

The God of Reversals

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[0 : 00] Father, we thank you for this great passage of scripture today. Thank you for Hannah's prayer. Thank you for her exalting in you.

And Father, we pray that as we read it together, you might teach us about yourself, teach us how to respond rightly to you, teach us how to respond rightly to each other. And Father, we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Friends, I want to begin tonight's talk by introducing you to someone. He's a member of a church that we're involved in setting up in Perth. His name is Jonathan.

It's not his real name, but it'll do for our purposes. Jonathan is now probably, I think, probably about 13, 14 years old. And in every observable way, he is just an ordinary young man now.

But whenever I go back to Perth and I see him, I feel tears welling up in my eyes. It'll probably happen to happen to me at lunchtime today or at 1.30 when I preach this sermon. And I'll tell you why.

[1 : 03] You see, Jonathan is a child of two wonderful Christian friends. I had watched them go out together. Heather and I had observed them thinking about marriage. We had both prepared them for marriage.

And I conducted the service at their wedding. And together they settled into a stable and a rich married life together. And we rejoiced. And when we started our new church or the new church in Perth, they joined us.

And eventually they began to think about children. And Kathy, again, not her real name, became pregnant. And I do have her permission to talk about this. She was 26 pregnant.

And we were meeting together at church one Sunday morning. And the service finished. And people were just doing the normal thing. They were chatting before they headed home. And suddenly Kathy's waters broke.

She was rushed into hospital. And everything was okay. But the baby was at risk. And Kathy would have to stay in hospital for the duration of the pregnancy. A week passed. And then infection set in.

[2 : 02] And the baby would have to be born. At 27 weeks, there was a possibility that he would survive. And so it was that Jonathan was born. He was a good-sized lad.

And at first he did well. But his lungs were just not up to sustaining him. Jonathan's parents watched him for over a week.

And grew to become very close to him. Their love for him grew. But after that week, he died. And I conducted the funeral with them and their family in the hospital chapel.

And then I watched them. I gave the child back to them, wrapped in a shawl. A corpse, as it were. And I watched them as they walked down the corridor. For this one last time, with this tiny little body, just wrapped in a shawl.

And his parents were overwhelmed with pain. It was a pain that endured for a long, long time. Eventually, they gathered up enough courage to try again.

[3 : 04] The pregnancy was watched by doctors, prayed over by friends. 26 weeks passed. Then 30. Then 35. And finally, Jonathan entered the world. And to this day, when I see him, I remember his brother.

I remember the parents' pain. And I thank God for the gift of this child. Friends, even in our modern and scientifically sophisticated world, conception and birth can never be guaranteed.

The birth of a child is never something to be taken for granted. How much more so must it have been in ancient Israel without modern, sophisticated medicine? How much more so when it occurred to a woman who had been barren?

And how much more so when a woman's worth and dignity and power and place in society was significantly determined by whether or not she could produce children? And therefore, how fitting it is that Hannah bursts into praise and prayer as she does in the passage we look at today.

Chapter 2, verse 1 says that Hannah prayed. However, just as prayer is often in poetic forms and we often pray in song, so it is that this prayer is in poetry as well.

[4 : 24] You can tell by the way that our versions have put it. It is a poetic hymn, as it were, or it could be called a psalm of thanksgiving. It is probably one of the earliest examples of Israelite poetry.

It is like many of the psalms. It is a prayer that is designed to be sung and joined in with by other people. What a wonderful response it is to what God has done for Hannah.

A prayer come hymn of thanksgiving. So, I want you to remember as we look at it that this is poetry probably designed to be sung. And I want you to notice something else.

What I want you to notice is the link between this song and Hannah's real life experience. You see, when we read the song, it is clear that it reflects her own experience, which we looked at last week. For example, Hannah's barrenness meant that she suffered from Peninnah's boasting and persecution of her. In other words, she had a proud enemy.

[5 : 21] You can see her reflecting on this in verses 1 and 5. That's a very important point. You see, whatever we say about this song, this prayer, we must not divorce it from its setting.

