

...to bring down and raise up

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[0 : 00] So our first reading this morning is from the book of 1 Samuel, starting at chapter 1, which can be found on page 271, and this reading will be the whole of chapter 1.

So 1 Samuel, starting from verse 1. There was a certain man of Ramathaim-Zophim, of the hill country of Ephraim, whose name was Elkanah, the son of Jeroham, son of Elu, son of Toyu, son of Zuth, an Erathrathite.

He had two wives. The name of one was Hannah, and the name of the other was Peninnah. And Peninnah had children, but Hannah had no children. Now this man used to go up year by year from his city to worship and to sacrifice to the Lord of hosts at Shiloh, where the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were priests of the Lord.

On the day when Elkanah sacrificed, he would give portions to Peninnah, his wife, and to her sons and daughters. But to Hannah he gave a double portion, because he loved her, though the Lord had closed her womb.

And her rival used to provoke her grievously to irritate her, because the Lord had closed her womb. So it went on year by year. As often as she went up to the house of the Lord, she used to provoke her.

[1 : 14] Therefore Hannah wept and would not eat. And Elkanah, her husband, said to her, Hannah, why do you weep? And why do you not eat? And why is your heart sad? Am I not more to you than ten sons?

After they had eaten and drunk in Shiloh, Hannah rose. Now Eli the priest was sitting on the seat beside the doorpost of the temple of the Lord. She was deeply distressed and prayed to the Lord and wept bitterly.

And she vowed a vow and said, O Lord of hosts, if you will indeed look on the affliction of your servant and remember me and not forget your servant, but will give your servant a son, then I will give him to the Lord all the days of his life, and no razor shall touch his head.

And she continued praying before the Lord. Eli observed her mouth. Hannah was speaking in her heart, only her lips moved and her voice was not heard. Therefore Eli took her to be a drunken woman.

And Eli said to her, How long will you go on being drunk? Put away your wine from you. But Hannah answered, No, my Lord, I am a woman troubled in spirit. I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink, but I have been pouring out my soul before the Lord.

[2 : 21] Do not regard your servant as a worthless woman, for all along I have been speaking out of my great anxiety and vexation. Then Eli answered, Go in peace, and the God of Israel grant your petition that you have made to him.

And she said, Let your servant find favour in your eyes. Then the woman went on her way and ate, and her face was no longer sad. They rose early in the morning and worshipped before the Lord. Then they went back to the house at Ramah, and Elkanah knew Hannah, his wife. And the Lord remembered her, and in due time Hannah conceived and bore a son. And she called his name Samuel, for she said, I have asked for him from the Lord.

The man Elkanah and all his house went up to offer to the Lord the yearly sacrifice, and to pay his vow. But Hannah did not go up, for she said to her husband, As soon as the child is weaned, I will bring him, so that he may appear in the presence of the Lord, and dwell there forever.

Elkanah, her husband, said to her, Do what seems best to you. Wait until you have weaned him. Only may the Lord establish his word. So the woman remained, and nursed her son until she weaned him.

[3 : 28] And when she had weaned him, she took him up with her, along with a three-year-old bull, an ephah of flower, and a skin of wine. And she brought him to the house of the Lord at Shiloh. And the child was young.

Then they slaughtered the bull, and they brought the child to Eli. And she said, Oh my Lord, as you live my Lord, I am the woman who is standing here in your presence, praying to the Lord.

For this child I prayed, and the Lord has granted me my petition that I made to him. Therefore, I have lent him to the Lord. As long as he lives, he is lent to the Lord, and he worshipped the Lord there.

So our second reading this morning can be found on page 272, 1 Samuel chapter 2, starting at verse 1, all the way through to verse 10. And Hannah prayed and said, My heart exalts in the Lord, my strength is exalted in the Lord.

My mouth derives my enemies, because I rejoice in your salvation. There is none holy like the Lord. There is none besides you. There is no rock like our God.

[4 : 30] Talk no more so very proudly. Let not arrogance come from your mouth, for the Lord is a God of knowledge, and by him actions are weighed. The bows of mighty are broken, and the feeble bind on strength.

Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread, but those who are hungry have ceased to hunger. The baron has born seven, but she who has many children is forlorn. The Lord kills and brings to life.

