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1

THE BARREN WIFE

1 Samuel 1:1–8

*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?” (1 Sam. 1:8)*



Among the treasures of our world are the great stories that shape the identity of whole peoples. Homer’s *Iliad* provided the ancient Greeks with a literary foundation on which centuries of great culture were erected. Out of the chaos of the Dark Ages, the Britons found a noble ideal in the story of King Arthur and Camelot. More ancient than either of these is the Old Testament book of Samuel, with its story of the rise of King David and the establishment of Israel’s kingdom.

As literature, Samuel is unsurpassed in the richness of its plot, the complexity and depth of its characters, the intensity of its action, and the profundity of its lessons. This is all the more the case when we realize that Samuel is not a fictional tale, but a true historical narrative. These people lived on our earth, and these events happened in our world. Homer and King Arthur inspire us through their fantasy world of heroes, maidens, and monsters. Samuel refuses to yield the palm when it comes to these. But Samuel’s importance lies not only in that its story is true, but also in that

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it forms a part of the unfolding story of God's salvation that is the greatest truth of all.

LAST OF THE JUDGES, FIRST OF THE PROPHETS

Samuel was born sometime around the year 1050 B.C. "In those days there was no king in Israel," says the book of Judges. "Everyone did what was right in his own eyes" (Judg. 21:25). This summarizes the condition of the nation at the time of Samuel's birth. Israel faced a leadership crisis that was accompanied by a spiritual crisis. Having entered the Promised Land in victory and strength, the people of God had lost their way spiritually, politically, and militarily. Judges 2:10 explains why: after Joshua and his generation, "there arose another generation after them who did not know the LORD."

Forgetting the Lord is the greatest evil that can befall any generation. Absent God's help, Israel failed to drive out the remnants of the Canaanites, but instead began to follow in their pagan ways and to worship their unholy idols. In punishment, God gave the Israelites over into the hands of their enemies, periodically showing mercy by raising up judges to deliver them (see Judg. 2:10–23). The book of Judges concludes with a series of stories that depict the decadent setting in which Samuel was born and raised, including the spiritual corruption of the Levites, the idolatry of the people, and the moral squalor of Israelite society.

The birth of Samuel portended a new age. Just as God would later prepare Israel for her Messiah by sending John the Baptist, God prepared the way for a king after God's own heart (1 Sam. 13:14) by sending Samuel, who was at once the last of Israel's judges and the first of the great line of the prophets who served during Israel's kingdom. David Tsumura observes: "Samuel takes the decisive role in the period of transition from the days of the judges to the monarchical era, leading to the establishment of the House of David and the beginning of the worship of Yahweh in Jerusalem."¹

The historical significance of Samuel is evidenced by the birth narrative that begins the two books of the Bible that bear his name. The Scriptures always take care to inform us of the birth and upbringing of its most important figures, and so it is here. Just as Moses, Samson, John the Baptist, and

1. David Toshio Tsumura, *The First Book of Samuel*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 104.

Jesus Christ were all born in times of distress to humble, godly parents, Samuel enters history as the child of Elkanah and Hannah. The book begins: “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” (1 Sam. 1:1).

Samuel’s father was a “certain man,” hardly a description for someone of prominence. We are told two things about Elkanah, starting with the place where he lived. Ramathaim-zophim was a small town in the very heart of Israel, belonging to the territory allotted to Ephraim, not far from its border with Judah, about five miles north of what would later be the city of Jerusalem. Samuel would put Ramah, as it was later called, “on the map,” making it Israel’s virtual capital during his judgeship (1 Sam. 8:4) and founding there the school of the prophets (1 Sam. 19:18–20). Neither Elkanah nor Samuel was an Ephraimite, however. They traced their lineage through Tohu to Zuph, who was an Ephrathite, a denizen of the region of Bethlehem in the land of Judah. Moreover, theirs was a priestly family, of the tribe of Levi and the clan of Kohath, as we learn in 1 Chronicles 6:33–38; the Kohathites were originally charged with guarding the ark of the covenant and serving as the tabernacle’s gatekeepers (Num. 3:31). Under David, the “sons of Kohath” were dedicated to the ministry of song in the tabernacle. Samuel’s grandson Heman is denoted as “the singer” and seems to have enjoyed the enormous privilege of serving as music director for Israel’s worship under David (1 Chron. 6:31–33). Samuel’s descendants were probably among “the sons of Korah,” to whom authorship of eleven psalms is ascribed.

