

Deep Theology for Dark Days: God's Sovereign, Unexpected Work 1 Samuel 1

*"O LORD of hosts, if you will indeed look on the affliction of your servant and **remember** me and **not forget** your servant...and the LORD **remembered** her..."*

Introduction:

"What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us."

These words by A.W. Tozer over 40 years ago ring true today. Some may argue that the other side of this coin is more important, namely what God thinks about us (as C.S. Lewis stated), but how individuals and churches think, teach, and perceive God will shape everything about them, including the direction of life and trajectory of decision making. Tozer went on to say this:

*"The history of mankind will probably show that no people has ever risen above its religion, and man's spiritual history will positively demonstrate that no religion has ever been greater than its **idea of God**.*

Worship is pure or base as the worshiper entertains high or low thoughts of God.

*For this reason the gravest question before the Church is always God Himself, and the most portentous fact about any man is not what he at a given time may say or do, **but what he in his deep heart conceives God to be like.***

*We tend by a secret law of the soul to move toward our mental image of God. This is true not only of the individual Christian, but of the company of Christians that composes the Church. **Always the most revealing thing about the Church is her idea of God.**¹*

How we view and understand God will not only dictate our *worship*, but will inform us about good and evil, purpose and hope, and how and where we find joy. A proper understanding of the sovereignty of God allows us to see both the *meta-narrative of redemptive history* (what is God doing in all of human history from Genesis to Revelation) AND *micro circumstances* (what God is doing in my life today). A robust understanding of the character and attributes of God helps us make sense of human tragedy like an indoctrinated little girl who is told she's really a boy, who in her misery looks for someone to blame for her angst and inflicts harm on those who teach that Jesus is the only way and that rebellion keeps one in hopelessness. A deep trust in God helps us when we are in circumstances we cannot control, in pain we did not ask for, and face realities that we did not choose. This is where **theology**, which simply means the *study of God*, is so vital to our life in this world. The issues are as real as they are difficult, and the difference between joy and hopelessness is NEVER a change in circumstances but rather a change in understanding of who God is and how He works.

We come now to 1 Samuel chapter 1, the beginning point of how God brought a king to Israel, established a kingdom, and how that kingdom is established forever and will one day be visible again. But as God often does, this story of a kingdom starts with the most humble of beginnings and in the most unexpected of ways. In fact, God works through the determined faith of a barren woman who endured pain and affliction to usher in a key leader in Israel, Samuel himself, who was pivotal in raising up a king. This story brings to light an important principle of God's grace and love: **He delights in helping us depend solely on Him**, since, as John Piper has stated, "*God is most glorified in us when we*

¹ A.W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy* (New York: HarperCollins, 1978), 1.

are most satisfied in Him.” God’s tendency is to make our total inability His starting point to accomplish His work in and through us. We see this thoroughly in the story of Hannah.

Painful Position by God in Dark Days (1:1-8)

The passage begins by introducing us to three people, each of whom shared a situation of anxiety and affliction. **Elkanah** was most likely a decently well off man who came from a largely unknown town. Though he came from the tribe of Levi, that is not highlighted in the text. He was a no one from nowhere. He was a pious man, however, since during a day when “*everyone did what was right in his own eyes*” (Judges 21:25), he led his family to worship annually at Shiloh, a place where the Tabernacle was located. But the story does not focus on this man, as he takes the place of a supporting actor on the periphery. The story shines a light on **Hannah**, Elkanah’s first wife, who had to contend with affliction, much of it caused by Elkanah’s second wife **Penninah**. Hannah’s life was filled with anxiety, tears, bitterness, provocation, irritation, and vexation. She was put into a position NOT of her choosing that created a great amount of angst, and we will see God was directly the source of keeping her there. What was the source of her pain?

