

# A Cry, a Prayer, a Vow and an Answer

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[ 0 : 00 ] This is the evening service at Holy Trinity on the 4th of September 2005. The preacher is Paul Barker.

His sermon is entitled, A Cry, A Prayer, A Vow, and An Answer, and is based on 1 Samuel 1-2-11. Amen. Well, sometimes you have to hit rock bottom before things start to improve.

It happens to sporting teams, especially with the incentive of preferential draft picks. It happens to political parties. It happens in personal lives. It happens in national and international affairs as well. Well, sometimes you have to hit rock bottom before things start to improve, and that's doubly the case in 1 Samuel 1-7, as in part we see tonight.

[ 1 : 31 ] Remember the context, and strictly speaking in the Old Testament, the first book of Samuel follows really on from the book of Judges. In the Hebrew way of sorting the books of the Old Testament, the book of Ruth was elsewhere placed.

So what we read or have heard read tonight follows immediately on from the end of the book of Judges. Now, the book of Judges is almost really the low point for Israel, rock bottom.

The book of Judges is not so much a cycle of events as a downward spiral of events. From the high point of Joshua's time with rapid and significant conquest of the land, if you read through the book of Judges, you see a gradual, indeed a steep decline into apostasy and immorality to a nation hitting rock bottom.

For by the end of the book of Judges, the nation of Israel, God's people, is largely apostate, that is, away from worshipping God as it ought. The leadership of the nation is corrupt and immoral.

The character of the judges whom God has raised up through the period of time has gradually got worse and worse so that the last judge, Samson, is a thoroughly compromised person religiously and morally.

[ 2 : 48 ] Not only has the external pressure of other nations been brought to bear on Israel, but its internal cohesion has come unstuck in the last five chapters of the book of Judges.

There remain the external threats, not least from the Philistines, whom we'll see again in a couple of weeks' time. But internally the nation is crumbling and falling apart as well.

It is a spiral into sin, into idolatry, into immorality, into apostasy. And the book of Judges ends with a number of times saying, everyone did what was right in his or her own eyes.

Israel is at rock bottom when we start the first book of Samuel. But so too, as we've heard tonight, is a pious, devout, honourable, noble, religious lady called Hannah.

Far from the immoral and idolatrous Israel, she is a model of devotion to Yahweh, the God of Israel.

[ 3 : 58 ] She, with her husband, whom she loved, and who was loved in return by him, would go with their family year by year to make their sacrifice as instructed in the earlier books of the Old Testament in the Pentateuch.

They would say their prayers. It would be a pilgrimage at this time to a place called Shiloh, at which was the Ark of the Covenant and the tabernacle that would surround that Ark as a sort of semi-portable, temporary temple place of worship.

It was there that the early books of the Old Testament said, you are to go and worship with the sacrifices and other offerings and vows and so on, regularly. And so that's where we read that they go to, in verse 3, to Shiloh.

Later on in Israel's history, but not for another 100 years or so, Jerusalem becomes the focus of that place, when a permanent building or tabernacle is built by Solomon, the third king.

But at this point it's still a tabernacle, maybe semi-permanent in its structure, and it's to Shiloh that they go, as verse 3 firstly tells us. But for all her religious zeal and her piety and devotion, for the honourable character that she seems to be, Hannah is barren.

[ 5 : 24 ] She does not and seems cannot have children. Indeed, we're told at the end of verse 5 that God, the Lord, that is Yahweh, had closed her womb, something that's reiterated at the end of verse 6 as well, because the Lord, Yahweh that is, in capital letters, Lord is Yahweh, the name of God in the Old Testament, had closed her womb.

She's barren. Something that was, no doubt, difficult to cope with, as indeed it is for many women in our own day. And the distress of being barren for her is exacerbated by the fact that her husband's other wife, Peninnah, has many children.

Sons plural, daughters plural, they're described later on. Now we might pause for a minute and think, well, he is a religious man with two wives.

It certainly means that he was relatively well off. Polygamy was not that frequent or common. It's not absolutely prohibited in the Old Testament, but the norm does seem to be one man and one wife, as indeed from Genesis chapter 2.