GOD’S BARREN WIFE

The primary focus in Samuel’s birth is not on his father, however, but on his mother, Hannah. We can often trace the faith of remarkable children to their remarkable mothers. So it is with this woman, who presents one of the most striking feminine characters in the Bible. Robert Bergen observes that “the spiritual powerhouse in this narrative was a socially impotent woman . . . [who] alone understood the true power of undivided faith in the Lord.”²

2. Robert D. Bergen, *1, 2 Samuel*, New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996), 63.

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There is much to say about this extraordinary woman, but at the time there was one fact that dominated her existence. Hannah's womb was closed, so she was unable to bear Elkanah any children. After telling us that Hannah is Elkanah's wife, the Bible simply reports, "Hannah had no children" (1 Sam. 1:2).

Hannah's barrenness seems to correspond to Israel's spiritual state. Women who suffer this condition often wonder how God is involved, but in Hannah's case we know, since the text informs us that "the LORD had closed her womb" (1 Sam. 1:5). There are many reasons why God brings trials into the lives of his people, often to stimulate our faith, but in the case of the mother of so important a figure as Samuel, the point has to do not with Hannah but with Israel. The Lord closed Hannah's womb to remind Israel that he had also caused the people to be spiritually barren because of their idolatry and unbelief. Israel was God's barren wife, having failed to give him the children of faith he desired. As a nation, Israel particularly manifested her barrenness in the resultant lack of the strong leadership of a true king. Bruce Birch explains: "The situation in Elkanah's family is intended as a parable of Israel's situation at this moment in history. Hannah's anxiety over having no children, even though Elkanah loves her, parallels Israel's anxiety over having no king in spite of the care and love of God."³

What God shows us through Hannah is relevant for every Christian whose faith seems barren. It is true for barren churches, as the church in the West, including America, can largely be considered today, bearing very little of the harvest of holiness and zeal for truth that God desires. As we continue in Hannah's story, she will model for us the grace-seeking prayer that we need to offer to God. But in these opening verses we see another essential point. For in a time when Israel as a whole had forgotten the Lord, "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" (1 Sam. 1:3).

Shiloh was the location of the tabernacle and the ark of the covenant in Elkanah's time. Eli was hardly an impressive spiritual leader, and his wicked sons, Hophni and Phinehas, made a mockery of ministry, as we will see (1 Sam. 2:22-25). Elkanah did not go up to Shiloh to see Eli or his sons,

3. Bruce C. Birch, *1 & 2 Samuel*, New Interpreter's Bible, vol. 2 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), 973.

but to come before the Lord and renew his covenant fidelity. Elkanah did what we must also do: he prioritized the place of God in his life and gave his attention to the Lord. However little Elkanah knew of true religion at a time like this, he knew enough to come as a sinner, seeking grace from God by means of the shed blood of a sacrifice.

This is how salvation begins for any barren soul. It begins with realizing that we must get right with God. Sinners come to the cross of Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God to whom the old sacrifices pointed, seeking forgiveness through his atoning blood and renewal through his redeeming grace. Spiritually barren Christians come back to the cross, confessing to God their sin and spiritual neglect and finding cleansing and acceptance through Christ's once-for-all sacrifice. This is what God desired from Israel: a sincere and repentant seeking after him and his grace, for which purpose he had afflicted them with the barrenness of the time of the judges, and which he reflected in the childless condition of godly Hannah. When we see Hannah's tears, shed not for her own but for Israel's failings, we should grieve for our own sins and the barren lives they cause. Her deliverance will likewise remind us of God's redeeming love and transforming power that is available to us.

TEARS IN THE TABERNACLE

The theology of Hannah's barren condition would have been little on her heart, however, as she returned to the tabernacle with her family. It was a dysfunctional family, primarily because Hannah was not Elkanah's only wife: "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" (1 Sam. 1:2).

The practice of polygamy is frequently seen in the Old Testament, though it was probably not the norm. The book of Genesis makes it clear that God designed marriage to be between one man and one woman (Gen. 2:24), a definition that is confirmed by Jesus Christ (Matt. 19:5). Elkanah's polygamy was probably provoked by Hannah's inability to bear children, which threatened both economic hardship and the cutting off of his name and lineage. Therefore, like the patriarchs Abraham and Jacob, Elkanah took a second wife to bear him children while his affections remained fixed on Hannah.

