

# 1 Samuel 1:1-28

## Introduction

What do you do when you find yourself in a helpless situation? There's an old saying: When the going gets tough, the tough get going. It's very macho. I can hear Billy Ocean singing it even now, back in the 80s, with Michael Douglas, Danny de Vito, and Kathleen Turner dancing around in the background pretending to sing the backing vocals. When the going gets tough, the tough get going. Well, perhaps. Perhaps there are circumstances when life is hard and you can roll up your sleeves and, with a bit of grit and determination, do something about it. But what do you do when your situation is utterly helpless? What do you do when your circumstances are utterly beyond your power to change... when you're at the end of yourself... when you're completely overwhelmed? What then?

This book of Samuel begins with a woman in exactly that situation.

And that's no coincidence. Because in a sense, this woman embodies the plight of Israel at that time.

The book of Samuel begins in the time of the Judges. In the Hebrew Bible, it comes immediately after the book of Judges. That book ends with these chilling words: **In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit.** The period of the Judges was a desperate time. Israel was in a helpless state. It was a spiritually barren and fruitless nation. And against that backdrop, we're introduced to a barren woman.

What we now know as 1 and 2 Samuel was originally not two books but one. It was one big book.

And this story of Hannah is placed right at the start to introduce us to some of the really big themes that will run through the whole book.

So then, let's look together at Hannah's story.

## Hannah's story

It begins by introducing us to Elkanah, who belongs to the tribe of Ephraim. He lives in Ramah. And we're told in verse 2: **He had two wives; one was called Hannah and the other Penninah.**

The writer of Samuel mentions that without comment. Polygamy was a feature of ancient culture. That doesn't mean that it met with God's approval. God's design for marriage is clearly expressed a few books earlier in the book of Genesis. It's a lifelong union between one man and one woman. And whilst it's true that the Bible never explicitly *condemns* polygamy, it certainly spells out the complications and the damage that result from it.

The fact that it's mentioned here indicates that Elkanah was a reasonably wealthy man. That's not meant as a sexist dig at women. It's simply to acknowledge that it would take considerable means to support two wives and the children they would bear.

But here's the problem. Look at the end of verse 2: **Peninnah had children, but Hannah had none.**

That's the issue that's at the heart of the verses that follow.

Now... Elkanah was a devout Israelite.

In the book of Deuteronomy, it says that all men must appear before the Lord three times a year. They weren't to arrive empty-handed but were to bring a gift in proportion to the blessings they had received from God. And we're told that Elkanah went up to worship and sacrifice year after year at Shiloh. Shiloh is where the tabernacle had been pitched, which contained the Ark of the Covenant. And we're told that it was under the care of the priest Eli and his two sons Hophni and Phinehas. That will become significant in later chapters as the story moves on.

What's also significant is the title that's used for God. Do you see it in verse 3?

### **The LORD Almighty.**

We might be familiar with that title, but this is the *first time* it's used in the whole of scripture.

Literally, it means 'Yahweh of Hosts'.

It's a title that emphasises the immense power that God has at his disposal, which he uses for the good of his people.

It's a little clue that this story's going to be more about God than about Elkanah and Hannah.

So... Elkanah was a devout Israelite.

And he was a compassionate man, who loved his wife, Hannah.

See what it says in verse 4.

**Whenever the day came for Elkanah to sacrifice, he would give portions of the meat to his wife Peninnah and to all her sons and daughters. But to Hannah he gave a double portion because he loved her, and the LORD had closed her womb.**

Note that the closing of Hannah's womb was God's doing. That's the second clue we get that God's at work here. Keep storing them up in your mind as we read the story.

And the description of Hannah's mental anguish that follows is unusually detailed for Hebrew narrative.

She's **downhearted** - verse 8.

She's in **misery** - verse 11.

She's **deeply troubled** - verse 15.

And she's in **great anguish and grief** - verse 16.

