

# 1 Samuel 1

Intro April 6, 2008 Asking God

A man observed a woman in the grocery store with a three-year-old girl in her shopping cart. As they passed the cookie section, the child asked for a treat and her mother told her "no." The little girl immediately began to whine and fuss, and the mother said quietly,

"Now Ellen, we just have half of the aisles left to go through; don't be upset. It won't be long."

He passed the mom again in the candy aisle. Of course, the little girl began to shout for candy. When she was told she couldn't have any, she began to cry.

The mother said, "There, there, Ellen, don't cry. Only two more aisles to go, and then we'll check out."

The man again happened to be behind the pair at the checkout, where the little girl immediately clamored for gum and burst into a terrible tantrum upon discovering no gum would be purchased.

The mother soothingly said, "Ellen, we'll be through this check out in five minutes, and then you can go home and have a nice nap."

The man followed them out to the parking lot and stopped the woman to compliment her nurturing care.

"I couldn't help noticing how patient you were with little Ellen..."

The mother broke in, "My little girl's name is Tammy... I'm Ellen."

How often do you find yourself talking to yourself during those stressful times? The stress may be a three-year-old tantrum, an adolescent outburst or a boss's harangue...or your own tormented soul.

When thoughts accuse, when you struggle with that pet sin you conquered yesterday, you may talk to yourself, "there, there, Chris, only a few minutes and it will all be over." Talking may be to keep you from saying what would otherwise flow so easily from your lips and you know would do so much damage. Talking may convince you to move on, not do what you know you'd later regret.

We know from experience, counting to ten, going to a happy place, talking to ourselves doesn't always work. It's hard to listen to the little voice inside when that little voice is an idiot. No one possesses sufficient intestinal fortitude to withstand every onslaught. Where then do we turn?

This morning we will turn to 1 Samuel and begin a journey where we will see how God leads his people. When a nation faces a leadership crisis, political pundits ponder the possibilities: Who will set the course? Who will lead us into a better tomorrow? When a family faces a crisis, where should they turn? What about a church? In our own lives, what does God's rule look like?

Questions of leadership, especially on a national scale, become more pressing in an election year. We are in the midst of it now, as McCain moves forward for the Republicans and Obama and Clinton continue to spar for delegates and the nomination. The nation looks for a leader to lead us out of the Iraqi quagmire and the economic slough of despond.

We are recipients of a great political system in which we may engage in the process to our heart's delight...or for some, to the extent our stomachs can withstand. Yet to whatever degree we participate in the political landscape, at the end of the day, we must always recognize that God is very much in control. That is true from the nation down to the individual.

This truth was well understood 3000 years ago in ancient Israel when they too faced a leadership crisis. Israel had settled in the Promised Land, but did not succeed in fully taking control of the land. For 300 years between Joshua and Saul, Israel was in a leadership crisis. While God sent judges to stem the tide of degeneracy, God's people continued the pattern of doing what was right in their own eyes. There was no king, no leader to whom the people looked other than the whims of their own hearts.

It is into this leadership void that we have 1 Samuel. This morning we embark on a new series of sermons on this Old Testament book that highlights three key leaders in Israel's history, the judge Samuel and Israel's first two kings, Saul and David. But before we delve into their lives, we must first set the scene to gain a better picture of God's grace during this dark time. God's gracious guidance is seen in how He works His will through otherwise inconsequential people.

READ 1 Samuel 1

The book begins with an inconspicuous man with an impossible dilemma.

Elkanah comes from the hill country of Ephraim, from a small town that archeologists aren't sure where it is today. We are given his lineage, but none of the names show up elsewhere, only reinforcing these are nobodies from nowhere. The geography and activities of this family raises questions we cannot entirely answer, which only reinforces their lack of personal importance.

He's an Ephrathite, living in the territory of Benjamin, but his son will serve under the priest Eli. 1 Chronicles 6 tells us that Samuel was a Levite, yet Elkanah's town of Ramathaim is not one reserved for the priests. So we are left wondering about their mysterious credentials.

The confusion continues in verse 2...he had two wives.

While polygamy was not clearly forbidden (except for the king - Deut 17), God's design in Genesis 2 is for one man and one woman. Some commentators jump on his shallow spirituality, but we should be cautious there. His reasons for a second wife may be due to the problems present by his first wife. Hannah had no children, but fertility is not a concern for Peninnah.

Elkanah is a good husband, polygamy aside.

