

A Small Reversal

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Preacher: Canon David Short

[0 : 00] Heavenly Father, we have heard already that you, with you, all things are possible. And so we ask now, as we turn to your word, that you would speak with us yourself, that you would reveal yourself to us and do what no one can do, give us life.

And we ask this in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen. Well, it would be terrific to open your Bible at 1 Samuel chapter 1.

We are going to begin a series today on the books of 1 and 2 Samuel, which were originally one book. And I make it page 225. And as you do that, I want to say what a personal joy it is to have Bishop Don with us this morning.

I'm very grateful to him for his encouragement, his shepherding, his leadership, his example and his prayers. And his ability to be with us today is a gift to us on this, our second Sunday.

Because it's the second Sunday, now is the time to start, begin complaining. And if you have any complaints, take them to Bishop Don. That's fair.

[1 : 23] I think the question really for us this week is, is there any real future in this for us? Do we have a future? The troubles of the last 10 years, the losing the property, in my view, unjustly, despite the gracious welcome last week from the pastor and the leaders of the Assembly Church, the Oak Ridge Church here, I still feel like a pilgrim and we are still guests.

And we had to make this pilgrimage and this transition not of our own choosing. And you have a senior minister who's a little bit feeble. And you all feel quite weary and you all feel like you need a big lie down.

And I think we're very conscious of our weakness and our powerlessness. There is no health in us. We have no power of ourselves to help ourselves. And the question is, where is any new spiritual vitality going to come from?

Where is spiritual growth and life and vision, where is it going to arise? Is it going to come from a new governance structure? No.

Is it going to come from a vision statement or being Anglican or trying hard? Well, as we begin the series in 1 and 2 Samuel, we go all the way back to 1100 BC.

[2 : 51] And the people of God were asking exactly this question, do we have a future? And our troubles are nothing compared to their troubles. Because in 1100 BC, the people of God were in a complete mess.

They had been rescued from cruel slavery in Egypt by the power of God's mighty hand. They had taken the promised land by God's mighty hand.

But after Joshua dies, they just settle down and grow comfortable. Instead of finishing what God had called them to do, they take the easy spiritual path.

And they begin to compromise with the gods of the Philistines. And they turn away from listening to the voice of God and from worshipping him alone.

When they got to the promised land, things were all really good. But gradually over time, they just surrendered to the spirit of the time. And if you go back to the next big book, the book of Judges, it is the story of a downward spiral.

[3 : 58] In fact, if you just flick back two pages to the very last verse in the book of Judges, it will tell you the tale. This is the end of the book of Judges, 21-25.

In those days, there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes. Absolutely, they did. Instead of being God's people under God's rule, living in God's place, it was like the wild, wild west, where might was right.

The book of Judges was a time of complete anarchy and lawlessness. Occasionally, a warlord would step up to the plate, calling himself a judge. And the final judge was Samson.

And when your spiritual leader is called Samson, you know you're in trouble. And some of the passages in Judges are so explicit and so gruesome, they cannot, they're not allowed to be read in the synagogue even today.

There was moral and spiritual anarchy. And it left Israel vulnerable to the Philistines, which were much more powerful. Although the ark of God had travelled into Shiloh, this town, nowhere town really, the clergy there were corrupt.

[5 : 23] But, of course, what we think of as the crisis is not really the crisis. It's another iceberg issue for Israel. Their issue was not so much political or military strength or organisational structure.

Their issue, the true crisis, was spiritual. So, just turn over to 1 Samuel, chapter 3, verse 1. We're moving around.

We're going to come to 1 Samuel 1 in just a minute. In chapter 3, verse 1, the second half of verse 1 we read, And the word of the Lord was rare in those days.

There was no frequent vision. The real problem was a famine of the word of God, which is absolutely, utterly devastating, because as Jesus says, we shall not live, we shall not live by bread alone, but by every word, that every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.

And if you go, and this verse here, this 3, 1, explains the mess at the end of Judges. In those days there was no frequent vision, and that explains in those days there was no king in Israel.

