

Reversal of Fortunes

1 Samuel 1:1-2:11

They were troubled times.

- They were the sort of times when a son would steal a fortune from his mother and only give it back because he superstitiously believed in the effectiveness of his mother's curse on the unknown thief.
- They were the sort of times when a man would set up his own religious system with his own man-made gods and hire his own personal priest.
- They were the sort of times when a group of thugs would kidnap a priest and force him to act on their behalf even though they'd blatantly ignored the instructions of this priest's God.
- They were the sort of times when a priest would break his existing contract and sell his services to the highest bidder.
- They were the sort of times when a traveller resting overnight in the safety of a village was subjected to strong and repeated demands for homosexual relationships.
- They were the sort of times when a group of ruffians would pack rape a woman to death.
- They were the sort of times when brother rose up in war against brother and almost wiped out an entire tribe within the nation.

The newspaper headlines jumped daily from one disaster to the next. Violence and tragedy multiplied around the country. There was no shortage of scandals for reporters to investigate. Sales skyrocketed as ordinary people clamoured for all the juicy details on the latest bit of wickedness. People were anxious – perhaps even fearful

for their own safety.

They were troubled times. They were times when we're told:

In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit.

Everyone did what was fit in their own eyes as far as religion was concerned. Everyone did what was fit in their own eyes as far as morality was concerned. There was a lack of proper order within the country.

It's within that context that we're introduced to a God-honouring family in the opening chapter of 1 Samuel. I think we need to be reminded of that context.

- Some of us come to 1 Samuel without thinking about Judges 17-21 because we've never got around to reading them. They're not the sort of stories told to Sunday School classes. They're not the sort of stories that are often preached. They're a bit too violent and weird for our modern Christian sensibilities – as I was told a few years ago.
- Some of us come to 1 Samuel without thinking about Judges 17-21 because the book of Ruth's in between. Ruth's such a romantic and uplifting story. It has that Hollywood ring to it. It helps us forget the anxiousness that's aroused by those stories at the end of Judges. We'd rather focus on the positive of Ruth than the negative of Judges.

Yet, it's the context of kingship – or lack thereof – that's behind the book of Samuel.

The Family Portrait

Elkanah had done his homework on his family tree – and so had the person who's telling us his story. His family

tree's listed for us in 1 Samuel 1:1 – all the way back to his great, great grandfather. Now, I'm sure these guys were very important to Elkanah – just as your grandfather and great grandfather are important to you – but they don't feature any more in the story and we don't know anything else about them, so I think it's safe to skip over them this morning. They simply indicate that Elkanah was a relative nobody. His ancestors were obscure. His home was out the back of nowhere. You wouldn't guess that God's next great act in history would begin with this family.

Elkanah came from the hill country of Ephraim. That area featured prominently in all those headlines in Judges 17-21. Things were bad in the hill country of Ephraim – but not so bad that no one honoured God there. There was at least one family living there who still thought about God and still tried to follow His directions.

Elkanah had two wives – Hannah and Peninnah. Hang on a minute, you say, I thought you said he tried to follow God's directions. How come he's got two wives? That's a good question – but it's not a question the story asks or answers. However, since you probably won't pay any attention to the rest of the story if I don't answer it, let me digress for just a minute.

- The Old Testament nowhere expressly says that polygamy – having more than one wife – is wrong. For example, the law doesn't say: Thou shalt not have more than one wife.
- The Bible, on several occasions, introduces us to polygamous situations – such as this one. It never seems to make any direct comment about the polygamy – and yet, on each occasion where polygamy

is mentioned, there are problems in the family relationships (usually in some form of rivalry).

- The Bible does present monogamy as the ideal – and that goes right back to creation – to the story of Adam and Eve in Genesis 2.

Maybe that doesn't answer all your questions about the situation – but it should tell you enough so that you're no longer thinking about who you're going to add to your harem as your second wife. And if that doesn't do it for you, the law of our land should.

Anyway, back to the story. There's quite a bit of tension in this family.

- Peninnah has provided her husband with lots of children.
- Hannah had failed to give birth to any children.

