

Going to God with our Grief

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- [0 : 0 0] I'm going to read from God's Word now, and this morning we're starting a new series in 1 Samuel. And so if you're using a Red Church Bible, 1 Samuel can be found on page 271. So it's 271 if you're using a Red Church Bible. So it's 271. 1 Samuel is this book in the Old Testament, closely associated with 2 Samuel. Originally they were all one book, but apparently they ran out of space, so they had to divide it in two. And that's why we have 1 and 2 Samuel. And so we are beginning in 1 Samuel chapter 1 this morning. So 1 Samuel chapter 1, and we're going to read from verse 1 as far as verse 18. 1 Samuel chapter 1, verse 1. There was a certain man from Ramath-aim, a Zupite from the hill country of Ephraim, whose name was Elkanah, son of Jeroham, the son of Elihu, the son of Tohu, the son of Zup, an Ephraimite.
- [1 : 1 8] He had two wives. One was called Hannah and the other Penina. Penina had children, but Hannah had none. Year 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. Whenever the day came for Elkanah to sacrifice, he would give portions of the meat to his wife Penina and to all her sons and daughters. But to Hannah, he gave a double portion because he loved her and the Lord had closed her womb. Because the Lord had closed Hannah's womb, her rival kept provoking her in order to irritate her. This 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. Her husband Elkanah 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? Once when they had finished eating and drinking in Shiloh, Hannah stood up. Now Eli, the priest, was sitting on his chair by the doorpost of the Lord's house.
- [2 : 4 3] In her deep anguish, Hannah prayed to the Lord, weeping bitterly. And she made a vow, saying, As she kept on praying to the Lord, Eli observed her mouth. Hannah was praying in her heart, and her lips were moving, but her voice was not heard. Eli thought she was drunk and said to her, How long are you going to stay drunk? Put away your wine. 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. Eli answered, Go in peace, and may the God of Israel grant you what you have asked of him. She said, May your servant find favor in your eyes.

[4 : 05] Then she went her way and ate something, and her face was no longer downcast. We're going to pause there in our reading, and I'd love for you to keep that open before you as we consider God's word together.

Spurgeon, who is an old preacher from back many years ago, once said this. He said, The mind can descend far lower than the body, for in the mind there are bottomless pits.

The flesh can bear only a certain number of wounds and no more, but the soul can bleed in 10,000 ways and die over and over again each hour.

Now, when Spurgeon was saying that, he wasn't making light of physical suffering, but what he was doing was acknowledging that in our minds and in our hearts, we can have a depth of grief or a depth of turmoil that can seem unceasing, unending.

It seems like it can go on and on and on. Spurgeon himself had first-hand acquaintance with such suffering.

[5 : 20] Seven people had died in the place where Charles Spurgeon was preaching in 1856. In the Royal Surrey Gardens Music Hall, Spurgeon was preaching to thousands of people, and somebody shouted out, Fire!

And of course, this caused a stampede. There was no fire regulation. Seven people died, and Spurgeon was severely traumatized after this incident.

He suffered from depression and what we would call now PTSD, post-traumatic stress disorder, for the rest of his life. So he knew what it was to suffer in his heart, in his mind, in his soul.

And perhaps this morning, you know what it is to grieve and to suffer, maybe as the result of losing a loved one, maybe as the result of depression or a broken relationship, maybe as the result of dreams being shattered, you know what it is to grieve.

It is rarely that you will come across somebody who has encountered no suffering or no significant grief in their lives.

[6 : 34] And so the question that we want to consider and with which 1 Samuel 1 helps us is how do we cope with that? How do we cope with the depth of grief that we sometimes experience as human beings made in the image of God?

Where do we turn? Or more pointedly, how do we find God in the midst of our grief? And as we ask that question, what we see first of all in this reading from 1 Samuel is how there can be deep grief poured into our souls.

There can be deep grief poured into our souls. As the book of 1 Samuel begins, we're given this genealogy in verse 1 of this certain man whose name was Elkanah and he was the son of Jeroham, the son of Elihu, the son of Tohu, the son of Zuth.

And the way it's being set up is that you think that Elkanah is going to be the main character in the story. And in fact, if you're familiar with other parts of the Old Testament, you might think that what we're being introduced to here is a king.

Here is going to be a hero of the story. Here is going to be somebody who is strong and full of courage and power and might in the sense that Hollywood actually often portrays these things.