[6 : 41] Of course there was a king in Israel. God was their king, but they had turned from him. So these two books of Samuel are at a time when the very existence of the people of God is in question.

And the books track the story of a massive transformation and transition in the life of God's people, where God literally brings life out of death.

And you can see this if you look at where the books begin and where they end. The books begin with chaos and anarchy, and they end with the kingdom of God at rest.

They begin with tribal warlords, and they finish with David, God's chosen king on the throne. And they begin with instability, and the future itself is in question, and they end with the promised eternal rule of the Son of God.

And I don't want to give too much away today, because we're going to take a while to go through these two books. But what God is doing is preparing the world for the birth of his Son.

[7 : 51] And I want to go out on a limb just for a moment and say I don't think there's any more important part of the Old Testament for understanding Jesus in the New Testament than 1 and 2 Samuel.

How's that? This is where the language of Son of God, this is where the kingdom of God, this is where Messiah comes from, God's anointed king. They all come from 1 and 2 Samuel.

And there are three big names, Samuel, who's a prophet, Saul, who's a king, a failure, David, who's the third king. We don't get to David until chapter 16.

And the reason is because any future for God's people is tied up with the question of what kind of leader does God want us to follow? You see, God does not send them a six-foot-six athlete with a Hollywood smile.

He doesn't give them a new political structure. He first sends them His word and that's why we begin with the prophet Samuel. So, one more verse before we go back to chapter 1.

[8 : 53] The end of chapter 3, down the bottom of page 227, verse 19. And Samuel grew and the Lord was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground.

And all Israel from Dan to Beersheba knew that Samuel was established as a prophet of the Lord. And the Lord appeared again at Shiloh, for the Lord revealed himself to Samuel at Shiloh by the word of the Lord.

Samuel must come before the king comes because our great need is not for just any king. You know, we don't need someone super powerful, a kind of a medieval monarch or a constitutional monarch or a superman who's ethically clean.

We need a leader from God who rules for God, who can bring us back to God, who can rescue us. We need an anointed king, a king of God's own choosing.

So, this is where the book begins, in chaos, in crisis, in death and barrenness. And the question rises, is there a future for God's people? And as Deb wonderfully read these passages to us, you could see that chapter 1, we're getting there, chapter 1 is the narrative of the birth of Samuel and chapter 2 is Hannah's praise song telling us what it's all about.

[10:16] When I was a teenager going to church, I walked into church one Sunday night and the curate asked me to read the first reading and I thought, sure, he said 1 Samuel chapter 1. And I remember coming to that word there in verse 1 and really realizing I should have done my homework.

So, someone asks you to read the Bible as you come to church, say, can I think about it? All right, chapter 1 is the narrative and I've called it from death to life, bitterness to worship. And as you noticed, it comes to us in three scenes. The first scene in verses 1 to 8 and we don't start in the big city, we don't start in the palace, we don't start at the centre, we start right out in the boonies with a guy who is completely insignificant and whose family is in a complete mess. Verse 2, he has two wives, the name of one is Hannah and the name of the other is Penina. Penina has oodles of children, Hannah has none. Hannah has a problem with no human solution. She is barrenness. She is lifeless. She has no real future. She is like Israel. It is a crisis of hope for her.

[11:28] No child, no heir, no possibilities. She has no real future. Like Sarah with Abraham had no real future. Like Rebecca with Isaac.

Like Rachel with Jacob. There's nothing she can do. She can't arrange it. She can't achieve it. Her sadness is that she needs the gift, the gift of life and new life and there's nothing she can do. But things get worse in verses 3 to 8. Hannah's life is made of misery because Elkanah is up and married a second wife, Penina, at the same time.

And Penina not only seems to be able to produce children at will, she's a saddest. And each year, Elkanah takes his family up to Shiloh for a religious occasion. He's a believer. And in verse 3, we first meet these two men, the sons of Eli, who are priests, Hophni and Phinehas. And I just, we're going to come across this in the next weeks. These are bad guys.