Each year he goes to worship at the tabernacle in Shiloh. There is no temple in Jerusalem yet. For 300 years the tent of meeting was maintained in Shiloh to the north.

But then we are given the ominous reminder in v3.

The place of worship in Shiloh was where the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, served as priests. We will hear more about them later (2:12), but for now we have the foreshadowing of the leadership crisis at the time.

We have a glimpse into Elkanah's character in v4 when the day of sacrifice came.

The animal was dispatched, its blood drained and carcass cooked. A portion was given to the priests for their own sustenance and the worshippers ate the rest as part of the feast.

Elkanah distributed the food, Peninnah was given several portions for her and her kids, of which there are at least four here, as she had both sons and daughters. Hannah on the other hand received one portion.

There is a translation difficulty. The ESV translates the idiomatic expression as a double portion, but better is to translate this as the LXX does, "that although Elkanah loved Hannah, he gave her only one portion because the Lord closed her womb."

This sets the family dynamics in perspective. What follows should not surprise us, but how God answers guides us how we are to live.

Picture the trauma here of a family celebration, of the joyous time of giving thanks when in fact there is little to be thankful for by Hannah. She has her husband's love, but no children. What is more, she shares that love with another who likewise is bitter about her lot in life

Peninnah has the children, but perhaps not the affection of her husband. Hannah is barren but loved by Elkanah and tormented by Peninnah.

But this is not just a momentary conflict. Year after year, while Peninnah's stomach grew large once again with another child, Hannah's arms remained empty. For whatever twisted reason, perhaps jealousy over being the number two wife, Peninnah torments Hannah.

"Mommy, why doesn't Hannah have kids like you and Daddy do? What's wrong with her?"

"Hannah, why do you even bother coming to the festival? What do you have to give thanks for, since it is clear for all to see that God doesn't care for you like he does for me?"

Hannah's response is understandable. If you have been in this kind of situation can you identify with the torment she endured; at a family festival but without a family. Times like this are often difficult for the barren, like Christmas with no children opening gifts in the morning, or family gatherings and not being able to share in the passing on of the tradition to the next generation. The church is a hard place for the childless. The emptiness is compounded when the kids are dismissed for Primary Praise but no one leaves the pew.

Elkanah tries, but fails to support her. Let's not be too hard on the guy, but he is clueless.

He knows why she is so sad, but wants to redirect her attention, but fails miserably. We shouldn't miss his sense of loss as well, that no matter how much he loved Hannah that would never be enough. She wanted something he could not give her, only God could.

Elkanah, an otherwise good man, could not stem the tide of despair. He never knew whether he would come home to an all-out civil war or to a temporary cease-fire. On the best of days, there was just a tense truce. He walked on eggshells, ready to take cover, not knowing when another spark would set off another round of explosions.

The focus shifts from Elkanah to Hannah.

After everyone else enjoyed the festivities broken-hearted Hannah slips away to the Tent of Meeting. There sits the aged priest, Eli, by the doorpost to provisional temple in Shiloh.

Hannah heart opens up in prayer. The pain of what she is going through is too much to hold in. Just tears in her tent will not do. Talking to herself, stealing will to withstand the pain comforts little. At God's house she pours out all the pain and bitterness that has welled up within through all these years. Her distress drives her to prayer. We hear a woman at rock bottom, who knows where to go.

She makes a vow. She is not just ranting, but expresses at her deepest level her trust in God.

She begins by addressing God as the Lord of Hosts. This shows up the first time in v3 as a description by the narrator, but v11 is the first on the lips of a person. It will be repeated in Samuel.

The term (YHWH s<sup>e</sup>ba'ot) evokes two powerful images for this childless woman. First she calls on God with the covenant name, YHWH, the name reserved for His dealings with His people. She addresses not just a powerful deity, but reminds God of his promises to His people. The next word refers to the angelic hosts, the armies of Israel or all creation. Here *hosts* is best understood generally as the numberless, the plentiful. Placed all together, she calls on her Father in heaven who is not barren. He is the promise keeping God of the multitudes.

This is no local deity, no ethnic mascot. Despite her pain, she does not see her God in the same light as her distress. In her pain she becomes a theologian. Her prayer presumes God is not only in charge, sovereign, but also cares.

Elkanah cared, but could do nothing. Peninnah cared not at all but bore children.

Neither human is the answer to her problem. Only God is both sovereign and good.

She knows who God is and who she is – she is His afflicted servant.

