

Does God hear us when life hurts?

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[0 : 00] We love a story with a big turnaround. Have you ever noticed that? It's in lots of our favourite stories. Maybe whether you're young or old you'll recognise some of these stories. Emma's going to help me hold them.

In the story of Ratatouille, at the beginning, the mean chef Skinner is at the top. He gets to run the restaurant.

And poor little Remy the rat and Alfredo, who's a terrible cook, are right at the bottom. But what happens in the story? There's a great turnaround. And by the end, Remy and Alfredo get to run the restaurant and mean chef Skinner is chased away by a pack of rats. Or maybe you know the story of Lord of the Rings.

At the start, there are some tiny little hobbits who live far away. Or the great evil king Sauron, who rules over everything. But what happens in the story? There's a great big turnaround. By the end, the hobbits are friends with the king and Sauron is never to be seen again.

Or one last story. Maybe you know this one. In Matilda, at the beginning, Matilda and Miss Honey are having a pretty rough time. And they're getting bullied by the big, mean Miss Trunchbull. But what happens in the story? A great big turnaround.

[1 : 32] At the end, Matilda and Miss Honey are really happy. And Miss Trunchbull runs away and is chased from the school. We love a story with a great turnaround. Thanks, Emma.

And actually, today's story with Hannah is one of the Bible's great turnaround stories. And today, we're looking at a woman called Hannah and her story.

And it's really important that we listen carefully to the story of Hannah, because she can teach us what it's like to feel right at the bottom and see God bring a great big turnaround.

Hannah's story starts off our series in 1 and 2 Samuel, a book in the Bible all about how God can turn things around. It comes in the Bible history just after the events of the book of Judges, which maybe you know, everything in Judges is chaotic and horrible. Everyone does what they want, because there's no king and no one really listens to God.

And so, as we start 1 Samuel, there's enemies all around, and things inside Israel are terrible. But in Hannah's story, and in stories later on, and actually in the whole book of 1 and 2 Samuel, really, we get to see God do a great big turnaround.

[2 : 57] Throughout the book of Samuel, we're going to see stories of battles and kings, terrible priests and an amazing prophet. But lots of stories where people who are at the bottom end up on top, and people who are on the top end up at the bottom.

And as we read Hannah's story today to start off our little series, we might ask a question that I'm sure Hannah would have asked. And that is, does God hear us when life hurts?

When I feel at the bottom, does God hear me when my life really hurts? Hannah's story is going to answer with a massive yes.

Her story does show us a God who hears, who remembers, who acts. And as we read Hannah's story, we'll get to see what God is like. The Lord who brings people who are on top down to the bottom, and people who are on the bottom up to the top.

As we read Hannah's story, the first thing that we actually need to do is cry with Hannah. Hannah's life is incredibly hard.

[4 : 11] And the first problem she has really is that she faces Panina. Panina, it describes as her rival. And Panina is a pretty horrible bully to Hannah.

And she makes fun of her. She provokes her, particularly because Panina has children and Hannah doesn't have any. And that makes Hannah really, really sad because she'd really like to have a child.

Panina was a bully. And every year on the trip to Shiloh to go and worship, Panina would provoke Hannah until it made her cry and not able to eat.

You can imagine how horrible she must have been feeling. Maybe Panina said something like this. Can I borrow a spare nappy for my baby? Oh wait, you won't have any because you don't have a baby.

It would be so horrible and painful to be bullied like that. I remember when I was bullied at school. It's horrible. It makes you feel like you're nothing. It might be confusing for us that this family in this story has two wives in it.

[5 : 22] That's not very normal. And the Bible's teaching all the way through is that God's plan is for marriage to be between one man and one woman for their whole life.

And sometimes in the Bible that's taught by a command. And sometimes in the Bible, like here, it's taught by telling a story of how badly things go when people ignore God's ways.

The first thing Hannah faces is Panina, who makes fun of her. What else does Hannah face? In her culture particularly, if a woman didn't have children, that was seen as very shameful.

Then maybe you read of Elkanah, who is not very helpful. He says to her, Hannah, why are you weeping? Don't I mean more to you than ten sons?

Sometimes, but even sometimes when people try to help, their words can make you feel even more alone because they don't understand at all.

[6 : 22] Maybe the hardest thing that Hannah was facing, though, is that the Bible clearly says that the Lord had closed her womb. Maybe you noticed that in our Bible reading in verse five and verse six.

It very clearly says that. What is God doing here? How does it add to our question of does God hear us when life hurts? I'm aware that as we talk about this kind of thing and maybe you know Hannah's story, it might be a story that is particularly painful for some of us here today.

And perhaps you would love to have a child and for various reasons aren't able to. It's worth acknowledging that and saying that Hannah's story does speak about some of that stuff.

