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The God of Reversals

1 Samuel 1-2v11

Introduction

I think we can definitely say the summer is over now. But it's been a good summer, with an unusual amount of sunshine for Scotland, and plenty of days when we could get out and enjoy a hike in the hills, a swim in the sea or a walk in the park. I noticed something and had it confirmed by a programme I listened to: it's been a really good year for butterflies. But also a really good year for wasps.

Contrast - 1 Samuel is full of them - good priests and bad priests, good kings and bad kings.

We're going to see the plans of men fail badly, and the plans of God grow towards glorious fulfilment. We've seen the Messiah introduced in Genesis as a child of Eve, later in Genesis as coming from the nation of Israel, now we'll see the royal line of David come into being.

Man makes bad choices, but our God is the God of reversals, and he is going to turn things around.

Context

At the start of this book we're at the end of the period known as the time of the judges. Israel had come out of Egypt, conquered the land that God had promised them, but then faced a series of challenges as they failed to follow God, fell under the power of an enemy, were rescued by a judge sent by God, and had a period of peace before falling again. The book of Judges shows us a downward spiral, ending up with the nation in chaos, not going God's way at all, and looking at the nations around them with envy instead of celebrating their unique position as God's chosen people.

Strife

And so it's fitting that we start the book with a family in turmoil. We're introduced to Elkanah and his two wives, Peninnah and Hannah. It's not the first time we've seen a man with two wives, showing favouritism, and bad feeling due to a lack of children.

Elkanah seems to be a reasonably pious man. He goes to Shiloh, where the tabernacle was, every year to worship and sacrifice. He doles out portions to the family so they could share in the offering, but he showed favouritism to Hannah by giving her a double portion. Maybe it's that favouritism that sparked off Peninnah to provoke Hannah, as she mocked her for not having any children, while Peninnah seemingly had several. Children were often seen as a blessing from the Lord, so Peninnah used the visit to the temple to point out Hannah's unfavourable position with God. Notice the language in verse 6: *the Lord had closed her womb*. The same provocation happened every year - Hannah must have dreaded what should have

been a joyful trip. She *wept and would not eat*. Elkanah shows his concern, but a massive lack of insight, by asking her *"Am I not more to you than ten sons?"*.

I wonder if you've felt like that - that you are less favoured by the Lord. Other people seem to be doing well. It might be health, wealth, family, career, but we can look around us and see that a lot of people seem to be doing better than us. Maybe God loves them more than us. The first lesson we learn from this passage is that God doesn't always shower practical blessings on the people that he loves. He does love Hannah and we're gonna see that later, but at this point it's not obvious from her situation. How could she be sure of God's love? She had his promises to her people. There are times in life when we have to hold on to his promises, because our situation doesn't seem blessed. Yet these times make us stronger. Illness, poverty and strife are not pleasant. But they can grow our faith. They're also opportunities for brothers and sisters in Christ to show love, by praying, comforting and supporting us when we're going through difficulties. Just don't suggest that your friendship is better than 10 sons.

Drunk?

Hannah does the right thing in response to her grief. She goes to the tabernacle and prays to the Lord. She makes a vow that if God gives her a son she will give him back to God. That's a strange prayer, isn't it? But then it maybe shows Hannah's motive for her sadness. It wasn't that she didn't possess a son, it was that she hadn't been shown God's favour.

We're going to hear later on about Hophni and Phineas, Eli's wicked sons, but it's Eli himself that sees Hannah praying. It's a sign of his short sightedness that he thinks Hannah is drunk rather than deep in prayer, and we'll see the same short sightedness later on when it comes to his sons. I like Hannah's turn of phrase when she says she isn't drunk on wine but is *pouring out my soul before the Lord*.

It's hard to tell the tone of Eli's response. Look at verse 17:

> *Then Eli answered, "Go in peace, and the God of Israel grant your petition that you have made to him." [1 Samuel 1 v 17]*

Is Eli prophetically offering Hannah answer to her prayer? Or is he just off-handedly doling out a standard blessing? It may be the latter, but we see in other passages how God uses the words even of his enemies to prophecy truth. Remember the words of Ciaphas, when he said it was expedient that one man should die for the people.

