

God is for Little People on 1 Samuel 1:1-20

By Rev. Russell B. Smith

Covenant-First Presbyterian Church
717 Elm Street, Cincinnati, OH 45202

The books of 1&2 Samuel are a part of a larger collection of history books that tell the story of Israel after the exodus from Egypt. The book of Joshua talks about the settling of the land. The book of Judges tells about the decline of order within Israel, and makes the case for the need of a king. Then 1&2 Samuel tell the story of the rise of the great King David, the man after God's own heart. After this, 1&2 Kings tell the stories of the later kings of Israel, including the division of the kingdom, the conquest of the northern kingdom (Israel) by Assyria, and the eventual conquest of the southern kingdom (Judah) by the Babylonian Empire. These books constitute a separate history from that found in 1&2 Chronicles, so that many stories in 1&2 Samuel and 1&2 Kings are repeated with different emphases in 1&2 Chronicles.

Our story today begins during the situation described at the end of the book of judges. It is a time of national chaos. There is very little moral order in the land. Life was cheap, and revenge was carried out swiftly. There was little unity among the twelve tribes of Israel. The ongoing evaluation in those closing chapters of the book of Judges was: "In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit" (Judg. 17:6; 21:25; cf. Judg. 18:1; 19:1).

And so here in the midst of these troubled times, we start our story of the deliverer. The books of Samuel explain that God raised up King David to unite the people of Israel and to lead them into a glorious future. But the story doesn't begin with King David or his father. It begins with an ordinary family: the family of Elkanah. And that's the point of lingering on this story for a while — God gives us this prelude in scripture for a reason, for whenever he does great things, God loves to bless little people in the process. When God operates on the world stage, he doesn't forget the small people caught in the sweeping events. God is there in the details.

So, before we get to the epic saga of nation building, we linger with an ordinary ancient family. Elkanah had two wives — but don't think that the Bible affirms having multiple spouses. As this story shows us, having multiple spouses causes division, bitterness, anger, and vengeance. The Old Testament patriarchs were allowed to have multiple wives, but it was not in God's good pleasure. God tolerated the practice for a time, but it was never his ideal.

Our story focuses on Hannah, one of Elkanah's wives. Hannah is barren — she has no children — while her rival Peninnah seems to pop them out like pies from an oven. Besides Hannah's anguish over her barrenness, Peninnah is constantly needling her. On top of that, the ancients considered bareness a sign of punishment from God (cf. Is. 4:1). Hannah must have been crushed. But God is for little people, and when he's up to something big, he loves to bless the little people.

Still, Hannah first has to suffer through the insensitivity of her husband. I think Elkanah is a well meaning man, but that he is just pretty clueless. Look at how he gives the double portion of the sacrificial feast to Hannah — this is an action of honor and tenderness. And yet, when he finds Hannah weeping, he offers cold comfort: "Don't I mean more to you than ten sons?" (1 Sam. 1:8). Most of the women out there are going, "Typical man!" He's trying here, but he has no idea how insensitive his words are.

That's the problem with just wanting to take away the pain. Most men are fixers; someone is crying, and they want to fix the problem. They think, "Let's just take this problem away, and it's all solved." But that is not always the case, nor is it always helpful. Usually, we have a need to be understood in our pain before we fix the problem. We long for empathy and connection, for someone to come alongside us and understand our pain, and then side-by-side to work through it to achieve a solution.

So, Hannah is an ordinary hurting woman who gets little help from her husband. The religious establishment isn't much help either. Here is this woman weeping and praying, and Eli the priest immediately assumes she's drunk. When he finds out she's not drunk, he sends her away, saying, "Go in peace, and may the God of Israel grant you what you have asked of him" (1 Sam. 1:17). Depending on what you make of Eli's character, he could have delivered this line as a quick pat on the head to get rid of her, or as a sincere apology for his rash judgment. Either way, Eli is of little help to Hannah in this episode.

And yet, Hannah doesn't engage in any blaming. We see no anger vented at her husband or at Eli. The story tells nothing of going to her friends to vent and tear down and destroy. No, the center of her response, and what brings her comfort, is prayer.

