

Hope of the Helpless

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[0 : 00] Friends, let's pray. Almighty God and loving Father, may the words that I speak now be from you and from your scriptures. May you graft them into our hearts and may you work in us so as to bring forth in us the fruit of good works.

And we pray this for the honour and praise of your name through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Friends, I was born to missionary parents, medical missionary parents. My earliest memories are therefore of an island just not far from the coast of Papua New Guinea.

They are memories of skimming across turquoise seas with my family in outrigger canoes and visiting islands of white sand, coral and brilliantly coloured fish. In my memory, Papua New Guinea was paradise and I could not imagine a more idyllic place to grow up.

Now, one of the main blessings of growing up in Papua New Guinea was one that I didn't really realise until much later. It was the total absence of television. You see, the absence of television meant that I was introduced to the world of reading.

My mum loved books. She could never stay away from libraries. So when we moved to Port Moresby, my childhood was spent going to the Port Moresby Library. Weekly family expeditions were made with the whole family and the whole family would plunder the shelves for the latest book to devour.

[1 : 22] Now, to tell the truth, I'm not sure when I discovered my favourite novel. My suspicion is that it was not in Port Moresby. Perhaps it was one of those books that were set for sort of standard secondary school reading.

However, one day I was introduced to a novel by Ernest Hemingway called *The Old Man and the Sea*. And when I read it, my childhood, my personality, my love of novels came together in this sort of wonderful synchronicity.

The storyline is based around a reclusive old man who fishes alone on a small skiff in the Gulf Stream. And on this particular day, he catches the fish of his life.

It is enormous. And in this gruelling battle, he finally loses this magnificent fish to sharks as he tries to bring it home. Now, I need to tell you that this novel is very skilfully written.

The skill of the author is so great that all I have to do now to renew the whole story is to pick up my battered copy and turn to the first sentence of the book. And from there, flip to the last four or five pages and suddenly my memory is tapped into.

[2 : 34] The story just comes flooding back. I can remember the details of it and I'm drawn yet again into its pages and I'll sit down and read it. Friends, the books of Samuel contain some of the most engaging of all stories in Scripture.

But let me tell you, they are not just stories. They are books of profound theological depth. They contain an enormous wealth of reflection upon God, on humanity, on God's purposes among his people and God's purposes in his world.

And I am convinced that with the books of Samuel, you can do what you do with the old man in the sea. What I mean is this. If you understand the first chapter or two of one Samuel, and if you understand the last chapter, four chapters or so of two Samuel, because it's all one book.

And if you have a vague grasp of the story in between, then you will have grasped the main points of these books. What's more, you'll have a good grasp of the theology of the books as a whole.

However, even if you didn't have this, even if you only had the first chapter and a half of Samuel, then you would still have many of the fundamental ideas that undergird the whole of the book.

[3 : 46] And these ideas are so fundamental that they continue into the New Testament. They undergird much of Christian faith. They orient us to Christian faith.

They orient us to what God has done in and through the coming of his son into the world. But they also unlock some of the deep truths of the Christian life.

So let me introduce you to the passages we're going to read today. So today and next week are foundational passages for the whole of the books of 1 and 2 Samuel.

Let me introduce you to the woman who is the star of chapter 1. I only have time to sort of give you the big framework for looking at this chapter, but look at it with me. We are introduced to a woman whose name is Hannah.

Hannah is a married Jewish woman. Her husband's name is Elkanah. And then for what we can tell, Elkanah is a man with a very good Israelite pedigree. He also seems to be a man of some financial substance.

[4 : 45] How do I know that? Well, because he can afford two wives and a number of children. That's probably the best indication. We also know that Elkanah is a devout man and a godly man, a devout worshipper.

How do I know that? Well, because we're told that each year he fulfills the law of Moses. That is, annually he makes a visit with his whole family to worship and sacrifice to the Lord Almighty at Shiloh.

Shiloh is where the Ark of the Covenant is housed at this point in Israelite history. So come with me as we travel one year with the family to Shiloh.

As we do, I want you to focus on Hannah. In verses 4 to 8, Hannah comes into sharp focus for this writer. And as the focus sharpens in on her, we find a woman under enormous stress.