The reason's obvious.

She's childless.

In ancient society, the shame of being unable to bear children was huge. Just imagine the sense of worthlessness she must have felt. Think about the looks of pity she must have received.

On top of that, Elkanah's other wife, Peninnah, was bullying her mercilessly. She was treating Hannah as a rival and using Hannah's childlessness to get one over on her. And it happened year after year, whenever they went up to Shiloh. It wouldn't stop, until Hannah broke down in tears and refused to eat.

And add to that Elkanah's insensitivity.

**'Hannah, why are you weeping?'** he says, in verse 8. **'Why don't you eat? Why are you downhearted? Don't I mean more to you than ten sons?'**

No doubt he meant well. But in effect, he's telling Hannah that she should get over it and move on.

As we meet Hannah here, she's at the end of her tether. She's utterly overwhelmed and in the depths of despair.

And perhaps the final straw is the knowledge that this is God's doing. *He's* the one who has closed her womb. That couldn't have been stated more clearly.

The knowledge that God is behind our sufferings can be hard to bear. The question is how we will respond to that knowledge.

And in verse 9, Hannah acts. She gets up from the meal and heads directly to speak to the one who is the source of her troubles. She makes a beeline to the Lord's house, the tabernacle.

And in her anguish, and through bitter tears, she prays.

Her plea, in verse 11, is that God would remember her.

**‘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...’** she says.

In the Bible, to remember is to act.

We see that in Genesis in the days of the flood. When Noah was adrift in the ark, God remembered him. That doesn’t mean he’d forgotten about Noah. Rather, it’s at that moment that God acted to bring the flood to an end. He sent a wind and the waters receded.

Likewise in Exodus, God remembered the Israelites. Again, it’s not that he’d forgotten about them. Rather, it’s at that moment that he acted to save them.

And it’s the same here. Hannah’s prayer is a call to action. She wants God to act. And she prays to him as the LORD Almighty, recognising his power to act.

And in return, she makes a vow. If God will give her a son, then she will dedicate him to God’s service all the days of his life.

It’s a bold and earnest prayer, offered to God out of the depths of her misery, with tears running down her face.

And watching on is Eli. He doesn’t hear what she says. He can just see her lips moving. And he assumes that she’s drunk.

She explains that it’s not the case. She’s been pouring out her soul to the Lord.

He sends her away in peace and prays for God to give her what she has asked for. And she departs.

And now, having committed her troubles to the Lord, we’re told that she’s able to eat once again. And we’re told that **her face was no longer downcast.**

That’s remarkable.

She doesn’t yet know how her prayer will be answered, but she has poured out her soul to the Lord and now she’s content to leave it with him.

She’s a model of the promise in Philippians 4, verses 6 to 7.

The apostle Paul writes there: **Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.**

Hannah has presented her request to the all-powerful God, who cares for his people. And now she goes in peace.

And from this point on the narrator picks up the pace. Now we're on Fast Forward. And the speed of the narrative emphasises that God is not slow in answering Hannah's prayer. She and Elkanah return home to Ramah. They make love. The Lord remembers Hannah. She becomes pregnant. Gives birth to a son. And calls him Samuel, which means, 'heard by God'.

Now it's Hannah's turn to keep her vow.

Initially she seems to stall.

She tells Elkanah that she'll take Samuel to Shiloh once he has been weaned. In those days, that would take up to three years. It raises the question of whether she intends to fulfil her vow at all.

But she does.

She takes Samuel to Eli. Gives him into the Lord's service. Then she and Elkanah return home to Ramah, leaving Samuel in Shiloh with Eli.

That's Hannah's story.

But what do we learn from it? What's the message for us today?

That's what we should be asking as we read it.

What does Hannah's story teach us?

So, that's our next heading.

### **What does Hannah's story teach us?**

We've noted the little clues that this story isn't primarily about Hannah. It's primarily about God.

It's teaching us about God's character.