[8 : 02] But by the end of verse 2, you realize that Elkanah isn't going to be the main character in this story.

In verse 2, we come across this lady called Hannah who was one of Elkanah's two wives. And Hannah, we're told, had no children.

That's where the story settles our minds and our hearts with Hannah who has no children. And for this lady who wanted children, we will see some of the deep upset and grief that this was for Hannah.

It was upsetting enough for Hannah in and of itself, but because of the situation that she is in, there is a deeper layered grief to this.

So there is a contrast between Elkanah being named as the son of, the son of, the son of, the son of, and Hannah having no sons, no children.

[9 : 13] There is a contrast there between Elkanah and Hannah. There is also this circumstance of polygamy where Elkanah has two wives, Hannah and Penina.

Now, this is what happened, and we see it on occasion throughout the Old Testament. We see it on occasion in different parts of our world in the modern day.

But we realized from the outset that this is not the way it was meant to be. God makes it very clear from the beginning it is one man and one woman in lifelong commitment to each other.

And you realize in this story of Elkanah and his two wives how this so complicated things and was inevitably going to cause grief, more grief for Hannah just by virtue of Penina having children and Hannah having none.

This would have provoked Hannah to grief and understandably so. And more than that, Penina deliberately provoked Hannah to grief.

[10 : 25] You see that in verse 6. Her rival, that's Hannah's rival, Penina, kept provoking her in order to irritate her.

And I think that word irritate her is probably very much understating stating what is going on here. Penina continues to rub salt in the wound for Hannah year after year after year so that Hannah is just heartbroken not only over her own situation but also over the heartlessness of Penina who is intentionally hurting her.

Intentionally hurting her. Penina is not a kind person. She's not a godly person. She is not somebody who weeps with those who weep.

And you realize that even though Penina is blessed with children it is not a sign of her godliness that she is blessed in this way.

And we need to pause for a moment and just to reflect on that truth that if we find ourselves in a situation like Penina's where we have something that somebody else doesn't have that they long for that doesn't mean that we are somehow better than them that we are somehow living a better life than them that God is somehow more pleased with us than with them.

[12 : 00] Penina was a cruel person and yet God has given her these children. Blessing is not necessarily a measure of godliness or how close we are to God.

We think of how Jesus says that God sends his rain on the just and the unjust. Blessing is a sign of God's kindness and generosity not necessarily a sign of us living a life that is pleasing to him.

So Penina she is being deliberately hurtful to Hannah and you can see just this layers of grief being poured into Hannah's soul. Penina is deliberately trying to be hurtful.

Elkanah Hannah's husband on the other hand he's trying to be helpful so in verse 4 whenever the day came for Elkanah to sacrifice he would give portions of the meat to his wife Penina and to all her sons and daughters but to Hannah he gave her a double portion because he loved her and what happens is Elkanah is trying to be helpful trying to be kind but actually it just ends up being hurtful for Hannah as well.

Food is not going to heal the hurt that Hannah is feeling and in Elkanah's mind he's thinking I'll just give her double and that will make it up to her somehow but he doesn't at all understand the grief that Hannah is experiencing he just doesn't get it and that becomes clear in verse 8 when he says to her Hannah why are you weeping why don't you eat why are you downhearted he knows the answer to every one of those questions it's because she doesn't have the children that she longs for he knows the answer to every one of those questions but then he asks this last question that shows us a little of his heart don't I mean more to you than ten sons Elkanah somehow manages to make Hannah's hurt about him to put him at the center here

[14 : 29] Elkanah you may be a fine husband but you don't mean more to me than ten sons because you're not a son a son that I long for and would love to have Elkanah somehow makes the solution to Hannah's grief Elkanah focused how can he do this how can he make this about himself and this adds to Hannah's grief in one way you could feel for Elkanah I mean what can he do what can he say that would alleviate the grief of this wife who he loves but perhaps he would have done better if he had realized there's nothing he can do there's nothing he can say that maybe what he should do is simply weep with Hannah in the grief that she's feeling rather than trying to solve this for her and so

