

## **When God Blesses You on 1 Samuel 1:21-2:11**

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In 1 Samuel 1:1-20, we saw that when God is up to big things, he loves to bless little people. Specifically, we saw that when God decided to raise up a King to guide and protect Israel, he started by giving a special child to an otherwise ordinary woman. Now we are going to see how Hannah responded to God's blessing. God blessed her tremendously, but what did she do in return?

The question in 1 Samuel 1:21-2:11 asks us is "What do we do when God blesses us?" That's a hard question to ask, isn't it? Let's be honest. We are so affluent, we are so used to getting our way, we are so used to having our every need and desire met — if not by purchase, then by our own cleverness and hard work — that we often forget that all blessings originate with God.

One of my favorite movies is *Far and Away*. It's the story of two Irish immigrants, Shannon and Joseph, who come to America to seek their fortune. When they land in Boston, all their money gets stolen. They are befriended by the "boss" in the Boston Irish Ghetto. He arranges room and board and employment. After some months, Shannon and Joseph build a good life, make friends, and save up money for their eventual trip westward. But then they fall afoul of the local "boss." He and his henchmen burst into their apartment at night and throw them out. As Shannon reaches for the tin cup in which she kept all her savings, the boss yanks it away saying, "There's not a penny there that didn't start with me."

Hannah here realizes that her blessings didn't come from her. They came from God. So, how does she respond, and what can we learn from her about the way we should respond to blessings?

First, Hannah fulfills her promises. Look back to 1 Samuel 1:11 — she made a vow. So, when she receives her blessings, she makes good on the vow. This is a point of integrity for her; she makes promises to God and then she keeps them. It's cliché, but it really does happen: people bargain with God, and then they unexpectedly get what they receive.

Last Fall, Scott Atkinson taught a class based on the book *The Gospel According to the Simpsons*. One of the episodes of *The Simpsons* they viewed was an episode where the boy, Bart, neglected to prepare for a major test. If he

failed this test, he would have to repeat the fourth grade. The night before the test, Bart has frittered away his study time, and he prays for just one more day to study — he prays for anything that would cancel school tomorrow. The next morning, a freak unpredicted snowstorm causes school to be cancelled. Bart is about to run outside and join his friend in playing in the snow when his sister Lisa catches him. “I heard what you prayed last night — and your prayer was answered.” Struck with remorse, Bart forgoes the day of fun in the snow, studies, and barely squeaks by on his test with a D-, just enough to pass the fourth grade.<sup>1</sup>

Our problem is that we see vows and promises simply as a bunch of words rather than a response of heartfelt gratitude. We all take vows: marriage vows, membership vows in organizations, baptismal vows. These vows aren’t chains that bind us. They are promises we make because we have joyfully received some great blessing, like the blessing of a spouse, or new companionship in a church or organization. The vow we make is a kind of fence we put around the blessing to preserve it. That is why one of the best things we can do in response to a blessing is to keep our vows.

But Hannah goes on to offer additional sacrifice. After she weaned the boy, she went up to Shiloh to give the child to the priests and offer sacrifice. A couple of quick cultural notes are in order. First, in those days before highly processed baby foods, children were not weaned until age two or three. Second, this story is taking place very early in Israel’s history, at a time when the temple in Jerusalem had not been built. The tabernacle that Israel carried with them in the desert had been set up at Shiloh some 19 miles north of Jerusalem. Shiloh became the center of worship, and part of the story of Samuel is to show how Shiloh stopped being the center of worship and how Jerusalem became the center. So that’s why Hannah is going to Shiloh to offer sacrifice. Sacrifice is over and beyond the offerings for sin. Sacrifice is that extra offering simply to please God. It’s going above and beyond the call of duty because you’re so overjoyed at what God has given you.

I had a friend who wanted to do something special for his wife, so he threw her a “just because” surprise party. It wasn’t anywhere near her birthday, so she had no idea to even expect it. They showed up at a friend’s house for dinner, and when she walked on the back porch, everyone shouted surprise. There was cake, and all her friends were there and they all had little gifts that symbolized the virtue they saw in her. He had to keep explaining this was a “just because” party — no special occasion. He was just so delighted with his wife that he wanted to lavish her with a party.

As you reflect on God’s gifts to you, are you so delighted that you’re moved to sacrifice? Sacrifice in this sense is about expressing your delight in a

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<sup>1</sup> Pinsky, Mark. *The Gospel According to the Simpsons* (Louisville: Westminster Knox Press, 2001), p. 34.

tangible, physical way. And it's not just about giving material blessings. It may be about taking time for personal worship, a personal retreat, or perhaps giving time to God's work among the poor, the hurting or the needy. Whatever it is, the primary motivating factor is joy.

