

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?

Teaching Aim

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

UNIT ONE



*Samuel—Delivering
God’s Message*

Lesson One

Hope from Despair

BIBLE COMMENTS

Understanding the Context

The Books of Samuel continue the story told in the Book of Judges. The intervening Book of Ruth simply tells an incident from this time. The Hebrews had settled in their tribal territories as described in the Book of Joshua. However, they had endured a long period of challenges to their possession of the land of Canaan as told in the stories of the “judges”—regional leaders who successfully led the Hebrews to defend their right to the land. Now a more serious threat appeared on the horizon—the Philistines.

It is an over-simplification but probably helpful to summarize as follows. In the time we are considering—the early days that the Hebrews were in the land of Canaan—two groups were trying to take and hold the land. These groups were the Hebrews and the Philistines. The Hebrews arrived first and were more numerous. The Philistines arrived a bit later. They were fewer in number, but they had a vastly superior organization. The Philistines settled in five city-states (Ashdod, Ashkelon, Ekron, Gaza, and Gath), each with its own ruler but bound together in a close alliance. In addition the Philistines had superior weapons. The Philistines

had moved into the Iron Age, while the Hebrews had only bronze. It is thus understandable that the Philistines could quickly seem dominant. They would become the most serious threat to the Hebrew possession of the land until the appearance of the Assyrian Empire, which would arrive on the scene in the eighth century B.C. The events in 1 Samuel probably happened about 1100–1000 B.C.

The books we call 1 and 2 Samuel were originally a single “book.” Remember that the *codex* form (which we call *books*) had not yet been invented. Writing was on scrolls. Since scrolls had to be rolled from one end to the other, the length of a conveniently manageable scroll was relatively short. However, since Hebrew used no written vowels, all of 1 and 2 Samuel would fit on a single scroll. When the Bible was translated into Greek, the written vowels took more space, and all of Samuel would not fit on a single scroll. So Samuel was divided into 1 and 2 Samuel.

Actually all of Samuel and Kings make up a continuing story. All are written from the same perspective. We usually call this perspective *deuteronomic theology*, meaning that the covenant made in the wilderness between Yahweh and Israel must be honored with faithful obedience in order for the promise of the land of Canaan for a homeland to be a secure and peaceful reality. This theme pervades the entirety of Old Testament history, but it is most noticeable in Samuel and Kings.

The Philistines appear as an oppressing people in the stories of Samson, the last of the “judges.” They will appear again in 1 Samuel 4. We are not told what, if any, connections there were between Samson and Eli. When 1 Samuel opens, Samson is evidently in the past, and Eli, an aging priest, is the national religious leader and as much of a political and military leader as the Hebrews had. He presided over the tabernacle and its ark of the covenant. The tabernacle was situated now in Shiloh, a small settlement in the central hill country of ancient Canaan, some twenty to twenty-five miles north of Jerusalem.

Eli is pictured as a devout and committed worshiper of Yahweh and an able religious leader. The fact that he could not control his two sons, Hophni and Phineas, suggests that he was not the aggressive and strong military-political leader demanded in the crisis created by the more war-like Philistines, and especially so in light of his advancing years.

The beginning of the story in which David would come to the throne to deal decisively with the Philistine crisis occurs when a devout family from the obscure village of Ramathaim in the hill country of Ephraim came to Shiloh to worship according to the family custom.¹

Interpreting the Scriptures

A Devout Family (1:1–8)

1:1–2. Elkanah, of the tribe of Ephraim, was the father and husband. His ancestry is given, but it includes no one otherwise known. He had two wives. Bigamy was more the rule than the exception in the early biblical stories. Peninnah had borne him several children, but Hannah was barren. This fact, though, had not diminished Elkanah’s love for her. However, Peninnah taunted her constantly about her childlessness. Remember that childlessness was considered a curse in biblical times.

1:3–5. Worship of *Yahweh Sabaoth*—the “Lord of hosts”—the Commander in Chief of all of the angelic forces, was a regular part of the life of this family, and it involved all of the family. Shiloh was, for a time, the center of Yahweh worship for the Hebrews. Excavations at the site have uncovered abundant evidence of occupation from this time but no clear evidence of a worship structure. That is in keeping with the biblical text—the tabernacle was a movable worship place, not a temple structure, and would leave few if any remains identifiable by archaeologists.

It is important to note the devotion of Elkanah and his family. They had a regular pattern of worship. We are not told of their day-to-day and week-to-week worship practices, but we can well assume that those who would take the entire family to this worship place annually would be devout in other aspects of worship.

The tabernacle at Shiloh was under the care of Eli and his two sons, Hophni and Phineas, who were priests. Eli had not retired and turned his work over to the two sons, but the sons were active in priestly duties. We learn in a later story that they were dishonest and far from being devout religious leaders (see 1 Samuel 2:12–17).