He brings down to Sheol and raises up. The Lord makes poor and makes rich. He makes low and he exalts. He raises up the poor from the dust. He lifts the needy from the ash heap to make them sit with princes and to inherit a seat of honour.

For the pillars of the earth are the Lord's, and on them he has set the world. He will guard the feet of the faithful ones, but the wicked shall be cut off in darkness, for not by might shall a man prevail.

The adversaries of the Lord shall be broken to pieces. Against them he will thunder in heaven. The Lord will judge the ends of the earth. He will give strength to his king and exalt the power of his anointed.

[5 : 35] Thank you, Kevin, for reading. And good morning, everyone. We're commencing a short series of studies in the opening chapters of 1 Samuel, which we're looking at over the summer holiday.

And it's under this general theme of God steps in. Today's talk is the first in this series, and we're looking at the entire passage that we've had read to us.

So please keep your Bibles open at page 271. And as Simon's already mentioned, an outline of the talk that I'm going to be giving is on the back of the service sheet.

The Radio 4 programme Desert Island Discs, that's been running since 1942, has a very simple format. A guest, normally some sort of celebrity or an influential person, chooses eight pieces of music that they would like to have with them on a desert island, along with a book and a luxury. It's something you might like to do yourself sometime, to decide which pieces of music sum up your life, either in terms of the people you know and love, the events you've experienced, or perhaps your attitude to life.

[7 : 06] Recently, a list of the most popular choices was produced. And it's very interesting that in the non-classical selections, the Edith Piaf song, Non, je ne regrette rien, which translates as, No, I'm not sorry for anything, was top.

This was followed by Frank Sinatra's, I did it my way. Curiously, third was Noel Coward's, Mad Dogs and Englishmen.

These choices reveal an attitude of arrogant defiance, and they sum up in many ways the prevailing view of our time, where individual rights and freedoms are seen as sacrosanct.

And it seems that no one has the right to tell anyone else what to do. Even in the church, we see an increasing number of people rebelling against the clear teaching of the Bible.

It therefore raises the question of who's in charge of your life. Well, in this series, we're going to see the sovereign God taking control of the lives of his people.

[8 : 28] In this case, the nation of Israel. However, in order to understand what is happening, we need to see what state that nation is in as this book opens.

Please, therefore, turn back a few pages, past the book of Ruth, to the final chapter of the book of Judges. That's chapter 21.

And when you've found that, please look at the very last verse, where we read that in those days there was no king in Israel.

Everyone did what was right in his own eyes. So the time we're looking at here is not so different from our own time today.

So the book of 1 Samuel starts where the book of Judges leaves off. And it opens with Israel at a very low point in its history. Remember, these are God's people.

[9 : 43] The promised heirs of Abraham who were delivered by God from Egyptian slavery and given by God a land flowing in milk and honey.

But who have, in effect, rejected this Saviour God and gone their own way. There is no king in Israel.

Everyone's doing what is right in their own eyes. God was meant to be their king. However, they'd rejected his rule and were making up their own rules.

And it stemmed right down from top to bottom. From the priests and leaders, and we'll hear more about that next week, to the ordinary people.

And where is God in all of this? It seems as if he's just left them to themselves and to the prey of their enemies, which at this time were the Philistines.

[10 : 46] And to be honest, that's exactly the problem. Recently, we've been working our way through Paul's letter to the Romans. In the opening chapter, we read of God's anger being revealed against sin and human wickedness.

Now, when we hear of God's anger, we tend to think of fire and brimstone, perhaps of God zapping people in some way. However, in Romans, we read of a far more chilling revelation of God's anger. Repeatedly, in the second half of the first chapter, we find the phrase, God gave them up. God gave them up. God gave them up.

God gives them up to the lifestyle they want. And in so doing, the people sow the seeds of their own self-destruction.

And it's the same for the nation of Israel here. God has left them to themselves and the outcome is horrific. And if you don't, believe me, take an opportunity to read through the final chapters of the book of Judges to see what a mess God's people, and I repeat, God's people, can get themselves into.

[12 : 07] However, God is not only a God who judges, as we've heard this morning, he is also a God who is merciful. And in 1 Samuel, we see him acting to turn back his people to himself, and in so doing, he's going to further his purposes in the world.

And these, as we've seen from our last two Sundays, looking at the end of Romans 8, these are to bring his people into a glorious kingdom.

