why do you weep? And why do you not eat? And why is your heart sad? Am I not more to you than ten sons? After they had eaten and drunk in Shiloh, Hannah rose.

Now Eli the priest was sitting on the seat beside the doorpost of the temple of the Lord. She was deeply distressed, and prayed to the Lord and wept bitterly. And she vowed a vow and said, O Lord of hosts, if you will indeed look on the affliction of your servant, and remember me, and not forget your servant, but will give to your servant a son, then I will give him to the Lord all the days of his life, and no razor shall touch his head. As she continued praying before the Lord, Eli observed her mouth. Hannah was speaking in her heart, only her lips moved, and her voice was not heard. Therefore Eli took her to be a drunken woman. And Eli said to her, How long will you go on being drunk? Put your wine away from you. But Hannah answered, No, my lord, I am a woman troubled in spirit. I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink, but I have been pouring out my soul before the Lord.

Do not regard your servant as a worthless woman, for all along I have been speaking out of my great anxiety and vexation. Then Eli answered, Go in peace, and the God of Israel grant your petition that you have made to him. And she said, Let your servant find favour in your eyes. Then the woman went her way and ate, and her face was no longer sad. They rose early in the morning and worshipped before the Lord. Then they went back to their house at Ramah. And Elkanah knew Hannah his wife, and the Lord remembered her. And in due time Hannah conceived and bore a son, and she called his name Samuel. For she said, I have asked for him from the Lord. The man Elkanah and all his house went up to offer to the Lord the yearly sacrifice and to pay his vow. But Hannah did not go up. For she said to her husband, As soon as the child is weaned, I will bring him, so that he may appear in the presence of the Lord and dwell there forever. Elkanah, her husband, said to her, Do what seems best to you.

Wait until you have weaned him. Only may the Lord establish his word. So the woman remained, and nursed her son until she weaned him. And when she had weaned him, she took him up with her, along with a three-year-old bull, an ephor of flour, and a skin of wine. And she brought him to the house of the Lord at Shiloh. And the child was young. Then they slaughtered the bull, and they brought the child to Eli. And she said, O my Lord, as you live, my Lord, I am the woman who was standing here in your presence, praying to the Lord. For this child I prayed, and the Lord has granted me my petition that I made to him. Therefore I have lent him to the Lord. As long as he lives, he is lent to the Lord. And he worshipped the Lord there. The story of 1 Samuel begins in an unexpected way, and with a surprising person. If we were telling the story of the rise of the kingdom, we would not tell the story this way. Perhaps we would begin with the battle of Aphek, or maybe we would jump to Israel's demand of a king in chapter 8. Yet it begins with Hannah, a

woman who is barren, and a woman who is in rivalry with a fruitful wife, Peninnah. In the situation of Hannah, it is as if the whole story and situation of Israel is condensed. The oppressors are fruitful, yet the faithful are barren. As a barren wife, Hannah should remind us of the wives of the patriarchs. [4 : 23] Sarah, Rebecca, and Rachel were all barren also. And the opening of the barren womb is a crucial theme throughout the scripture. As the barren and oppressed wife who calls out to the Lord, Hannah represents the entire nation. The nation waiting for the promised seed of the woman to deliver them from their condition. And the fact that the narrative of Samuel begins at this point, rather than many years later when Samuel reaches maturity, gives us insight into the priorities of the Lord and the way that he works and views the world. As in the story of the Exodus and in the story of Ruth, covenant history seems to have broken down irreparably. And it's through the prayers and the courage of faithful women that a new future becomes possible. In the midst of this gathering gloom of history, God plants the seeds of his future in unexpected places. In praying for a son, Hannah promises that if the Lord hears her request, she will dedicate him to the Lord, and he will be a Nazarite all of his life. Like Samson and John the Baptist, Hannah's son would be a dedicated servant, bound by a vow of special service for all of his life, and a daughter of a barren woman whose womb was opened. The Nazarite was a person who exercised a priest-like task within the wider world, with many of the same limitations that the priests were under in their service, and Hannah's son would be set apart for a lifelong special mission, a form of holy war, preparing the way for the establishment of the kingdom to come. At the beginning of 1 Samuel, Israel languishes under wicked and spiritually dull rulers. We can see something of this in chapter 3. There's a threefold parallelism. We're informed that the word of the Lord was not heard in those days, that Eli the high priest was losing his sight, and that the lamp of God would soon be extinguished. It's a world without light, without the light of revelation and prophetic vision, without the light of spiritual and physical perception in the high priest, and without the symbolic light of God's presence. And the little light that remains is guttering, is about to be snuffed out, and the world of the tabernacle will fall back into darkness in the story of the battle of Aphek, as the ark of God is captured. The two sons of Eli, Hophni and

Phinehas, are wicked and corrupt priests who despise the offering of the Lord and violate the women at the tabernacle door, the virgins who were to represent Israel's holiness as the Lord's betrothed bride.

