


TIM CHESTER
1 SAMUEL
FOR YOU



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1 Samuel For You

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Published by:
The Good Book Company

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(Hardcover) ISBN: 9781909919570

(Paperback) ISBN: 9781909919563

Design by André Parker

Printed in the UK

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SERIES PREFACE

Each volume of the *God's Word For You* series takes you to the heart of a book of the Bible, and applies its truths to your heart.

The central aim of each title is to be:

- Bible centred
- Christ glorifying
- Relevantly applied
- Easily readable

You can use *1 Samuel For You*:

To read. You can simply read from cover to cover, as a book that explains and explores the themes, encouragements and challenges of this part of Scripture.

To feed. You can work through this book as part of your own personal regular devotions, or use it alongside a sermon or Bible-study series at your church. Each chapter is divided into two shorter sections, with questions for reflection at the end of each.

To lead. You can use this as a resource to help you teach God's word to others, both in small-group and whole-church settings. You'll find tricky verses or concepts explained using ordinary language, and helpful themes and illustrations along with suggested applications.

These books are not commentaries. They assume no understanding of the original Bible languages, nor a high level of biblical knowledge. Verse references are marked in **bold** so that you can refer to them easily. Any words that are used rarely or differently in everyday language outside the church are marked in **grey** when they first appear, and are explained in a glossary towards the back. There, you'll also find details of resources you can use alongside this one, in both personal and church life.

Our prayer is that as you read, you'll be struck not by the contents of this book, but by the book it's helping you open up; and that you'll praise not the author of this book, but the One he is pointing you to.

Carl Laferton, Series Editor

INTRODUCTION TO 1 SAMUEL

We live in an age when personal freedom is perhaps our culture's highest value.

You're not the boss of me.

Don't impose your views on me.

What gives you the right to tell me what to do?

Or, to put it another way, when the history of our age is written, it could be summed up as a time when "everyone did as they saw fit". Those words could be the anthem of our time. In fact, they are actually the closing words of the book of Judges (Judges 21:25). This attitude is not new.

In the Hebrew Bible, unlike in our English Bibles, the order of the books means that 1 Samuel follows Judges (Ruth belongs to "the writings" and so comes later). So the last thing you read before the opening of the book of Samuel in the Hebrew Bible is the last verse of Judges: "In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit".

In many ways, the story told in 1 and 2 Samuel is the solution to this problem. The books of 1 and 2 Samuel were originally one book, the book of Samuel. The book of Samuel starts with no king, and ends with a king.

The days when Israel had no king were days of moral anarchy. The final chapters of the book of Judges make for grim reading. These are the stories you were never taught in Sunday school. They are ugly and brutal. This is what life is like when there is no king and everyone does as they see fit.

But the situation is more ambiguous. It is true that Israel had no king; but fundamentally, that was because they refused to acknowledge God as their king. The LORD was to be Israel's king. The real problem was not the lack of a king, but a lack of obedience to God as king.

This ambiguity continues into the book of Samuel. We will see Israel asking for a king, and we will see God regarding that as a

rejection of his rule. We will see the rule of the first king, Saul, and wonder whether Israel having a king is much of an improvement on Israel having no king. Even the rise of King David in the second half of 1 Samuel and his rule in 2 Samuel prove a mixed blessing.

So 1 Samuel leaves us looking beyond this history of ancient Israel. Israel's kings were anointed with oil, so they were known as "the anointed one"—"messiah" in Hebrew, or "christ" in Greek. As we see the disastrous reign of Saul, the king Israel asked for, and as we see the flawed reign of David, the king God blessed his people with, we are being pointed towards *the* Christ, the one man who rules God's people in the way God wants. God himself promised David that one

of his sons would reign over God's people for ever (2 Samuel 7). And so the history of the first christ leaves us longing for the rule of the ultimate Christ.

The distinctive themes and emphases of 1 Samuel will become clear as the story unfolds, and we will draw them together in the final chapter. There we will return

to the question of why the book was written. But as we read 1 Samuel, we will see Jesus Christ. And seeing him in and through 1 Samuel will enable us to see him with fresh colour and texture, and see afresh what it means for us to follow him as King in an age that worships personal freedom.