However, we've also seen that the journey to this kingdom lies along the path of suffering. So we're going to see that above all, God is sovereign, and that although his people may have thought they have deposed him, that is far from the case.

These first couple of chapters in 1 Samuel can almost be thought of as an overture. Often, in operas or musicals, West End shows, they start with an overture, where all the main themes and tunes of the show are played, in brief, as a precursor to the main story.

Well, here in 1 Samuel 2, chapters 1 and 2, we have an overture to the whole book. It's a scene set within a humble Jewish home, and it's as if God wants to show his global purposes being played out on a domestic stage through this woman, Hannah.

[13 : 45] What we shall see is that in God's sovereign purpose, in order to raise up a person, or indeed to exalt a nation, then first he must bring that person or those people to a lowly state.

He must humble them, and he does this through both adversity and opposition. Let's now look at the first of these points, that the sovereign God brings low.

As we see from the opening two verses of chapter 1, Hannah is married to Elkanah, a respectable man who lives in the hill country of Ephraim. However, Elkanah has another wife, Penina, and there's the rub.

Penina has children, Hannah has none. Now, I don't know if there are any women here who have had to deal with infertility, or who may be experiencing such difficulties now, but I know what a miserable and unbearable state it is.

However, in Hannah's case, there is an important detail that we must not overlook. So, if you look down to verse 5 in chapter 1, you will see that the reason for Hannah's infertility is due to God's

direct intervention in preventing her from having children.

[15 : 13] And here is an indication, therefore, that God has a purpose in the life of Hannah. he has brought this adversity into her life for a reason. However, it is not only adversity that Hannah has to face, but she also has to deal with opposition, in particular from wife number 2, Penina.

We see this in verse 6, where we read that her rival used to provoke her grievously to irritate her. her. And it's all too easy to imagine, isn't it?

The smug look while breastfeeding. The news over a meal that another baby is on the way. The dig at Hannah's failure as a wife.

It would be unbearable. But look again at verse 6, and you see that this irritating behavior of Penina's is also linked to God's purpose in Hannah's life. Her rival used to provoke her grievously to irritate her because the Lord has closed her womb.

The writer seems to want to emphasize the point that all this suffering that Hannah is experiencing is directly due to God. Now it's important to say at this point that we're not told that this was due to any sin or wrongdoing in Hannah's life.

[16 : 31] We should not therefore see this as a punishment. There may well be women or couples present this morning who are longing for a child and who can identify with the pain and suffering that Hannah felt.

You may therefore feel that like Hannah God has deliberately closed your womb. However childlessness which may be temporary or permanent does happen to quite a substantial number of people.

But what we have here is something special. Here God is using Hannah's childless state to bring about his grand purposes in the lives of his people.

We see a similar example in John's gospel where Jesus and his disciples pass a blind man and his disciples ask him whether the man's blindness was due to his own sin or to his parents.

And in reply Jesus says, neither, rather he, that is this man, is blind so that the works of God might be displayed in him. Of course in this case the work of God is for Jesus to heal the man and thereby display who he is and to provide a powerful illustration that Jesus brings sight to the spiritually blind.

[17 : 43] So, in a similar way, Hannah's barren state has a spiritual purpose. Nevertheless, it is a tough providence that appears to run counter to what we think a loving God should do.

However, in order to make sense of it, we need to see the bigger picture. The desperate state of Hannah's life is nothing compared to the desperate state of God's people, Israel.

And the time is coming for God to act. Matters come to a head in the Elkanah household when once again the family are on an outing to Shiloh to worship God, something they did every year, as we see in verse 3.

Whilst there, they have a family meal. And, as usual, Panina takes the opportunity to have a dig at Hannah. And Hannah now is so miserable that she's crying her eyes out and refusing to eat.

Into this cauldron of emotion steps Elkanah, who does, if we're honest, what we men are so good at in these situations. In trying to make things better, we end up making them worse.

[18 : 52] So we read in verse 8, he says, Hannah, why do you weep? And why do you not eat? And why is your heart sad? Of course, that's an immediate giveaway. He doesn't have a clue what seems to be going on with the two women.

And then his piece de resistance is to add the words of comfort, am I not more to you than ten sons? At this point, Hannah is brought to a place so low that in desperation she goes to the temple. And weeping bitterly, she prays this remarkable prayer. Reading from verse 11, she vows, O Lord of hosts, if you will indeed look on the affliction of your servant and remember me and not forget your servant, but will give your servant a son, then I will give him to the Lord all the days of his life, and no razor shall touch his head.