Hannah weeps in verse 8 she is weeping in verse 7 she is weeping she is provoked by Penina she is placated by Elkanah and it just goes on year after year after year and you can imagine each year as they go up to Shiloh the anxiety for Hannah building is it a year since we've been there is this happening again is this coming again and maybe there were moments when Penina didn't say anything for a little while and Hannah knew it's just a matter of time before Penina opens her mouth to get the dig in again and maybe there were years where Elkanah didn't say much on the subject and then as he saw Hannah's grief he opens his mouth again and Hannah must be thinking please just don't say it maybe what is most grievous for Hannah in this is this question of where is God where is God in her grief

Hannah had a big view of God she had a big view of God she didn't have a view of God where God winds the universe up like a clock and just lets it go and sees how things will unfold that would be a frightening view of God she had a big view of God and God's name is all over these verses we see the Lord's name in verse 3 we see the Lord in verse 5 we see the Lord in verse 6 we see the Lord in verse 7 we see the Lord in verse 9 we see the Lord in verse 11 we see the Lord in verse 12 but the question for Hannah is where is the Lord in this where is he and maybe most difficult of all for Hannah with this big view of God is that she knows that God is right there in the middle of this that God is the one who knits people together in their mother's wombs and the childlessness that she is experiencing is not an exception to God's providence he tells us that clearly in verse 5 the Lord had closed her womb verse 6 the Lord had closed

Hannah's womb and what's really hard for Hannah is that she has this big view of God but actually that is causing more grief for her that is raising big questions for her why God are you not blessing me with the child that I want why is this continuing year after year after year for Hannah to have a big view of God it will answer some questions but it will raise other questions and so for Hannah as we come across her in the start of this story there is deep grief being poured into her soul from the provocation of Penina from the placating of Elkanah from the childlessness that she is experiencing and from this question where is

God in this why is God not hearing me in this and what we experience in this being the focal point of this story is at least initially an acknowledgement that God sees the broken hearted that God is not distant from them that God is with them in the midst of it we can say at least that much so far but it still begs this question where is Hannah going to turn in her grief she certainly can't turn to Penina she certainly can't turn to Elkanah she is rightly careful with her heart but she is getting a lot of grief poured into her how is she going to cope what we see her doing is she pours out her grief to

[20 : 31] God she pours out her grief to God she uses this phrase in verse 15 I was pouring out my soul to the Lord all that is being poured into her soul she pours out before God it's interesting that Hannah hasn't yet spoken in these verses but in verse nine Hannah is on the move Hannah stands up or it could be translated Hannah arose and who knows whether Elkanah noticed that she had stood up who knows whether Penina noticed that she had stood up maybe nobody noticed that she had stood up but God noticed that she had stood up this is a turning point for Hannah Hannah wants to get to

God she wants to get to the house of the Lord to the temple of God she wants to get to this place where God's presence was made known in a focused way in the Old Testament for Hannah the most important thing in her grief is that she get to God that she pour out her grief before God everyone else had eaten and drank she didn't eat she couldn't eat her mind and her heart were elsewhere she needs to get to God with her grief there's a quote from another quote from Spurgeon about preaching about sermons and he says this or about reading our Bibles he says to a young man don't you know young man that from every town and every village and every hamlet in England this might be actually a different preacher sorry not Spurgeon and every hamlet in England wherever it may be there is a road to

London so from every part of the Bible there is a road towards Jesus and my dear brothers and sisters your business is when you come to the Bible to say what is the road to Christ I have never found a part of the Bible that did not have a road to Christ in it and if I ever did find one I would go over every hedge and ditch but I would get at my master and in a sense that's Hannah's heart in this moment as she arises she needs to get to God in her grief grief and this is not a given it is not always a given that we get to God in our grief sometimes we will sit there eating and drinking with friends and having fun and that's the way we try to deal with our grief and those can be good gifts from

God but we need to get to him with our grief Hannah knew this and part of what draws her to God is knowing that she can be honest with God in a way that she could not be with Penina that she could not be even with Elkanah she is feeling distress!