It is a song, a prayer, an exaltation of victory. God has met the needs of this woman and this song celebrates exactly that.

It is a song of exaltation or victory. This song is tied to Hannah and to her experience and the book makes that clear. However, Hannah doesn't just want us to reflect on her experience.

You see, she knows that her experience actually will teach something profound to others as well.

And so what she does is she uses her own experience to reflect on some general principles about God and his ways in his world.

And you can see how she does this in the very first few verses. Have a look at them. In the first very few verses, we hear about Hannah and she talks about my heart, my horn, my mouth.

[6 : 20] But then she moves on and she starts talking about God. She talks about the Lord and then she moves on again. And in verses three, in verse three, she talks about other people and she tells them to do certain things in response to what she has said.

So I wonder if you can see what's going on here. Hannah is using song or prayer to do what much good Israelite and Christian song does. That is what she's doing is she's drawing on her personal experience and she uses it to talk about timeless theological truths.

She goes on to suggest how those truths should have impact on the thinking and the experience of other people. With all this in mind, I want I want us to turn to her song.

Let's see what she has to say. Let's see what timeless truths about God she will open up for us.

Look at verses one and two. The language is extremely personal and appraises God exuberantly.

However, notice that the focus is not on herself. It's not even on her child, but it's on God. God may lift her horn. He may cause her to be able to boast over her enemies.

[7 : 26] She may delight in his deliverance of her. But those actions just serve a truth about this God. He is beyond comparison.

There is no one holy like him, she says. There is no one beside him. There is no rock like him. He is the source of her delight. And it's only in him that her horn can be lifted high.

God has shown himself to be a God who's really worthy of the name. There is none like him. So if you wanted to put a heading above verses one and two, you could write praise for our incomparable God.

There is none like him. But let's move to verses three to eight. If you wanted to put a heading over these verses, it could be praise the God of reversals.

He turns things upside down. You see, Hannah starts in verse three by turning to those listening in to her. And she says to them, don't keep talking so proudly or let your mouth speak with such arrogance.

[8 : 25] For the Lord is a God who knows and by him deeds are weighed. Can you hear and see what she's saying? If God is the source of her deliverance, if he is the ground of her exaltation, then everyone who hears should turn away from false sources of those things.

Don't exalt yourself by talking proudly. Don't let your mouth be filled with arrogance. If you glory in those things, you glory in shadows. There is a real God and he sees through such false glory. He is a God who knows and by him deeds are weighed. Now look at verses four and five. Let me read them to you. And while I do, see if you can spot God in them.

The bows of the warriors are broken, but those who stumble are armed with strength. Those who are full hire themselves out for food, but those who are hungry are hungry no more.

She who is barren has born seven children, but she who has many sons pines away. You see, you can't spot God in these verses, can you? He's not there. He is noticeably absent.

[9 : 33] Hannah just talks about the turning of the world's normal power structures on their head. Weapons of warriors are broken. The ones who stumble around become armed with strength.

The ones who are full become empty. The hungry are no longer hungry. The woman who's barren will bears the perfect number of children. And the one who has many sons pines away. But then Hannah tells us that such things are not an accident.

They don't just happen. They're not just random events in our world. These things have a source and that source is God. Look at verse six. It is the Lord who brings death and makes a life.

It is he who brings down to the grave and he who raises up. He sends poverty and wealth. He humbles. He exalts. He controls everything between life and death.

And this God operates outside the box of normal expectation. He has no respect for human power structures. He loves in fact turning human power structures on their heads.

[10 : 29] But let's move on to verse eight. Hannah gives the theological undergirding of what she says. God can do all of this because of one thing. He is the creator.

That is he set the foundations of the earth. And if he did that, then he can turn human power structures in whatever way he likes. What is the overturning of human power for a God who created all power?

Praise be to God the creator. Praise him for his power over human power structures. Praise him that he overturns pride. Exult in the God who raises the poor from the dust.

Glory in him who helps the helpless. Wander at the creator who brings death and makes alive. Who brings down to the grave and who raises up.