Now let's be clear, this is not a bargain with God, for she has nothing to bargain with. All she says is that if you, Lord, will give me the child I've so longed for, in return, out of gratitude, I will give him back to you.

It's a remarkable prayer. However, as if to add insult to injury, Eli, who is the priest in charge of the temple, sees Hannah silently praying and mistakes her for being drunk.

[20 : 14] He goes up to her as she's praying and says, how long will you go on being drunk? Put away your wine from you. But Hannah replies, no, my loves, I am a woman troubled in spirit.

I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink. I have been pouring out my soul before the Lord. Do not regard your servant as a worthless woman. For all along I have been speaking out of my great anxiety and vexation.

Here is Hannah at her lowest point. She has poured out everything, her soul, her being. She is dry. She has nothing left.

Let's pause at this point and let me ask you, have you ever been brought to this point in your life where you are so low and to a state of such desperate humility that all you can do is pour out your soul, your very being to God?

If you have, then take heart. For our God, the God of this book, the Bible, as we see shortly, hears such prayers because he is a God who resists the proud but gives grace to the humble.

[21 : 33] And so we come to the turning point in the passage. Eli, realising his error, now says to her, go in peace and may the God of Israel grant your petition that you have made to him.

She has called upon the name of the Lord for her salvation and has received the response, go in peace. May the God of Israel grant your petition. And in faith, she leaves it in his hands.

She replies to Eli, let your servant find favour in your eyes. And then she goes back, has a meal and is no longer sad. She has poured out her soul to the Lord and is content to leave it there.

So having seen Hannah brought to such a low state, let us now see secondly how the sovereign God raises her up.

So we'll be looking at verses 1 Samuel 19 through to chapter 2 verse 10. And he does this through hearing the cry of his servant and through his great salvation that he has prepared for his people.

[22 : 40] So in verse 19, the following morning the family worshipped together and then went home, with Hannah a changed person. And in the course of time we read that the Lord, the Lord who'd closed her womb, remembered her.

He remembered the prayer that she'd prayed. He remembered the pain and bitterness that she'd endured. He remembered the longing that she'd had. He remembered the sacrifice she was prepared to make.

He remembered her lowly estate. And he answers. Hannah conceives and gives birth to a son. And she calls him Samuel.

A name that, and if you look down to the bottom of the page on 272, to the footnote, you'll see it means heard of God. And every time she saw him wake up or fed him at her breast, comforted him when he cried, played with him, and then sung him to sleep, every time she said his name over and over again, as we do as parents with our children, every time she said Samuel, she reminded herself that the God of Israel hears.

Jesus, and she was reminded of the vow that she had made, and she kept that vow. Over the course of time, Hannah raises the boy and weans him, and eventually at perhaps the age of four or five, she returns to the temple, to the house of the Lord, and there she again meets Eli and reminds him of that evening a few years ago, where she prayed for a child and that God had granted her request.

[24 : 25] And now in response, she makes good her vow. We read in verse 28, Therefore I have lent him to the Lord. As long as he lives, he is lent to the Lord.

You might think that it would be a moment of great sadness for Hannah to be handing over the son she had so longed for. In fact, far from it.

Instead, we see a woman exulting in God's great salvation as she once again prays. And really this prayer, it's a psalm.

It's a song. It's a song of praise to God. We read it in verses 1 to 10 of chapter 2. It's a prayer about divine deliverance, indeed about God's salvation.

It might seem strange. Surely, what we're talking about here is a barren woman who is now very happy because she has a child. Far from it.

[25 : 30] Hannah sees that what has happened to her is in microcosm, that is, in a small way, representative of what God does and is about to do for his people.

She was in great distress, and God had brought her low, and now God has come to her rescue. But more than that, God's people are in great distress, and they need God to come to their rescue.

Hannah, in her joy, sees this child as an example of the great reversals that God can cause. Look how she prays. Verse 1, my heart exalts in the Lord, my strength is exalted in the Lord.

She's on top of the world, so much so that she can now deride her enemies, the Peninas, and anyone else who scorned her because she was barren. Why? Because she rejoices in the Lord's salvation.