That may not sound like a big deal to us. In our culture, we have some women – maybe not very many, but there are some – who don't want to give birth because of the damage it does to their figure. We have other women who see children as an unwanted interruption to their career paths. There are some women who don't want children because they'd interfere with their lifestyle. And, let me hasten to add, there are also husbands who want to pressure their wives in those same directions. That was not the case in ancient Hebrew culture. Having children was very important. In some circles it was even said that a woman's worth was measured by the number of children she had. It may even be that Elkanah took a second wife because Hannah has no children – but that's only a guess that some people make.

It could even be argued that her lack of children showed she'd failed to receive God's blessing. When Moses told

Israel about life under God in the land God promised them, he said (Deuteronomy 7:14):

You will be blessed more than any other people; none of your men or women will be childless, nor any of your livestock without young.

Hannah's missing out on that promised blessing. She's childless. Her condition reflects the fact that the nation as a whole wasn't doing what God commanded them. They weren't following God's instructions. Indeed, often they turned away from the real God to chase after other false so-called gods. Thus, as He was entitled to by what He told them beforehand through Moses, God withheld the promised blessings from them. The hopelessness of Hannah's situation reflected the hopelessness of Israel's situation.

The situation was not helped by the fact that Peninnah – the second wife – took every possible opportunity to dig the knife in a bit further. I'm sure she had her own pet ways of getting under Hannah's skin.

- Maybe she'd get Hannah to baby-sit so she didn't feel left out of the family.
- Maybe she'd wax eloquent about the magnificent joys of motherhood.
- Maybe she'd have pointed conversations with her children within earshot of Hannah.

The time of the annual pilgrimage seems to have brought out her best attacks. Even going to church didn't stop her

- Maybe she kept reminding Hannah about God's command to be fruitful and multiply and asked her what a disobedient person like herself was doing at God's house.
- Maybe she sang that psalm about children being a blessing from the Lord and asked her whether she

preferred Elkanah's love to God's love.

That's the problem. We have a woman who's loved by her husband, but doesn't appear to be loved by God. God has closed her womb. The text is quite explicit. It says so twice. What will happen?

- Will she go down to the grave in childless sorrow?
- Will she find something other than a child to give her satisfaction and joy in life?
- Will her enemy be struck down by God?
- Will God intervene and give her a child?

Those who read their Bibles know Hannah's not alone in her condition. There have been others before her – others who also demonstrated God's plans.

- Sarah, the wife of Abraham, didn't manage to give birth until she was 90 years old.
- Rebekah, Isaac's wife, had to wait 20 years before she produced any children.
- Rachel, Jacob's favourite wife had to watch her sister Leah give Jacob six children before she became pregnant with Joseph.
- The unnamed mother of Samson was barren for many years before the angel appeared to her to announce she'd give birth to the last hero recorded in Judges.

Hannah wasn't alone in her barrenness. There was a history of barren women in the development of Israel as a nation. Yet, I doubt that was much comfort to Hannah. She wasn't really interested in whether there were others who shared her condition – she was only interested in having her own children. Not even Elkanah's efforts and special attention or her favoured position with him could comfort her.

The Particular Year

In verse 9, the story moves from the general to the particular. It moves from what happened year after year to what happened one particular year. We aren't told whether Hannah prayed each year when she came to Shiloh. We aren't told whether Hannah prayed daily at home. We are told she wept much and prayed on this occasion. There are two parts to her prayer.

- First, she asks God to look on her great misery and remember her in words that remind us of what happened with Israel when they were in slavery in Egypt.
- Secondly, she vows that, if God does grant her a son, she'll give him back to God.

The rest of 1 Samuel 1 tells us what happens in response to Hannah's prayer.

- God does indeed remember her – not in the sense that God had forgotten all about Hannah and He suddenly notices her existence once again – but in the sense that God acts to relieve her misery.
- Hannah, for her part, fulfils her vow. When the child's weaned, probably around the age of 3, she takes him back to Shiloh for him to be raised at the sanctuary. Have you ever wondered how Samuel turned out so well, when Eli's sons turned out so badly? It's an interesting question – but not one the text answers.

What's the Point?

That's the basic story. What are we to make of a story like this? This story's in the Bible – so it's not simply a tale to be read as a bed-time story while we try to get the children to sleep. God has some point to this story that's

relevant to how we relate to Him. What is it? Do we, for example, look at this story to see what morals we can learn from Hannah?