The sacrifice offered by Elkanah was probably a peace offering, in which part of the animal sacrificed was burned on the altar, part was given to the priests, and the remainder was returned to the worshiper to be eaten as a part of the worship celebration (see Leviticus 3:1–17; 7:11–36). First Samuel 1:4–5 tells of Elkanah’s distribution of portions of the sacrifice returned to him: one to each family member except Hannah, who received a double portion. He loved her even though she had borne no children.

1:6–8. Peninnah regularly subjected childless Hannah to scorn and ridicule. This went on year after year. Hannah was greatly disturbed both

by Peninnah’s taunts and by her own sense of inadequacy as a wife—so much so that she was unable to eat. Her husband’s continual expressions of how much he loved and valued her did little to comfort her and to enable her to deal with the stigma of barrenness.

The Old Testament statement in verse 6, “the Lord had closed her womb,” troubles modern readers. We live in a scientific age in which we have many physical and some psychological answers to questions of childlessness. The Hebrews and their contemporaries had none of these. They lived in what we may call a *theocentric universe*—a God-centered world in which whatever happened or didn’t happen was to be fully explained by divine action. *God did it!*—so they believed and said.

While we must never deny divine involvement and intervention in human affairs, we must guard against blaming everything that happens on God. If you carry this idea of a theocentric world to its ultimate, you might spread a sleeping bag in the middle of an Interstate highway, crawl in it, and say: *If God wills, I’ll have a pleasant night’s sleep.* We must not tempt or challenge God in this way. At the same time, we must never deny God’s power to intervene in our lives in any way God sees fit at any time God sees fit. Our prayer requests to God must always be subject to God’s infinite knowledge and divine will.

Praying for God’s Help (1:9–18)

1:9–11. Hannah took her problem in heartfelt prayer before God. As she prayed, she was obviously in distress and was weeping bitterly. In this great anxiety she made a solemn vow to God: *Give me a male child, and I will devote him back to you.* Her vow included a dedication of the son as a Nazirite for all of his life.

The Nazirite vows are recorded in Numbers 6:1–21, which describes the three basic requirements for a Nazirite: no consumption of wine, “strong drink” (usually this Hebrew term refers to date wine, which was more intoxicating than grape wine), or anything produced by the grape vine; no cutting of hair or beard; and strict avoidance of any contact with the dead. One could be a Nazirite for life or for a specified period of time. Samson and Samuel are the best-known Nazirites in the Old Testament. Most likely the Nazirites were exemplifying and glorifying the more ideal life and times in the wilderness, when the Hebrews were not tempted by the lifestyle and practices they encountered in the land of Canaan—there were no vineyards in the wilderness. The Nazirite vow was certainly not simply a vow of abstinence; rather, it was a vow of dedication to God.

The heartfelt sincerity of Hannah as she prayed to God is obvious. It came from a deeply troubled spirit. Childbearing was considered a necessity for women in the ancient Near East. Some ancient laws of that culture permitted a husband to abandon any wife who did not bear children.

The importance of childbearing is obvious in the earlier stories of the Old Testament. Note particularly Sarah, who felt the need to bear children through her servant, Hagar (Genesis 16), and the childbearing contest between Leah and Rachel (Gen. 29—30). The latter case even involved providing servant girls (Bilhah and Zilpah) to increase the children they could provide for their husband.

The importance of bearing a male child was also significant. Such ideas remain in many parts of the Near East. Go to one of the bedouin living in the region today. Ask how many children he has. His response will be: *I have so many [number] sons*. Daughters don't count! This was probably even more true in Hannah's time. Her life as a second wife and in the view of her contemporaries as a "second-rate" wife was troubling, almost unbearable.

1:12–18. Eli observed Hannah as she, in her great distress, prayed silently and fervently, her lips moving but making no sound. His first response was that she was drunk, having consumed too much wine. He spoke harshly to her. But her heartfelt response assured him that he had misjudged her. He then spoke to her with understanding and comforting words. He joined her in the petition that God would grant her prayer. Thus assured by the man of God, Hannah went back to the family gathering. Her countenance was changed, and she was now at peace—a peace that comes only when our human problems are laid with faith at the throne of the Almighty.

Prayer Answered, Promise Kept (1:19–28)

1:19–20. The petition of Hannah was answered. She conceived and gave birth to a son. "She named him Samuel." This Hebrew name is of uncertain meaning but was explained by Hannah as, "I have asked him of the LORD."