And it's not going to give us total answers to the topic. But I think there are things we can learn from the specifics of Hannah's situation. And so if God has closed Hannah's womb, why on earth would he do that?

Well, for Israel, which is Hannah's people, earlier in the Bible, God had made some promises to them. Specifically, he promised these kind of things.

[7 : 34] He said, if you pay attention to these laws and are careful to follow them, then none of your men or women will ever be childless. Or God said later on, if you fully obey the Lord your God, you will always be at the top, never at the bottom.

Now, this would be really confusing for someone like Hannah, who thinks, but I am childless and I totally feel at the bottom. What is God doing? Clearly Hannah is suffering and Israel as a whole are right at the bottom.

What's going on? What's going on? Hannah's suffering is being highlighted as a symbol of what's going on in Israel more widely. C.S. Lewis, who's the author of the Chronicles of Narnia, said this. He said, pain is a megaphone, is God's megaphone to wake up a deaf world. And I think that's what's going on here.

Pain is God's megaphone to wake up a deaf world. Hannah's painful situation, really painful situation, is being used by God and highlighted for us at the start of the day.

[8 : 48] It's God's life, God's life, is being used by God and highlighted for us at the start of 1 Samuel. Like a painful megaphone to wake us up to the fact that things in Israel are not all right. Things in Israel are a mess.

Pain does that, doesn't it? It shows us that things in life, in the world are not right. That we need God's help and we long for him to fix things and bring his new creation, where a world will be free of sin and suffering.

And for Hannah, her particular suffering is like a signal or a megaphone that things in Israel are not all right. Both Hannah and the whole country of Israel need a great turnaround from God.

With all these things Hannah faced, we see how much she would need a great turnaround. You imagine every year she and her family go on this trip to Shiloh to worship God.

And all these things that she's facing come together at once. She must have longed so much for God to turn things around. But Hannah is an amazing example for us for a few reasons.

[9 : 59] And the first one is that as we cry with Hannah, she'll teach us to cry to the Lord. Look at verse 10. It says, in her deep anguish, Hannah prayed to the Lord, weeping bitterly.

She told God everything that she was feeling. And then she makes a big promise to God, a vow. Hannah, 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 for all the days of his life. No razor will ever be used on his head. Hannah is praying desperately. She's crying. She pours out her soul to the Lord. She feels right at the bottom.

And Eli, the high priest, sees her. And what does he say? He thinks, well, her lips are moving, but no voice is coming out.

It's pretty weird. I've never seen that before. Somebody acting at the temple or crying. She must be drunk. And Eli rebukes her.

[11 : 06] He tells Hannah, stop being drunk and go away. It will be a bit like coming to church one day. You have had just the worst week. And you come to church and cry.

Understandably. And someone says, what on earth are you doing? Crying in church? You must be drunk. Get out of here. It would be horrible. It would be so horrible.

But Hannah, even though she's weak and right at the bottom, isn't a pushover. She tells the truth clearly to Eli. And perhaps Eli is a bit taken aback by it.

He says, go in peace. And may the God of Israel grant what you have asked of him. Hannah takes this as a good sign. Goes home with her husband.

She eats and her face is no longer sad. And that's where we pause for now. But it's worth just saying, Hannah's story is really, really sad.

[12 : 03] We want to cry with her. And I think if we read it and sit with it properly, it does make us ask questions like, does God hear us when life really hurts?

Why is it that bullies get to be on top often and those who suffer at the bottom? Why often does God seem to not allow life to be fair?

And yet, as we cry with Hannah, Hannah's an amazing example to us. Firstly, because she helps us cry to God. Because she believes he is the one who can cause a turnaround.

Being at the bottom shows us something very important about God. And it shows us that he is the one that we really need. And for Hannah, perhaps that's why she's left at the bottom for quite so long.

It tells her, her and us, that God is the one that she really needs. And that's the first thing. We cry with Hannah. And secondly, we can celebrate with Hannah.

[13 : 04] Probably you know how the story ends. It's good news for Hannah. What happens next? Verse 19. Early in the morning, they arose and worshipped before the Lord, and then went back to their home at Ramah.

Elkanah made love to his wife Hannah, and the Lord remembered her. Now, the Lord remembering her, it doesn't mean that God had kind of ever forgotten her with like a mental problem or that he was struggling in an exam.

He remembers her means he remembers what's going and wants to, and does act to rescue her.

He remembers he acts to rescue her. And so in the course of time, Hannah became pregnant and gave birth to a son.

This is what Hannah has been wanting for so, so long. And so we can say Hannah has found a great big turnaround. Here we go.

Hannah must feel like Hannah must feel like she's on top of the world. The thing that she's waited for for so, so long has been answered by God. All the years of taunts, of tears, of longing.

