

1 SAMUEL 1:1-20

INTRODUCTION TO THE BOOK

In the original Hebrew 1 & 2 Samuel formed one book and the reason they were separated had to do with the writing of the Septuagint. The Septuagint is a Greek translation of the Old Testament Hebrew. Now when these books were being translated into Greek because Greek requires at least one third more space than Hebrew the translators decided to divide the book of Samuel into two books and they did this simply for convenience sake.

They probably wanted to make the scrolls easier to handle or it may be that it was divided because of the length of scrolls available at the time. It is important however when reading through both books of Samuel that we view it as one book.

Although this kind of biblical literature is generally classified as historical the Jews listed it under the list of former prophets (Joshua – 2 Kings). This shows that the Jews believed that God was speaking just as clearly through the historical events as through the more overtly prophetic books. This is what we ought to expect as we preach through this book, although it is full of historical events and contains lots of historical details the Bible is history through which God speaks so as we go through this book we must listen to God's voice in the midst of all the historical detail.

Samuel was a prophet and judge and he wrote these books. His first book covers the history of Israel from the time of Eli the Priest (1060 BC) to the death of Saul (1010 BC). The book covers a period of transition, the rule of the judge's draws to a close with Samuel being last judge and the establishment of the monarchy is introduced.

The book centres around three main characters Samuel who is the last of the judges; Saul the first of the Kings and David Israel's greatest King. The history is not presented in strict chronological order for there are large gaps in the history of all three men, so it is selective history and the reason for this is because of Samuel purpose in writing this book.

His purpose is to provide a history of the Kingdom of God during a new period in its development it is not to provide us with a historical account of the three main characters. So our focus of attention as we go through this book will be with the work of God and its development rather than with the characters although to see God at work we have to look at the characters for God works through these main characters to establish his kingdom.

1. THE PROBLEM WITH ELKANAH'S FAMILY (vs. 1-8)

The story begins with the birth of Samuel, but before Samuel is brought into this world there is turmoil and heartache. We are introduced to Elkanah who was a Levite (1 Chronicles 6:26-27 & 34-35) but as 1 Samuel opens it does not appear that he is carrying out his Levitical duties at the tabernacle at Shiloh.

Perhaps because of the poor spiritual state of Israel at this time, remember this is right at the end of the period of the Judges when everyone did what was right in their own eyes, perhaps because of the poor spiritual state of the people not many were travelling to Shiloh in order to perform their religious duty.

If this was the case then Eli's sons who were the priests operating at Shiloh (v3) did not need other people to relieve them of their duties or perhaps because Eli's sons were unsavoury characters, they simply did not let anyone else function at the tabernacle. They had a monopoly on it. Now Elkanah had two wives Hannah who was childless and Peninnah who had many children (v2).

Now although Elkanah was a devout man who loved God and was a dutiful husband and father he was also a polygamist and although that was something which although not prominent in Israelite society at that time, it was something that did exist (Deuteronomy 21:15-17).

It was clearly against God's command and purpose, which was for one man and one woman to be united in marriage for life (Genesis 2:24). Now when any person or any society chooses to disobey God's clear commands then you can expect problems and indeed one will reap what one sows and that is exactly what happened in Elkanah's family. How did Elkanah get himself into such a state?

It seems that Hannah was his first wife as she is mentioned first. But she remained childless and childlessness was a stigma in that society for it was seen as a sign of God's disapproval as children were a gift from God. So it seems that Elkanah wanting to keep the family line going and that was important if you were an Israelite because from the family line comes the Saviour. Therefore Elkanah took Peninnah as his second wife; a wife that could bear him children and that is what he did. For all Elkanah's devotion and spiritual life he failed to wait and trust on God in this situation.

But he was not the first person to do that for Abraham also tried to hurry God along when Sarah was barren and that also led to disastrous consequences. Now the fact that Elkanah has two wives causes untold problems in Elkanah's family.

It is also an indication of the generally low spiritual condition of God's covenant people as a whole. However we must keep Elkanah's failing in context for compared to some of the priest at that time whose immorality was well known (2:22) Elkanah was better than most but he was a man of his time and followed the ways of some when it came to polygamy but compared to the rest of the people of his time; he is an example of the best of God's people at that time.