The history of the first christ leaves us longing for the rule of the ultimate Christ.

Two Notes on the Book

Who wrote the books of 1 and 2 Samuel? The short answer is that we do not know. They are named after the prophet Samuel, but this does not mean he wrote them. In the Greek version of the Old Testament, they are called "1 and 2 Kingdoms". And Samuel's death is described in 1 Samuel 25:1, so he could not have written about the events after

this point. Nevertheless, Samuel may have been one source for the books: 1 Chronicles 29:29 talks about “the records of Samuel the seer”. The books were probably compiled from different sources.

And what kind of genre is this? A useful description is that this is a *preached history*. In other words, it is real history. It is not a collection of parables or fables—the events it describes really did happen. But it is more than a record of events. 1 Chronicles 29:29 says: “As for the events of King David’s reign, from beginning to end, they are written in the records of Samuel the seer, the records of Nathan the prophet and the records of Gad the seer.” There were other historical annals. The writer of Samuel is doing more than creating a historical record. He is writing with a purpose. What he records is never less than historical, but as we read it, we are doing much more than reading history. We are being shown who God is and how he rules his people; and we are being shown Jesus, his Christ.

I. A COMING KING

When you look at the state of the church today, or when you look at the state of your nation and its culture, what do you see? It is hard to avoid the sense that in some ways there is a crisis. God is not acknowledged. His ways are not followed. Perhaps there is nothing new in that. But today, God is scorned and opposed. The **new atheists**^{*} describe themselves as “**anti-theists**”. It is not just that they have differing ideas. They are actively anti-God.

The books of 1 Samuel and 2 Samuel were originally one book, the book of Samuel. In the Hebrew Bible, they follow directly after Judges 21:25: “In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit”. That could be the motto of our age: everyone does as they see fit. You can make up your own morality. You can decide for yourself what is right. If you read the final chapters of Judges, then you soon discover that a culture living by this rule is truly ugly. How do we live in this kind of situation?

Four times at the close of Judges we are told that “in those days Israel had no king” (Judges 17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25). Then 1 Samuel opens: “There was a certain man” (1 Samuel **1:1**^{*}) and we are bound to wonder: *Is this the man who will be king in Israel?* It quickly becomes clear he is not. But that is what the book of Samuel is about—the man who will be king in Israel.

The only other time the phrase “a certain man” is used in the Bible is in the opening to the story of **Samson** (Judges 13:2). So the

* All 1 Samuel verse references being looked at in each chapter are in **bold**.

[†] Words in **grey** are defined in the Glossary (page 213).

writer of Samuel immediately alerts us to the fact that we are in the time of the Judges (and indeed Samuel and Samson may well have been contemporaries). We are waiting for a king. This is why Elkanah is introduced with a long **genealogy** (1 Samuel **1:1**). If you are familiar with stories of Israel's kings (as later readers in Old Testament times would probably have been), then it sounds like the introduction to a king.

So we are being led to expect this to be the story of King Elkanah. But this is not what we get. We expect the story of a king... and we are given the very domestic story of one woman's private grief—so private that it is not even voiced.

Hannah's story is structured in a chiastic pattern (named after the Greek letter *chi*, which is shaped like an "x"), in which the first and last events are parallel, the second and penultimate events are parallel, and so on. At the heart of the story is the coming of Samuel.

- a. Elkanah and his family go from Ramah to Shiloh (**1:1-8**)
 - b. Hannah's prayer of misery (**v 9-11**)
 - c. Eli and Hannah in conversation (**v 12-18**)
 - d. Samuel is born (**v 19-23**)
 - c'. Eli and Hannah in conversation (**v 24-28**)
 - b'. Hannah's prayer of joy (**2:1-10**)
 - a'. Elkanah and his family return from Shiloh to Ramah (**v 11**)

Hannah's Plight

1:2 suggests Hannah was Elkanah's first wife; **verse 5** says she was his first love. The name Hannah means "favoured". But she is **barren**; and so Elkanah takes a second wife, Peninnah. To make matters worse for Hannah, the name Peninnah means "fruitful", and true to her name, Peninnah has children. We are not told how many she had, but **verse 4** talks about "all her sons and daughters". **Verse 2** puts it starkly: "Peninnah had children, but Hannah had none."