- **The sting of barrenness** – Infertility is hard in every culture. One of the God given gifts in marriage is pro-creation, and one the great joys of womanhood is becoming a mother. The Bakker family, like so many others, has felt this sting for several years in our newly married stage, watching friends being blessed with children as we lived in the tension of being happy for them while feeling the throbbing pain of sadness. In Hannah’s culture, there was an even greater sense of harshness in the inability to produce children. Hannah knew the Scripture, that God promised the blessing of children to Israel in obedience (Deut. 7:14; 28:4) and cursed Israel without for disobedience (Deut. 28:18). *Was God punishing her? Where was He? Why would He withhold something good and promised to her?* Perhaps you have not felt the sting of barrenness, but have felt the pain of having something out of your control, that you did not ask for nor earn, but had to live with effects in your life, be it joblessness, cancer, or children who do not love the Lord. Hannah’s story is common to all in this broken world where our dream and expectations are dashed leaving us troubled in spirit.
- **A well meaning but emotionally inept husband** – We’re not trying to paint Elkanah in the worst of lights, but he definitely was not a source of comfort or encouragement to Hannah. It is clear that he loved Hannah, even loved her more than Peninnah (1:4, 5). But though he loved her, he chose to marry another, creating perpetual tension in his house. The Bible NEVER condones polygamy, but tolerates it. In every case, going against God’s commands and taking more than He intended creates turmoil. Even his words were no comfort. In her sadness of infertility, he said “*Why is your heart sad? Am I not more to you than ten sons?*” A better statement would have been “*You, Hannah, are worth more to me than 10 sons*”, but his actions actually betrayed that thought. He gave Hannah a double portion of the sacrificed meat, but that only exasperated the situation among his *other* family. Hannah did not find solace in her husband, but only more angst.
- **Relentless social pressure** – Though Hannah did not have social media in her day, she could not get away from the pressure of reminders day in and day out of her condition. Hannah’s name means “*gracious*”, while Peninnah’s name meant “*prolific*”, a name she certainly lived up to. To be fair to Peninnah, she knew she was second fiddle in the marriage, much like Leah in Genesis 30. But out of her scorn, she took out her lack of love on Hannah, berating, belittling, and passively and overtly making her feel terrible in her infertility. Note the descriptions: *rival*,

provoke grievously, and irritate her. This would have been relentless, and Hannah could not get away from the words nor visual reminders of her plight. So her home was not a place of refuge but a place of torment.

- **A seemingly unresponsive God** – It is clear that Hannah was a woman who knew and believed the promises of God, and sought the Lord in prayer. But God felt miles away and His answer was seemingly negative, or worse, nothing at all. But there is a phrase stated twice in this narrative that blows the roof off our minds: ***the LORD had closed her womb.*** ***What??!!!!?*** It is one thing if God simply did not allow her to GET pregnant, it is quite another if HE WAS THE ONE WITHHOLDING. The One she was praying to was the one creating the roadblock in her life! What was she to think of this, or what are we supposed to think of this?

God is in control of all things, and when He withholds, says no, or says “not yet”, it is because He is DOING something in our life. In fact, God has used infertility multiple times in Scripture (Sarah – Gen. 11:30; Rebekah – Gen. 25:20-21, 26; Rachel – Gen. 29:31-30:24; Elizabeth – Luke 1:5-25) to accomplish great things. We are ok with the language of “allowance”, but these phrases are more difficult for us to process and swallow. It stirs up the “why” questions in our mind and heart. *Why wouldn’t He give me a child? Why doesn’t He provide the job? Why won’t He rid me of cancer?* We know He can, so when He doesn’t, it feels incongruous to His love. But what Hannah learned, as we do today, God always does everything according to His will and glory (Psalm 115:1-3) and our ultimate good. He tends to bring us to the brink of ourselves so that all we have left is to trust Him, depend desperately on Him, and in this, we are truly in a position for joyful worship and as useful vessels for His glory.

Perpetual Pursuit of God in Dark Days (1:9-18)

Now, having a proper understanding of God’s sovereignty makes joy and worship possible, but in no way does it make it easy! Put yourself in Hannah’s position and what emotions, thoughts and feelings would be going through your head? Frustration, bitterness, anger, depression, anxiety, and sadness to name a few? When we feel this way, we often act out of these feelings rather than the truth. We turn to artificial substitutes that numb our pain and turn away from the true solutions given by a sovereign God. In other words, Hannah turning to alcohol, adultery or divorce would not be surprising. Giving up on prayer, worship, or God altogether would not be shocking. The potential of her becoming a woman addicted to her sin, bitter and frustrated, angry and mean toward others was high, maybe even understandable. But here is where Hannah becomes a clarion example, because in the midst of terribly difficult circumstances, she engaged in **perpetual pursuit of her God**.

