

Focal Text

1 Samuel 1:1—2:1a

Background

1 Samuel 1:1—2:10

Main Idea

God brings hope and joy in circumstances that seem hopeless and joyless.

Question to Explore

What would be required for you to have greater hope for the future?

Study Aim

To describe how God brought hope to Hannah and Israel and identify ways in which our hope for the future could be increased

Study and Action Emphases

- Affirm the Bible as our authoritative guide for life and ministry
- Develop a growing, vibrant faith
- Include all God's family in decision-making and service
- Value all people as created in the image of God
- Encourage healthy families

LESSON ONE

Hope from Despair

Quick Read

God gave Hannah future hope by answering her passionate prayer for a son, and God gave Israel future hope when Hannah kept her precious promise and returned Samuel to God.



1 AND 2 SAMUEL: *Following God in Changing Times*

As a child growing up at First Baptist Church, Eldorado, Texas, I listened to Creola Phelps tell wonderful Bible stories. Creola, or “Crayola” as we called her, painted vivid word pictures. She described Hannah crying and praying for a baby. Creola told us how God answered Hannah’s prayer with the birth of Samuel and how she gave her young son to Eli to be a special helper to the priest and to God.

Looking back, I remember two impressions—the value of children and the power of prayer. In fact, I thought that was the way a family got children. What I don’t remember was any mention of Elkanah’s other wife, Peninnah. Creola didn’t talk about plural marriages.

Little did I know that years later polygamy would be talked about in my home town when in early 2004 a sect of the reportedly polygamous Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints moved to a nearby ranch. Although polygamy is illegal in the United States, I once again thought about the practice and contemplated the problems. I reviewed the Bible stories of men who took more than one wife and recognized how polygamy complicated family life. The husband inevitably favored one woman over another, and the relationships created disharmony. Such is the story of Elkanah, Hannah, Peninnah, and Samuel.

1 Samuel 1:1–28

¹There was a certain man from Ramathaim, a Zuphite from the hill country of Ephraim, whose name was Elkanah son of Jeroham, the son of Elihu, the son of Tohu, the son of Zuph, an Ephraimite. ²He had two wives; one was called Hannah and the other Peninnah. Peninnah had children, but Hannah had none.

³Year after year this man went up from his town to worship and sacrifice to the LORD Almighty at Shiloh, where Hophni and Phinehas, the two sons of Eli, were priests of the LORD. ⁴Whenever the day came for Elkanah to sacrifice, he would give portions of the meat to his wife Peninnah and to all her sons and daughters. ⁵But to Hannah he gave a double portion because he loved her, and the LORD had closed her womb. ⁶And because the LORD had closed her womb, her rival kept provoking her in order to irritate her. ⁷This went on year after year. Whenever Hannah went up to the house of the LORD, her rival provoked her till she wept and would not eat. ⁸Elkanah her husband would say to her, “Hannah, why are you weeping? Why don’t you eat? Why are you downhearted? Don’t I mean more to you than ten sons?”

⁹Once when they had finished eating and drinking in Shiloh, Hannah stood up. Now Eli the priest was sitting on a chair by the doorpost of the LORD's temple. ¹⁰In bitterness of soul Hannah wept much and prayed to the LORD. ¹¹And she made a vow, saying, "O LORD Almighty, if you will only look upon your servant's misery and remember me, and not forget your servant but give her a son, then I will give him to the LORD for all the days of his life, and no razor will ever be used on his head."

¹²As she kept on praying to the LORD, Eli observed her mouth. ¹³Hannah was praying in her heart, and her lips were moving but her voice was not heard. Eli thought she was drunk ¹⁴and said to her, "How long will you keep on getting drunk? Get rid of your wine."

¹⁵"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. ¹⁶Do not take your servant for a wicked woman; I have been praying here out of my great anguish and grief."

¹⁷Eli answered, "Go in peace, and may the God of Israel grant you what you have asked of him."

¹⁸She said, "May your servant find favor in your eyes." Then she went her way and ate something, and her face was no longer downcast.

¹⁹Early the next morning they arose and worshiped before the LORD and then went back to their home at Ramah. Elkanah lay with Hannah his wife, and the LORD remembered her. ²⁰So in the course of time Hannah conceived and gave birth to a son. She named him Samuel, saying, "Because I asked the LORD for him."