1:21–28. For the next year or two, Hannah remained at home when the family of Elkanah went to Shiloh for their annual pilgrimage. She explained to her husband, *I will wait until the boy has been weaned. Then I will take him and leave him as I promised.* Elkanah was in agreement with her decision. A child normally would, in this time, be weaned at two to

three years of age. When that time came, she took Samuel to Shiloh along with sacrifices. She presented him to God and placed him under the care and tutelage of Eli. She reminded the aging priest and leader of their previous encounter and explained that the child for whom she had prayed was now being “lent” to God for the remainder of his life. We see from 1 Samuel 2:21 that Hannah later had other children—three sons and two daughters.

Hannah’s Song (2:1–10)

The prayer or “song” of Hannah is one of the oldest of the songs or poems in the Hebrew Bible. It is a joyful, exultant song of gratitude and praise to God. He is the source of joy and blessings. God is the Giver of life and the Keeper of God’s people. Many interpreters have noted the similarity between this and the “Song of Mary” (Luke 1:46–55), often suggesting that Hannah’s is a model for Mary’s.

Focusing on the Meaning

Above all else, this passage calls us to recognize and acknowledge that all of our lives are lived under the authority and beneficent grace of an all-powerful God. The world is God’s; we are God’s creation. Life in its fullness can be lived only with this awareness. Here we see expressed some important truths.

Regular worship of God is a valuable pattern for us. The trip to Shiloh was a regular part of the life of this family. We need to set a pattern or patterns for regular worship. Therein we experience the guidance of God in our lives and God’s freely-given blessings.

God hears our prayers sincerely offered to him. He heard Hannah and responded to her plea. Hannah added faith to her prayer. Note how, after her prayer and conversation with Eli, her countenance changed and she could go with a new attitude to face her tormenter, Peninnah.

God expects us to be obedient and to keep the pledges we make to him. I can only imagine the heart-rending difficulty of giving up a child at the tender age of two or three. This Hannah had promised to God, and this is what she did. As we will see in the next lesson, she did not forget Samuel, but she truly “lent” him to God for the rest of his life. God did indeed use him in marvelous ways in leading his people. Never forget that God

is still calling for those who are willing to step out and provide leadership for him. Every generation needs a Samuel or two or maybe more.

God can bring hope, encouragement, and assurance to us even in the face of deep despair and discouragement. Take Hannah as an example. Certainly life today is not as simple as it was in Old Testament times. But we have blessings that Hannah could never have imagined.

Remember that the same God is still in charge of the world and humankind. You can lay your problems and burdens at the feet of the One who has all of the answers, and you can live life trusting in him. Hannah did. Why don't you?

TEACHING PLANS

Teaching Plan—Varied Learning Activities

Connect with Life

1. To build a theme wall for this quarter's study, put a six-foot length of background paper on the focal wall. From construction paper, cut three eight-inch silhouettes (or ovals). Space these across the top and label them "Samuel," "Saul," and "David." From half sheets cut three smaller silhouettes. Add these and label them "Hannah," "Eli," and "Jonathan." The lead characters of 1 Samuel are now in place.

Below the silhouettes write in three-inch letters: "Following God in Changing Times." Under the title, print the quarter's motto: "For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope" (Romans 15:4). On the lower right, put a map of the Old Testament world (available from your church resources or a Christian bookstore). On four sheets of 8 ½" x 11" paper, print the unit and lesson titles. Add Scriptures and dates the lessons are to be studied, and place the sheets on the lower left.

Unit One: Samuel—Delivering God's Message

Hope from Despair
Listen and Tell
Ebenezer Living

2. Enlist a man and a woman to be hidden readers for two monologues. Have them come early to practice their scripts and then remain hidden until time to read (a copy of the scripts is available at www.baptistwaypress.org). You could record the reading in advance and play it at this time.

Hannah: Life can be so hard! Never did I dream that I would have trouble having a baby. All my life I dreamed and planned to be a mother. But the years keep passing, and God sends no baby to my life and my heart.

Elkanah is kind, and he comforts me. I know, though, that he is disappointed. He says, *Don't cry. Am I not worth more to you than ten babies?* Oh, yes, of course he is; but it isn't the same. It doesn't take away the emptiness.

Eli: Feast days are here again, and the pilgrims come and go as always. One of the joys of being God's priest is seeing old friends year after year—tracing the growth and change of the families.

Here comes Elkanah and his brood. Looks like Peninah has another new baby to dedicate this year. But there comes Hannah with empty arms again. The ways of Yahweh are a mystery for sure! Why would God close the womb of one and make the other so fruitful?

3. Lead the class to name the three greatest changes since the beginning of the new millennium. (Suggestions may include such matters as the war on terrorism, the rise of China in world trade, or the influence of cell phones in every arena of life.)

Follow with, *What do you think are the greatest changes we will face in the coming ten years?* Point to the study theme wall and ask, *How could this study of 1 and 2 Samuel help us deal with these changes?*

Read together the motto verse, Romans 15:4. Call on a member to pray that God will give us hope through this study.