Barrenness had added meaning in Old Testament Israel. The promise of a Saviour to Adam (Genesis 3:15) and **offspring** to Abraham (Genesis 22:17-18) meant people were looking for a Saviour from within Israel. Every new birth raised the question: *Is this the one?* Without children there was no future for God's people and ultimately no hope for the world. So barrenness was a personal tragedy, just as it is today. But it also carried a sense of exclusion from the purposes of God's people. That Hannah's primary concern is participation in the future of God's people is perhaps reinforced by the fact that when she receives a child, she gives him back to God (1 Samuel **1:28**).

Verse 5 is **ambiguous**. It probably means: "Although he loved Hannah, he would give Hannah only one portion, because the LORD had closed her womb" (RSV). Elkanah is being scrupulously fair. It is one portion per person. But that means Peninnah is given several portions for herself and all her children (**v 4**), while Hannah just receives one. It is fair, but it accentuates Hannah's loss. Every year when they go to Shiloh to worship God, it's another reminder that she is barren and Peninnah is fruitful. And every year is an opportunity for Peninnah to "provoke" Hannah (**v 6**). She is called Hannah's "rival". This is *not* a happy family. And "this went on year after year"; time and time again, Hannah suffered, "till she wept and would not eat" (**v 7**).

Hannah's Prayer

Hannah's womb was closed. But why? Because "the LORD had closed her womb" (**v 5**). God is **sovereign**, and so he is sovereign over our suffering. Whatever the medical causes for Hannah's barrenness, ultimately it was God who had closed her womb. The key thing is what you do with this information.

- For Peninnah it is a reason to mock Hannah. They come to worship God (**v 3**), and you can imagine Peninnah saying: *What have you got to worship God for? "Hannah"—that means "favoured". So how has God favoured you? By closing your womb!*

- For Elkanah, it is a reason to pity Hannah. He says: “Hannah, why are you weeping? Why don’t you eat? Why are you downhearted? Don’t I mean more to you than ten sons?” (v 8). Perhaps Elkanah wants Hannah to show more interest in him than in her childless state.
- For Hannah, it is a reason to pray. If God has closed her womb, then maybe God might also open her womb. In **verse 9**, God’s sovereignty spurs her into action. Up until this point things have happened to Hannah. She is passive. But now she stands up from the meal and goes to the **LORD’s house** to pray (v 10-11).

Eli the priest sees Hannah praying. Her lips are moving, but she is not speaking aloud (v 12-13). So Eli thinks she is drunk (v 14). “‘Not so, my lord,’ Hannah replied, ‘I am a woman who is deeply troubled. I have not been drinking wine or beer; I was pouring out my soul to the LORD. Do not take your servant for a wicked woman; I have been praying here out of my great anguish and grief’” (v 15-16). She was not intoxicated. She was praying.

True Prayer

This is true prayer. There is a brand of spirituality that says true prayer is about quiet and contemplation. Sometimes the implication is that the more spiritual you are, the more calm and composed you will be. It is not true. Hannah’s prayer—which is a prayer, as we’ll see, that God answers—arises from:

- deep anguish (v 10)
- bitter weeping (v 10)
- misery (v 11)
- being deeply troubled (v 15)
- great anguish and grief (v 16)

If you are experiencing anguish or bitterness, then you are in a good place to pray well! Perhaps your problems mean your mind is all over

the place, so you find it hard to concentrate in prayer. But actually that is the kind of condition that produces good praying. Prayer is not a technique we need to master. It is “pouring out [your] soul to the LORD” (v 15).

One of the main reasons we do not pray more is that we do not feel the need to pray. We think we can manage without God, and so our prayers end up a duty to perform, options in our busy day. Prayer was not a duty or an option for Hannah! She did not get up from the meal because she had realised that she had not had her quiet time that day. It was the cry of an anguished soul.