Now let's turn to the last two verses of her song. If you wanted to put a heading over them, it could be praise God the judge of all. Hannah has already told us in verse three that God knows and ways deeds.

[11 : 34] In verse 10, she will tell us that he judges the ends of the earth. Here in verse 9, she looks, peers into the future. And she uses the future to describe him as acting as judge.

He will divide the godly and the wicked. He will guard the feet of his saints. And he will silence the wicked in darkness. The faithful are like Hannah.

They are those who trust in God to strengthen them. The wicked, well, they must be the opposite, mustn't they? They are those who trust in their own might. For as Hannah says in the last line, it's not by strength that one prevails.

Now, as the books of Samuel go on, we will see this time and time again. You see, we will see people trust in God and exalt themselves. And we'll see people trust.

Sorry, we'll see people trust in God and be exalted. And we'll see people trust in weapons and strength who will be humbled or brought down. We'll even see this in the very next chapter. Why don't you read ahead in the nights that come and see if you can spot it.

[12 : 42] Read on and see who is humble before God and who is not. And what happens to them and how God reacts to them, what God does to them. But let's not get ahead of ourselves.

Let's turn to the last two lines of the song. Hannah's experience has led to eternal theological truths. It's led to her to tell people how to act as a result.

It's led her to predict how God will use those eternal truths in the future. But now she becomes a prophetess. She takes these eternal truths and she applies them to kings who do not yet exist in Israel.

If God is as she says, then what she says will not just apply to barren women. It will apply to kings as well.

And so God will give strength to his king. He will exalt the power of his anointed. Now the word for anointed here is the word for Messiah.

[13:46] Hannah is saying that true kingship can choose how it operates. It can operate by lining itself up with the poor, the dependent and the helpless. Or it can be proud and arrogant. And if it is proud and arrogant, what will God do to it?

God will thunder against it. For such arrogance is wickedness. If it is poor and dependent and helpless before God, then he will exalt and strengthen it.

Kings who are like Hannah will reap from God the same sorts of actions that Hannah herself reaped. In her humility and her dependence.

Friends, there is so much more that I could tell you about this song, but I just want to concentrate on three things. And what I want to do in our remaining time is this. I want to use this song to do some reflecting on the place of song in Christian life and ministry.

Then I want to tell you why I think this song is here. And finally, I want to tell you what place this song has in the Bible as a whole. Okay, so not too much to do in the remaining time.

[14:55] Let's think about Christian song for a moment. And I think this is good for us because we're about to combine services in a couple of weeks. And therefore, it's good for us to think about what we're going to do in song in those services.

Let me tell you that Christians, like Israelites, have always been people of song. I mean, even as the Lord Jesus is going to his death, he stops with his disciples and sings a hymn. Here in Hannah's song, we see two great elements of song among God's people.

And the first one is this. Song puts us in touch with the experience of what it means to be God's person in God's world, doesn't it? Christian and Jewish songs often therefore use the word I.

Read through them. Read through the Psalms and see it. They often use the word I. And they do it for good reason. You see, using I or talking about my personal experience allows others to tap into a wealth of godly experience and make it our own.

It enables us to say, oh, yeah, I've been there too. I've felt that. I've experienced that. I know what that's about. I can identify with that. In other words, it uses the experience of others to help us express our own experience.

[16:05] That's the beauty of godly music. And in turn, it allows us to learn the same things as the person who designed the song learnt.

And all of this becomes even more potent when you set your song to the right music. Then it just buzzes. It just is beautiful.

And in this way, Christian and Jewish song is very experiential. Hannah's song is exactly like this. It's about her experience. And it allows Israel and us to tap into it and to see our own experiences in new light.

However, Hannah's song shows us something else. You see, song is a marvellous way of teaching profound truths about God. It teaches theology. Good music will teach good theology.

And with that in mind, let me tell you that six poems or songs frame the whole of the books of Samuel. You're going to look for them sometime. One's only two lines long.

[17:04] But nevertheless, see if you can find it. It's tucked away round about chapter 18 is a clue for you. Anyway, there are six of them. And these six songs, if you understand the theology of these six songs, you'll be able to sum up the story in the theology of the whole book.