And here are three things this story teaches us.

Firstly, it teaches us about the sovereignty of God.

#### **1. The sovereignty of God**

Perhaps it's helpful to remember that Hannah isn't the first barren woman we come across in the Bible. In fact, the Bible is full of barren women who are used by God to raise up key figures in the story of salvation.

Think of Abraham's wife, Sarah, who became the mother of Isaac. One of the first things we're told about her in the Bible is that she was not able to conceive.

Think of Jacob's wife, Rachel, who became the mother of Joseph despite her initial inability to conceive.

Think of Manoah's wife, who we're told was barren and childless, yet became the mother of Samson.

In the New Testament, think of Elizabeth, who was also unable to conceive, yet became the mother of John the Baptist.

New chapters in the story of salvation often begin with... nothing.

And that's what's happening here.

When we read this first chapter of Samuel, it's not obvious that there was a national crisis in Israel. But as we read on, it soon becomes very clear that there *was* a national crisis. And what we're learning here is that God was sovereignly at work in the life of Hannah to raise up a prophet who could lead his people through it. It was God who closed Hannah's womb. And it was God who opened her womb. He answered Hannah's prayer and gave her the son she craved. And in doing so, he raised up his instrument to answer the desperate plight of his people.

That's what's so amazing about these verses.

God was in sovereign control of every detail of Hannah's story. And he was skilfully weaving *her* story into the overarching story of his people.

He is utterly sovereign. And there is great encouragement for us in knowing that to be true. Even in our darkest moments, he is in control and working out his sovereign purpose - *in* our lives and *through* our lives, even though we might not always be able to see it.

Secondly, Hannah's story teaches us that God is the helper of the helpless.

## 2. The helper of the helpless

Hannah had no one to turn to for help but the sovereign God. She was desperate and powerless. So, she threw herself on the only one who could help her. She threw herself on God. And God loves helping the helpless. That's who he is.

We see that elsewhere in the Bible.

When the Israelites cried out to God from the distress of their slavery in Egypt, he raised up Moses to rescue them.

During the days of the Judges, whenever the Israelites cried out to God because of the oppression of their enemies, he raised up a Judge to deliver them.

When Daniel cried out to God for help in an impossible situation, God answered.

God regularly makes our inability his starting point. He often begins with our helplessness. Because it's when we're helpless that we do what he made us to do - to depend on him.

He is the helper of the helpless.

And most importantly, we see that in the gospel.

Into the powerlessness of our slavery to sin, and our helplessness in the face of death, comes the good news of Jesus. It proclaims that while we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly, to save us from our sins and to reconcile us to God.

From beginning to end, and very clearly here in Hannah's story, the Bible declares that God is the helper of the helpless. His love reaches into the depths of our helplessness and raises us up.

And, thirdly, Hannah's story teaches us how to respond.

### 3. Our response

There's no promise here that God will answer our prayers as he did with Hannah. There were no doubt other childless women in Israel who cried out to God for a child but didn't receive one. And that's still true in the church today. There's no promise here that God will answer every prayer for a child. But the Bible does promise that God listens to our prayers and gives good gifts to those who ask him. He does see the misery of his people. And he always answers our prayers in his love and wisdom.

Hannah's story should therefore encourage us to bring our situations to God in prayer and to depend on him as our helper.

When the going gets tough, we get down on our knees and we pray. We recognise our weakness and we cast ourselves on God.

And that should be the way we live every day.

Since the days of Adam and Eve, the inclination of the human heart has been to assert our independence from God. To seek autonomy. To push him away and live as we please.

The call of the gospel is to set aside our independence and to live the way God made us to live - in prayerful dependence on him, trusting that he is all-powerful and wholly committed to our good and wellbeing.

Let's pray.

Loving Father, please help us to learn from Hannah's story, and to prayerfully depend on you every day of our lives, especially when we're feeling helpless and overwhelmed. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.