This should remind us that God is sovereign and we must wait on him to work out his purposes and trust him when things do not go as we like; rather than trying to do things our way. To do things our own way rather than doing them God's way always leads to turmoil. This incident also reminds us how easy it is to make concessions to the customs of our culture at the expense of the principles of the word of God.

We have a lot less excuse than Elkanah for doing so; because whereas he had the Law of Moses we have the full revelation of the completed Scripture.

In our day the problem is not polygamy but it is the problem of having more than one wife, with marriage divorce remarriage divorce etc and such a culture causes division and heartache in many a home. Likewise with living together so dominate in our own culture we must be careful that we do not allow such a practise to creep into the church of Jesus Christ.

With such loose standards of morality in our day then it is no wonder that there are so many tensions and disputes in families for we are reaping what we sow. The church must teach clearly the morality of the Bible, we must preach the gospel that offers hope and forgiveness through Jesus Christ; but we must seek to uphold God's moral standards within our church and set an example in this immoral world in which we live.

Now the internal problems within Elkanah's family mirrored the spiritual problems within the nation as a whole. The nation was guilty of spiritual polygamy just as Elkanah was guilty of physical polygamy. The main problem in the family related to Hannah and her childlessness. Her circumstances were very painful for her, as any childless couple will know.

I do not want to underestimate the pain that childlessness can cause especially to women and Hannah is daily reminded that she was childless by the fact that Peninnah had children and these children would be around Hannah every day.

This childlessness and the fact that Peninnah was jealous of Hannah conspired to make Hannah's life a misery. That misery was probably greatest when the family made their annual visit to Shiloh in order to worship and offer their sacrifices to God (v3). Such was Peninnah's jealousy of Hannah that she chose this annual festival to vent her anger upon Hannah.

Peninnah saw herself in competition with Hannah for the affections of her husband Elkanah and this was not helped by Elkanah who tried to compensate for Hannah's childlessness by giving her tokens of his love (v5). There is a difficulty with the word translated "double portion" (v5). It could simply mean that he gave out portions to everyone and those portions would be bigger for Hannah than Peninnah as they would be shared out among the family.

But the NIV has chosen to go for the meaning that Hannah received more than Peninnah because Elkanah loved Hannah more. However it is understood it seem clear that Elkanah's love lay with Hannah and Peninnah although loved was not his first love.

But at this annual festival Peninnah kept provoking Hannah in order to irritate her (v6). This was not a one off occasion but year after year at this annual festival Peninnah provoked Hannah to the extent that Hannah wept and would not eat (v7). Elkanah tried to comfort Hannah by highlighting their relationship but nothing could bring her any comfort (v8).

Only the Lord could change Hannah's situation and so Hannah turns to the Lord and pours out her heart out to him (vs. 9-16).

2. HANNAH'S PRAYER (vs. 9-20)

Now Hannah was willing to accept that her childlessness was a result of the Lord's providential dealings with her. She knew that it was the Lord who had closed her womb but why did He do that? She was not told (v6)? But God's sovereign purposes for Hannah did not stop her asking the Lord to change her circumstances (vs10-11); if He closed her womb; then she knew that He was capable of opening it as well.

Her heart's desire was to have a child of her own and although she accepted her childlessness and put up with the taunts that accompanied her barrenness; nevertheless her great desire was still to have a child. Now this teaches us something about prayer and the sovereign purposes of God.

Although Hannah accepted God's will for her in her childlessness she did not presume that it was the Lord's will for her to stay childless. There are some Christians who might have advised Hannah to simply praise God for her barrenness because that was his purpose for her and they might even have discouraged her from praying for her situation to change.

But Hannah knew that because it was the Lord's will at that moment for her not to have children why should it not be the Lord's will to bless her with children in the future. There is nothing about the sovereign purposes of God, which says that situations and circumstances must always remain the same. So a Christian couple that would love to have a child find out that they are unable to conceive for whatever reason. Does that mean that God does not want them to have children forever?

It might mean that; but it might mean that He wants them to adopt someone else's children or it might mean that in the future God will enable that couple to conceive. If a church is small now

does that mean it must always remain small? Is it not possible that God could turn a small church into a very large church sometime in the future?

