

God Hears - 1 Samuel 1-2

Date: 23 April 2023, 2nd Sunday after Easter, Daphne Brett baptism

Location: St George's Battery Point

Series: Seeking a King

Texts: 1 Samuel 1:1-2:12

When will you hear, God? Do you even care? How can someone in my own family be so cruel? Doesn't she see my pain? Year after year it's the same. Her taunts, her mocking. The reminder of what is not there, of broken dreams. "When are you going to have a baby?" The meal is the worst. She is given portion after portion, one for her, one for each of her children. Elkanah gives me two portions. I know he means well. I know he loves me. But who is the second one for? The child I so long for. The child who never comes. It's a portion for emptiness, for death. The food has turned to ashes on my tongue. I run out in tears and cry out to you. How many times have I prayed this prayer? But that's all I can do. Maybe this time you'll hear. "LORD Almighty, if you will only look on your servant's misery and remember me, and not forget your servant but give her a son..."¹

Today we're starting a new series on the book of Samuel. I say book, because although there is 1 and 2 Samuel in our Bibles, that only reflects the fact that it was written on 2 scrolls because it was too long for a single scroll. We'll follow that lead and look at 1 Samuel this year and 2 Samuel next year. A great theme of the book is "Seeking a King", the title of this series. It begins in a time of moral and political chaos in Israel. The book follows the lives of 3 great leaders - Samuel, Saul and David. But it starts with Hannah, her grief and anguish, and her great prayers. This is a story of battles and politics and the kingdom, but it's also personal, because God is at work both in the big picture and also in our lives in all their mess and pain and broken dreams. And Hannah's story tells us that he is a God who hears.

Looking for Leadership - intro to Samuel

Before we get into these opening chapters, let's set the scene for the book.

Hundreds of years earlier God had promised a man named Abraham that through his family, all people on earth would be blessed. His descendents became the people of Israel. God rescued them from slavery in Egypt. He made a covenant with them, promising to be their God. They in turn promised to obey him and the laws of the covenant which he gave them through the prophet Moses. God brought them into the promised land of Canaan. But over the following generations Israel kept rejecting God and turning to the idols and wicked practices of the nations around them. The nations oppressed them. God raised judges to

¹ 1 Samuel 1.11

rescue them, but the nation spirals downward. The book of Judges ends with these words: “In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit.”²

Now, that might sound like a great situation to our ears. We live in a culture which says, “You do you”. “Be true to yourself”. “Do whatever you want so long as it doesn’t harm others.” I’ve been to plenty of funerals where the theme song is Frank Sinatra’s “I did it my way”. But for Israel this is a disaster. The book of Judges ends in moral chaos and civil war. It’s a society falling apart. The book of Samuel opens with this situation. Moral chaos. Social fragmentation. Menaced by surrounding nations. The question of moral and political leadership is pressing.

Just a note on the date and composition of the book. Samuel forms part of the great sweep of Israel’s historical narrative told from Joshua through to Kings. This was completed after the final events recorded in the book of Kings, that is during the exile in Babylon between 560-539BC. The book itself refers to earlier sources such as the book of Jashar.³ However while the exile is the likely date for the final form of Samuel, the bulk of the book was likely composed within a generation after David.⁴ The genre is history, but it’s not a bare bones account of the “facts”. It is what you might say “crafted” to understand the facts of the great events and the relationship between the historical actors. As such the book shows extraordinary literary artistry with repeated themes, parallels between characters, irony and so on. So, it’s worth us paying close attention to the text. I encourage you to read the whole thing, and if you’ve got a Bible, do follow along. It’s page 263 in the church Bibles.

Hannah - 1.1-18

Let’s return to Hannah. In the middle of that national strife, the book of Samuel opens with the intimate scene of domestic tragedy. We meet Elkanah and his two wives, Peninnah and Hannah. Peninnah has kids. Hannah does not. Her womb is closed. While childlessness is a heartbreak for those who want kids, in Hannah’s day it was even worse. Children were the only means of social status and recognition for women. There were no other career paths or ways to be someone. Your identity was your husband and especially your kids. On top of that, not having kids put you in a very precarious economic position. Who would provide for you when you were old? There was no other social security. Along with the poor, the foreigner, and the orphan, widows were one of the 4 most vulnerable groups of people in

² Judges 21.25

³ 2 Samuel 1.18

⁴ Robert Alter, *The Story of David*, Norton & Company, New York, 1999, xii

ancient Israel. So Hannah's social and economic future are on the line. And Peninnah rubs her nose in it. She wants a son, but does not have him. She cries out to God.