God has rescued her, and who is this Lord? Well, let's look at verse 2, there is none like him, either in strength, or holiness, or wisdom. Verse 3, he knows all things, and he judges them.

[26 : 43] But what this God really likes to do is to turn the tables. She says, look at me, I was this provoked, misunderstood woman. I was a nobody, and look at me now because of what God has done.

And this is just a picture of who this God is. He is the one who breaks the bows of the mighty, but gives strength to the feeble. He is the one who makes those who are fat and full hungry, but those who are hungry full.

He is the one who gives the barren women loads of children, but makes those with many forlorn. He is the one who brings down, but raises up.

He takes the rich and mighty ones and brings them low, but takes the poor and lowly and exalts them. He'll take care of his faithful ones, but he'll cut off the wicked.

The whole prayer is filled with hyperbole, exaggeration, but as she comes to a crescendo in verse 10, we get a glimpse of the prophetic nature of this prayer, of this song of praise, as she states that the adversaries of the Lord shall be broken to pieces.

[27 : 59] Against them he will thunder in heaven. The Lord will judge the ends of the earth, and then that he will give strength to his king and exalt the power of his anointed.

She sees that in some way, in the birth of this child, in the birth of Samuel, that God is going to come to the rescue of his people through a mighty, God-appointed, God-anointed king, which of course is exactly what the book of Samuel is all about.

Hannah's prayer, this song of praise to God, the God who is the great reverser, however, points us to a prayer and a song of praise of another woman, one who was also misunderstood, a young teenage woman, who was pregnant, and yet a virgin.

Turn with me, therefore, to Luke chapter 1, and you'll find it on page 1031 of the church Bible. And let's hear there Mary's joyful song in response to her situation.

We read from verse 46, she says, my soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my savior, for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant.

[29 : 32] For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed, for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name. And his mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.

He has shown strength with his arm. He has scattered the proud in their thoughts. He has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate.

He has filled the hungry with good things and the rich he has sent away empty. He has helped his servant Israel in remembrance of his mercy as he spoke to our fathers to Abraham and to his offspring forever.

You see, Hannah's celebratory prayer of salvation marking the great reversal in her life and also in the life of the nation of Israel points us to another celebratory prayer which marks an even greater reversal one for the entire human race when God's king Jesus comes into the world in order to rescue his people not from their enemies the benighted or the philistines of this world but from the consequences of their sin and for the consequences of our sins.

sins which lie at the root of the greed and the jealousy that causes so much misery in the lives of people and which show us to be rebels against God our maker sins that need to be paid for and can only be paid for by the cruel and brutal death thirty odd years later of the baby Mary carries in her womb.

[31 : 11] Have you ever been brought to the point where like Hannah you have nothing and are nothing before this almighty God? Perhaps you're in the middle of a tough providence and this is where you are you're at your wits end then I urge you call on the name of the Lord like Hannah pour out your soul to the Lord call on his name ask him to deliver you not solely from the situation you're in but for the even greater predicament of being under his judgment for your sins call on the name of Jesus to save you from this and do so may you like Hannah go in peace and may the God of Israel grant your request perhaps you have done this maybe recently perhaps even during this service or maybe many years ago if you have cast your mind back to the time when you in sheer desperation called on the Lord to rescue you and you knew his deliverance in your heart well like

Hannah celebrate that deliverance rejoice in the

Lord and in his salvation worship his anointed king remember the vows that you made to follow him and don't give your child give back your life to him and make good that vow remember that all you have is a gift from God and so as God has been gracious and merciful to you then in response to God's mercies as Paul writes in Romans present your body as a living sacrifice holy and acceptable to God and so in closing let me ask you what discs what songs are you going to take to your desert island or more poignantly to your grave Edith Piaf's defiant je ne regret rien no regrets Frank Sinatra's arrogant I did it my way or instead of that of Samuel Crossman who wrote my song is love unknown my saviour's love to me love to the loveless shown that they might lovely be oh who am I that for my sake my lord should take frail flesh and die or perhaps in the words of our final hymn by Charles Wesley look at verse three on the service sheet come almighty to deliver let us all your grace receive suddenly return and never never more your temple leave you we would be always blessing serve you as your hosts above pray and praise you without ceasing glory in your perfect love or maybe so to the glory of God Amen free out all until you and all come oh big out guy wah indarrassní