Finally, Hannah offers praise. Scholar Walter Breuggeman says of this passage, "Israel is peculiarly a community of doxology. Its life consists in praise to God for what God has done and for what God characteristically continues to do."<sup>2</sup> And look at this extensive prayer that Hannah offers. She offers praise for her individual blessing (1 Sam. 2:1), then she moves to praise for God's blessing to her people (1 Sam. 2:2-9), and finally she offers praise for God's promise of final victory for his people through his coming king (1 Sam. 2:10). And all through this praise, her prayer focuses on the character of God. God is holy and uniquely powerful: "There is no one holy like the Lord; there is no one besides you; there is no rock like our God" (1 Sam. 2:2). He is all knowing: "for the Lord is a God who knows and by him deeds are weighed" (1 Sam. 2:3). He controls life and death: "The lord brings death and makes alive" (1 Sam. 2:6); and he controls material blessings: "The Lord sends poverty and wealth; he humbles and he exalts" (1 Sam. 2:7). He shows concern for people who are hurting: "He raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap" (1 Sam. 2:8). He loves his people: "He will guard the feet of his saints" (1 Sam. 2:9). And he will finally come in judgment: "The Lord will judge the ends of the earth" (1 Sam. 2:10).

How many of us have prayed prayers of praise where we focus so extensively on the character of God and on the great things he has done for us? Most of us work through the laundry list of prayer requests, or we cry out in need like Hannah did earlier. But God wants to bring us to a place where we are so overjoyed that we overflow with praise. If this kind of prayer is unusual or uncomfortable for you, I suggest you spend some time meditating and reflecting on the Psalms — actually pray the Psalms or prayers like Hannah's back to God. Let their words become your words. Use Hannah's prayer to offer God thanksgiving for all he has done for you through Jesus Christ. And when God blesses you, respond by keeping your vows, sacrificing to God, and offering praise to him.

One person who exemplified this characteristic was Mary Kay Ash. She was one of the most successful entrepreneurs of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As the founder of Mary Kay cosmetics, she made millions. She was also a committed Christian. Her philosophy was that everything she had came from God, so she was quite generous in giving away her money and her time. In most of her books, she gives direct credit to God's work in her life. For instance, in her autobiography, she has a whole chapter about giving to God, about her belief that God has given us everything to use for his purposes.

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<sup>2</sup> Breuggemann, Walter. *First and Second Samuel* (The Interpretation Commentary Series; Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990), p. 16.

She tells the following story about her pastor asking her to speak to the church on behalf of the building campaign for the new children's center: Fundraising had been tepid at best. Each Sunday a different congregation member spoke, and a couple of hundred dollars trickled in. She reluctantly agreed. But time got away from her, and she didn't get the opportunity to prepare her comments the way she wanted. So, the Sunday she was to speak came, and she was terrified — she had nothing prepared. She was hastily praying, "You have to tell me what to say, Lord," and getting ready for church, when she sensed God telling her, "Match whatever people give today." She was nervous about it, but when her time in the service came, she said, "You know, we've been talking about building this building for some time ... but at this rate, the children are going to have grandchildren before the building is built. We must do something about this. You've heard me talk about our company and how we operate on a cash basis. Well, I'll match whatever you give today ... [no pledges, only] cash or checks." She left church feeling like her talk had been a miserable failure. She waited all night for the phone call from the committee chair telling her how much had been raised. No call. The next morning she received the call, and the first thing the chair told her was that she didn't have to keep the promise. She began to wonder how much had been given. Maybe \$5000 or \$10,000? That would be wonderful for the church. She assured the chair that she would keep her end of the bargain and give the amount. How much was raised? He told her \$107,748. She was stunned. She was going to keep her word, but she knew she would have to take out a loan to fulfill that kind of commitment. And then that afternoon, she received a phone call from her son, Richard, who had convinced her to invest in some oil wells several months before. He called to tell her that the two oil wells had just come in as gushers — between the two of them, her share for the month would be \$100,000. Mary Kay concludes the story with this: "This incident reminded me of something I learned as a little girl in Sunday school ... You never need to be afraid of giving for God — because he will always see to it that you get back a hundredfold. That's what the parable of the talents is all about. The more you give, the more you get. You can't outgive God."<sup>3</sup>

Now, I could say, "God has given so much, now how much have you given him? How could you hold back when he has done so much? You need to give more, you need to sacrifice more and suffer for Jesus." But that's not the point of the passage. The point is to teach us how to celebrate. The point is that when God has really been good to us, this is how we should respond as Christians. The point is that these actions arise out of a sense of joy, not a sense of guilt. Mary Kay is right — you can't outgive God — you can't even come close to giving God anything that he deserves or asks. If we give only out of guilt or a sense of duty, then we're missing something big. Don't get me wrong, duty is good, it carries us through the dry spells, but it's not the goal.

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<sup>3</sup> Ash, Mary Kay. *Mary Kay* (3<sup>rd</sup> edition; New York: Harper/Perennial, 1994), pp 138-144.

The goal is enjoying our relationship with God. And so we're talking about pleasure and fulfillment and satisfaction. I suggest to you that if you honestly look at what you've been given in life and you make an honest effort to celebrate God's gift to you using some of what Hannah used here, I honestly believe you'll be more satisfied, less controlled by the things that you own, and more free in your ability to live the life God called you to. You think about that.