[12:29] They are religious thugs. They use their position at the temple and tabernacle for personal, sexual, financial gain. And anyone who spoke out against them would be beaten.

And old Eli, who was the resident priest, what did he do? Absolutely nothing. He was a good man, but he was weak. So verse 5, to Hannah, Elkanah gave, well, it's not really, he gave a portion because he loved her, though the womb had closed her womb.

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

Therefore, Hannah wept, wouldn't eat. And Elkanah, her husband, said to Hannah, why do you weep? And why do you not eat? And why is your heart sad? Am I not more to you than ten sons? To which we say, no, you're not. This is, I mean, this is a picture of domestic misery, grand scale.

[13:36] You know, Penina takes every opportunity to throw the very cause of sadness back into Hannah's face. She's vindictive. And she, going up to the feast only makes things worse.

It gives them close proximity. Penina's there with all the children and she's fat with twins again. She says, it's the Lord who closed her womb, Hannah. What are you going to do about it? And Hannah has a number of marks of depression.

She can't eat. She's constantly weeping. And although I think I would give points to Elkanah for trying, this is just my take on it, I think he asks four really stupid questions, frankly.

Why are you weeping? And then, aren't I not more to you than ten sons? You know, it's all about me and aren't I adequate for you? Let's not dwell there.

Come on. So here is the opening scene of the book. It's domestic mess. Here is a woman, Hannah. She's trapped with a rival, with a husband who needs at least to go to sensitivity school.

[14:45] She has a lifeless womb, no future to speak of. She's a microcosm of Israel. Now in the second scene from verses 9 to 20, everything slows down and we come to one particular day, one day of desperation.

Who can Hannah go to in her lifelessness? Who can she go to from the persecution from Peninnah? Verse 10, she was deeply distressed and prayed to the Lord and wept bitterly. And she vowed a vow and said, O Lord of hosts. Incidentally, that's Yahweh Sabaoth. Hosts is the word Sabaoth. There's a special cup of coffee and piece of cake for those of you who got that at the bank.

O Lord of hosts, if you will indeed look on the affliction of your servant and remember me, here she is in the tabernacle, not forget your servant and give to your servant a son.

I will give him to the Lord all the days of his life and no razor shall touch his head. It's an amazing speech and as old Eli is sitting by the door watching what's going on, Hannah is praying silently although her lips are moving.

[15 : 57] It's profound, personal pain and agony. She's pouring out her lifelessness to God, to the Lord of hosts because where else, I mean, where else do we take it?

You know, if it's the Lord who's closed our womb, who else can you go to? It's very important. This prayer of Hannah's, it is the turning point of the chapter and it is the turning point of the books of Samuel and it's the turning point of the history of Israel and it is the turning point of the people of God and for the world itself because this is the beginning of God sending his son.

Remember last week when we were in the book of Hebrews, we came across that verse that says, Without faith, it's impossible to please God. Whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.

This is how faith works. It doesn't just, it's not passive resignation, it's not fatalism, it's not being nice publicly but plotting revenge privately.

It's knowing that God is good and that he holds the future and it's taking action toward him, it's seeking him out. And Hannah uses the language of Exodus, look on our affliction and remember us and she prays over and over and over.

[17 : 30] And did you notice in verse 13 that now for the second time, Hannah's tears are misunderstood. She's praying with such intensity and Eli, the old priest, thinks that she's on the bottle.

So he calls out in verse 14 and this is David's short translation, Get off the grog woman. I was going to use plonk but I'm not sure that's so widely understood here.

See here is the past, here's the state of pastoral care in Israel. The spiritual leader of Israel can't tell the difference with someone pouring their heart out in prayer and someone rolling drunk.

Where was Dan giffed when they needed him? I mean imagine, imagine being a communion and coming up to one of the prayer teams and God's laid something heavily on your heart and you feel trapped and lifeless and nowhere to go.