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The emotional divide in this marriage that necessarily followed corresponds to the names of the two wives: Hannah, whose name means “gracious,” and Peninnah, whose name means “prolific.” Polygamy always causes family conflict, but much more certainly when one wife receives affection and the other receives children. The discord in Elkanah’s house mirrors the intertribal dissension within Israel and reminds us all of the importance of family and church unity.

Hannah’s emotional distress over her barren womb would have been grief enough without Peninnah to goad her. Her trial is familiar to women today who suffer an inability to bear children. She had never had the thrill of bringing the news of a pregnancy to her husband, but had instead known the monthly frustration of infertility. Whenever she went to the marketplace or socialized with other families, the sound of infant voices—the very sound she most desired—plunged into her heart like a knife. William Blaikie adds that “the trial which Hannah had to bear was particularly heavy . . . to a Hebrew woman. To have no child was not only a disappointment, but seemed to make one out as dishonoured by God, as unworthy of any part or lot in the means that were to bring about the fulfillment of the promise, ‘In thee and in thy seed shall all the families of the earth be blessed’”⁴ (Gen. 12:3). It is always cruel, and almost always unwarranted, to assume another’s affliction as a sign of God’s disfavor, especially a trial so painful to a woman’s heart. But since children were considered a sign of God’s favor (Deut. 7:14; 28:4), and since the Mosaic law listed barren wombs as one sign of God’s curse for covenant-breaking (28:18), childless women were often scorned in female society, depriving them of the emotional support they needed. All this was Hannah’s bitter portion, month by month and year by year.

Then there was Peninnah. While Hannah had Elkanah’s heart, Peninnah had his children, and she missed no opportunity to inflict misery on this account: “[Hannah’s] rival used to provoke her grievously to irritate her, because the LORD had closed her womb. So it went on year by year” (1 Sam. 1:6–7).

A typical example is what took place during this visit to Shiloh: “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,

4. William G. Blaikie, *Expository Lectures on the Book of First Samuel* (1887; repr., Birmingham, AL: Solid Ground, 2005), 5.

because he loved her, though the LORD had closed her womb” (1 Sam. 1:4–5). We can imagine Elkanah’s quandary: should he distribute all the portions for Peninnah and her many children, but only one to Hannah? In order to express his sympathy and love, he gave Hannah a double portion. This sign of special favor enraged Peninnah, inciting her to savage mockery. Perhaps this was delivered backhandedly, as imagined by Dale Ralph Davis:

“Now do all you children have your food? Dear me, there are so *many* of you, it’s hard to keep track.”

“Mommy, Miss Hannah doesn’t have any children.”

“What did you say, dear?”

“I said, Miss Hannah doesn’t have any children.”

“Miss Hannah? Oh, yes, that’s right—she doesn’t have any children.”

“Doesn’t she *want* children?”

“Oh, yes, she wants children very, very much! Wouldn’t you say so, Hannah? [In a low aside] Don’t you wish you had children too?”

“Doesn’t Daddy want Miss Hannah to have kids?”

“Oh, certainly he does—but Miss Hannah keeps disappointing him; she just can’t have kids.”

“Why not?”

“Why, because God won’t let her.”

“Does God not like Miss Hannah?”

“Well, I don’t know—what do you think?”⁵

This imagined conversation may or may not reflect Peninnah’s actual strategy for afflicting Hannah’s heart, though it fits the Bible’s description that Peninnah would “provoke her grievously to irritate her” to the point of tears (1 Sam. 1:6–7). A loathsome heart like Peninnah’s calls for our reflection, especially since it bears such a resemblance to our own hearts. Blaikie writes, “To suffer in the tenderest part of one’s nature is no doubt a heavy affliction. But to have a heart eager to inflict such suffering on another is far more awful.” Blaikie warns all who play the part of Hannah’s fellow-wife, who mock those who suffer and lord over those who are cast down: “You may succeed for the moment, and you may experience whatever of

5. Dale Ralph Davis, *1 Samuel: Looking on the Heart* (Fearn, Ross-shire, UK: Christian Focus, 2000), 13–14.

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satisfaction can be found in gloated revenge. But know this, that you have been cherishing a viper in your bosom that will not content itself with fulfilling your desire. It will make itself a habitual resident in your heart, and distil its poison over it.”⁶ That Elkanah’s second wife would conduct herself in such a way during a visit to the tabernacle reminds us that the outward show of religion, without an inward correspondence, will often be a mask for the most spiteful hearts.