- **Desperate prayer for distressed faith** – There are a few principles that we see in Hannah’s remarkable prayer and pursuit of God. **First, her prayer was littered with tears.** Her prayer was not formulaic but was full of truth and emotion, of trust and anxiety. She wept bitterly, was troubled in her spirit, and poured out her soul before the Lord. This is far removed from the sanitized prayers that we pray in public or before a meal. Her tears, just like ours, are not too big for God to handle or deal with. David cried out to God through tears, ***“Every night I flood my bed with tears; I drench my couch with my weeping. My eye wastes away because of grief; it grows weak because of all my foes. Depart from me, all you workers of evil, for the LORD has heard the sound of my weeping. The LORD has heard my plea; the LORD accepts my prayer.”*** (Psalm 6:6-9). Isn’t this wonderful? God wants to hear our plea, He hears our tears, and understands our emotions! We can tell Him our complaint and troubles (Ps. 142:2) and He does not shun us or look at his watch.

Second, she prayed in faith even when God seemed distant – Notice that she stated her affliction and then revealed her feelings, “*remember me and do not forget your servant*”. Have you ever felt that way in your prayer, that your words go no higher than the ceiling before bouncing back? Now, if we ask wrongly for God to give us things to spend on our own passions (James 4:3), God won’t answer those and they should bounce back. But when we pray according to His will and STILL get an answer of “no” or “wait”, it could cause us to give up. But Hannah trusted the source, and continued to cry out to the Lord faithfully, relentlessly, and in this, she did not lose heart (Luke 18:1).

Third, she vowed to the Lord in prayer – Look at verse 11 and the conditional vow she made. Vows are made in Scripture and are freewill, meaning we don’t have to, but God expects us to pay if we make a vow (Ecclesiastes 5:4-5). Each time we commit to honor or obey God in prayer or in song, we are making a vow, a promise to Him. We make vows on our wedding day to promise to love and be faithful to the one we are marrying. Here, she prayed specifically for a son, and vowed to give him back to the Lord if God delivered. Now, this can easily sound like a *quid pro quo* prayer, holding something back from God unless He delivers the way WE want Him to. But this was a prayer of faith. It was not a demand but an offering. It was an acknowledgement that having a child was NOT the greatest or highest point in life, since she was willing to GIVE UP THAT son for the sake of the Lord. Many have made vows in foxholes they did not intend nor think through the implications of keeping. Hannah made a vow she considered and willingly followed.

- **Turning to God consistently even when people (even those who know better) let you down** – When Hannah came into the Tabernacle she expected to find empathy and compassion, and instead found an out of touch priest named Eli (we’ll come back to him in a few weeks). As she’s pouring out her heart, he sees her and concludes that she must be **drunk**, perhaps knowing her plight and seeing her lips move without words coming out. Here was another case where Hannah did not and could not find solace in places like her marriage, home, and even a place of worship like one would have expected. Sometimes the deepest wounds are by those we love the most or those from whom we expect the most. Here, instead of encouragement she found herself in a position to defend herself. After hearing her explanation, Eli was able to salvage a bit of wise encouragement, in offering her peace and the hope that God would grant her the prayer of her heart.

At the end of this section there is a simple yet profound phrase: “*she went her way and ate, and her face was no longer sad.*” Did this mean that she was no longer in distress or sadness in her circumstance and situation? By no means. But it does illustrate this point. When we bear our soul to the Lord, making known our deepest fears and harshest thoughts to the one who never changes, it allows us to move forward in a sense of peace, rest, and joy. I’ve often wondered how one ever deals with life WITHOUT the knowledge of a good and sovereign God, and even the thought leaves me anxious. But sometimes we can act like *practical atheists*, passively ignoring God or turning elsewhere in our distress, and we miss out of the grace He lavishes and extends to all who come before His throne (Heb. 4:16). God is the answer to the longing of our soul, and Jesus is the means to get us there.