Look for them sometime. Anyway, I hope you can see what I'm saying. Song is not just a way of entering and experience. It's also a way of hearing and teaching truth.

And so with Israelite and Christian song, the purpose is not simply that you engage with the song and identify with it experientially. Now, it's also that you engage with what it says about God.

That is, you take on board the things that it teaches you. Or you use song to remind you of the truths that you already know about God. Friends, song does both things together.

It engages us emotionally and experientially. And it engages us cognitively and theologically. It engages us emotionally and experientially.

[18:08] It engages us cognitively and theologically. Now, it is the place, I think, where theology and mind and heart and experience are all tied together in one rich mix when it is done well.

Now, with that in mind, I think there are two dangers that we can fall into. In my life as a Christian, I've been in churches where both dangers have been seen and practiced.

Let me tell you about them. The first danger is that you realize that songs teach. Now, if you think that what a song is mainly about is teaching, then you work hard to make sure that your songs, in fact, do it.

You make sure that you get your theology right in your songs. However, you then often downplay or neglect the fact that music is designed to help us engage with that theology in a variety of ways. In the worst cases of this approach, you actually go out of your way to make sure that your song does not engage people emotionally. It is felt that if this happens, the teaching might be lost or minimized.

[19 : 17] Of course, all of this is made even worse if the music is such that those singing can't join in or engage because it's just unsingable music. Some churches I've been part of in the past have been great at doing this, that is, getting theology right in their music.

But the end result has been that the songs have been abstract and impersonal and often unsingable. They've got those timeless truths about God, right? But they have not helped people engage, experience or identify with those truths.

Let me give you an analogy. Songs that are overly concerned with theological content can sometimes be just like a husband who loves his wife but never buys her flowers.

That is, it's like a husband who tells his wife, I love you, but never holds her hand, never embraces her and never makes love to her. It's stunted and it's somewhat empty.

Now, it's full of content, but it lacks engagement. However, let's get to the other side. There's another danger with our music and song, isn't there? And the other danger is that if we use song to engage people emotionally and experientially, but then we forget about truth and theology.

[20 : 37] And again, such song is even worse if it uses the force of the music in order to do this. So you use music as a power to bring people to a place that may have nothing to do with cognitive information at all.

Let me return to my analogy. Song that is experientially rich but theologically weak is like a man who woos a woman with flowers and romance but who's simply after sex.

Can you hear what I'm saying? Songs that engage people emotionally and experientially but contain no timeless truths about God are essentially seductive.

It pretends there's a relationship but really there is no substance or truth in that relationship. It doesn't help people engage with God and learn about him. It simply makes them think they are engaging with God, but it's only happening emotionally and experientially.

It simply makes them think they are engaging with God. Now friends, I wonder if I might put before you a proposition. I think that if modern Christian music suffers from one or the other ailment, it is the second.

[21 : 53] Okay, contemporary Christian music, if it suffers from one or the other ailment, it is the second. Much of modern Christian song that we sing has nothing in terms of truth about God in it.

It uses music to bring people to a place. They don't rejoice in distinctively Christian things and could be sung by Muslims without offence or Buddhists.

Some of the songs we sing have nothing in terms of truth about God. Some tell us nothing about God's deeds. There's one that's based on Psalm 150 that Christians sing that says, Praise God for this, praise God for that, but it misses the one line in the song that tells you what you should praise God for, His wonderful works.

It's striking for what it misses out. Or if they do mention God or Jesus, it's just plastic and lacks theological depth. Friends, let's watch Hannah. Let's listen to Hannah and the other great songwriters of the Bible.

And let's watch the great Christian songwriters of history. And let's write and sing music that talks about life as it is before God, involving God, and engage with it and identify with it and sing it with gusto.

[23 : 07] But let's also write and sing music that is full of who God is and what God has done so that people might be comforted and encouraged by truth. So let's put our music and our song under the spotlight.

You see, what we sing will be what people believe in another 20 years. In my ministry, I have at times visited people to run services in aged homes.