We love a God who hears our prayers. Consider Psalm 22, which starts off: "My God, my god, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from the words of my groaning?" It is this very personal anguish that Jesus cites while suffering on the cross. The psalm continues with an expression of grief, but then in verse 22 there is a turning point: "I will declare your name to my brothers; in the congregation I will praise you. You who fear the Lord, praise him! ... For he has not despised or disdained the suffering of the afflicted one; he has not hidden his face from him but has listened to his cry for

help.” Therein lies our comfort, our hope. In the midst of our suffering, in the midst of our pain, our God hears our cries. Our God hears us and sympathizes.

Nancy Blackwell is one of the consumer hotline operators for McCormick, a company that makes spices. In a recent interview, she talked about her job and the volume of calls and the kind of calls she gets. Usually, she hears from people who have forgotten their mother’s dressing recipe, and the turkey dinner won’t be the same without it — all they know is that it was on the back of the old packages of the poultry seasoning mix. But then she talks about a special set of callers. “We have people who call over and over,” she says. “Some say, ‘My mother’s not here anymore, so I’m calling you.’ Or a widower says, ‘I’m doing the cooking now.’ It makes you sad. People send gifts — zucchini bread, cookies, tomato preserves. It’s nice to know you helped.”¹

When the human heart is wounded, there is a natural inclination to go talk to someone for healing, to share the hurts and receive comfort. And that deep need for connection will even drive us to the spice lady if she has a listening ear. God places us in each others’ lives to be that listening ear. He places us in each others’ lives to bear each others’ burdens.

But in Hannah’s story, we see a dramatic failure — as will happen. Your friends, your family, your pastor will let you down at some point. It’s because we’re all human and sinful. But God is for little people, and even in the midst of pain and loneliness and being let down by those you should have been able to count on, God brings comfort. And in Hannah’s case, the comfort did not come after the child was born or even after the pregnancy; the comfort came simply after her time of prayer and receiving Eli’s blessing.

I know that eventually she gets her desire. But realize this, this story is not teaching that if we beg God and act nicely, then he’ll give us what we want. There are plenty of good godly women out there who ache to bear a child, but for some reason in God’s divine providence he has chosen not to allow it. I know the ache and the anguish that goes along with that situation. This passage does not make light of that. Rather, it teaches that God, in the midst of that pain, grants comfort in a supernatural spiritual way.

So, rather than seeing the birth of this child as God’s fulfillment of Hannah her wish, we need to look at the broader story. This child Samuel would grow up to become the last judge of Israel. He would be the prophet that God would speak through to establish first the kingship of Saul and then the kingship of David. The kingship of David would then become the line of kings that would eventually culminate in Jesus Christ, the great king who was fully God, fully man, who suffered and died and rose again to pay for the sins of his people. Samuel is an important player in God’s divine drama of his intent to bless his people.

¹ Fast Company, December 2003. “A Day in the Life of Work,” p 124.

Now, here's the point: God could have raised up this important figure from any family. But he chose to raise Samuel up through Hannah. God's intent was to raise up a great prophet. However, in so doing, he also decided to bless a hurting woman so that all hurting women could have hope. Do you see the difference in perspective? It's not a hurting woman saying, "God's going to grant her wish and not mine." Rather, it's God saying, "I've got something big to do, but I'm going to bless people through the little details as well."

When God is up to something big, he doesn't forget the little people along the way. The Bible is full of such stories: God is going to raise up King David. In preparation he chooses to bless Ruth, a penniless widow, and her penniless mother-in-law Naomi. Ruth marries the wealthy landowner Boaz and she becomes the mother of a child, and through that child, the great-grandmother of King David. When God is up to something big, he loves to bless the little people. God wants to raise up John the Baptist to prepare the way for the coming messiah, so he chooses aged Zechariah and Elizabeth, who were devoted servants but were childless. He grants these elderly people a child because when God is up to something big, he doesn't forget the little people. He loves to bless. And the stories in the Bible are only a fraction of the stories all throughout history. They are stories of blessing that don't have to happen for God's purposes to be accomplished. These are stories of gratuitous blessing, of God's lavish abundant blessing just because he loves to be good to people.