By the standards of Hebrew storytelling, the description of her emotional and mental state is very detailed, amongst the most detailed in the whole of the Old Testament. Look at it with me. Verse 8.

[5 : 45] We're told that she is downhearted. Verse 10. We're told that she is in deep anguish.

Verse 11 says she is afflicted or in misery. Verse 15.

Hannah herself tells us she's deeply troubled. Her spirit, literally in Hebrew it says her spirit is hard or severe or fierce. Verse 16 describes her as one of in great anxiety, grief or vexation.

And the picture when you put it together is overwhelming. You see, here is a woman at the end of her tether. She is in desperate straits. She is desperate. So desperate is her situation that verse 10 says she is driven to uncontrollable and bitter weeping.

Friends, this woman is a woman to feel for. She is psychologically at rock bottom. Let's therefore dig deep into the cause of her distress. First, we need to understand Hannah's social world.

You see, verse 2 has told us that Hannah is barren. And in the society in which Hannah lived, the role of a woman was to bear and raise children. And it was a great shame if you couldn't do this.

[6 : 55] It was a great shame if you could not bear children for your husband. It was something people probably gossiped about in the village. Probably, you know, as you walked past people, you got looks of pity from them.

You might have got talk behind their back. That's Hannah. She can't give children to her husband. And it would have made you feel worthless and unfulfilled if you were Hannah.

But the pressure doesn't only come from the society that she lives in. The pressure also comes from her God. Take a look at the end of verse 5 and the beginning of verse 6. Twice we are told that the Lord had closed Hannah's womb.

Now, this is a very unusual statement in the Bible. You see, often in the Bible you are told that a woman is barren. But you are not told that the source is God himself.

This is quite rare. And the writer is making clear that God is the source of this woman's stress. The Lord has closed her womb. Take another look at verses 6 to 7.

[8 : 00] And not just society and God are the source of her grief. These verses tell us that the other wife of Elkanah would use God's affliction to persecute her.

The word provoke that is used here has the sense of humiliate her. Penanah, you see, humiliated Hannah because of her barrenness. You can imagine it. She would say perhaps to her things like, I can produce children.

What about you? She would mock her, humiliate her. So here is Hannah under pressure to produce children. She's known to be barren. She's surrounded by a woman who can produce children almost at the drop of a hat.

And that woman rubs Hannah's nose in the fact. She mocks her, provokes her, humiliates her. And then there's her husband. Let's have a look at how he reacts and how he adds to her stress.

Look at verse 8. We're told that Elkanah's response would be to say to her, Hannah, why are you weeping? Why don't you eat? Why are you so downhearted?

[9:07] Don't I mean more to you than 10 sons? Now, my own reading of these rhetorical four questions is that they have a slight accusative feel to them. The tone is one of reproach and perhaps impatience.

The impression is that he's seen his wife's brooding, her depression, and he wants her to move on. We know that Elkanah loves his wife. The text tells us this. But his words ring with frustration. She seems fixated on the issue of her own problems and her childlessness. He would be happy if she were fixated or passionate about him. And so there we have it.

Can you hear it in his voice? I think it is very self-centered. Hannah, why are you weeping? Can you hear the tone? Why don't you eat?

Why are you downhearted? Notice the tone of accusation. Don't I mean more to you than 10 sons? Anyway, so there we have it.

[10:10] A woman under great stress. And that stress comes to a head each annual visit to the temple. They turn up to the temple. And let me tell you, temple visits were normally times of great joy, of feasting and partying.

But not for Hannah. For Hannah, the temple services remind her of her God. Perhaps she senses that he may even be part of the problem. The partying, the attempts by her husband to compensate, they just make things worse.

They also provide opportunities for more bullying and humiliation by Peninnah. And so everything comes to a head. Verse 7 says that these occasions cause her so much stress that she cannot even eat.

And then something snaps. You see, this year, there is a breakthrough in Hannah's life. Look at verse 9. Up until this point, Hannah has been a victim. She's been the object of the actions of everyone else.

Not now. Now she acts for herself. Do you see what the text says? She rose. She stood up. And what does she do? Does she sink into depression?