But there are a number of folk in the Old Testament who have more than one wife, and on every single occasion, there are at least internal family problems. That is, by way of example, through the Old Testament, whether it's Abraham, or Elkanah, or David, or Solomon, always having more than one wife, shows up to be problematic at minimum, at least in the family.

[ 7 : 03 ] And so the consistency of that example, at least, is to warn us away from polygamy, even if there's no absolutely explicit law that a man must have only one wife.

Certainly adultery is prohibited and so on. So that's by way of a little pause to comment on the fact that this man has two wives. And given that they're named in order in verse 2, Hannah and then Peninnah, and Hannah is barren, the suggestion may be that he took a second wife because he couldn't have children with the first wife.

And certainly Peninnah, we're told in verse 2, had children, but Hannah had none. So her distress is accentuated by the fact that her husband has a wife with many children.

Her distress is even further exacerbated by the fact that this other wife, Peninnah, provoked her. So in verse 6, her rival, she's described in verse 6, used to provoke her severely to irritate her because the Lord had closed her womb.

You can imagine the sort of thing. Peninnah saying to one of her many children, have you seen how many children Hannah has? Where are they? All sorts of provocative sorts of things to say, we might expect.

[ 8 : 19 ] So Hannah's distress is exacerbated by the provocation of Peninnah. It's also accentuated at the point of annual worship. At a time when you go up to rejoice before the Lord for the blessings that you've received from Him, she is barren.

And at the high point of their religious cycle annually would be the low point for her, it seems, emotionally. So that instead of rejoicing, which is a command frequently found, for example, in Deuteronomy 12, when it talks about going to the central place of worship and there you shall eat and rejoice and celebrate all that the Lord has done for you, Hannah's barrenness stared her in her face even more acutely than it did for the rest of the year.

And even it seems her loving husband, in verse 8, can't ease the pain. Why do you weep? Why don't you eat? Why is your heart sad? Am I not more to you than ten sons?

Some say his words show as a form of shallowness in his care of her. At least he did care and loved her, it seems. But they are no substitute for the children.

And she shows the hallmarks of depression in her inability to eat as she comes at this sacrificial meal where they would eat and celebrate. Portions are given to her to eat, double portion indeed from her husband.

[ 9 : 44 ] But the loss of appetite is a frequent mark of depression. So year after year this occurred. They would go up to Shiloh and year after year she would find an emotional low point at what should be the religious high point.

Understandably so. And yet throughout all of this, this pious woman never abandoned her faith in Yahweh the God of Israel. So in verse 9 and 10, remember this has been a cycle year after year. We're not sure how many years. We're not even sure now how old she is. But we're told in verse 9 that she rose and presented herself before the Lord. That is she would go into one of the inner sanctuaries of some sort.

Perhaps the one for the women to enter and present herself in the presence of Yahweh. 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 the prayer that she prays at least in summary is given to us in verse 11.

[10:50] It's quite a profound prayer in effect. She prays, O Lord of hosts. A name that is used for God several times in the scriptures firstly in this chapter and earlier on in this chapter as well.

O Lord of hosts is a bit like saying O Lord God Almighty. unity. The hosts being the heavenly hosts or the armies that is used in this title of God to particularly focus on the power of God.

You know we might say O Lord of love for example in a prayer where we want to focus on God's love. This is a prayer focusing on the immense and sovereign power of God. And yet it's a prayer for one woman in the middle of all of the peoples of the world and in the midst of the people of God. Of course the prayer is to Yahweh because he's the one we've earlier been told has closed her womb. If he's closed her womb she's praying to the one who closed it to open it in this prayer. And she prays If only you will look on the misery of your servant and remember me and not forget your servant but will give to your servant a male child.

[12:02] A specific prayer. But not a selfish prayer note for she goes on at the end of this prayer to say Then I will set him before you as a Nazirite until the day of his death.

He shall drink neither wine nor intoxicants and no razor shall touch his head. A Nazirite was somebody who took a particular vow usually for a short period of time for themselves that they would neither drink nor shave their head nor beard as a way of focusing for a particular time of devotion to God.

The instructions for that you find in the book of Numbers earlier in the Old Testament. An example of that is Samson the last of the judges in the book of Judges. As I said before a thoroughly compromised character.

