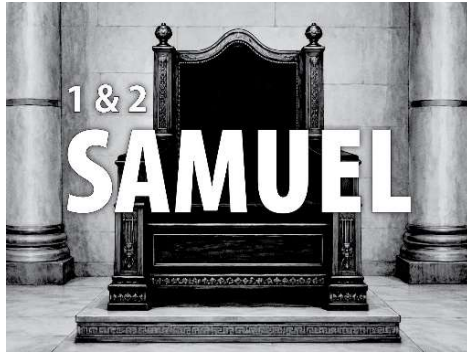




## Part 1 – Hannah’s Hope

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### 1 Samuel 1:1-8

The books of 1 and 2 Samuel are remarkable among ancient writing not least of all for the absence of monsters and demigods that populate ancient myths. The books of Samuel are profoundly human. Indeed the account begins not with kings or battles or royal intrigue but with the heartbreak of barren Hannah.

The books of Samuel belong to the category of Old Testament historical narrative. They are not epic poetry like the *Odyssey*.

Nor do they bear any of the hallmarks of mythological writing. We will find no cyclops or sirens here. In these books we will read genealogies, records of military personnel, government records, and the accounts of battles won and lost. But the vast majority of the books of Samuel are given to the accounts of particular individuals as they traverse family drama, fear, jealousy, marriages, births, violence, friendship, betrayal, and loyalty. Most significantly we will trace the handiwork of God as he preserves the righteous line promised in Genesis 3:15.

The books of Samuel, therefore, tell the story of God’s dealings with his people. The primary figures are Samuel (prophet/judge), Saul (Israel’s first king), and David (forerunner of the royal Messiah). Certainly we will learn powerful lessons about integrity, loyalty, failure, and the madness of sin. But we will also learn about the enduring grace of God in preserving the line that will bring the Savior King into the world. And that brings us back to Hannah with what appeared for years to be her hopeless barrenness. As he does so often for his people, God turns despair into hope and hope into fulfillment.

### ***Crisis and Chaos***

Written about 1,000 years before the birth of Jesus, the books of Samuel record events as the time of the Judges comes to a close and the era of the kings is inaugurated. These were days of crisis and chaos for Israel. The Hebrews had been formally constituted as a nation at Sinai under the leadership of Moses. God made a covenant with his people by delivering them from captivity in Egypt and giving them his moral law (the 10 Commandments). They were to be his holy nation.

In the years that followed, the people existed as tribal communities loosely organized across the land. They failed to heed God’s command to rid the land of pagans and their wicked practices. Instead, the people lived in a cycle of sinful rebellion against the Lord. When their sin would reach levels that threatened their survival, the Lord would send invaders to attack his people and bring them under discipline. As his people repented and cried out for mercy he would send a judge, a mighty leader, to deliver them from the hands of their enemies. But the people continued in their cycle of sin. The Book of Judges ends with these ominous words: “In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes” (Judges 21:25). This is the world into which Samuel, Saul, and David take their place.

### ***“A certain man”***

One would expect that the Books of Samuel would begin in a way that captures the great themes and echoes the historic urgency facing the people of Israel at that time. After all, these books are a record of great prophets and kings, of wars and kingdoms, of national politics and redemptive history. So it is striking that the writer begins his account with these simple words: “There was a certain man of Ramathaim-zophim...”

**Vs. 1** – We know almost nothing about Elkanah except for the few details given in this passage. “A certain man,” is not the way one would introduce a particularly important person. In fact, Elkanah was not especially significant from what we can tell. Though he seemed to have had some means, he was probably not rich in any way that would have attracted much notice (he only had two wives after all!).

Elkanah was from Ramathaim-zophim which was a small town belonging to the region of Ephraim, named for one of the twelve sons of Joseph. The region of Ephraim was just north of Jerusalem and was home to Bethel and Shiloh. Though Elkanah was living in Ephraim, he traced his lineage through “Elihu, son of Tohu, son of Zuph, an *Ephrathite*.” That little detail will later resonate with great significance. Of course, we

remember Elkanah because through his once barren wife Hannah, he became the father of the Judge/Prophet Samuel who would announce and anoint Israel's greatest king. Many generations later, a once barren woman Elizabeth would give birth to a son who would announce and baptize the Son of God.

### ***Worshipping at Shilo***

**Vs. 3** – Much like other details in this brief account, it is significant that Elkanah worshipped the Lord as a regular pattern. When so much of Israel had turned to pagan gods and adopted ungodly practices, Elkanah continued in a regular pattern of faithfulness to the Lord. It is an indication that he was a pious man. His worship involved sacrifices which the Lord had prescribed for his people. Moreover, Shilo was home to the tabernacle which would later be replaced by the temple in Jerusalem. So in Elkanah's day those who worshipped at Shiloh did so in the presence of the ark of the covenant. The ark was the means God used to dwell among his people. It was where the high priest would make annual offerings of atonement for the sins of God's people.