- Hannah prayed for years and years and finally her persistence in prayer was rewarded. Does the text say that?
- Hannah poured out the very depths of her heart in fervent prayer and God responded by granting her request. What if her deepest request had been for something wrong – would God have granted that? Or what if God's purposes in Hannah's life were best served by her remaining childless?
- Hannah made a bargain with God – she got her child by promising to dedicate him to God. Does the story teach us that the way to get your prayers answered is to find the right bargain?
- Hannah was misunderstood – perhaps by her husband and definitely by Eli. Is there perhaps here a word of comfort for all who feel misunderstood?
- Hannah was persecuted by Peninnah. Is there a promise here that God will come to the rescue of all those who are persecuted?
- Maybe there's a promise here that all old infertile women will have their wombs opened if only they pray enough or have enough faith?

Certainly God answers Hannah's prayer – but do you think Hannah was the only childless woman in Israel who was asking God for a son? There's not a general promise here that God will grant children to all barren women. The reason this story's in the Bible is because it's out of the ordinary. This is not typical – it's unusual.

Maybe Hannah's not the key. Maybe the key to the whole story's Elkanah's faithfulness in making this

religious pilgrimage to Shiloh each year. Maybe that's what this story's all about. If you're devout like Elkanah, God'll reward your wife with a son. This is the law of cause and effect whereby you can guarantee to get the blessings you want out of God. That's not the way the story comes across, is it – though that's sometimes the way we want to organise our lives and the way we read the Bible.

Perhaps it's teaching us that all parents should dedicate their children to God – and send them off to board at theological college when they're three years old. That'd give those theological lecturers some real work to do! Or perhaps we could make this the new test for those who feel called to the ministry – your mother has to be a godly, praying woman aged over 60 when you're born as her first child.

Does not the story focus on God and what God does?

- It's God who closes Hannah's womb.
- It's God who hears Hannah's prayer.
- It's God who remembers Hannah.
- It's God who gives Hannah a son.

More than that, it's God who's dealing with the troubled times in Israel. It's God who's raising up a leader who'll rescue His people. It's God who's taken notice of the fact that there's no king and everyone's doing their own thing.

There are hints of kings scattered throughout the story. The NIV states that Eli sits on a chair by the doorpost of the temple – but it could also be translated that Eli sits on a *throne* at the entrance to the *palace*. That, perhaps, is not too unexpected – since Eli is the current leader in Israel. However, I'm reliably told by the commentaries

that there's also an extended word-play on the name *Saul* – the one who does become the first king. Unfortunately, it loses something in the translation – no one's come up with English words that capture the sense of what's going on. There's a very strong hint here that God's doing something about the kingship. Our expectations are that Hannah's child will be the future king who'll deliver Israel from the anarchy at the end of Judges.

As the story unfolds, those expectations will be disappointed. Samuel is indeed a leader of God's people. God will use him to deliver Israel from her enemies. But he's not the king – although he does anoint the future king when Israel demands one. Through all these hints, I think the narrator's saying to us: Israel's demand for a king did not take God by surprise. God was preparing the way for a king well before then.

Hannah's Prayer

The significance of this story's highlighted in Hannah's prayer or Hannah's song in chapter 2. Verse 1:

*My heart rejoices in the Lord;
in the Lord my horn is lifted high.
My mouth boasts over my enemies,
for I delight in Your deliverance.*

Hannah delights in God and God's salvation that's been given her. God's delivered Hannah from childlessness. God's changed Hannah's situation from barrenness to joy. Hannah's enemies – mainly Peninnah at this point – can no longer level their previous accusations against her. She no longer cringes before those who've dominated her in the past. It may have looked like God was against Hannah, but no longer.

God's the cause of Hannah's delight – the God whom she describes in verse 2:

*There is no one holy like the Lord;
there is no one besides You;
there is no Rock like our God.*

There's no one or no thing like God – no power, no experience, no achievement, no possession, nothing that's like God. People who don't know God have all sorts of substitutes for God. The Bible calls them idols. We call them other things. They're the focus of our hopes and our confidence and our dreams and our ambitions. They're the things our lives revolve around. Hannah, who knows God, knows the stupidity of substituting anything or anyone for the Lord. He's the incomparable God. There's no one like Him.