And in some ways the suggestion of another Nazirite is probably to ring slight alarm bells in our minds if we've just read the cycle of all those judges and now here we think not another Nazirite like Samson what a bad character he ended up being.

But what is significant here is that it is the potential mother that is making the Nazirite vow. And it's not temporary but permanent. That is for the whole of his life he will not drink wine or shave his head.

[13:28] Well sometimes we blokes wonder about our mother's interference in our lives. Here perhaps is an extreme example. Hers is not a selfish prayer though because she is going to give him back to the Lord.

Not for herself to keep but as a gift to the Lord. It's not a bribe to God but a vow and promise that is sacrificial and generous.

It is a God honouring prayer not a selfish one. Now Eli doesn't recognise that she is praying. When he observes her mouth because she's praying silently he thinks that she was drunk.

Now that may show the depths to which the devotion and piety of Israel has sunk that the chief of priests can't even recognise somebody who's praying sincerely. Although on the other hand we must also say that in the ancient world and as indeed some modern cultures when people read they often read aloud.

Here is somebody unusually perhaps reading silently. In fact I gather that reading silently is something that's only happened in much more modern times. When I was in China a month or so ago especially those apparently who are reading English would read out loud and indeed once in my class I said I'd like you to just read for yourselves these verses and they all started reading them out loud.

[14:53] It was not quite what I expected and often around the university where I was in China there'd be people walking around with their book reading out loud as part of I guess their normal way of reading. Well here for whatever reason Eli thinks she's drunk.

Of course she's not. Her heart is troubled and at least to Eli's credit he accepts her defence. In verses 15 and 16 Hannah answered in response to him saying put away your wine and so on she says no my lord I am a woman deeply troubled I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink but I've been pouring out my soul before the lord do not regard your servant as a worthless woman for I have been speaking out of my great anxiety and vexation all this time.

This is a woman who's very focused on what she's been doing in praying and Eli to his credit responds by saying go in peace the God of Israel grant the petition you have made to him though it seems that she's not told him what that is.

All she's said is that she's deeply troubled and hence praying. He doesn't know what she's praying for but he sends her away with his priestly blessing that the Lord may answer her prayer and Hannah goes away with confidence that the prayer will be answered.

In verse 18 she said let your servant find favour in your sight and then Hannah here called just the woman went to her quarters she ate and drank now with her husband whereas before she did not eat or drink and her countenance was sad no longer.

[16:31] Here is a woman of faith she is trusting the word of the priest and trusting God who's heard her prayer that he will indeed answer her prayer. A woman of remarkable faith.

And there's a play on words here as well because when she says let your servant find favour in your sight the word for favour in Greek is *hain* like the word Hannah so here is somebody called Hannah who is in a sense saying may I receive *hain* grace or favour is the idea.

Here is somebody you see who models what the writer to the Hebrews exhorts us all to do to draw near to the throne of grace with confidence and you don't need to be a New Testament Christian in effect to have done that for here is someone in the Old Testament before Jesus who's drawn near to the throne of grace with confidence.

So after rejoining the sacrificial meal with her family at Shiloh they rose early in the morning verse 19 says worship before the Lord and then they went back to the house at Ramah a few miles away from Shiloh a bit north of Jerusalem.

Well Hannah's confidence is not misplaced because we're told at the end of verse 19 that Yahweh remembered her. Remember her prayer in verse 11 Yahweh remember your servant and do not forget her and now we're told that Yahweh did exactly that he remembered her.

[18:05] It doesn't mean that Yahweh somehow had forgotten about her and somehow he's you know reading and thinking oh I've got to do something for Hannah not at all. Often in the scriptures we hear that statement the Lord or Yahweh remembers and what it means is that he remembers in effect a promise that he's made and he acts now to keep it.

So in Genesis 8 at the height of the flood God remembers Noah and the rain stops. When Israel is under persecution in Egypt at the beginning of the book of Exodus and they cry out to God for mercy God remembers the covenant that he made with Abraham in Exodus chapter 2 and he acts and he raises up Moses leading to their exodus from Egypt.

Here now God remembers and then we read immediately in verse 20 in due time Hannah conceived and bore a son she named him Samuel for she said I've asked him of the Lord.