In verse 10 she is in deep anguish anguish that's what she's feeling this deep anguish as she seeks God sometimes we're told not to trust our feelings and we certainly should weigh them up but you know sometimes we can trust our feelings for Hannah it was entirely appropriate that she should be feeling this deep anguish she was right to feel distressed and she prays that anguish to God she pours that out to God in verse 10 she weeps bitterly before the Lord she sobs before him she is so honest before God in her prayers she doesn't put a brave face in it she doesn't tidy things up she doesn't blow her nose before she prays it's not like she's going into a job interview where she has to present the best version of herself she is deeply distressed and she pours that distress out before

[25 : 21] God she is so honest in her prayers not only is she honest as she pours out her grief before God she is so humble she is so humble in her grief she refers to herself time and time servant if you will only look on your servant and not forget your servant then your servant will give him to the Lord all the days of his life there's this striking humility on the part of Hannah as she approaches God in prayer she knows that she cannot heal her own heart she knows that she is at her limit she knows this deep grief that has brought her to the edge and if anyone if anyone can help her with this it is

God she speaks to God in honesty and in humility you are God and I am not for Hannah like the psalmist she knows that better is one day in his courts than a thousand elsewhere for Hannah like the psalmist she would rather be a door keeper a humble servant in the house of God than dwell in the tents of the wicked Hannah pours out her grief before God with this eagerness and with this honesty and she does it not to make a show in verse 13 Hannah was praying in her heart this was all going on in her heart and her lips were moving but her voice was not heard isn't it an encouragement that as you look at

Hannah's heartfelt prayer that there's no spoken words coming out of her mouth sometimes if you're in a prayer meeting there is silence and sometimes those silences are empty nobody's praying who knows but you know sometimes in a prayer meeting the silences are signs that people are praying deeply in their hearts in a way that they struggle to put words on it's an encouragement when people pray out loud but silence isn't the mark of a bad prayer meeting Hannah is pouring out her soul before God in silence the mark of a good prayer meeting the mark of good prayer is this sense of being heartfelt in it being honest in it being eager to know

God in it Hannah is not doing this for show she's doing it for God she says to God if you will only look if you will only remember if you will not forget if you will give me a son and what you realize is that Hannah is experiencing a communion with God that is so precious that is so rare have you had moments like this with God with this level of honesty with this level of hunger with this level of right emotion Hannah is experiencing something with God here that Elkanah as far as we know never experienced that Paninah as far as we know never experienced that God has drawn

Hannah to himself to experience him in a way that if her life had not been as it was she may never have known him like this we can't plumb the depths for Hannah of why the Lord had closed her womb but we can perhaps suggest that if it had all been easy if it had all been straightforward for Hannah would she have been here with God would she have known God in the way that she knows him as she pours out her grief to him would she have had this profound intimacy with the Lord if she hadn't had the grief it's hard for us to face that but that seems to be the reality here would she have committed her son to the

[30 : 36] Lord if she hadn't so yearned for him she says to God I will give him to the Lord I will give my son to the Lord for all the days of his life and no razor will ever be used in his head which seems strange to us it's a way of Hannah saying he's yours God he's yours God and so amazingly at a personal level Hannah has been brought into this intimacy with God that she may never have known otherwise as she pours out her grief before him but what we're also given is this little glimpse as we begin this book of 1st Samuel this little glimpse that actually God is not going to work through the powerful and the great through the kings or the presidents that he's going to work through this one otherwise overlooked lady pouring out her soul in grief before him what this story is like if you realize if you short circuit it a little bit and you know who Hannah's son is going to be he is

Samuel he is the one who the book is named after and it's as though we are looking through this little crack in the wall and seeing this beautiful landscape rolling hills trees flowers birds all representing God's promises through this small little opening where Hannah is pouring out her soul before God that God is going to do something far greater through Hannah's grief than even she realized to paraphrase one author hopeless and desperate as the case appeared for God's people at that time there was a praying woman and where there's a praying woman there is always hope and so Hannah pours out her grief before the Lord and you think okay we're good to go everything's going to be fine everything's going to be peachy for Hannah and the very first thing that happens is she gets accused of drunkenness by a priest in the house of the Lord she's still misunderstood in verse 14

Eli says to her how long are you going to stay drunk put away your wine and she's suddenly torn down from this spiritual high to being accused in this totally baseless accusation and if we could learn anything from Eli it is this don't judge by appearances give people the benefit of the doubt keep our mouths shut until we have understood where people are at the hurt we would save others and the embarrassment we would save ourselves if we just paused before casting judgment on somebody amazingly Hannah how graciously she responds to Eli look at what she says not so my Lord Hannah replies she gives him the benefit of the doubt I am a woman who is deeply troubled

I have not been drinking wine or beer she explains it to him 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 and though Eli does not deserve this gracious response from Hannah she graciously explains what is going on to him and he is given a glimpse into a deep God glorifying spirituality that perhaps he never would have known otherwise and she invites him to do what he is supposed to be doing which is representing God to the people to reflect God to her which thankfully in this moment he seems to do in verse 17 as he says go in peace and may the God of Israel grant you what you have asked of him and so Hannah pours out her grief to God she earnestly seeks

