

When God Is Most Invisible

Series on 1 Samuel

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Bible Text: 1 Samuel 1:1-20

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Let us take our Bibles and turn to the Old Testament to 1 Samuel chapter one. You will find that on page 225 of the church Bible, 1 Samuel chapter one.

And over the summer, if the summer comes, we are going to be looking at the story of Samuel. It is very good of you to kind of set up a normal July day in Scotland here in Philadelphia. When we came across the bridge this morning we couldn't see Philadelphia for the cloud cover and it just made us feel very much at home as if we are back in Scotland. I hope that is not the way it is going to be. We came away from that, ok?

Have you found 1 Samuel yet? That is good. Let's read it together.

There was a certain man of Ramathaim-zophim of the hill country of Ephraim whose name was Elkanah the son of Jeroham, son of Elihu, son of Tohu, son of Zuph, an Ephrathite. He had two wives. The name of the one was Hannah, and the name of the other, Peninnah. And Peninnah had children, but Hannah had no children. Now this man used to go up year by year from his city to worship and to sacrifice to the LORD of hosts at Shiloh, where the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were priests of the LORD. On the day when Elkanah sacrificed, he would give portions to Peninnah his wife and to all her sons and daughters. But to Hannah he gave a double portion, because he loved her, though the LORD had closed her womb. And her rival used to provoke her grievously to irritate her, because the LORD had closed her womb. So it went on year by year. As often as she went up to the house of the LORD, she used to provoke her. Therefore Hannah wept and would not eat. And Elkanah, her husband, said to her, "Hannah, why do you weep? And why do you not eat? And why is your heart sad? Am I not more to you than ten sons?"

After they had eaten and drunk in Shiloh, Hannah rose. Now Eli the priest was sitting on the seat beside the doorpost of the temple of the LORD. She was deeply distressed and prayed to the LORD and wept bitterly. And she vowed a vow and said, "O LORD of hosts, if you will indeed look on the affliction of your servant and remember me and not forget

your servant, but will give to your servant a son, then I will give him to the LORD all the days of his life, and no razor shall touch his head.” As she continued praying before the LORD, Eli observed her mouth. Hannah was speaking in her heart; only her lips moved, and her voice was not heard. Therefore Eli took her to be a drunken woman.

And Eli said to her, “How long will you go on being drunk? Put away your wine from you.”

But Hannah answered, “No, my lord, I am a woman troubled in spirit. I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink, but I have been pouring out my soul before the LORD. Do not regard your servant as a worthless woman, for all along I have been speaking out of my great anxiety and vexation.”

Then Eli answered, “Go in peace, and the God of Israel grant your petition that you have made to him.”

And she said, “Let your servant find favor in your eyes.” Then the woman went her way and ate, and her face was no longer sad.

They rose early in the morning and worshiped before the LORD; then they went back to their house at Ramah. And Elkanah knew Hannah his wife, and the LORD remembered her. And in due time Hannah conceived and bore a son, and she called his name Samuel, for she said, “I have asked for him from the LORD.”¹

You know, it is a principle that the good old days are never quite as good as we remember them. And certainly that was what I discovered growing up. My mother used to remind me when I was a teenager of how good the good old days were and how bad the present days were. I would often remind her that when she was my age the Nazis were invading most of Europe, Glasgow where she grew up was being bombed every night and her own father had been killed in a bombing raid and millions of people were being put into death camps. The good old days weren't as good as she remembered. And the bad days, which were my days, were surely not all that bad if all she had to say about them was to comment on the Beach Boys.

I mean, I wasn't even into the Rolling Stones, but the Beach Boys. I ask you, if ever there was a band that was innocuous, but pleasant to the ear, it was the Beach Boys.

Well, if we wanted a period in history when we could really say they were the bad old days, then I imagine we could go further, we need go no further than look at the period we know as the period of the judges in the history of Israel. It was a period when things were not good.

¹ 1 Samuel 1:1-20.

Here were the children of Israel. They had been brought out of Egypt. They had seen signs and wonders. God had acted for them. They had gone across the Red Sea. They had been fed in the wilderness. Under the leadership of Moses they had come to the verge of the Promised Land. Under the leadership of Joshua they entered the Promised Land. They subjugated all of their enemies. They settled down. They built homes. They made themselves a home there in the Promised Land. Everything seemed set for a future bright with the promises of God.