[11:15] Does she feel increasingly sorry for herself? Does she cave in to Elkanah? Does she retaliate to Peninnah? Does she become bitter with God? No. She makes a beeline for the source of her troubles.

She rises. She stands up. She goes to the one responsible for shutting her womb. And she lays it out before him. Look at her prayer and her vow. Verse 11. She says to God, Lord Almighty, if you will only look on your servant's misery and remember me and not forget your servant, but give her a son, then I will give him to the Lord all the days of his life.

And no razor will ever be used on his head. There's a number of things to notice here. First, she asked God to remember. Now, in Hebrew, to remember doesn't mean sort of what we do when we leave our keys somewhere and then suddenly we think, oh, I've left my keys somewhere.

No. In Hebrew, to remember is what God does when Noah is floating above the floodwaters for 40 days. And then God remembers.

When God remembers, he acts. And that is what God does when he remembers his people in Egypt, in Exodus 2. When he remembers his people, he acts.

[12:29] And Hannah is actually saying to God, I want you to do something. I want you to remember. And I want you to remember and do something for me. I want you to do another Egypt, as it were.

She wants him to hear her groaning and decide to do something about it. The next thing to notice is another word that Hannah uses. Some of our versions slightly mask it, but she uses the word twice, the word give twice in these verses.

She asks God to give her a son. And then she says that she will set that Lord before the son. Literally, she says she will give that son to the Lord for lifelong service as a Nazarite.

And friends, that those that word, that single word sums up the rest of the story. From now on, we need to watch for that word. Give. Will God answer her prayer?

Will he give Hannah a son? And will Hannah keep her vow? Will she give that son back to God?

Now, let's see what happens. Look at verses 12 to 19.

[13:34] Eli, the priest, he's been watching all of this from a distance. And at first, he thinks she's, this woman is drunk. Then she explains. And he pronounces a blessing.

Look at verse 17. And I want you to look at our version, or some of our versions use the word grant. But the Hebrew uses the word give. Let me read it to you as it would occur in the Hebrew.

This is what Hannah would have heard. Eli says, go in peace. The God of Israel, give you the petition you have made to him.

Wonder, can you imagine how Hannah would have felt at that word give? How would she have felt? She's just used it twice. You give, I give. And now God's represented. The person who represents God on earth uses it with her.

And he says, may the God of Israel give you the petition you have asked. It's my guess that all of this solidifies the change in her. Look at verse 18.

[14:32] She returns to her family. Before going to God, she couldn't eat. Now she can. Now, you see, she can worship the Lord with her family. And now her countenance is no longer sad.

Verse 19, then heaps verb upon verb. There is action after action in this verse. The family arise. They worship. They go back to Ramah. Elkanah makes love to Hannah. God remembers her. She becomes pregnant. She gives birth. She names the boy Samuel. These verbs piled one upon the other tells us that God did it quickly. I mean, nine months is a long time, isn't it? But nevertheless, God has acted with speed, as it were.

He's given Hannah her request. Now the initiative lies with her. And the question is, will she keep her side? Will she give? Will she give this long child back to God?

It's a big cost for her. And immediately we strike a problem. Look at verse 21. Elkanah goes up to Shiloh, and he goes with all his family.

[15:35] But verse 22 tells us that one was missing. Hannah has taken initiative again. She doesn't go up to Shiloh. Her promise seems to have this sort of little shadow hanging over it.

And Elkanah appears to recognize this. Look at verse 23. He says, he tells Hannah to stay, but then he adds, only may the Lord make good his word.

In other words, I think he's urging Hannah not to stand in the way of the Lord's word being fulfilled. And of her promise being fulfilled. In verse 23, we find Hannah on her own again.

Now, let me tell you something that you wouldn't know. Weaning took two to three years in the ancient world. And so it's entirely likely that Hannah did not go, and I think the readers of the original text would have known and understood this, two to three years that she doesn't go up to Shiloh.

And so we begin to, the original readers, I think would have begun to wonder, will she indeed give to God this child? And then all that doubt is blown away in verse 24, because she acts and she goes up to Shiloh with a substantial offering.