²¹When the man Elkanah went up with all his family to offer the annual sacrifice to the LORD and to fulfill his vow, ²²Hannah did not go. She said to her husband, "After the boy is weaned, I will take him and present him before the LORD, and he will live there always."

²³"Do what seems best to you," Elkanah her husband told her. "Stay here until you have weaned him; only may the LORD make good his word." So the woman stayed at home and nursed her son until she had weaned him.

²⁴After he was weaned, she took the boy with her, young as he was, along with a three-year-old bull, an ephah of flour and a skin of wine, and brought him to the house of the LORD at Shiloh. ²⁵When they had slaughtered the bull, they brought the boy to Eli, ²⁶and she said to him, "As surely as you live, my lord, I am the woman who stood here beside you praying to the LORD. ²⁷I prayed for this child, and the LORD has granted me what I asked of him. ²⁸So now I give him to the LORD. For his whole life he will be given over to the LORD." And he worshiped the LORD there.

1 Samuel 2:1a

¹Then Hannah prayed and said:
“My heart rejoices in the LORD;
in the LORD my horn is lifted high.

Painful Portrait: The Favorite But Not Favored Wife (1:1–8)

The story begins during the time described in Judges 21:25, “In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit.” Everyone doing as “he saw fit” led to chaos and confusion.

In that setting, we meet Elkanah from Ramathaim in the hill country of Ephraim. We know little about Elkanah from Scripture except his tribe and his ancestry through four generations (1 Samuel 1:1).

The Bible mentions that Elkanah had two wives—Hannah, who had no sons or daughters, and Peninnah, who had children (1 Sam. 1:2). When a

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woman did not have any children or in some cases only daughters, her husband might exercise his authority and take a second wife. The Bible writer lists Hannah first, and her name means *grace, favor, charming, or attractive*. Most likely, Elkanah wed her first, but

when she did not bear children, he married Peninnah, which may mean *fertile or prolific*.

In Old Testament patriarchal society, a woman gained value and prestige primarily through marriage and her ability to produce heirs, preferably sons. The male head of the family held all power. A bride moved in with her groom’s family, and property passed to sons. Everyone rejoiced in the birth of a baby boy. The birth of a baby girl, particularly a firstborn, wasn’t greeted so enthusiastically. Even for ceremonial cleansing, purification took twice as long after a female’s birth than a male’s (Leviticus 12).

In addition to what we know from Scripture, we can make several inferences. We assume that Elkanah was dedicated to Yahweh because he vowed to travel annually with his family to Shiloh for special worship (1:3, 21). We can also presume reasonable wealth to afford the journey and an animal.

Part of the worship involved a sacrifice. The sacrifice became a source of conflict between Elkanah's two wives. Elkanah gave a single portion of meat to Peninnah and each of her children (1:4). However, he generously provided Hannah "a double portion because he loved her, and the Lord had closed her womb" (1:5). The Bible doesn't explain why "the Lord had closed" Hannah's womb. Certainly, Scripture gives no indication of any judgment against her. Hannah had apparently done no wrong, and yet her religious community believed that if she had no children, God was punishing her.

Whether out of jealousy of her husband's greater love for Hannah or because he favored Hannah with extra meat, Peninnah constantly taunted Hannah about her childlessness (1:6). Peninnah understood the plight and agony of a woman without children and chose to hurt Hannah in the most painful part of her heart. Hannah's inability to have children would have been difficult enough without Peninnah, but the rival wife "provoked her till she wept and would not eat" (1:7).

Elkanah tried to comfort Hannah by asking (1:8), "Don't I mean more to you than ten sons?" Of course, Hannah's unspoken answer was *no*. Elkanah didn't understand. He really couldn't. He had children. She had none. He had sons. She had none. He had worth in society's eyes. She had none. He had wealth. She had none. If Elkanah died, Hannah had few options as a childless widow. She would become virtually destitute.

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Passionate Prayer: Not Drunk, Just Desperate (1:9–18)

Our younger son developed bacterial spinal meningitis shortly before his four-month birthday. My husband John and I prayed our most passionate prayers as Michael lay near death in the intensive care unit. God answered when Michael lived and suffered only minor effects. We teased him when he graduated from Baylor University with his master's degree, reminding him how smart he would have been had he not contracted the brain infection. These twenty-five years later, the weeks in the hospital remain a blur. In my mind, though, I can replay conversations with friends who visited or called and the desperation of other families in the ICU waiting room—one in particular of a mother driving the car during an accident

in which her newly married daughter became a paraplegic. During those days a friend who lost a son to leukemia reminded me that the only thing worse than losing a child would be never having had him at all. Hannah knew the agony of never having had a child at all. She felt helpless and hopeless. Life offered no joy.