But then thing went from good to bad and from bad to worse. And there was that whole period that we know of the judges where everybody did what was right in their own eye. The biblical comment is this that, "In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes."²

Everybody was his own king. Everybody was his own lord, made up their own rules, were looking out for number one, thought they were ultimate rather than God was ultimate. They worshipped God, the Lord of hosts, but they also worshipped the gods of the nations they had invaded and subjugated. They worshipped the gods of the nations round about.

Here were people who had everything going for them and yet in the midst of it they had turned the back on God.

It wasn't to stay like that, of course. There was to be a great movement of God and it is with the man who was responsible for turning things around that we are looking at this morning, this man Samuel.

But it is interesting the background as we come to look at the life of Samuel, the background that is indicated to us in those very days, the days of the judges. God had come to Israel and he said something like this. Let me read to you from Deuteronomy seven.

For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but it is because the LORD loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers, that the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt.³

These are the people that we find described in the book of Judges. And that God had in making a covenant with them had laid down some stipulations. He had said this, that if they kept his rules and kept his Word then he would bless the fruit of their womb and there would not be a male or a female barren among you or among all of your flocks. In

² Judges 17:6; 21:25.

³ Deuteronomy 7:6-8.

other words, God would demonstrate to them that these were the people that he chose to use to bring the blessing of Abraham to the entire world.

Now that is the background to the story that we have just read. The very first thing that we find that we are introduced to in this story is a picture of barrenness. In other words, an entire reversal of the promise that God had made through Moses to Israel that he would bless the fruit of their womb and that there would not be a male or a female barren among them.

We start the story this morning with this picture of barrenness. And I think the reason for that is that we are meant to see in Hannah's physical barrenness an indicator of the spiritual nature, the spiritual condition of the children of Israel at this point in their history.

It is a very human story and I think we can take a moment just to look at the humanity of the story and to observe as we read it that this story must have come directly from Hannah herself, probably, most likely, through Samuel her son who is responsible for this work that we have before us, at least for part of the work that we have before us today.

We are told the story quite straightforwardly. Here was a man who had two wives. It is interesting. The Bible doesn't very often comment on polygamy. It doesn't condemn polygamy. It just tells you the story of polygamous marriages and that is usually enough because there isn't one marriage that is described in the Bible that is polygamous that is a happy marriage. And this wasn't a happy marriage. When you read this man had two wives it is meant to signal to you, this is not going to be a happy story. And every many here can say amen.

I will repent afterwards at leisure. The email address is now working.

Well, it wasn't very happy for Hannah. We see that. In fact, I think you can pick up indications that her is Hannah's own report of what is going on here. Her rival used to provoke her grievously, to irritate her all the time.

Look at verse seven. This went on year after year. Year after year this went on. It was the normal portion of her life. As Hannah looks back to these moments, what does she remember? She remembers the provocation. She remembers the kind of thing that was going on with especially when they went up to the sanctuary of God.

I guess in those circumstances they were traveling and so they would be camping over night. And as they camped over night in the morning you can just imagine breakfast.

If you have ever gone camping with another family, especially a family that has lots of children...

We have friends. We used to have friends who came camping with us when we had lots of children. Theirs were always well dressed, well groomed, well behaved and ours just kind of descended on the table in the morning.

Well, you can imagine what it was like. Here is Hannah. She has no children of her own. She gets up for breakfast. She sits down for a quiet breakfast and there is this mass just descend. You know, it seems like there is one popping out. Every year they go up tot the temple there is another. There is another to add to the table. There they are in the morning and the children are asking their mom the question. They say, “Why is it, mom, that Aunt Hannah doesn’t have any children?”

“Well, I don’t know, darling. You will have to ask her yourself. Maybe Hannah doesn’t want children.”

“But surely she wants children. She likes us. She plays with us. Surely she would love children, mom.”

“Maybe she can’t have any children. Hannah, would you like to tell them why it is you don’t have any children? And, by the way, did you know that I am expecting again?”

You can imagine this going on year after year. It is there in the text. Year after year this went on. She would provoke her and irritate her.