[16:47] And the sacrifice is slaughtered, and the boy is presented to Eli. And in verse 27, she uses the word give again. Our version, perhaps, or some versions use the word grant.

But in the original, the word is the same word we've seen all the way through this story. It's the word forgive. She asked God to give her a son. She promised she would give him back to the Lord.

The Lord has answered her prayer, and she has fulfilled her promise. Out of her grief, God has been at work. The whole chapter began in worship, and now it ends in worship.

But let me tell you, the story is not quite finished. Look at chapter 2, verse 11. So flip through the next chapter, get to verse 11. This is the end of this little narrative. For she and Elkanah go home to Ramah, where things began.

She has her desire, a son. But in his mercy, God has used her to fulfill his desire. What do I mean by that? Well, this toddler will grow into a prophet, who will bring the word of God to all of Israel.

[17:57] And he will oversee the introduction of kingship in Israel. Now, there's the story. Let's see if we can now sort of stand back a little bit from it, and see what we can make of it.

What do you think is going on here? What exactly does God want to tell us? What does God want us to learn from this story? Well, the first thing to say, is that Hannah herself tells us what we can learn.

She does this in some extended theological reflection, as she prays or sings in 2 Samuel 2, 1 to 10, which we'll look at next week. But I don't want to focus on those things today.

We'll get to that and her interpretation next week. Nor do I want to focus on the fact that God has acted sovereignly, to use this woman's distress, to put Samuel into place, as a solution for the problems that Israel doesn't even realize it has.

No, today I want to focus on what we learn about God from Hannah and her situation. Friends, you see, as we live in our world today, we live in a world that loves power and looks to the powerful, don't we?

[19 : 05] But Hannah is not among such people, is she? She is not among the powerful of this world. Rather, her situation here is deliberately and obviously painted by our writer to be desperate.

She, like Israel, is helpless. And if you just read the preceding book, book of Judges, or, you know, or go back a book or two, you know Israel's in a hopeless mess, a helpless mess.

And Hannah, Hannah's story tells us that these sorts of situations bring delight to God. You see, the very nature of helplessness is that you cannot rely on human ability.

You cannot rely on your own resourcefulness. You cannot manipulate events or people. You are exactly that, helpless. God thrives on helplessness. For when people are without resources, they can finally do what God designed them to do.

They can turn away from depending upon themselves, and they can depend on him. In weakness, they can be strong as they turn to the help of the helpless. See, friends, time and time again, we see this in the Bible, don't we?

[20 : 13] We see it with Israel in Egypt. We see it during the period of the judges. We see it when every man does what is right in his own eyes, which is a closing verses of the judges, the sort of historically preceding book for this one.

We see it when Israel later on is suffering in exile. We see it when persecution reaches a pinnacle in the latter chapters of the book of Daniel. And we see it in the world of the New Testament.

For there in the world of the New Testament, Israelites are overwhelmed by the power of the Romans. They seek a powerful Messiah who will overthrow the Romans. But what does God do? God acts by sending not a powerful Messiah, but a child. Like this child. But a child who will grow and defeat more powerful enemies, not with a sword, but with a cross.

But friends, if we're Christians, we have seen this God at work in our own lives, haven't we? For those of us who have become Christians, have at some time in our existence, been aware of the distance that sin forges between God and us.

[21 : 24] Haven't we? At some time, we've been aware that there is a holy God, and that we are sinners, and that God is justly angry with our sin. And we've realized that we cannot bring ourselves to God, and that we are indeed helpless.

And into such a situation comes the good news of Jesus. In Romans 5 that we read earlier on, Paul tells us that while we were still powerless and helpless, that Christ died for us and reconciled us to God.

Yes, we know the God of the powerless. We know the helper of the helpless. We have been where Hannah has been. We have experienced his mercy in Jesus.

Because of Jesus, we know that we can confidently draw near to God's throne of grace, and we know that when we do, we will receive grace to help in time of need. And friends, this is the truth I want us to take home today.

I think it is emphasized in the story of Hannah. You see, the God that we worship is the God of the helpless, the God who comes in the form of an infant suckling at his mother's breast, the God who comes to be crucified on a cross, the God who exalts weakness because there his strength can be magnified.