God in the temple of the Lord in this honest humble God seeking way and we can learn from her we can learn from her no matter how deep the grief that has been poured into our souls throughout the course of our lives we can learn from Hannah in pouring out our grief before the Lord we don't need to go to the temple of God where is the temple for us Jesus says that he is going to have the temple taken down and rebuilt in three days and when he says that people are confused but he's speaking about his body he's speaking about himself and in what Jesus has done on the cross he has made the way open to God in a way that Hannah would have had her breath taken away you mean you can just approach the throne of God's grace and in this singularity of Jesus what he has done is open the way so that the Holy

[36 : 21] Spirit is poured out onto his people in an unprecedented way so that his people individually and together are the temple of God so that we can eagerly pursue God because he indwells us and he dwells with his people we can approach him with honesty and humility in a way that Hannah would have been amazed at and yet we can learn from Hannah and how she poured out her grief before the Lord let's just think briefly about the aftermath of this prayer of Hannah's is it going to make everything fine is it going to make everything okay well what we do see for Hannah is that God pours his peace into her heart that God pours his peace into our hearts you know the outcome for Hannah which describes for us

Hannah's answer to prayer where she does receive the son that she prays for but before we jump to that we don't want to short circuit this because the first answer to prayer that Hannah receives is that God pours his peace into her heart in verse 17 go in peace Eli says may the God of Israel grant you what you have asked and verse 18 may your servant find favor so that by the time she does go her way in verse 18 she eats something and her face was no longer downcast this isn't a quick fix for Hannah this has gone on for years but in this moment she experiences this peace of God that surpasses understanding she experiences the favor of God in a way that is beautiful and

God glorifying she will continue to experience life in this world with all its ups! and downs but God has given her this profound peace and favor that means that she can face what life will bring Hannah has this play on words where the name Hannah means favored and then she says may your servant be favored may Hannah be Hannah she can eat again she is no longer weeping she has left it with the Lord and it's not that everything is perfect it's not that everything is right but there has been substantial peace poured into the soul of Hannah in a way that it pushes out the grief that she has experienced to some extent she has experienced the Lord in a way that Penina Elkanah Eli haven't she has experienced the

Lord in a way that reminds us of Gethsemane this heartfelt grievous prayer before the Father where Jesus in honesty and humility cries out to God what we see in Jesus is not just one who bears our sins but one who bears our sorrows one who bears our griefs we sing that Jesus had no tears for his own griefs but sweat drops of blood for mine and when we sing that I need to take a deep breath because of course Jesus had tears for his own griefs Father take this cup from me but what the hymn is trying to convey is the fact that he went to the cross for us he went to the cross to bear our sorrows he entered into our suffering and heartache he is with us in it he weeps at the tomb of his friend and he will one day wipe away all our tears to grieve at times we will continue to weep at times but to know the

Lord in the midst of it will give us a peace and a favor like no other I was speaking to a friend of mine recently and he had lost a loved one and he had lost this loved one from his life all too young and I asked him how are you doing in your grief it had been a few years since this person had passed away and I had seen a little bit of the journey that he had been on but he turned to me and said no I'm doing okay I'm doing okay and what he meant by that was of course he will continue to grieve the one that he had lost but that he had known God's healing God's peace God's favor in a way that gave him real ballast that brought real favor that meant he could eat again that meant he could sleep again that as he poured out his grief to

[41 : 56] God God poured a peace into his soul that can be found nowhere else Hannah's story is an invitation to us it is an invitation to us when we experience grief being poured into our soul and we cannot cope it is an invitation for us to pour out our grief to God and over time to receive the peace that he will pour in it's not instant it's not a quick fix it's a process but it is real it is substantial and one day it will be perfect and so we will pray now and we will ask God to help us as we grieve father we thank you for the honesty of this passage that we have read we thank you that you are a big God carefully in control of all things and yet Lord that causes us to question at times and so father we pray that you would help us in whatever grief we are facing whatever troubles we are facing whatever afflictions we are facing whatever anguish we are facing to be able to pour out our souls before you with honesty with humility with a commitment to you and

Lord that in so doing we would experience your peace as you pour it into our hearts Amen