And normally we sing. And we sing old hymns. And do you know what happens? Those people whose minds have long drifted away, their mouths will begin to move.

And they'll go, holy, holy, holy, Lord God almighty. They may not know what they're saying, but they remember the words. They remember the words. They remember the words. And the music will bring back those words to them.

If that's the case, I fear for our future. And for us when we get old. Because most Christian music has no substance. And we'll be mouthing platitudes.

[24 : 15] Now, by the way, I should say that I think here at Holy Trinity, we do a good job with our musicians. So, don't worry. It's okay. I'm not having a go at you.

I think you get a wonderful balance. Your songs help us to engage in all the ways that I've said. They have been strong. We're strong theologically. But I think we also want to engage people emotionally and experientially as well.

So, you musicians, thank you for your ministry to us. Now, let's now return to Hannah's song. Let's ask ourselves why the author has started the book with her story and her prayer slash song. Now, on one level, it's very easy to answer that question, isn't it? He simply wants to introduce us to Samuel. That's where all of this is going. And Samuel's the key figure for introducing kingship. However, a detailed story and a theologically packed poem or song is a rather grandiose way of just telling us that Samuel's on his way, isn't it?

[25 : 19] Now, my thought is that the author is laying the theological groundwork for the rest of the book. So, as we begin the book, we find ourselves thinking this, that if God can give a child to a barren woman, then he can do anything, can't he?

And if he can take on and if we take on board what she says about God, then we'll be prepared for what's coming in the rest of Samuel. For example, it will be no surprise if we know this story and this poem.

It'll come as no surprise for us when God chooses a lad to oversee the demise of the bad priesthood of Eli. No surprise.

It will come as no surprise when it comes that that lad will receive a prophetic word from God to bring to all of Israel. We'll not be astonished when Israel is superstitious and arrogant regarding the Ark of the Covenant, chapters 5 and 6.

We'll watch and we'll wait for God to judge such arrogance with the defeat of them at the hands of the Philistines. And it won't be unexpected, you see, when God punishes Saul for his pride in thinking that he knows better than God.

[26 : 31] No, we'll expect him to get his comeuppance and to be brought low. And it won't come as any shock to us when God chooses a young shepherd from an inconspicuous family and exalts him to be the king of all of Israel.

And it won't be surprising when that lad is anointed the king of all Israel. And if we've heard Hannah's song, then we will not in acknowledgement that the Lord sends the same when the Lord sends the same lad out with nothing but a sling and some stones to conquer a boasting Goliath and to bring him down.

And we'll think it entirely consistent when he enables a weak and under-resourced Israelite army to defeat the militarily superior Philistine army. And when we watch proud David walking on the roof of his palace, thinking at what he has gained for himself, and then looking down at naked women and killing their husbands in order to cover up his lust, we will know what's going to come.

God will bring the proud down. We'll wait for God to act, knowing that he knows and weighs the deeds, particularly of his kings. Can you see what I'm saying?

Getting this story right is fundamental, and hearing Hannah's song is critical. If you hear it right, then you'll be ready for everything that comes in the books of 1 and 2 Samuel. Just think about it.

[27 : 51] Let me give you a clue. You want to read 1 Samuel? You know who to look for. People like Hannah. Find people like Hannah. They get the big tick in the books of Samuel. People like Penanah.

They will come down. You see, God's incomparable worth will just be cemented in your mind when you read on in Samuel, because you'll see him play it all out.

Let me just say that if Hannah gets things right, then we shouldn't even stop with Samuel, should we? We should expect that if this theology is right, it'll be right anywhere and everywhere. If she's right, we will not be surprised, will we, when a virgin gives birth to the Son of God?

No. No surprises. When God sends a local Israelite man from Nazareth against the greatest and proudest enemy of the people of God, the devil himself, and he wages war on him.

Nor will we be surprised when he overcomes the devil through the weak and ignominious death of his son on a cross outside Jerusalem. No, we won't be surprised. And we won't be shocked when we join in with John in Revelation 5, when we're told to look around the throne room for a lion from

the tribe of Judah.