[22 : 43] Friends, with that in mind, I want us to do some self-reflection. I want us to ask today, why it is that although we know these things about God, we don't go to him like Hannah did.

Because whatever else is happening in this text, she is intended to be an example to us. Friends, I know that many of us here today feel as though life might be out of control for us.

Many of us feel overwhelmed by life and circumstances, whether temporary things or long-term things. Many of us are embittered by what life has brought us or circumstances has brought to us. Well, if that's you, then can I urge you to do what Hannah does? That is not to sit in your bitterness and anguish, but to stand as she did and to refuse to be a victim and to make a beeline for the one who oversees your life.

Let's call upon God to remember us, his people. To do what he did with Noah, with Israel and with Hannah. Now, please hear me correctly. You see, I am not promising that God will do what he did with Hannah.

[23 : 51] I'm not promising that he will listen, but I am promising that he will listen. I am promising that it is in his nature to remember the trouble of his people. It is in his nature to meet helplessness with help and powerlessness with rescue.

God's nature is to help the helpless. The books of Samuel tell us this story time and time and time again. The high moments in the books of Samuel are characterized by people doing what? Simply relying on a God who is sovereign. Think about one of the great moments in the books of Samuel. What would it be? David and Goliath.

Israel feels as though they are totally lost. Helpless. And this young man walks onto the scene and says, Who is this circumcised Philistine that he should defy the armies of the living God and calls upon God and walks into the midst of it?

He is a God who believes in God who is the helper of the helpless. And it will be repeated time and time again at the high moments in the books of 1 and 2 Samuel. God's people will do this.

[25 : 06] David at his lowest, when he's been thrown out of his city by his son Absalom, when his concubines have been raped on the palace roof by his son, will be climbing the Mount of Olives and he will call upon God to be the help of the helpless.

Can you see now why Samuel begins with this story? It begins with this story because this is what God wants us to know about him and what he wants us to do when we remember him.

He is the hope of the hopeless. He is the helper of the helpless. And it begins with this story because it demonstrates what God wants his people to know and do and be like.

He wants us to be those who run to him because we know that this is who he is. He wants us to be dependent like Hannah, like Mary, like Jesus.

And with that in mind, I want to close by reading a hymn to you. It's a hymn that is often sung at funerals. It's a hymn, I think, though, that can be sung in the midst of all of life's great hurdles.

[26 : 19] It's written in the 19th century by Henry Francis Light and it goes like this. Listen to the words. They are great words. Many, some of our folk in our older congregations in the morning, they will have it sung at their funerals and it's a good choice, I think.

Listen to the words. Abide with me. Fast falls the eventide. The darkness deepens, Lord. With me abide. When other helpers fall and comforts flee, help of the helpless.

O abide with me. I need thy presence every passing hour. What but thy grace can foil the tempter's power? Who, like thyself, my guide and stay can be through cloud and sunshine?

O abide with me. I fear no foe with thee at hand to bless. Ills have no weight and tears no bitterness. Where is death's sting?

Where grave thy victory? I triumph still if thou abide with me. Hold thou thy cross before my closing eyes. Shine through the gloom and point me to the skies.

[27 : 28] Heaven's morning breaks and earth's vain shadows flee. In life, in death, O Lord. Abide with me. It's a great one, isn't it? Hannah went running to this God and said, Give and I give.

She was asking for God's mercy, God's kindness, God's remembering. And she went to the right source, didn't she? And that is the source that we should go to.

Let's pray. Let's pray. Father, we thank you for Hannah for this very early hero in the books of Samuel.

Thank you for all that she teaches us about relating to you. Thank you that she looks to you as help of the helpless. that she runs to you amidst the troubles of life and knows that you can be relied upon.

Father, we thank you for the way that she points us toward how we should act as your people. That in our helplessness, we should run to you and what you have done on the cross and cling to it.

[28 : 44] Father, we thank you that you are the God of the helpless. We thank you that you've answered our greatest prayer through the death of your son for us.

Thank you that even on the cross you exalted weakness for there your strength was acknowledged and magnified. Father, we pray that you'd help us to live as your dependent people poor in spirit and rich in faith.

We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.