She is putting into practice what we read earlier from Hebrews 4. No creature is hidden from His sight, and through a High Priest far better than Eli, who will fail Hannah, we have a High Priest who gives us bold access to our Father, who never fails us.

Then comes the vow: give me a son and I will give him back.

She seeks not just to receive promises from God, but to give her word, too. The dedication of the boy to God has the wording of a Nazirite vow as seen in the promise not to cut his hair.

The Nazirite vow, from Numbers 6, was a temporary vow, wherein a person dedicates oneself to the Lord, abstaining from any use of grapes, from cutting his or her hair and touching a corpse. Since the child would be a Levite by birth, her vow reinforces her willingness to not lay claim to him, but give him to God.

Her torment does not go unnoticed. Eli's been watching.

Seeing her lips, but not her heart, Eli *knows* all too well what's going on. His heart, tainted by cynicism, knows how, at these festivals, the faithful imbibed too much of the spirits.

Poor Hannah, with a clueless husband, a cruel co-wife and a condemning clergyman.

These are sad times. A priest sees a woman pouring out her heart to God and it is such an unusual sight that he concludes she is drunk. But rather she is dealing with bitterness in the best possible fashion, pouring out her anger before God. She went to the temple to both express her pain and to hear God's pronouncement of peace.

Hannah explains. Eli changes his tune and blesses her, pronouncing peace and that God will grant her prayer. She leaves a changed woman. She went not to vent her spleen, but speak to God. She sought not a chance to rant, but to find the answers outside of herself. But in pouring out her sadness to God she returned with peace. With that exchange, she returned home.

As we pour out our bitterness to God He pours in peace. When we give our tears to the Man of Sorrows we receive back his favor, his grace. What is pictured here is described by Peter in 1 Peter 5:6-7. We are called to cast our cares on the One who cares for us.

When you cry out to God are you willing to hear His pronouncement of peace. Not that all will be well and easy but that His love for you is secure. This table below, the bread and wine, are given to help.

What happens next illustrates what will continue to happen through this book. God answers the prayer, providing not just a son for Hannah, but a new leader for Israel. God does the unexpected, reversing what we assume will be.

She conceives, bears a son and calls him Samuel.

His name is a wordplay. The end of v20 gives us the meaning of his name as *asked from the Lord*.

His name will be a reminder of Hannah asking and God hearing the request. But this is more than just a reminder that we should pray and ask God for the impossible.

As the child grows, she fulfills her vow. She waits until he is weaned, probably when he is three or four and returns again to Shiloh with the family. She brings a thank offering, presenting the young boy to Eli.

This is no prescriptive for a baby dedication, although there are parents who would love to drop their four year old off at church for him or her to be raised by us...but that is not what this is about. This singular event should focus our attention not on what we are to do, but what we should believe.

What is all this about? Are we to just learn from the examples of the childless woman's anguish, the godly husband compassion or the importance of prayer? There are helpful examples here.

We should be careful not to make this just a lesson on the importance of prayer when faced with tough times, for there were many childless women in Israel who no doubt prayed and died without ever knowing what it meant to hold their baby. We are told this story not so that we can be like Hannah and have our prayers answered just as she did.

Asking of God is important. But Hannah is not the answer. Prayer itself is not the answer. The story is about God working among His people for His glory. The story opens us up to what God will continue to do in providing a leader for His people. God hears and provides for us in ways we never expect, but specifically He provides a child to a childless woman who in turn gives him to the Lord.

Samuel points us to that child who was presented in the Temple a thousand years later, who would lead us as our sovereign king.

God's answer to our deepest problems is not merely an increase in spiritual fortitude. It is not just talking to ourselves to quiet our anxious hearts or find the inner strength to get through the day. We are not to expect that even in prayer we can manipulate our circumstances to come out, as we desire.

Rather we turn to the One given us by the Father who will ask His Father what we need to endure the trials. He will give us what is necessary, leading us to that place where we will receive the grace to endure, to change the circumstances or be changed by them.

During this election year it may be tempting to look to 1 Samuel as some prescription as to how we should be governed in this land. Some may derive principles of good governance and those principles may or may not be beneficial. But if we seek that, we miss God's grace and power that will change us.

But this we do know, what unfolds in these pages transcends any election year and points us to God's gracious rule of us as His people. It is to Christ we are to look. It is the Father who with the elements on this Table feeds and nourishes us. Here we find His grace.