Could her words be yours too? Are there things for which your heart aches that you do not have? A child? I know that's the case for some at St George's. A spouse? Maybe life turned out very different from what you'd imagined, or hoped. A job you hate. A failed marriage. A loved one swallowed by the grave. Your children or grandchildren's lives are a mess. You've got a list of broken dreams. Maybe like Hannah you've prayed to God, weeping bitterly. You're in such anguish that it looks like you're drunk. Where is God in all this? Does he even care?

I love Hannah's story because it gives voice to the real pain and sorrow that we experience, the heartache that we bear year after year. One of the things we'll see in Samuel is that things aren't black and white, neat and easy. Life is messy, complicated, full of wounds. Hannah shows us what to do with our hopes and heartaches. She prays. It's all she can do. Notice how the text describes her prayer. Verse 10

In her deep anguish Hannah prayed to the LORD, weeping bitterly.

And then when Eli sees her soundless lips moving and thinks she's drunk, she says to him, verse 15,

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. **16** Do not take your servant for a wicked woman; I have been praying here out of my great anguish and grief.

Just as an aside, this sets up a recurring theme for Eli the priest. He can't see what is going on right in front of him. Here he mistakes faithful Hannah for a drunkard, later we'll see he's blind to the wickedness of his own sons.

I'm reminded of 1 Peter 5.7, *Cast all your anxieties on him because he cares for you.*

Hannah does what God's people have done throughout the ages, pouring out her soul to God, because he cares for us.

In her prayer she says, verse 11

LORD Almighty, if you will only look on 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.

We'll come to her promise to dedicate her child to God shortly. But for the moment, let us pause on the first part of her prayer. She asks God to look on her. To see her misery. To remember her. To not forget her. These are an echo of the opening of the book of Exodus. There we read that, "God heard," the cries of the Israelites, and "he remembered his

covenant.”⁵ God says to Moses, “I have indeed seen the misery of my people ... I have heard them crying out ... I am concerned about their suffering. So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians.”⁶

How Hannah prays is shaped by what she knows of the story of God’s care for his people. She appeals for him to act for her as he has acted to rescue the nation. That is to say her prayer is a prayer of trust, that God not only cares about his big picture plans for his people, but he also cares for her.

Did you notice when her face was lifted up? It’s there in verse 18. It was not when Samuel was born. It was after she prayed. Yes, Eli has asked God to answer her prayer, “Go in peace, and may the God of Israel grant you what you have asked of him.” But she does not know the outcome. Yet still her face was no longer downcast. This is the prayer of faith, entrusting the depths of her soul to God and leaving the outcome to him.

Hannah’s God is our God. The God who sees us; who remembers us; who is concerned about our suffering. He is the God we can pour out our soul to. Even year after year. He may not answer our prayers in the way he answered Hannah’s. But in prayer we meet with him, and so like her we may find we can find peace for the day.

Samuel - 1.19-28

God does answer Hannah’s prayer as she had hoped. In time she has a son and she names him Samuel, which means “asked of God”, in recognition that God gave what she had asked for. And she makes good on her promise to dedicate Samuel to God. She says,

After the boy is weaned, I will take him and present him before the LORD, and he will live there always.

It seems this was about 3 years old, because when she goes up to Shiloh with her boy, she takes a 3 year old bull to sacrifice. She says to Eli,

I prayed for this child, and the LORD has granted me what I asked of him. **28** So now I give him to the LORD. For his whole life he shall be given over to the LORD.’

With the sacrifice of the bull, we see what it cost Hannah to give this her son, her only son, over to the service of the Lord. I find it instructive that Hannah was prepared to give the thing that she most wanted, that for which her heart had ached, back to God. Isn’t this the

⁵ Exodus 2.34

⁶ Exodus 3.7-8

case for all of God's gifts to us? They belong to him first and foremost. He gives them to us to use for his purposes and glory.