The main image Jesus gives of prayer is a child asking her father for help. And three-year-olds do not ask for things in a quiet and contemplative way! They insist, they shout, they clamour, they persist. There are children who are quiet. If a child cries and no one ever comes, then eventually they stop crying. There are orphanages where children have been neglected to the point where an eerie silence hangs over the dormitories. The point is this: the cry of a child is a cry of faith. It reflects their belief that there is someone out there who hears them and responds to them. Of course, they are also selfish, and often we struggle to work out what they want, so it can get fraught! But it is essentially a cry of faith. And the cry of prayer is a cry of faith. It arises from the belief that God is a Father who is able (powerful enough) and willing (loving enough) to answer.

What creates great praying? A deep sense of our need and a deep sense of God’s care.

Our prayers
end up a duty
to perform,
options in our
busy day.

How to Go in Peace

Eli recognises this: “Go in peace, and may the God of Israel grant you what you have asked of him” (v 17). Hannah replies: “May your servant find favour in your eyes” (v 18). Remember, the name “Hannah”

means “favoured”, so she is punning on her name, saying in effect: *May the favoured one be favoured.*

Then Hannah eats. It is a sign that she is not longer in anguish. “Her face was no longer downcast” (v 18). This is really striking. Hannah does not yet know how God will answer her prayer. But the point is that she *has* prayed: and now she is happy to leave it with him. She is a model of the truth expressed in Philippians 4:6-7: “Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” Hannah has presented her request to the LORD. Now she knows the peace of having poured out her heart in prayer to the God who knows all things, and who cares for all his people.

God's Answer

The favoured one is favoured. Hannah becomes pregnant and gives birth to a boy (1 Samuel 1:19-20).

Names are often significant, especially when the act of naming and the meaning of the name are described in the text. Hannah not only names her child, but explains why: “Because I asked the LORD for him” (v 20). The name “Samuel” actually means “his name is God”. But the Hebrew word “ask for” is *sa'al*. It is close enough for Hannah’s explanation of his name to make sense. Samuel is the child that was asked for, from the one who is God.

This emphasis on asking runs through the story. In **verse 17**, Eli literally says: “Your asking that you have asked”—*the request you have requested*, we might say. In effect he says: *May God give you the samuel you’ve samueled*. When Hannah fulfils her vow and presents Samuel for service in the **tabernacle**, she says: “I prayed for this child, and the LORD has granted me what I asked of him. So now I give him to the LORD. For his whole life he shall be given over to the LORD” (v 27-28). In Hebrew, the word “to give” or “to dedicate” or “to lend” is from

the same root as the word “to ask” (because lending is what you do in response to someone asking). So again there are four references to asking in these two verses. Literally what Hannah says is: “The LORD has granted me the asking that I asked of him. So now I give the response to my asking to the LORD. For his whole life he shall be given as a response to my asking to the LORD.”

The point the writer is making is this: Hannah asks and the LORD gives. The LORD closes Hannah’s womb and the LORD opens Hannah’s womb. God answers prayer. Of course, he does not always give us exactly what we asked for. There were many barren women in Israel who did not receive a child. But he does “look on [his] servant’s misery” (v 11) and he does respond to our prayers in his love and wisdom and power. Jesus says: “Ask and it will be given to you” (Luke 11:9).

Hannah asks
and the LORD
gives. But
how often we
do not ask.

But how often we do not ask. We think we can rely on ourselves; or we think that we cannot rely on God. “You do not have because you do not ask God” (James 4:2).

But there is something else going on here. There is a foretaste of what is to come in the story. For “*sa’al*” is actually even closer to another Hebrew name, the name “Saul”. Saul is the king whom Samuel will anoint, because the people have “asked for” a king. Having been repeated again and again in chapter 1, the word does not recur until 1 Samuel 8:10, when the elders of Israel ask for a king. The books of 1 and 2 Samuel are dominated by three figures: Samuel, Saul and David. Samuel is the child that Hannah asked for and Saul is the king the people asked for. But who is David?

Questions for reflection

1. How does Hannah's praying encourage you in your own?
2. Is there anything you need to pray about, and then pursue feeling at peace about?
3. Is there anything you do not ask for in prayer because, deep down, you think the Lord cannot or will not give it? Could Hannah's example prompt you to start praying for it regularly and boldly?