Guide Bible Study

4. Invite the group to identify two voices from Samuel's times. Cue the hidden readers for Hannah and Eli at this time. Let listeners guess who the Bible characters are.

5. Invite the class to open their Bibles to 1 Samuel 1:1–8. Ask half to listen for facts about the husband, Elkanah, as the others listen for details about Hannah. After the reading, call for characterizations of these two people. Encourage responses with:

- What causes us to think Elkanah was a good man?
- Was Elkanah aware of the conflict between his wives?

Add information from the *Study Guide*, “Painful Portrait: The Favorite But Not Favored Wife.”

6. Continue the story from 1 Samuel 1:9–18. Ask half to listen for the priest Eli’s reaction to Hannah’s prayer and the other half to note the content of Hannah’s vow. After the reading, hear responses. Then ask:

- How might Eli have handled the situation more sensitively?
- How did Hannah respond to Eli’s misjudgment of her?

7. Summarize 1 Samuel 1:19–28, using information in the *Study Guide* section, “Precious Promises: The Dual-Edged Sword.” Read aloud verses 26–28, on Hannah’s keeping of her vow. Ask:

- Were Hannah’s actions rash and irresponsible? naïve? or brave and full of faith?
- How did Hannah’s sacrifice help shape Israel’s future history?

Encourage Application

8. Lead the group to complete a song of joy using 1 Samuel 2:1–2. Suggest the tune, “Michael, Row the Boat Ashore.” Write these partial lines on a tear sheet and let the group finish them with rhyming words.

I rejoice in God _____ , Alleluia!
He has heard _____ , Alleluia!
There is none _____ , Alleluia!
He is _____ , Alleluia!

Close by singing your new praise song together.

Teaching Plan—Lecture and Questions

Connect with Life

1. Draw a long arrow on a poster board. To the left write, “The Judges”; to the right, “The Monarchy.” Use the *Study Guide* article, “Introducing 1 and 2 Samuel: Following God in Changing Times,” to explain the significant period we will study this quarter. Add these approximate dates to the time arrow as you lecture:

- 1105 B.C.—Samuel is born
- 1020 B.C.—Saul becomes king
- 1000 B.C.—David becomes king

Ask, *Why are times of political transition difficult for people?* (Times of divided loyalties, conflict, changing laws and expectations, the unknown)

2. Add three key phrases to the poster:

- The Former Prophets
- Deuteronomic Historians
- Two Scrolls

Explain these ideas from information in the article in the *Study Guide*, “Introducing 1 and 2 Samuel: Following God in Changing Times” (see also “Understanding the Context” in “Bible Comments” in this *Teaching Guide*).

3. Lead members to find and mark Romans 15:4, noting reasons this study is important to us today. Call on a member to pray that the study will encourage us and give us hope.

Guide Bible Study

4. Invite someone to begin Hannah’s story by reading 1 Samuel 1:1–8 aloud. Encourage the class to listen for what the passage tells us about Hannah, Elkanah, and Peninnah. After the reading:
 - Give background on polygamy from the opening paragraphs of the lesson comments in the *Study Guide*.

- Lead the group to search verses 4–8 for clues to Elkanah’s personality. (See *Study Guide*, “Painful Portrait: The Favorite But Not Favored Wife.”)
 - Ask members to contrast the personalities of Hannah and Peninnah.
 - Suggest ways infertility issues affect today’s families, even with current medical advances in this field.
 - Ask question 5 in the *Study Guide*.
5. Have another person read about Hannah’s prayer in 1 Samuel 1:9–18.
- Lead the group to respond to Hannah’s desperate vow in verse 11. Ask, *Would you have made that kind of bargain with God? What does it show about her heart?*
 - Call attention to the small article, “Prayer in Scripture,” in the *Study Guide*. Walk through each question, asking, *How was this illustrated in Hannah’s life?*

Encourage Application

6. Summarize the rest of the story in 1 Samuel 1:19–28. Read aloud Hannah’s words in verses 27–28.
- Invite listeners to suggest emotions Hannah and Elkanah must have had as they traveled toward Shiloh to give their son into God’s service.
 - Spend time on question 2 in the *Study Guide*, “Have you ever made a promise to God in a desperate time? If so, did you keep your promise? What are some implications of making and keeping promises to God?”
7. Read part of Hannah’s song of praise, 1 Samuel 2:1–2. Close by thanking God for remembering Hannah and Israel with the gift of Samuel. Pray for God’s intervention through godly leaders in our own nation’s future.

NOTES

1. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations in lessons 1–6 and the Easter lesson are from the New Revised Standard Version Bible.