And are not Hannah's words what we want for our children too? That they live always in the presence of the Lord, and that their lives be devoted to God? We want what is best for our kids, and yet if we're honest as parents we know that their lives are not really in our hands. We can entrust them to our heavenly Father, whose everlasting arms⁷ alone hold them. We do our best to love them. We work hard to teach them. So we also pray for them.

Hannah's dedication of Samuel is a little picture of what Andrew and Sarah have done today in bringing Daphne to be baptised. They've entrusted her into God's care, even as they did with Elsie, so sadly born too soon. They make promises on Daphne's behalf that her life will be given over to God. They pray that like Samuel she will one day hear God's call on her life, and grow into the promises they have made on her behalf, so offer her life in worship to God and service to Christ.

Hannah's Prayer - 2.1-10

We've seen Hannah's prayer for a son, but that is a distant second to her magnificent prayer in chapter 2. It's more of a song than a prayer, and it is famously a model for Mary's song when she learns she will give birth to the Messiah.⁸ After all her longing for a son, we may be surprised to find that this barely gets a mention in Hannah's prayer. She says, "My heart rejoices in the LORD, and "she who was barren has borne seven children," but that's about it. The focus is much more on God and on his purposes.

The writer has placed Hannah's song as a bookend to Samuel. Its counterpart are two songs of David in the penultimate chapters of 2 Samuel 22-23 at the end of the book. These songs rehearse the main themes of the book. They prophesy what will come.

At the centre of the song is a stanza on the theme of divine reversal. This is seen with God answering Hannah's prayer. Where she was empty, her womb is now fruitful, whereas, "she who has had many sons pines away," verse 5. But it's a wider pattern. Verses 7-8:

The LORD sends poverty and wealth;
 he humbles and he exalts.
8 He raises the poor from the dust
 and lifts the needy from the ash heap;

⁷ Deuteronomy 33.27

⁸ Cf. Luke 1.46-55

he seats them with princes
and makes them inherit a throne of honour.

This is the great theme of the Gospel that Proverbs so elegantly summarises:

God opposes the proud but shows favour to the humble.⁹

It's a theme we see played out again and again in Samuel. Those puffed up with their own self importance, who ignore God and his ways, God will bring down. But those who humbly trust him, he will lift up. We see this play out with Eli and his sons, with Saul, and tragically with David himself. Hannah knows this. She lives this. It's why she trusts God with her prayers for a son. 1 Peter 5.6-7 draws out the implications for us. In fact those verses could be a summary of 1 Samuel 1-2.

“Humble yourselves under God’s mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time.
Cast all your anxieties on him because he cares for you.”

A second theme of the song is that God is sovereign as both saviour and judge. This theme comes out in verses 2-3 and 8b-10a. “There is no Rock like our God...” “It is not by strength that one prevails; those who oppose the Lord will be broken.” He is the one who fights Israel’s battles. Verse 3, “Do not keep talking so proudly,” literally reads “Do not increase your speaking ‘O Tall One, O Tall One’”.¹⁰ And we catch a glimpse here of Goliath hurling insults. Similarly the end of the verse, “for the Lord is a God who knows, and by him deeds are weighed,” brings to mind the theme of the book that God does not judge by appearance, but knows the heart.

Hannah’s song opens and closes with the final theme - that God will save, through his anointed, or in Hebrew, *Messiah*. The horn of verse one becomes the horn of God’s anointed in verse 10, and we look to when the horn will be used to anoint God’s chosen king. The prophetic expectation of the Messiah which concludes Hannah’s song, is of course fulfilled in great king David’s greater son Jesus. He was humbled, even to death on a cross. He was the only son, whose life was dedicated to God, and offered in sacrifice to rescue a sinful and wayward people. It is in him, the true Messiah, that we see God does hear and care for his people.

Hannah finds meaning and hope in the midst of her own grief, because she sees her story caught up in the greater story of what God is doing to bring in his kingdom under his Messiah. God is at work to accomplish his purposes and care for his little ones, even you and me. So with Hannah we can trust God and give him our hopes and griefs and our gifts because he cares for us.

⁹ Proverbs 3.34

¹⁰ Paul S. Evans, *1-2 Samuel*, The Story of God Bible Commentary, Zondervan, 2018: 50