Eli himself is very old, and the woman Hannah, with whom the story begins, has a closed womb, and is sorely provoked by a fruitful counterpart, Peninnah. The story is then framed in terms of themes of hopelessness, social decay, corrupt power, and bitter struggle with oppressive and ascendant rivals. During their yearly visit to Shiloh for worship and sacrifice, Hannah leaves the festivities in order to cry out to the Lord at the tabernacle, weeping in her anguish. She vows to the Lord that if he gives her a son, she will dedicate him to the Lord, and that he will be a lifelong Nazarite. Eli, the high priest, mistakes the fasting Hannah's pouring out of her soul to the Lord for drunkenness. This is suggestive of his lack of spiritual perception, and this lack of perception may be a sign of things to come, that he is about to be toppled from his perch quite literally later on, and then going to be replaced by a faithful leader of the people.

The Lord remembers Hannah, in verse 19, and grants her request. He opens her womb and gives her a son, whom she names Samuel. The Lord's remembering and hearing of the woman who cries out might recall the exodus for us, where the Lord heard the groaning of his people, remembered them, and opened the womb of Egypt for the birth of his firstborn son that was dedicated to him. Hannah names her son for the fact that she asked him from the Lord, Samuel's name suggesting heard of God. A strange aspect of this, however, is that the explanation that she gives would fit better with the name Saul than with the name Samuel. This perhaps sets us up for the juxtaposition between Samuel and Saul later on in the story, perhaps also juxtaposing Hannah's asking for a son and Israel's asking for a king.

When Samuel was weaned, Hannah brought him up to Shiloh to give him to the Lord. Samuel was adopted as a son of Eli, although as we'll see later on, Samuel is the one who's dedicated to the Lord. He sleeps in the tent of the Lord, is primarily the son of the Lord, with Eli as his guardian. And the theme of adoption is very important in 1 Samuel.

[8 : 53] Peter Lighthouse writes, Eli's paternal relation to Samuel forms the background for the contrast between Samuel and Eli's natural sons that is developed in chapter 2. Father-son relations are moreover prominent throughout 1 and 2 Samuel. Samuel's troublesome sons provided a pretext

for the people to ask for a king, and Saul was adopted as Samuel's son. Later David became a son-in-law to Saul, and much of the account of David's reign in 2 Samuel is taken up with recording David's difficulties with his sons. In each of these cases, biological sons were replaced by an adopted son.

Just as Eli and his sons lost the priesthood and were supplanted by Samuel, so Samuel's sons were supplanted by Saul, and Saul's son by David. In contrast to Genesis, the true son in 1 and 2 Samuel is not a younger biological son, but an adopted son who comes from outside the genealogy.

1 and 2 Samuel thus makes the typology of Genesis more precise by showing that the seed would not come through the normal channels of fleshly descent, but would be pre-eminently the one born according to the Spirit. In 1 Samuel chapter 1, rather than focusing upon the corridors of power, the first moves of God's great national and cosmic purposes in history appear in the unwitnessed intimacy of domestic and personal struggles, and in the persevering faith of an obscure person without political power or public influence. In this and a number of other stories like it, special attention is given to women. The struggle of childbearing and rearing is not consigned to a largely sentimental private realm, but is rendered integral to the great drama of salvation history. The stories of the matriarchs of Israel and of women such as Ruth and Hannah are not romanticised. They are stories with much suffering and oppression and bravery and significance, but they're stories of persevering and overcoming faith in dark places, of quiet and unsung victories whose fruit will one day erupt into public consciousness. Whereas most people would tell the story beginning at the point where the plant first broke the surface of the soil, God tells the story in a way that begins with the first germination of the seed. These are stories of unrecognised turning points in the tide of history, not least because

God is a God who remembers and who attends to the people that others may ignore. God answers the prayers provoked by the personal struggles of faithful women such as Hannah, in a manner that affects more public and radical social turnarounds through them. The many biblical accounts of women struggling to give birth and being answered by God cast childbearing as a profoundly active calling requiring stubborn and persevering faith. And the frequency and prominence of these accounts, their priority in books such as Genesis, Exodus, Ruth, 1 Samuel and Luke, also makes clear that despite the hiddenness of their labour, God regards and honours these women as prominent actors on the stage of his history and never disconnects the dramatic socio-political harvest of his purpose from the unseen work in sowing and nurturing its seeds. There is a great danger of neglecting or denying the significance of the obscure and personal struggles and victories of the faithful, those struggles and victories that do not assert themselves on the grand public stage of society and history. When our eyes scan for the signs of social and political reversal, we wouldn't think about looking at the agonised prayer of a barren woman like Hannah. Like Eli the high priest who lacks spiritual perception, we can fail to recognise the importance of people and actions we've grown accustomed to ignoring perhaps. We can give people the false message that the capacity to make great social and political difference is something that belongs to the rich and the prominent public figures alone. We can deny the value, the necessity and the potential of quiet and private callings. We can push people into worldly moulds of influence. But yet we serve a God who attends to the weak and the vulnerable, who remembers the forgotten and the ignored, and who hears the silenced and the oppressed. The greatest of social earthquakes can find their unseen epicentres in the most unexpected of places. A question to consider. If 1 Samuel chapter 1 gives us a window into the way that history really works, the way that things are actually turned around, in what ways might it inform and change the ways that we seek to make a difference in our society.