[29 : 06] And we look around and we find a lamb standing as though slain. It'll be entirely appropriate. We regard it entirely according to God's character when it's not the wise and the influential or the noble from God that God or the noble that God chooses.

To be his people and to shame the wise. Now, we'll not think it's strange that he uses ordinary people like us to go into the world as missionaries to evangelize the world. Just ordinary people. These things won't surprise us because Hannah has led us to expect that it's not by strength that one prevails. In Jesus and in his ministry, we'll see Hannah's profound theological insight wonderfully fulfilled.

God will have given strength to his king and exalted the horn of his Messiah. It's a remarkable part of scripture, these two chapters, isn't it?

Absolutely astounding. What started with a helpless, emotionally strained, distressed, persecuted and barren woman ends in heaven with a lamb that was slain standing and being worshipped by all of heaven and earth.

[30 : 17] Is that not something else? It is no wonder that in Luke chapter 1 verses 46 to 55, Mary remembers the song of Hannah.

And echoes it in her own song about the coming birth of her son. For Hannah has captured the core of the hopes and aspirations of God's people in all time.

And those hopes will eventually be fulfilled in the plans and purposes of God in Jesus Christ at the end of time. Friends, I can't close without one further observation. You see, this song is not just about the books of Samuel.

It does not just have implications for the New Testament. This song is designed for us to join in with. It's a song for us to hear and take notice of.

And in the history of Christian missions, you can find it has these echoes everywhere. Let me just tell you one of them from Pakistan. I like it because I visited Pakistan and I found out about this particular man.

[31 : 18] Let me tell you about him. His name is Dit. He belongs to a low class, very low class division of Hindu outcasts. A cast of sweepers and scavengers, the sorts of people who clean toilets.

Thought to be the lowest of the low. They deal in bones and leather and horn and animal hair. Things unclean. And Dit is 30 years old. He's crippled in one leg.

And Dit has been taught about Jesus by a converted friend. And he seeks baptism. And the missionaries, well, they're a bit cautious about all of this. However, they cannot find a reasonable objection to baptizing Dit.

And so in June 1873, the missionary eventually agrees to baptize the small cripple. Dit is overjoyed. He is the first among his clan to embrace Christian faith.

And the family gathers. And they are angry. And Dit explains. And their reaction is worse than he expects. But he resolves to continue on in the faith despite opposition and rejection.

[32 : 26] And he hobbles around. And he hobbles around. On his stick. A cripple walking place to place. And one by one, Dit explains his faith to others.

And gradually, they continue to convert to Christ. And more and more members of his family join him.

And the news of Christ spreads from household to household. From family clan to family clan. From village to village. Eleven years later, in 1884, the missionaries had struggled to make any progress in Pakistan up until this point.

But eleven years later, in 1884, it is reported that in a single year, the communicant membership of the Synod of Punjab had doubled to more than eleven hundred. Largely, as the result of Dit's ministry.

The next year, they reported that another 500 had been added. And much of this can be traced back to the efforts of this little cripple from a despised outcast people group.

[33 : 34] In fact, if you go to Pakistan today, and you ask people about their Christian faith, many of the significant number of Pakistani Christians today can trace their heritage back.

Back, back, back. Hundred years plus to Dit. Friends, that's the God of Hannah. That's the God she rejoices in. The God who takes weakness and makes it strong.

He is the incomparable God of reversals and surprises. So, let's pray and remember this God and thank him. Father, we know that even we ourselves, really, when we think about it, don't deserve to be here.

We would never have expected that we'd be here worshipping among your people. As people who know you. And yet you did a remarkable thing in our lives.

But, Father, we thank you mostly for that remarkable thing that you did in your son. Where you took this child, born of a virgin, and installed him in the heavenly places as your king over all creation.

[34 : 51] Thank you for his being willing to become human for us. And thank you for your surprising exaltation of him.

And, Father, we pray that we might take on board the theology of this story, this song, this prayer, and might let it shape our own lives.

And, Father, please do in us these things that will surprise the world, and so that you alone might have glory.

Father, we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.