You pour out your heart to God and the prayer team may tell you to go and sleep it off. You'll be better in the morning. Verse 15 Hannah answered No my Lord she says I'm a woman troubled in spirit I've neither drunk wine nor strong drink but I've been pouring out my soul before the Lord.

[18 : 45] Don't regard your servant as a worthless woman. All along I've been speaking out of my great vexation and anxiety. And then Eli suddenly speaks in his capacity as the priest of the people of God.

Go in peace he says the God of Israel grant your petition you've made to him and she says in words that remind us of Mary let your servant find favour in your eyes.

The woman went away and ate and her face was no longer sad. It's amazing. Her joy is immediate. She does not know whether God has answered her prayer but she's changed by the reality of her time with God.

and in the last two verses of this middle scene report the happy news God does exactly as she asked he remembers her with a powerful remembering and gradually child comes and Hannah's future opens up for her and for Israel because she's given the gift of life.

And then in the final scene verses 21 to 28 Hannah's despair is replaced not just with happiness but with worship worship of the Lord the Lord who gives life to the dead who calls into existence the things that do not exist it's the Lord who's Hannah's hope he is the key person in this chapter he's the actor it's the Lord who closed her womb it's the Lord to whom she prays it's the Lord who grants her petition it's the Lord who remembered Hannah and so she fulfills her vow by giving Samuel back to the Lord taking him to the temple before the ark and while she's waiting to bring him to the temple Elkanah speaks a word in verse 23 he says only let the word of God be established which I think is Elkanah speaking better than he knows somehow he sees the boys coming as having to do with God's word and the chapter finishes with Samuel worshipping before the Lord at Shiloh well now brothers and sisters what do we do with this story how do you read

[20 : 55] Old Testament like this what do you do with it I mean do we take Hannah as an example and say to each other listen if you're really in difficulty pray hard hard hard and God will give you what you want if we did that why don't we take Peninnah as an example or what about Elkanah I

mean Elkanah in the second half of the chapter not the first half well I think we're very fortunate about this I shall tell you that one of the commentaries I read this week had no fewer than six lessons on child raising from this chapter is that what it's about well the relief is that Hannah tells us exactly what it means because in chapter 2 verse 1 she bursts into spirit inspired prophecy telling us exactly what the events mean and you may be surprised to know and those of you who are going to be studying 1 and 2 Samuel that at the end of 2 Samuel

King David himself bursts into hear a spirit inspired prophecy and sings a psalm of praise to God saying many of the same things that Hannah says and these two songs bookend the books of Samuel helping us understand what they're really about and we're not going to go through it in detail this psalm although I would encourage you to read it and compare it to Mary's song in Luke chapter 1 that would be Luke chapter 2 I'm sorry but let me just make three comments what's chapter 1 about 1 it's about God if you were in Hannah's shoes and you had to write an experience about God giving you the gift of life like this what would you write I'd give a verse to Penina how hard things were I'd give a verse to Samuel what a delight he is

I'd give thanksgiving to God Elkanah not so much but Hannah's song is not about any of those things Hannah's song is about God my heart exalts in the Lord my strength is exalted in the Lord my mouth derives my enemies I rejoice in your salvation verse 2 there is none holy like the Lord there is none besides you there is no God like our God I went through the psalm carefully there are 35 references directly and indirectly to God that's why Hannah's prayer in chapter 1 is the turning point prayer is always the turning point it's only in prayer it's only in the presence of God that we are given the ability to see things as they really are to see that our needs are not the biggest issue we can moan and complain about our weakness and our feebleness and our difficulties all day but I tell you the sign that we truly believe in our feebleness is that we actually pray if you go back through chapter 1