[14 : 18] And now she has a baby, a son. She can say, because I asked the Lord for him, now I have this son. And so she names him Samuel.

But in her rejoicing, we see a second amazing thing about Hannah. First, we saw her faith to cry to God, and now her faith to keep her promise to God.

Hannah waits until Samuel is weaned. That means he can begin to eat proper food. And probably in that culture, he'd be weaned aged two or three years old.

Hannah cares for Samuel and wants to make sure he's properly looked after. She is still his mum.

She still loves him very much. But she keeps her promise and takes him to Shiloh and presents him for a lifetime of service to the Lord.

And the Lord has given to her and she gives back to the Lord. But do you notice Hannah honours the Lord so amazingly? She doesn't do what we might consider to be best for her or best for her family or her child even.

[15:28] But she brings her precious child, the one she loves so much, and presents him for a lifetime of service to the Lord. Can you imagine that?

Receiving what you have most desperately longed for from God and saying, I want to give this back to God forever. Hannah is an amazing example of faith and sacrifice for us.

Do you see, the people on top in life often don't realise that everything they have is a gift from God. But the people who are on the bottom in life often are able to realise that the things they have are a gift from God.

Perhaps that time of Hannah's waiting for Samuel prepared her to give Samuel back to God. And we're going to see in the next few weeks, it's really good that she did.

Because Samuel was not just for her, but was for all of Israel. I want to say though, Hannah's story is going to make us wonder something very important though.

[16:39] And that is, if we pray like Hannah, will God always answer our prayers and fix all our problems like he seems to for Hannah? The truth is, this Bible story is not a life hack which explains that if we cry enough, or are humble enough, we can demand that God answers every one of our prayers.

But Hannah's story does help us, because it shows us what God is like. I found this quote really helpful this week. It says this, this passage does not promise that God will always do what he did with Hannah.

But it does display a God who listens, whose nature is to remember the trouble of his people, and one who meets helplessness with help, and powerlessness with rescue.

And sometimes we will ask God for a great turnaround, and his answer will be, not yet, or not at all. But at other times the answer will be yes.

And for all of us, if we're trusting in Jesus, we will experience the greatest turnaround that there's ever been. What we can be sure of is this.

[17:56] The God of Hannah is our God. Which means, the God of Hannah, who listens, who remembers, and who acts to bring a great turnaround, is our God.

And through Jesus, God has promised that one day he will make everything right. He will finish his plan to rid the world of sin and suffering, and an amazing and happy future is certain for us.

And that's why we can celebrate with Hannah. Because the God of Hannah is our God. We know that he always hears us, even when life hurts.

And he always has purposes, even in our suffering, even if we don't know them. And we know that God always promises to bring the greatest turnaround of all.

Which means, in the lowest, it's not working, in the lowest moments of our lives now, we can look to an amazing God, who is capable of doing what he did for Hannah, and will bring the greatest turnaround ever through Jesus.

[19:05] And the God of Hannah, the story of Hannah, in 1 Samuel, kicks off the whole book. And it's going to mean that the reader of 1 Samuel knows that they can have hope in the God of Hannah, even when they're at the lowest moments.

In the lowest moments of 1 Samuel, and in the lowest moments of the whole Bible history story.

That actually, God can turn things around. And through Jesus, we see that God will and is turning things around.

That one day we looked forward to a time of no more pain, or sin, or suffering. So we cry with Hannah, we celebrate with Hannah, and lastly, we're going to sing with Hannah.

Hannah's experience leads her to sing. But did you notice, her song isn't about herself, or about her baby. It's a song about God.

Hannah has this amazing song about God, who hears our cries and brings a great turnaround. And we see that in the first couple of verses.

[20:15] But actually, we see it described, I think, most helpfully, perhaps, in verses 4 to 8, where we get all these little pictures. And we're going to get pictures like the weapons of a warrior which are broken.

Weapons of a warrior might look quite big and scary, but when they're broken, they go right at the bottom. Or we're going to see stories of those who had lots of food suddenly going hungry.

Like this quite fat man whose dinner has suddenly disappeared. He's going to go right at the bottom. But we also see stories like those who stumbled, like this old man on crutches, armed with strength, able to jump up and down.

Who's suddenly at the top. Or this woman, who was hungry, is now well fed with some delicious chicken drumstick, I think. Hannah's song is amazing because it's all about a great turnaround. Those who were at the bottom end up at the top. And actually, those who are at the top end up at the bottom. Maybe you notice one of the lines talks, it's probably the closest line to Hannah's story, at the end of verse 5.

[21 : 38] It says, she who was barren has born seven children, but she who has had many sons pines away. But actually, even that verse is not all about Hannah and Samuel, because Hannah never does have seven children.