Is that not what we must pray for? Yes we must accept our smallness at this moment of time and in this period of the history of this church, but we must continue to pray for God to make us larger by saving sinners while accepting God's sovereign purposes at this period of time.

Perhaps a Pastor labours in a church for years and sees very little fruit and then moves to another church. Does it mean that He will see little fruit in his next church? Of course not and Hannah knew that and we ought to learn that lesson as well. But notice what it is that changes the situation for Hannah, it is her prayer or perhaps I should say it is her Lord who responds to her prayer.

In fact it seems that one reason why the Lord had closed Hannah's womb was to teach her and us to pray and to trust and depend on God. It was because Hannah had no children that she turns to prayer and at least one reason why we face trials and hardships and immense difficulties is that we too need to learn to pray and to trust God to change our situation.

In a world where people are very independent and self sufficient including Christian people; it is good to learn the lesson of our need to pray and trust God and sometimes the only way God can get our attention in order to teach this lesson is through trials.

But let us briefly examine this prayer and learn some lessons from it. The first thing we learn from it is that Hannah is totally submitted to God and his purpose in her life as she prays. She calls herself the Lord's servant (v11) she knew that she had no merit of her own; there was no reason why God should answer her other than the fact that she is a servant of God and is in desperate need.

Her whole purpose in life was to serve her God and if that meant doing so childless she was prepared for that but she humbly asks for a child as a servant of the Lord. My dear friends when we approach God we have no merit of our own, we are his servants, we are his people because of Jesus Christ and therefore we can come through him and plead our cause through him.

But there is nothing in us that should lead the Lord into answering our prayers; all we can do is humbly present our requests before the Lord as one of his servants who has been redeemed through His Son Jesus Christ.

Another thing I want us to see here is that Hannah's prayer is very specific, she asks for a Son, a son because she promised that this child would be given to God to serve him at the tabernacle and only a son could do that (v11). Now I wonder if we fail to see answers to our prayers because our prayers are simply non-specific. They are "God bless" prayers instead of "Lord change such and such a person."

Hannah's prayer had a very clear purpose she knew what she wanted and prayed specifically for it. What do we want God to do for you personally or for this church? Then pray especially for it; not demanding that God does it but humbly asking that the Lord will look upon us with favour and hear and answer our prayers.

Hannah also persisted in praying (v12), she was serious and fervent and desperate and there are times when the Lord withholds his answers from us in order to test our resolve. Will we persist to ask him for that thing or will we waiver? Are we desperate enough to keep on praying for God to act or does it not really matter to us if God answers our prayers or not?

Hannah was truly desperate, she wept and prayed and was distressed within her soul about her barrenness and amazingly the Lord answered her prayer (vs. 19-20). After praying and having

received some hope that her prayer would be answered from Eli who was God's representative as Priest, Hannah goes home.

What happens next? Well Hannah exercised faith that works; for Elkanah slept with her for Hannah knew that the child if conceived would only come about by natural means, she was expecting God to work through the means that He has established (v19). God answers Hannah's prayer for He remembers her which means He looks upon her with favour and in the course of time Hannah gives birth to Samuel (sounds like the Hebrew for "Heard of God").

Hannah whose name means grace receives grace from God. Now there is one final lesson from these remaining few verses which is that God answers prayer through his established means. So if we want sinners to be saved; He does that through the preaching of the gospel. So we need to get on with proclaiming the gospel to sinners.

If we want God to meet our financial needs then He normally does that through the job that He has given to us and if you haven't got a job then keep looking and applying and praying. You see prayer is not an excuse for doing nothing believing that everything depends on God. Everything does depend on God; but God works through means and therefore we must use every means that God has given to us while praying specifically at the same time.

Although God can answer our prayers supernaturally and he could have done that for Hannah; but his normal way of doing things is through the natural established means of life and therefore as we pray we must exercise faith and use the means that God has given to us and through which He works in order to accomplish his purposes in answer to our prayers.

Therefore let us be people who believe and who pray and then who work faithfully and depend totally on the God of all grace to be gracious to us.

Amen