Now one good side of the story is that she had a loving husband. The text tells us he was a loving husband because whenever he was dishing out the portion, he always gave a bit more to Hannah. Hannah noticed that. She records it. She tells Samuel. We have got it in our Bible. Elkanah did try to show little acts of kindness to her.

But did you notice how human the story is? Did you notice that kind of way which in verse eight Elkanah her husband speaks to her? It is so human. There isn’t a woman in this room doesn’t recognize the ill advised attempt of a man to comfort a woman who has a problem. I mean, really. Here she is. She has this problem. She is being irritated and annoyed by this other woman that she has to live with. I don’t know if the other woman was a lot younger, a lot prettier. Certainly she was more fertile. Everything Hannah wasn’t this other woman was and she has to live with this woman. And he is wondering why she is upset. He is wondering why she is not eating. He is wondering why her heart is so sad.

And then he pulls out of his armory of arguments the punch line. Did you notice the punch line here?

“Am I not more to you than ten sons?”⁴

⁴ 1 Samuel 1:8.

I mean, he doesn't get it, does he? That is not exactly what she wants to hear. And she is looking at him and she is thinking to herself, "Well, actually, no. I want to have a family and right now you are not really replacing that inner longing that I have to have children.

Now it is so human, isn't it and humorous, because that is the way life is. And I think it is there in the Bible to remind us that these stories happen to real people.

Well, this Hannah's barrenness and the bitterness that she felt as this went on year after year, the provocation that she felt.

And it is in the midst of this bitterness that Hannah, we are told, goes into the temple to pray, verse nine.

"After they had eaten and drunk in Shiloh, Hannah rose."⁵

And we are given a little insight here into the temple or it wasn't a temple, but a shrine, a worship place in Shiloh.

Eli the priest is sitting on the throne. I think that the Hebrew word means a throne and it is an indicator that Eli as the priest of Israel is kind of standing in for any kind of king there is. He is the nearest thing to an authority figure that they have in the land. So Eli the priest is acting in the place of a leader within Israel and there he is on his throne beside the doorpost of the temple of the Lord.

Hannah comes in. Do you notice how she comes in? She comes in distressed, deeply distressed. She is beside herself. She is distracted. She is weeping bitterly. She is praying to the Lord. That is why she has come into the house of God. And as the priest looks at this and as the priest observes her do you notice that the one person whose calling and responsibility it was to represent God and to image what God would be like in the way he treats her, doesn't treat her that way?

He looks on. He sees her mouthing the words, that she is feeling too deeply to say words out loud.

Have you ever been in that position where you are feeling so deep and you can't say it? You want to tell someone what is going on in your heart, but you know that if you try to say it, it wouldn't come out. You would just break down. You would... tears would flow and you are embarrassed to allow the tears to flow.

And here is Hannah and the tears are flowing. She can't talk. She can't articulate everything that is on her heart. Her tears are her prayers. She is pouring them out to God. There is the language that she uses. She pours out to God her heart.

Here is Eli who is looking on and what does he assume? I love the way it is put here.

⁵ 1 Samuel 1:9.

“Therefore Eli [when he saw this, Eli] took her to be a drunken woman.”⁶

“Therefore...” as if that was the logical thing that you would assume when a lady comes into the worship place, kneels down, starts to weep and is mouthing something in the presence of the Lord. That is what you would assume, that she was a drunken woman, that she was a worthless person. Things have degenerated so much in Israel that true religion and honest to God devotion is something of which Eli the priest of Israel is completely unfamiliar. He hasn’t seen this happen. This is not the regular thing that takes place when people come into the sanctuary, if they come at all.

Sadly, of course, it could happen today, can’t it? It can happen that elders or pastors can not observe, can not see what is going on in your heart, can’t read what is really going on in your life, mistake people’s behavior for something other than what it really is because they don’t read us properly. Have you ever been misread by someone? Then you will understand what Hannah feels.

And it is a great joy for us, isn’t it, as we read this this morning that we have a priest and that when we come to God and we are pouring out our soul to God and when we are crying to God for his help and his mercy we have a priest who is touched with the feeling of our infirmities, who does know what we are going through, who is flesh and blood with us.

We read about King David. The people of Israel were able to say to him, “You are flesh of our flesh. You belong to us. You are one of us. You are of the same race as us. You are of the same people as us.”