Why was the offering of sacrifices at the heart of the people's worship? The Levitical sacrificial system was put in place in part to tutor the people in their need of atonement. They were sinners and God was holy which presented a massive dilemma. How do sinful people have access to and fellowship with a God who is holy? The sacrifices pointed the way ahead and gave the people a glimpse of what the Messiah would do on their behalf. This was especially true of those blood sacrifices which were meant to address their sin.

### ***"He had two wives"***

**Vv. 2-8** – "The name of the one was Hannah..." – It was not uncommon at that time (even as it is in certain regions of the world to this day) for men of means to take more than one wife. In some cases this was a way that wealthy men boasted in their prosperity. For Elkanah, the reason for taking a second wife (Peninnah) was almost certainly because his first and favored wife Hannah could not conceive. It is important to be reminded that the Bible does not prescribe everything it describes. And while this practice of polygamy violated God's design, the Lord nevertheless bore with the ignorance of his people patiently in those days (Acs 17:30). His choice to take a second wife, notwithstanding, Elkanah is depicted as an honorable and pious man (**vs. 3**).

The situation in Elkanah's household reflects the wisdom of God's design for marriage as being between one man and one woman. As one commentator notes, "Polygamy always causes family conflict, but much more certainly when one wife receives affection and the other receives children."<sup>1</sup> The writer tells us that Peninnah, whose name means something along the lines of "fruitful" or "productive" (talk about adding insult to injury!) was cruel to Hannah. Even on their trips to Shiloh to worship the Lord, the "overly fertile, mouthy, thorn"<sup>2</sup> in Hanah's flesh could not resist the opportunities to mock her as Elkanah divvied up the tokens of sacrifice to Peninah's many "sons and daughters" (**vs. 4**). This cruelty persisted for years (who knows how many children Peninah bore for Elkanah?) and so often manifested at the place of worship precisely because it gave Peninah the opportunity to assemble all of her children in Hannah's sight (**vs. 7**). One wonders how often Hannah heard the questions of Peninah's children, "Why doesn't Hannah have any children?"

As important as Elkanah is as the father of Samuel, Hannah, whose name means *grace*, is the primary focus. One commentator 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."<sup>3</sup> At particular times in redemptive history, the Lord used the experience of barren women to produce remarkable moments of hope. We think of Sarah whose years of childlessness would come to an end with the remarkable birth of Isaac. Or what of barren Rebekah, the wife of Isaac, who would later give birth to twins? There was also Rachel, Jacob's wife. She suffered through childlessness and bore the reproach of her sister Leah. But the Lord had not forgotten Rachel who conceived and gave birth to Joseph, Jacob's greatest son, along with Benjamin the beloved. In the New Testament we are told of Elizabeth, who after years of waiting gave birth to a son named John who would announce the arrival of the Messiah.

These examples are not meant to teach us that God will cause all women who bear the sorrow of childlessness to suddenly begin conceiving sons and daughters. Rather, those accounts repeat a theme

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Phillips, *1 Samuel*, REC (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2012) p. 10

<sup>2</sup> Dale Ralph Davis, *1 Samuel*, FOTB (Scotland: Christian Focus, 2000) p. 12

<sup>3</sup> William G. Blaikie, quoted in Phillips, p. 10

Covenant Presbyterian Church  
September 13, 2026

deeply anchored in God's Word that the Lord saves his people not by our willing or merit but wholly by his power and might. God opened barren wombs in order to preserve the righteous seed (Gen. 3:15) and that, entirely by grace. And this is precisely the way that he saves his people to this day. He brings life to lifeless hearts. He grants repentance to hardened hearts. He brings salvation to the condemned.

***Does God care?***

That Hannah's sorrow seemed especially acute in the place of worship (vs. 7) seems particularly poignant. A place where the practices are specifically designed to produce comfort and hope can, for those who feel singled out in their sorrow, be an especially sorrowful location. The practices of the sanctuary were designed to cause worshipers to look up and see the deliverance of the Lord. And yet for Hannah, what she felt was not deliverance but loss. At a time when the inability to conceive was often seen as the Lord's disfavor, the practices of worship assuring her of the Lord's favor almost certainly felt like a contradiction.

And yet the Scriptures call us to evaluate our sorrows and our sufferings in an entirely different light. The writer reminds us in this passage of the Lord's sovereignty. It was the Lord the who closed Hannah's womb (**vs. 5**) but, as we will come to find out, it was not a punishment nor a sign of the Lord's disfavor. Indeed, the Lord had a purpose that far surpassed Hannah's ability to grasp during her years of bitter sorrow.

"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."<sup>4</sup>

**Vs. 1** – "...an Ephrathite." – Neither Elkanah nor his son Samuel were Ephraimites though they lived in that region north of Jerusalem. The region of Ephraim would eventually be among the northern tribes swept away by the fearsome Assyrians. By lineage, Elkanah was an Ephrathite. *Ephratha* was an ancient place named for Bethlehem, which was in the southern region of Judah, the town of David, and the birthplace of the Messiah.

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<sup>4</sup> Davis, p. 13