Hannah's prayer is mentioned 11 times it's when she prays to the same God who closed her womb that her fears and her failure are cut down to size that the future opens up that's how prayer works it's because we are speaking and pouring out our bitterness to God a prayer reverses the effects of suffering prayer reverses the attacks of Satan I mean even Penina's persecution is gathered up to God if Penina had not been so nasty would Hannah have poured out a bitterness to God it's only in prayer that we begin to see that God's grace often comes to us wrapped in suffering is that not true is that not true for us it's about God it's not about you it's not about us it's not about me Hannah can see how big this is she sees her becoming pregnant has a very big public dimension to it she speaks about all creation in verse 8 and the ends of the earth verse 10 because the birth of the baby is bigger than Hannah had imagined it's part of God's salvation in prayer we speak better than we know and if we were to read on in Samuel we know that this child becomes the king maker and the king breaker by prayer the domestic details in our everyday lives are brought into connection with

God and his purposes with salvation with judgment a new life as you read the psalm we find it's about God secondly it's about life Hannah's psalm has a very simple structure it's like a V or an arrow point lying sideways like this it begins and it ends exulting in the strength of God and right at the centre the core of the psalm which is the point of the psalm is verse 6 which I read to you the Lord kills and brings to life the Lord brings down to Sheol and raises up God alone is holy God alone is mighty God alone controls life he alone has the keys of death and hell God alone can bring the transformation and the life and the vitality that we so desperately need in God alone is our hope and the way that he does it is by reversal we don't have time for this but do you remember when we were in

[26 : 44] Luke's gospel so much of what salvation looks like is a great reversal a reversal of death a reversal of sin a reversal of values and Jesus takes on all the things we worship and he says he just clears the board he shatters the way we look at our status our wealth and our looks and our achievement and he says what's exalted among humans is an abomination to God and Hannah sees it see verse 7 he makes poor he makes rich he brings low he exalts Hannah can see that God brings transformation and life through reversal sometimes he does it despite corrupt clergy sometimes he does it through nasty people like Penina but the most utterly impossible reversal of all life out of death that's God's God alone holds the gift of life in his hands and Hannah says he's a God of knowledge he doesn't always explain it to us but he gives us this gift he gives that gift to all who call upon him and seek him and call upon him in faith it is about God and it's about life and

finally thirdly it's about

God's king and the future did you notice in verse 10 right at the end of the psalm Hannah makes a very curious reference to God's king there is no king in Israel nobody's thinking about a king but she says the last half of that verse the Lord will judge the ends of the earth he will give strength to his king he will exalt the power of his anointed right up to verse 9 Hannah has been talking in the present tense and now in verse 9 and 10 she goes into the future it's only the God of life who knows the future only God can speak with any integrity about the future and Hannah speaks the word of God if God alone can give life our future is with him and Hannah tells us that any true future is inextricably bound up with God's king not any king but with this king the anointed messiah one that's what anointed means that's what messiah means anointed and if you've been a Christian for a while you'll recognize and know that when we open the new testament Mary is singing almost exactly the same tune it begins with another woman who's barren another prophet who comes and then the angel appears to Mary and says your son will be great he will be called the son of the most high and the Lord God will give him the throne of his father David and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever and of his kingdom there will be no end that is why I am very confident about the future we have a joyful hope not because of who we are not because of what we do not because of our abilities and gifts but because of that child born to Mary the Messiah God's King that's why we gather to worship here today because of the biggest and most stunning reversal of all which are about to celebrate the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ through his death and resurrection Jesus took our death on himself and has given us life he's taken barrenness the life of barrenness and he's opened up for us a future a sure future the promise of life that cannot be taken away by death a life of constant newness of renewal in the spirit a life of glory a life that we enjoy together and that we deeply want others to find and we as a church we've got to do everything we can to build our lives individually and as a church around this Jesus Christ and his death and resurrection because our future as the future of the entire world depends entirely on the anointed king level of our feebleness doesn't really matter really it's not the key factor you might feel it is it's not just like Hannah's inability was not the key factor and offering God acceptable worship means placing our hopes and our future and our dreams on Jesus Christ seeking first his kingdom praying your kingdom come and if you want to know what it looks like for the kingdom to come you're going to have to keep coming and hear the rest of 1 and 2 Samuel so let's kneel as Bev leads us in prayer