Now the doctor might say well here is a woman who having had a priestly blessing goes home and now relaxes and as her body relaxes so she finds she can get pregnant.

The skeptic might say well isn't it a great coincidence? That she's prayed and a little bit later she conceives and has a child. But as an earlier former Archbishop of Canterbury said when you pray coincidences happen.

[19:31] God answers prayer and that's what's going on here. We're actually told that in verse 19 it's Yahweh remembering that leads her to conceiving. Sure she knew her husband Elkanah and they had sexual relations that led to her being conceiving and the child coming but it's God's answer to prayer that is behind what's going on.

So often prayer is a great struggle for Christians. It's certainly one of the greatest struggles I face regularly to pray and commit everything in prayer to God and to rely in prayer on Him.

And I think for many of us we probably experience the same struggle. We like to be competent, we like to be self-sufficient, we like to be in control often as well.

We like to be able to explain things and rationalise things and prayer somehow jars with all of that. But our regular prayer, our prayer should be regular as an expression of our humility and dependence upon God.

Here is a woman who's hit rock bottom and at that place is thoroughly dependent upon God. It ought not to be that we only pray when we get to rock bottom either.

[20:45] Certainly this is urging us to pray to a God of grace and mercy, a God who answers prayers, a God who is the Lord of hosts, sovereign in power.

The next year when it comes around to go back to Shiloh for the annual sacrifice, Hannah declines to go. She says I'm going to wean the child and then I will go. Elkanah accepts that view in verses 21 to 23.

And when the child is weaned, Hannah goes with the family back to Shiloh. Probably that meant the child was four or five years old, a longer weaning period than is current in our culture but that seems to have been what was probable in the days of Hannah in ancient Israelite culture.

And there she goes, we're told in verse 424, she took him up with her along with a three-year-old bull, an ephah of flour and a skin of wine. That's quite a substantial sacrifice, a three-year-old bull would be a very significant and very costly sacrifice for an ancient agricultural society.

Very costly because of what you might have got out of the bull for your own food or own further little bulls, calves. So they're costly offerings but nowhere near as costly as the gift of her son to stay in the temple or the tabernacle with Eli, to there grow up to be some form of servant of God if not priest or prophet to God.

[ 22 : 14 ] She explains to Eli who she is even though it's perhaps four or five years later and she tells him of the vow in effect that she's made. Verse 26, as you live my Lord I'm the woman who is standing here in your presence praying to the Lord for this child I prayed and the Lord has granted me the petition that I made to him therefore I have lent him to the Lord as long as he lives he is given to the Lord.

She left him there for the Lord. We're told earlier on in fact that the name Samuel was given to him in verse 20 we're told that for I have asked him of the Lord and in those verses I just read at the end of chapter 1 four times the idea of asking God has given me what I've asked of him he's given it back and what I ask of him I give or lend the emphasis is on this idea of asking although the word Samuel actually is not the Hebrew word for ask unusually but the idea behind naming him and tying it in with his asking is in effect expressing thankfulness to God for answering what she's asked for in prayer.

well this is a remarkable act of faith to give back her son after waiting years for him you may well expect her to keep him and maybe have other children and give one of them when she's sort of got a surplus to requirements but not at all.

I think there's a challenge here even for parents to be honest. See in my experience most Christian mothers and Christian fathers are actually quite reluctant to see their children in Christian ministry let alone those who are unbelieving parents of believers who want to be in Christian ministry.

Well this Nazarite vow that she's committed to her son is far greater and more significant in some senses than a child going into Christian ministry and I think Hannah's example here ought to be a challenge maybe to you who become parents those of you who are about what you want for your child.

[ 24 : 24 ] Too often parents buy in to the standards of our age and want their children to be successful so long as that's not in Christian ministry and heaven forbid that it's overseas Christian ministry at that.

Hannah's gift is a stunning act of faith really and it's not a reluctant vow. She doesn't get to this point with regret and think oh what a stupid promise I made unlike say Jephthah back in the book of Judges who made a ridiculous vow to kill whoever came out of his house first and it was his daughter.