And our great high priest took on our humanity that he might be one with us, that he might have a fellow feeling with our pains, that he might know where we are so that when we come to God he never misreads or misjudges or misrepresents or misunderstands. He knows exactly what it is we are bringing to him. He reads us perfectly and the Holy Spirit takes our sighs and our groans and translates them into perfect prayers and presents them to the throne of grace.

Well, Hannah comes and pours out her prayers to God and vows a vow to God. She says, actually, the word... the idea of pouring out prayers, I think, is a great thing. But as she comes to God do you notice how she reasons? She reasons with God that if what God will remember her, will look on her, rather, and remember her, then she will give her son to him in dedication to his service.

Now the language there that Hannah uses is language that she would be familiar with because ever since the time of Moses the children of Israel rehearsed, repeated, memorized, used the language of the deliverance from Egypt. They would remember that God had said, “I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters. I know their sufferings, and I have come

⁶ 1 Samuel 1:13.

down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey.”⁷

And here is Hannah as she comes to that God and she is saying, “You are the God who worked with our forefathers. You saw them in their distress in Egypt. You heard their cry. You came down to help. You brought them out. Now if you can do that for us corporately as a people, the people of God, if you can do that for the assembly of Israel, you can do that for me.”

There is the logic of believing prayer. As we look at the greater and we think, if God can do the greater thing, then he can do the lesser thing in my life.

And there is a sense in which when we come to God in prayer we need to be arguing with God. We need to assault the battlements of heaven. In the language of C H Spurgeon we need to assault the battlements of heaven and make our weaponry as we assault the walls of heaven, the promises of God, the Word of God. We need to assault God with his own Word and say, “But you said... but you said... Remember what you said.”

And the great assurance of the Bible is that when we approach God like that, God hears because he invites us to hear.

I remember doing a university mission. I think it was in Aberdeen and the prayer committee who were organizing it sent out a prayer bulletin and at the head of the bulletin they had this quotation that when God determines to do a work he does, first of all, he decides what he is going to do, then he stirs up his believing people to pray for the thing that he wants done. And then he adds in answer to the believing prayers of his people. In other words, God ordains not only the end, but he ordains the means to the end and the means to the end of the believing fervent prayers of God’s people. Hannah prays out of her bitterness to God.

Well, this priest turns things around. He hears. He watches her. He observes her. And then he speaks a word of blessing to her. He apologizes. Well, he doesn’t apologize, actually. He just assumes his role as the priest.

In verse 17, “Then Eli answered, ‘Go in peace, and the God of Israel grant your petition that you have made to him.’”⁸

That is interesting that as she responds to this—you look at verse 18—as she responds to this she recognizes that this is the Word of the Lord.

Now you would think that she would think to herself, “This man misjudged. This man misunderstood me. This man is now disqualified from being a spokesman for God.”

Not only that, by the way, but I think she is also aware of the reputation of his sons. Did

⁷ Exodus 3:7-8.

⁸ 1 Samuel 1:17.

you notice at the beginning of the story when he is introduced his sons are also mentioned? And then when Hannah is responding and defending herself in verse 16 she says to him, “Do not regard your servant as a worthless [man].”⁹

Now later on that same word is used of the children of Eli, his sons were worthless men. She says, “I am not a worthless woman.” In other words, I am not like your boys.

But whenever he speaks the Word of God to her, do you notice that she takes it, she assumes it to be the Word of God? Now this is interesting because in all of our reformed confessions it is made quite clear that there is a difference between the Word of God and its power and its potency in our lives and the instrument, the vehicle through whom the Word of God comes. The minister, the elder, the Bible class leader can be ungodly, can be out of fellowship with the Lord, can be disobedient, can be short sighted, can have various blind spots in terms of their understanding or their obedience. But the Word of God is powerful. God can use even unworthy instruments and the Word of God does its own work. The Word of God does the work. It illumines the mind. It creates faith in the heart. It shatters all the reserves that we have. All our resistance can be broken down by the Word of God.

She recognizes this and she takes it to be the Word of God and do you notice the immediate change that comes over her in verse 18 because she believes what she hears, because she believes the Word of God? She takes it seriously. She puts her faith in it. She trusts the Word of God.

What happens?