At the time, however, Peninnah must have felt quite the sensation of triumph. The truth is that our tongues can drive others into despair. We read simply that “Hannah wept and would not eat” (1 Sam. 1:7). In the very place where hope should reign—the house of God—Hannah experienced only distress. The church sanctuary is sometimes the most depressing place for those who feel singled out by their trials, though it is also the place they most need to be. Realizing this, Christians are reminded to be thoughtful of the afflictions of others, to be sensitive in our conduct and speech, and while rejoicing in our own blessings to go out of our way to provide heartfelt sympathy and support to those who grieve. Pastors should likewise aim to be sensitive to broken hearts like Hannah’s when they lead in pastoral prayers. In general, worship in the church should not assume a lighthearted happiness in all the worshipers but should reflect and embrace the full range of human emotions as the covenant community meets with God.

A GREATER LOVE THAN THIS

Even here at the beginning of her story, however, there are signs of hope for Hannah. The first sign of hope is the very statement about God’s involvement that many dread about their afflictions: “the LORD had closed her womb” (1 Sam. 1:5). Instead of resenting God’s sovereignty in our trials, we Christians should lift up our hearts. Our God has proved his faithfulness and love by sending his own Son to die for our sins. In Hannah’s day, he was known as the God who was faithful to deliver Israel from bondage in Egypt and who was mighty in securing for them the Promised Land. Rather than assuming some unholy, spiteful, or condemning purpose in God’s afflictions, believers need to remember that God is holy, so all his

6. Blaikie, *First Samuel*, 7–8.

deeds are holy; God is good, so he intends our sorrows for good; and God is filled with mercy for the brokenhearted. God does not seek to destroy us through our trials but to save us through our trials. As Hannah herself would later testify: “He raises up the poor from the dust; he lifts the needy from the ash heap” (1 Sam. 2:8). So if God is the One who closed the womb, we should take heart, since he can surely also open it.

In Hannah’s case, God was using her plight to orchestrate Israel’s deliverance from the dark era of the judges. This was a cause dear to Hannah’s heart, as we know from the song she later lifted up to God’s praise (1 Sam. 2:10). We may never know how God has worked through our most bitter trials to bring others to salvation, to equip us with sensitivity in ministry to others, or even to launch a significant gospel advance. But we do know God, and we know from his Word that “for those who love God all things work together for good” (Rom. 8:28), so we can have confidence in God’s purpose in our lives.

A famous example from church history is the tearful experience of Monica, the mother of the early church’s greatest theologian, Augustine of Hippo. As a devoted Christian, Monica was grieved by her brilliant son’s disdain for the gospel, and even more so for the sexually dissolute life that she witnessed him leading. Night after night she pleaded with the Lord for Augustine. One night was especially trying, for in the morning her son planned to board a ship bound for Rome, where a young man could be expected to plunge deeply into sin. All night she prayed, and when Monica arose in the morning to find her son gone, she wept bitterly before the Lord. Little did she know that in Italy her son would come under the influence of the noted preacher Ambrose of Milan, and that during his stay there he would be converted to faith in Jesus. Moreover, the very wickedness over which this faithful mother grieved provided Augustine with a keen appreciation for God’s grace in salvation. His teaching of salvation by grace alone would have a profound influence on generations of later Christians, including a direct influence on the men used by God to lead the Protestant Reformation.