This particular year after Elkanah's family finished eating the sacrificial meat, Hannah slipped away and went to the worship center where the priest Eli sat near the entrance (1:9). From the depth of her heart and the misery of her soul, Hannah sobbed inconsolably as she took her hurt to the Lord (1:10). Was this the first time Hannah prayed for a child? Probably not.

. . . God would use their son to bring hope, not only to Hannah but also to the people of Israel.

She likely talked to God every time Elkanah took her to Shiloh and many times in between.

This time we know she made a vow to God. In her prayer, she first acknowledged Yahweh's greatness by addressing him as "O Lord Almighty" (1:11). *The Message* translation of the Bible indicates she called him, "God-of-the-Angel-Armies" (1:10). Hannah then expressed her dire

God Still Answers Prayer and Brings Hope from Despair

When Archie Jones was reappointed and his bride Caroline appointed as missionaries to Chile, Archie spoke fluent Spanish, but Caroline knew not one Spanish word. During their first two-and-one-half-hour worship service in Puerto Montt in Chile, the new missionary understood nothing except that each time someone prayed, they mentioned Caroline and Archie.

After the service, Margarita Coli wrapped Caroline in a huge hug. Archie translated as the woman tearfully explained that the Joneses were "living, breathing answers to her prayers." More than twenty-two years earlier when the church began in her home, Margarita started praying daily that God would send missionaries to live and work there. They had finally arrived.

Too, God answered Caroline's prayers about language study through Margarita, an elementary teacher. Margarita assured Caroline that she had been praying for her most of her life and would surely take care of the novice missionary's language study. God equipped Margarita herself for the task of teaching Caroline using elementary textbooks—not only "the language of the angels" but also about her country and its people.

desperation and her deep desire. She promised that if God gave her a son, she would give him back for the Lord's service in a special way, and "no razor will ever be used on his head" (1:11). By choosing those words, Hannah made a Nazirite vow for her son. In the Book of Numbers, God set out the rules for the specific "vow of separation to the Lord as a Nazirite" (Numbers 6:2). Although usually for a period of time, the vow could be for a lifetime. A Nazirite could not drink wine or any fermented drink or eat anything "from the grapevine, not even the seeds or skins" (Num. 6:3–4). He could not cut his hair, go near a dead body, or become "ceremonially unclean" even if a parent or sibling died (Num. 6:5–7). One of the most notable Nazirites in Scripture is Samson. When God's angel informed Manoah's childless wife she would have a son, the angel told her to set him apart as a Nazirite, and she did (Judges 13). Later, the breaking of Samson's Nazirite vow led to his downfall (Judg. 16).

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Hannah prayed fervently but silently. However, she moved her lips as she sobbed. Eli judged hastily and pronounced Hannah drunk (1 Sam. 1:12–13). He severely chastised the despairing woman, "How long will you keep on getting drunk? Get rid of your wine" (1:14). Hannah responded with sincere honesty. No, she had not been drinking. If anything, she was drunk with despair as she poured out her soul's misery to the Lord in prayer (1:15–16).

Eli didn't ask Hannah about her prayer. Perhaps he suspected her need because he had seen Elkanah bring his growing family year after year to Shiloh, first just Hannah and then Peninnah and her increasing brood of sons and daughters. Eli certainly didn't know the vow Hannah made, but he responded to her anguish, her passion, and her faith. The priest blessed her request, "Go in peace, and may the God of Israel grant you what you have asked of him" (1:17). Hannah left with such confidence Yahweh would give her a son that she ate and her expression changed (1:18).

Precious Promises: The Dual-Edged Sword (1:19–28)

As our children grew, John and I tried not to make too many promises, but we did promise to attend as many of Marshall, Michael, and Holly's

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activities as we could. When the boys played Little League baseball on different teams at different complexes, John and I often found ourselves dividing our loyalties—a parent with each child. However, one

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evening Marshall and Michael played at the same time on adjacent fields. From neither set of bleachers could we view both games, but when we stood in the grassy area between the two outfield fences, we managed to see both diamonds. However,

our necks moved like oscillating fans when Marshall and Michael stepped into their respective batter's boxes at the exact same moment. Even though they're now all twenty-something, we still try to keep our promise to be present for special moments. Keeping promises as a parent isn't always easy, but for Hannah keeping her parental promise was a dual-edged sword.