“Then the woman went her way and ate, and her face was no longer sad.”¹⁰

What has happened? She has resolved the issue before God. She believes God. That is the very heart and nature of faith that is to believe God.

Now I have to say this. You cannot draw a direct line between Hannah’s experience and yours in the particular problem that she had in her life. This is not God’s answer to everybody who struggles with this issue of barrenness. In fact, in the Bible the fellowship of the barren is quite select. They are in the Bible because these are unusual things that happened that the barren should be fruitful and rejoice. They are in the Bible because these are the moments that are quite crucial in the developing story of redemption, that from nothing God is able to create something, that from utter weakness God is able to bring strength, that there is something in this story line that you find right throughout the Scriptures as you find all of these key people in the Bible mentioned over and over again, from Sarah the wife of Abraham right through to Elisabeth the mother of John the Baptist who enjoyed the fellowship of the barren and into whose life God acted for this one reason, that he is developing the story here for the arrival of the promise to Abraham, the fulfilling of the promise to Abraham, to us and to the world.

⁹ 1 Samuel 1:16.

¹⁰ 1 Samuel 1:18.

As Jesus said to the Samaritan woman, “Salvation is from the Jews.”¹¹

Where is Jesus born? He is born in Bethlehem, Ephratha. Did you notice that in this story ourselves this morning we read in verse one right at the very beginning of the story that this little family had its origins there in Ephratha. In other words, the very tying of the story of the birth of Samuel in these miraculous circumstances is tied in the Scripture to the events of Ephratha from which Israel’s greatest king David is born. David influences not only Jews, but Christians. He is our greatest of men.

And it is precisely in the footsteps of David that our King Jesus is born where an even greater miracle was required, but, again, the same idea. Starting in Genesis where the seed of the woman would destroy the serpent culminating in the seed of the virgin of Bethlehem.

You see? Hannah is taking her place in the drama that is going to find its ultimate fruition in the arrival of Jesus. It is the gospel story. This is not given as an example so much as part of that story of redemption that is going to be completed in Christ, that a woman who could have no children with connections to Ephratha, Bethlehem will have a child who will solve the leadership problem in Israel. That is Hannah’s story.

God is going to deal with a problem of leadership in Israel his way. When they elect Saul king he is eventually disqualified they learn again. God will solve the leadership problem in Israel his way with his man and ultimately God has solved the leadership problem for the world by raising up John the Baptist to prepare the way of the King of kings and the Lord of lords. And here is Hannah at this bitter point in her life discovering that in the midst of all of her pain, her God had not let her down and her God had not abandoned her. She demonstrates that a believer even under the old covenant has a vital relationship with God, has freedom in their personal approach to God in prayer, that this religion of the Old Testament is far, far, from the formal ceremonial cut and dry sacrificial procedural approach that we often malign it as having been, that there are genuine believing people here and she is one of them.

God is working in her heart to prepare the way for the coming of King Jesus.

What does she learn? She learns that in the midst of her weakness God is there, that even when God is most invisible, but his voice is not being heard and there is no prophetic voice in Israel and God has been silent since the time of Moses and Joshua, when there has been no one who has been declaring the Word of God to the people. There have been judges like super men who have come and they have done great things, but nobody has been speaking the Word of God. God seems to be most invisible. God is present. Blessed is she to whom is given the instinct and can tell that God is on the field when he is most invisible.

Let’s pray.

¹¹ John 4:22.

Father, we pray that by the power of your Holy Spirit, you would enable us to grasp what Hannah grasped, the Word of promise, a promise which was really important in terms of the bigger picture of the gospel. Through that experience she demonstrates in her weakness and her prayerfulness the attitude of a true believer who casts themselves wholly on you and pours out their complaint to God. Thank you that you take our tears, put them in a bottle. They are precious to you, that you hear the prayers of your people uttered or unexpressed, that you are never far from any one of us and that we have a great high priest who is touched with the feeling of our infirmity and who bears us up before you. Lord, we pray that by the power of the Holy Spirit we would take great confidence from that today. Make us a praying people we ask you. Make us a people who are dependent on you. Just as we have been crying out to you in these months as we have been going through this process of transition. May it not end today, but may it only begin as we look forward to the future together in the providence of God. We pray in Jesus' strong name. Amen.