Therefore, verse 3:

*Do not keep talking so proudly
or let your mouth speak such arrogance,
for the Lord is a God who knows,
and by Him deeds are weighed.*

God is the God who knows. He's not detached from the affairs of this world as if He wasn't aware of what's reported in our newspapers or on our televisions. He's not detached from the issues of individual lives as if He doesn't know the pain and suffering and difficulties you're going through. He's the God who knows. There are no secrets from Him. Thus, the wise person's careful about his/her words – lest they be offensive to the God who knows. The wise person's careful about his/her actions – for the God who knows will weigh up what's done and not done.

Knowing this about God changes one's view of the world

– turns it upside-down. Those who know God have a different view of the world from those who don't know God.

- The one who doesn't know God looks at the world and judges the world on the basis of what they see. They look for security in power and wealth and position and title and influence and popularity and prestige and skill. They look at important people and how they got to be important and how they stay important and they strive to copy those things.
- The one who knows God, however, looks at things very differently. God's quite capable of reversing situations in terms of the way in which people usually look at things.

Hannah lists a number of different situations.

- In war, it's usually the strongest warriors who win – those with the wisest strategy and the best-trained warriors and the latest technology. In Hannah's time, that was the Philistines. But when you take God into account, things look rather different. God is quite capable of defeating those with strength on their side. God's quite capable of helping out those lacking strength. If you should find yourself fighting against God, the issue won't be the size of your strength.
- In economics, it's usually the haves that get ahead – those with the most money and the best investment strategies and the biggest inheritance. There are some people in the world that you simply can't imagine them ever going hungry. Yet, if God turns against them, will their wealth save them? If God decides they should be destitute, will their investment strategies defeat God's plans?

So Hannah continues on through the rest of verse 5 and verses 6 and 7 and 8. God brings death. God makes alive. God sends poverty. God sends wealth. If you don't take God into account, you have a distorted view of the world.

Hannah's not describing what happens everywhere and everyday. She's describing the possibilities. These are the possibilities the one who doesn't know God doesn't take into account – the reversals God can bring into people's lives. Are you impressed by power? Do you think wealthy people are secure? Do you think you have the power to hold onto life? This is God's world. God calls the shots. God will be victorious. God's purposes will come to be. God will defeat all opposition. The second half of verse 8:

*For the foundations of the earth are the Lord's;
upon them He has set the world.*

*He will guard the feet of His saints,
but the wicked will be silenced in darkness.*

*It is not by strength that one prevails;
those who oppose the Lord will be shattered.*

*He will thunder against them from heaven;
the Lord will judge the ends of the earth.*

*He will give strength to His king
and exalt the horn of His anointed.*

And thus we get back to the king.

The king who comes needs to know what Hannah knows. The important thing for the king isn't the size of his army or the durability of his titanium chariots. The important thing for the king isn't the wisdom of his advisers or the size of his Swiss bank accounts. The important thing for the king isn't how many points he's ahead in the polls or

how well he looks on the cover of *Cleo*. The important thing is to remember God. It's God who's sovereign. It's God who humbles or exalts. It's God who makes kings or consigns them to the scrapheap. As you read the book of Samuel, you discover that the first king – Saul – forgot that.

The final term of Hannah's song is *Messiah* – the one who's anointed. It points forward to the anointing of Saul and David. Even more than that, it points forward to the real Messiah – Jesus. There are echoes of this story in the life of Jesus.

- John the Baptist, the one who introduces Jesus to the world, is born to a barren woman.
- Mary, when told of her pregnancy, bursts into a song that's similar to Hannah's.
- And, in Jesus' death, we see the reversals that God brings about to achieve His purposes – for it's through the cruel execution of this nobody who lives in the backblocks of the Roman Empire that God provides true life for His people.

In 1 Corinthians 1:25, when speaking of Jesus' death on the cross, Paul writes:

For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength.

As we travel through life, we face the temptation – the constant temptation – to place our trust in the same things that everyone else around us is placing their trust in: the amount of money in their bank accounts, the strength of their investments, the solidity of their houses, their ability to hold down a well-paying job, the steps they take to maintain great health. Now, there's nothing wrong with

having investments or owning houses or exercising for health – but those things aren't permanent. Our whole lives can change in an instant – a car accident, a bolt of lightning, a heart attack, a tsunami.

This is God's world – the God who knows. The most important thing is to be in right relationship with Him – to acknowledge Him and His purposes; to live as He directs. Our hope is not in ourselves and what we've done, but in God and what He's done for us. Life's not about us getting our way – it's about submitting to God and Him getting His way.