Stupid thing to do. But she goes on at the beginning of chapter 2 with a song of praise that shows that she is thoroughly committed to the vow that she made to give back Samuel to the service of the Lord.

For her song shows sincere joy and indeed exaltation overflowing from her heart. And notice that this song comes not when she conceives not when she gives birth but when she gives up her son. That is this song does not occur earlier in chapter 1. This song is when she gives Samuel back to God. It's a very striking position for this song.

[ 25 : 38 ] Some people say well she's borrowed from the psalms she may well have done although David's psalms wouldn't have been written at this time. She's had four or five years I guess to write this psalm so it may well be indeed her own writing although she's probably borrowed expressions from other sorts of songs and phrases of Israelite worship of her day.

But see how the fulfilling of this vow is a thing of great joy for Hannah. My heart exalts in the Lord. My strength is exalted in my God. My mouth derides my enemies because I rejoice in my victory. God is the focus. It's intensely personal.

My heart exalts my strength my mouth. I rejoice. So it begins with her personal answer to prayer as the motivation for this psalm even though the psalm or the song goes on into a much broader sweep of things to give God thanks for.

And in verse 2 three times she says in effect God is incomparable. Yahweh is the only God in effect what she's saying here the one of power. There's no holy one like the Lord. There's no one besides you.

[ 26 : 46 ] There's no rock like our God. It's thoroughly suggestive of there only being one God but it's in the language of God being incomparable. He is the one who's answered prayer. No other God no other thing could answer the prayer that Hannah prayed for a child.

It also suggests not only the power of God but his reliability the rock as a symbol of reliability and steadfastness as is frequently found in the Old Testament in particular.

Probably picking up the idea that God indeed has answered precisely the prayer of chapter 1 verse 11. And therefore in the light of all that God has done there is no place for pride.

Hannah's not boasting in this song she's boasting in the Lord. And so in verse 3 she says talk no more so very proudly let not arrogance come from your mouth for the Lord is a God of knowledge and by his actions are weighed.

That is she's not boasting that somehow she's got something she deserved. She's boasting in God and therefore not speaking arrogantly of herself either. Maybe hidden in verses 1 to 3 is a sort of rebuke to Penina who used to provoke her.

[ 27 : 56 ] No children yet Hannah? Look at all mine. Hannah's saying in effect the boasts of the arrogant are nothing. It is humility before the Lord that matters.

Now the fact that verse 3 is in a sense significant it seems to me for this psalm because what goes on in the verses that follow give reason why pride before God is fatal and foolish before God because personal strength is undone by God.

The strong one is the one who is weak and relying on the strength of God. Notice how verse 1 emphasizes the strength of God. My strength is exalted in my God.

And the psalm ends in fact with a note of strength of God as well. That is the one who is in effect honored by God is the weak one, the humble one as Hannah was and is still.

So see verse 4. The bows of the mighty are broken and the feeble gird on strength. The one that is who relies in their own strength, God who is more powerful, the Lord of hosts after all, breaks their strength.

[ 29 : 12 ] But the feeble they gird on strength, from God that is. Hannah is in effect saying she was feeble and God has strengthened her. In the contrast with Peninnah we see the same thing.

And later in this very book we're going to see exactly verse 4 fleshed out on the battlefield. When the might and strength of the Philistines represented by the giant Goliath is overthrown by the feeble David shepherd boy and his little stones.

The same reversal continues in verse 5. Those who are full have hired themselves out for bread and those who are hungry are fat with spoil.

And we'll see that fleshed out next week later in chapter 2 with Eli's household. At the end of verse 5 very particular for Hannah the baron has born seven well she hasn't quite got there yet but seven's the ideal number and she who has many children is forlorn.

Maybe specifically stating what is the case for Peninnah now that Hannah has got a child. Again the idea of reversal. Verse 6 most profoundly the Lord kills and brings to life.

[ 30 : 26 ] He brings down to Sheol and he raises up. That is the God who brings life to a barren womb is demonstrating in that a greater power over life. The power of resurrection in fact is what verse 6 is hinting at.

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

Poverty and wealth. The God of reversal. He lifts up the poor. He brings down the rich. As he's lifted up the weak and brought down the strong. As he's lifted up the barren and brought down the full.