Persistent Promises of God in Dark Days (1:19-28)

A book about a monarchy and rule by kings did not start with royalty or the people asking for a king, but an infertile woman pleading with God for a son that would be dedicated to the Lord. God displays His power, authority, and ultimate rule by using the weak of the world to accomplish the glorious. This last section begins and ends with **worship**, as Hannah and Elkanah worshipped before leaving for home, and

ends with her son Samuel worshipping at Shiloh. In between is the gracious end of this story which is the beginning of an establishment of greatness in Israel. The text emphasizes the fact that God was the object behind the birth of Samuel, as it is stated that **“the LORD remembered her.”** God acted in accordance with His character, power, and in response to her prayer. It is exactly how He works in us today. There are two principle points to take away in this section:

- **Paying our vows expresses faith and thankfulness** – How many times have people prayed in a vow to the Lord, only to ‘forget’ later on: get me through this situation, and I’ll _____! I can imagine that Hannah could have been tempted to hold onto her child even after God delivered on His part. Instead, Hannah was faithful to her vow and kept her son for 3 years until he was weaned off of her milk and returned him to the Lord in Shiloh. Three years is enough time to get attached, to wane in one’s commitment and to play the justification game. But Hannah was determined to fulfill her end, where she would give Samuel to the Lord’s service and have him **“dwell there forever”** (1:22). Paying our vows, no matter how hard they are, expresses faith in God’s promises, thankfulness in His gifts, and the fact that HE IS GREATER THAN ANYTHING He actually offers us. Think of each song that we sing as we gather together, each commitment that we make. When we fulfill these we are declaring that there is greater joy in obedience than in anything else, and that God is treasured high above others.
- **Children are a wonderful gift, and a terrible idol** – The chapter closes with her explanation to Eli back in the Tabernacle three years after her interaction with him, this time with a young son in tow. She said, *“For this child I prayed, and the LORD granted me my petition that I made to him. Therefore I have lent (in dedication) him to the LORD. As long as he lives, he is lent (in dedication) to the LORD.”* Again, Hannah willingly did what is so difficult – she gave what was most precious to her back to the Lord. This is perhaps one of the best and clearest views of parenting that we have in Scripture. Children are a gift or heritage from the Lord (Ps. 127:3), gifts of His grace that we do not deserve nor earn. We are tasked with the responsibility of training up our children to leave, to follow the Lord, and to live for His glory (Eph. 6:4; 1 Tim. 3:14-16). But ultimately our children are NOT our own, but are dedicated to the Lord, knowing that they are the Lord’s. We have a short amount of time and responsibility to give them what is most important, to love them with a view to leave, and to hold them with a consistent open hand. Failure to do this means our kids become idols, taking up a wrong place in our life where we are unwilling to do the loving and truthful things with them that they need. This is the pathway to a child-centered home, parents doing everything FOR their kids rather than equipping them to do hard things and prepare for a life of service. The first few chapters of 1 Samuel line up with a great amount of irony, comparing Hannah’s parenting with Eli’s, as the priest raised two self-centered, abusive, wicked sons who were not restrained or disciplined by their father, ending all of their lives in righteous judgment and tragedy.

Hannah’s life exemplified a deep understanding of God’s greatness, love, and grace. Even when it did not make sense or when life revealed the bitterness and affliction in her heart, she clung intimately to her God. This is the solution to every circumstance that is out of our control, that we cannot fix or solve on our own. This is consistent with the Psalms. I leave you with a Psalm of David, a Psalm that expresses emotion and angst but ends in trust:

“How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I take counsel in my soul and have sorrow in my heart all the day? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me? Consider and answer me, O LORD my God; light up my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of

*death, lest my enemy say, 'I have prevailed over him,' lest my foes rejoice because I am shaken. **But I have trusted in your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation. I will sing to the LORD, because he has dealt bountifully with me.***

Because God is sovereign, we can sing when it hurts. We can rejoice in sorrow. We can move forward in sadness. That is why we need deep theology for dark days, and why what we think about God is the most important thing about us.