The day following Hannah's prayer and blessing from Eli, the family worshiped one more time and then returned home (1:19). Within a few months, God "remembered" Hannah, and she became pregnant. Before Elkanah's next trip to Shiloh, Hannah gave birth to a baby boy she named Samuel, "Because I asked the Lord for him" (1:20).

When the time came to return to Shiloh, Hannah decided not to go with Elkanah on his pilgrimage. She explained her vow to her husband, telling him, "After the boy is weaned, I will take him and present him before the Lord, and he will live there always" (1:21–22). In the patriarchal society in which they lived, Elkanah had the power to cancel Hannah's vow (Num. 30:6–15). But he chose not to, perhaps because he had other sons or perhaps because he understood the greater purpose for his son to be used by God. Elkanah answered, "Stay here until you have weaned him; only may the Lord make good his word" (1 Sam. 1:23a). Whether Elkanah knew it or not, God would use their son to bring hope, not only to Hannah but also to the people of Israel.

Just imagine Hannah's thoughts as she "stayed at home and nursed her son until she had weaned him" (1:23b). She had about three years to rock Samuel, talk to him, teach him, and instill her great love in him. Those must have been bittersweet days as the new mother joyfully thanked God for the grace she received and as she made plans to return that grace to the Lord.

Finally, Hannah made the annual trip with Elkanah. She took Samuel " . . . and brought him to the house of the Lord at Shiloh" (1:24). They

also brought significant sacrifices—“a three-year-old bull, an ephah of flour and a skin of wine” (1:24).

Once they made the sacrifice, Hannah and Elkanah took Samuel to Eli. Hannah reminded the priest of their earlier encounter when she prayed for a son (1:26). She showed him Samuel and offered her response to God’s gift, “For his whole life he will be given over to the Lord” (1:28). They all immediately worshiped Yahweh.

Perfect Praise: The Words of a Proud Parent (2:1–10)

Birth announcements occasionally arrive in our mailbox but more frequently today in my e-mail inbox. Sometime ago one came from Fuling, China. Proud parents Cheryl and Rich Gochis announced the arrival of baby Hannah into their family. Her thick black hair, beautiful dark

Prayer in Scripture: Who, What, When, Where, Why, and How?

- Who should pray?
“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28).
 - For what should we pray?
“. . . In everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God” (Philippians 4:6).
“. . . Your will be done” (Matt. 6:10).
 - When should we pray?
“Pray continually” (1 Thessalonians 5:17).
 - Where should we pray?
“But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. . . .” (Matt. 6:6).
 - Why should we pray?
“If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer” (Matt. 21:22).
 - How should we pray?
As Jesus taught his disciples in Luke 11:1–13 and prayed himself in John 17.
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almond eyes, and four gleaming teeth contrasted with the coloring of her mom, dad, and two big brothers. Several months later, John and I

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attended a special service for Hannah. As with their sons Andrew and Jacob, Cheryl and Rich dedicated their daughter to God. They explained that Andrew helped choose the name Hannah for their adopted child, and they desired that she become a woman of prayer like Hannah in the Bible. Then the

Gochis family, along with grandparents, aunt, uncle, and friends, praised God for his precious gift. The biblical Hannah praised Yahweh for his precious gift, too.

In her joyful song, Hannah glorified the source of all joy—the Lord. In a prayer reminiscent of Mary’s *Magnificat* in Luke 1:46–55, Hannah worshiped as her “heart rejoices in the Lord” (1 Sam. 2:1). She celebrated the One with all holiness, all strength, and all power. She exalted the Lord who cares for those who have been in need like herself (2:2–9).

But Hannah didn’t just sing of her own joy. Like Mary, she sang of a nation’s joy in the coming king, singing, “He will give strength to his king and exalt the horn of his anointed” (2:10). Hannah’s hope from despair became Israel’s hope from despair. When God answered Hannah’s prayer for a son and she kept her promise to dedicate Samuel to him, Yahweh began taking Israel from disorder to order. He set in motion the events that would end the chaos of the judges and lead to the great monarchy of King David.

Too, as the Lord often does, he chose an unlikely candidate for his blessing. The world saw a miserable, barren, worthless woman. God saw a person of passionate prayer, willing to keep her promise whatever the cost. God saw a woman in despair and gave her hope and joy. God offers us that same hope and joy today.