Take heart, then, if you grieve under afflictions, to know that God has willed them for you. John Chrysostom, the great preacher of the early church, wrote of sorrows like Hannah’s:

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Even if we are suffering grief and pain, even if the trouble seems insupportable to us, let us not be anxious or beside ourselves but wait on God's providence. He is well aware, after all, when is the time for what is causing us depression to be removed . . . It was not out of hatred, in fact, or of revulsion that [God] closed [Hannah's] womb, but to open to us the doors on the values the woman possessed and for us to espy the riches of her faith and realize that he rendered her more [fruitful] on that account.⁷

The second cause for Hannah's hope was the tender love displayed by her husband, Elkanah: "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?'" (1 Sam. 1:8). Before we turn to his words, we should not overlook the simple fact that Elkanah went to his wife. How comforting it is simply to be present with those who suffer! Our mere presence with the sick, the troubled, and the grieving is often more powerful than any words. And when he did speak, Elkanah made to Hannah the essential point that he loved her very much and that her inability did not sour him toward her. If others scorned her, she could draw strength from her husband's solidarity, and though she might easily fear losing everything because of her barren womb, Elkanah reminded her that she would not lose his love.

As is typical of men (who are sometimes inept concerning women's hearts), Elkanah's words are not above criticism, and might even be considered self-centered. Notice that he asks her, "Am I not more to you than ten sons?" rather than telling her, "You are worth more to me than ten sons." So it will often be that the most well-meaning friends may not know what to say, and they may say it imperfectly (or worse). But there is One whose comfort does not fail and whose remedy does not err. The final cause for Hannah's hope lay in the Lord and in the reality that she had not, in fact, given up her faith in him. Great as Elkanah's love for Hannah was, there was a greater love than his and a Comforter who could do what her husband never could, One who could answer Hannah's plea and grant the desire of her heart.

7. John R. Franke, ed., *Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1-2 Samuel*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, Old Testament vol. 4 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 195.

We sometimes suspect that a broken heart like Hannah's would have little concern for theology, yet it is at times like these that we most need the truths we have learned about God. Just as the people of Israel had descended into idolatry because they had forgotten the Lord, so Hannah most needed to remember the Lord. She needed theology—that is, the knowledge of God's character and ways. There is good reason to suspect that while Hannah's heart wept, her mind was reflecting on the Bible. Perhaps she remembered how God had so often granted special sons through the barren wombs of believing women. She would certainly have known about how God gave the covenant heir Isaac through Abraham's wife, Sarah, though she was not only barren but well beyond childbearing age. She would also have known about how Isaac prayed for his barren wife, Rebekah, and she gave birth to twin boys, including Jacob, the father of Israel. Jacob's wife, too, suffered childlessness. In fact, Rachel suffered in a situation similar to Hannah's, because of the malice of her sister and co-wife, Leah, who though little loved was prolific in childbearing. But God remembered Rachel and answered her prayer by giving her Joseph, the greatest of Jacob's sons, along with Benjamin, the most beloved.

The prevalence of barren wombs among women most blessed by God may have caught Hannah's attention, and if so, she may have realized that a son whom she should bear could be of special importance to God. This idea is suggested by the prayer that Hannah goes on to offer (1 Sam. 2:1–10). The biblical theme of God's blessing on the barren womb makes the important point that God saves not by human capability, human achievement, or human working. God saves by grace. God causes the barren womb to bear children, just as he causes the lifeless heart to believe. God thus calls his people not to trust human wisdom and human effort, and not to despair in the face of human failure, but to trust God, who gives life to the dead and salvation through the barren womb. Hannah's affliction, like ours, was therefore a call to faith in God. Her weakness was a call to reliance on God's power. Her failure was a call to believe in God's faithfulness. And her grief was a call to seek for God's grace.

Grateful though Hannah might be for her husband's love, her true hope lay in a greater love than this. Her hope lay in the Lord, whose whole record of dealing with Israel was one of faithfulness, power, and grace. Our true hope, in all our trials, and especially in the burden of

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our guilt for sin, is that same God, the God who has revealed his love forever by sending his own Son to redeem us by his blood. Indeed, when the time came for our Savior to be born, he was conceived by the Holy Spirit not in a barren womb like Hannah's but in the virgin womb of Mary, proving that nothing is impossible for our God. Davis applies the lesson to us: "When his people are without strength, without resources, without hope, without human gimmicks—then [God] loves to stretch forth his hand from heaven. Once we see where God often begins we will understand how we may be encouraged."⁸

King David once asked himself, "Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me?" His answer? It is the answer that we will see revealed through the faith of Hannah, an answer that all who know the Lord can come to embrace in every trial: "Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God" (Ps. 43:5).

8. Davis, *1 Samuel*, 13.