And so on in this prayer of reversal. The ash heap that they're forced to sit on is like where Job went. The dung heap of the city. The sewerage pit in effect where the rubbish would smoulder and burn away.

Where homeless live in cities like Cairo today. See God is a God of reversals. He brings down the proud, the strong, the boastful, the arrogant, the full, the rich and so on.

[ 31 : 37 ] And he lifts up those who are weak. Those who rely on him. A God of reversals. In effect this psalm stating that God is a God of reversals is saying in effect what the New Testament calls

being saved by grace.

You see the ones whom God saves can't earn it or achieve it. It is thoroughly the work of God. And that's what Hannah is singing about. Her being given a child when she was a barren woman is just one little example about the whole way that God operates with human beings.

The God who saves by grace. As Hannah had asked for grace, Hain from God. So God is the God who brings grace to the weak and the powerless.

Those who rely on him. So those who are proud and arrogant as verse 3 says. Those who rely on themselves. Those who seek their personal strength and self-sufficiency.

They're pursuing a foolish indeed fatal course. The pattern of God's operation is to raise up salvation via weakness.

[ 32 : 47 ] Not human strength. And even today as Paul writes in 2 Corinthians for example. For Christians we are weak. It is only the power of God in us that accomplishes anything.

The Christian church is weak. Christian ministry is weak. It's foolishness to our world. But because of God it is strong and powerful. And of course because our hearts are sinful we often resist this sort of teaching.

We often think that we accomplish something that warrants God's attention. We like to be self-sufficient. It's why we don't pray. We like to be those who aren't weak and poor and humble and empty handed.

But God wants us to be like that so that his strength is manifest and obvious. So verse 9. God will guard the feet of his faithful ones but the wicked shall be cut off in darkness for not by might does one prevail.

There in a sense is a theme for the rest of the books of Samuel. Though we'll only look at a few more chapters in this series. Not by might does one prevail but by faithfully and humbly trusting in the power of God.

[ 34 : 01 ] And see the final reversal of verse 9. The wicked shall be cut off in darkness but the feet of the faithful ones will be guarded. There's a final and irrevocable reversal on that final judgment day.

As I said at the beginning this is not simply a story of one woman who hits rock bottom whom God happens to answer her prayer and give her a child even though with an extraordinary act of generosity she gives that child back to God.

Hannah had hit rock bottom. Her prayer is answered and the God of reversals lifts her up. But this song of Hannah shows that it's not just about her that the God of reversals is the typical way in which God acts bringing down the proud and strong and lifting up the weak the lowly and the humble.

And so in a sense it picks up the second theme of rock bottom. For Israel is at rock bottom. We're meant to know that when we begin this book from the book of Judges. And it's through Samuel that God will lift up his people.

And that's why the psalm finishes as it does in verse 10. Hannah's song began with strength and it ends with strength but it's God's strength.

[ 35 : 31 ] And God will provide a divinely strong king, an anointed one as the end of verse 10 says. And here begins in this very song, in this very verse begins in effect what we call messianic expectation in the Old Testament of a king to come.

An anointed one literally is what the word Messiah means. And here is its first use in effect. And we may well think from Hannah's song, maybe she even thought it herself, that Samuel would be that person, that anointed king for the people.

Not so as the chapters follow show. Great prophet, yes, but not king. And we may well think when we get to Saul, the first king, that here finally is the anointed one who will lift up God's people.

Indeed the word Saul literally means the asked for one. So if Hannah was going to be strict in what she named her son, because I've asked for him, therefore I call him Saul, we might expect.

So as the reader of this book thinks, Saul, surely he's the anointed king, but if you keep reading through, he's not. And David is, by the end of this book, made clear.

[ 36 : 44 ] So it's no wonder that when Mary in the New Testament conceives and is pregnant, she bases her song in Luke 1 on this song, because she knows that her son, son of David, is the anointed one, the Messiah long promised.

You see, Hannah's song here shows us more than a personal reversal for a pious lady. God is working to reverse his people's plight, which they do not deserve. God is working to save and he saves by his power, not theirs. God is working to save and he saves by his strength, not theirs. Look forward eagerly for God's anointed one to save. Amen.