Instead, this line is another one showing us that this song really is all about God. And it's another poetic picture of the God who can turn things around.

But Hannah's experience leads her to sing and praise God for all of this. And you can see the pattern in the song, right? The pattern of the great turnaround. Those who are at the bottom end up on top.

And those who are at the top end up on bottom. And it's explained, I think, by the last little verse of the song. Look at the end of verse 9, start of verse 10.

It says this. It is not by strength that one prevails. Those who oppose the Lord will be broken. It means this.

[22 : 40] Don't trust in your own strength. If you set yourself up against God, he will bring you down. But if, like Hannah, you humbly trust in God from a place of weakness, he will lift you up.

Hannah teaches us in this song. This is the character of God. The one who brings a turnaround. And as I said, Hannah's song sets up the whole story of 1 and 2 Samuel.

Where we'll see time and time again, even great kings who trust in their own strength. And set themselves up against God. And if they do that, God will bring them down.

But those who are humble and trust in God for help, God will lift them up. For the Lord brings down the proud and lifts up the humble. Actually, I reckon if you really believed and understood Hannah's song, it would be a pretty helpful key for lots of the rest of the Bible.

Like when you read the stories of the kings of Israel in Kings or in Chronicles. I reckon if you'd compared them to Hannah's song and said, do they trust in themselves and put themselves up high?

[23 : 55] Well, we know what's going to happen to them. Or do they humble themselves and trust in God? Well, we know from Hannah's song what's going to happen to them. Honestly, the same is true for us today.

If we trust in our own strength and are proud and exalt ourselves up against God, the destiny is he will humble us down.

But if we are humble and trust in God and ask him for help, for strength, for most of all the forgiveness of our sins, God has promised that he will lift us up.

Everyone is going to be humbled at some point. The question is, are you going to be humbled now in this life and trust in God?

Or are you going to be humbled on the final day? And that will be your destiny forever at the bottom. Finally, as we sing with Hannah, you might have noticed that we hear echoes of another woman's song in the Bible.

[25 : 02] Hundreds of years later, another woman, that is Mary, the mother of Jesus, sings a very similar song.

Look at these couple of lines from Mary's song. Mary sings, my soul glorifies the Lord, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant.

He has brought down rulers from their thrones, but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things, but has sent the rich away empty. God's pattern of hearing and helping the humble who trust in him and bringing down the proud who hate him continues.

And Mary sings because she is about to see another surprising child. Jesus, God's ultimate king and saviour of his people.

If Hannah is the trailer, then it's like Jesus is the full movie has come out. Jesus is the one who came not with worldly power, but with humility, a baby in a manger.

[26 : 12] He was a friend of sinners, the poor and the outsider. And his teaching was that blessed are those who hunger now for you will be satisfied.

But woe to you who are well fed now for you will grow hungry. In his life, in his teaching, Jesus showed this. He lifted the lowly and challenged the proud.

And Jesus took the lowest place of all. On the cross, he takes the very lowest place, taking our sin on himself. And because of that, God exalts him to the highest place.

That is like the greatest turnaround of the whole Bible. Jesus, who was right at the bottom, ends up right on top. And so today, as we sing with Hannah, we get to learn this pattern of how God acts. It gives us a key to one and two Samuel. It actually gives us a key to the whole Bible and to our lives too. If we are humble and trust in God and ask for his help and forgiveness, he will lift us up to be with Jesus.

[27 : 25] But if we are proud and exalt ourselves against God, he will send us down. So we've cried with Hannah. We've celebrated with Hannah.

And we've sung with Hannah. And all of Hannah's story shows us what God is like. I hope you can see that Hannah is an amazing woman from our story.

But I hope even more, and I think Hannah would hope this too, that you can see how amazing her God is, our God is. The question we had at the beginning, does God hear us when life hurts?

Hannah's answer would be yes. God is very capable of acting in power. And his nature is to bring a turnaround, to lift up the humble who trust in him, to bring down the proud who dishonor him.

And as I've said already, that doesn't mean God will fix every problem that we want straight away.

And it might mean we have to trust him from low moments, even for a lifetime.

[28 : 30] But we can trust that his ultimate plan is to bring a great turnaround, like we see pictured in Hannah's life. And we're going to finish by singing together the words of Hannah's song.

And so if Jenny is going to come and play the piano for us, and we're going to sing a slight English adaptation so that the words more easily fit to a tune that we know.

But it means that we really can join in with Hannah's song and praise the God that Hannah has learnt about through her story. And you'll know the tune. It's the tune from Come Thou Fount.

And we're going to sing the words of Hannah's song. So if you'd like to stand, we can sing together.

Thank you.