Whatever his intention, Hannah accepts his blessing and leaves a changed woman. She arrived fasting and crying, and she leaves eating and no longer sad. God hasn't yet granted her prayer, but the very fact of handing over her anxiety to God makes a difference to her.

Prayer may not change your circumstance, but it will change you. That's our second lesson.

God Heard

God does grant Hannah's prayer though. Look at verses 19-20:

> *They rose early in the morning and worshiped before the Lord; then they went back to their house at Ramah. And Elkanah knew Hannah his wife, and the Lord remembered her. And in due time Hannah*

conceived and bore a son, and she called his name Samuel, for she said, "I have asked for him from the Lord." [1 Samuel 1 v 19-21]

Hannah had prayed that God remember her, and God did remember her. When the word "remember" is used in scripture it isn't just to mentally recall. After all, God can't forget us so how could he remember us? It's more than that, then, it is to actively bring to mind and to do something. In Hannah's case God's remembering was to give her a child. The thief on the cross who turned to Jesus and asked him to remember him when he came into his kingdom was asking for salvation. And we weekly have what we sometimes call a remembrance service. It should be more than just us mentally recalling what Jesus did on the cross, that recall should result in an act of worship.

Hannah called her son Samuel. The name Samuel could mean name of God, but it also sounds like the Hebrew for heard of God. Incidentally if you see a person in the Bible with El in their name - Elijah, Daniel, Joel, the El part is short for Elohim, meaning God. Elkanah means God purchased.

Samuel wasn't taken up to Shiloh for his first few years. I guess that Hannah didn't want to come before God with the son she had promised him and take him away again. So she said once the baby had been weaned, she would take him up on the next visit.

A Gift Returned

In verses 24-28 we have Hannah bringing her offering to the Lord. A bull, some flour, some wine, and most importantly her son. How hard must that have been to give up the very desire of her heart, entrusting him to the Lord?

Then they slaughtered the bull, and they brought the child to Eli. And she said, "Oh, my lord! As you live, my lord, I am the woman who was standing here in your presence, praying to the Lord. For this child I prayed, and the Lord has granted me my petition that I made to him. Therefore I have lent him to the Lord. As long as he lives, he is lent to the Lord." [1 Samuel 1 v 25-28]

Why did Hannah say she was lending Samuel to the Lord? When you lend something you still consider it yours and you expect to get it back some day. You also expect the other person to take good care of it. Hannah was entrusting Samuel to God, expecting him to take good care of her son. She didn't expect to have him returned to her during his lifetime, but maybe she was looking to be reunited with him in the glory.

What do you have that is precious to you? What would hurt to give away? Are you willing to give it to the Lord? Remember that the only reason you have it is because it was a gift from God in the first place.

Hannah's Prayer

And finally we have Hannah's prayer in chapter 2. Peter covered this a few weeks ago, so I'm not going to go into great depth with it. I wonder how it got to us. Did Hannah write it down and pass it on to Samuel when he was older? Was it a prayer that she developed and prayed regularly, and her family learned by heart too?

However it got to us, it is a powerful piece of poetry, and lifts up our hearts in praise to the God of reversals. He is the one who brings down the prideful and lifts up the humble. He has turned Hannah's life around and he is in the business of turning people's lives around today as well. Let's read the prayer through again:

"My heart exults in the Lord;
my horn is exalted in the Lord.
My mouth derides my enemies,
because I rejoice in your salvation.
"There is none holy like the Lord:
for there is none besides you;
there is no rock like our God.
Talk no more so very proudly,
let not arrogance come from your mouth;
for the Lord is a God of knowledge,
and by him actions are weighed.
The bows of the mighty are broken,
but the feeble bind on strength.
Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread,
but those who were hungry have ceased to hunger.
The barren has borne seven,
but she who has many children is forlorn.
The Lord kills and brings to life;
he brings down to Sheol and raises up.
The Lord makes poor and makes rich;
he brings low and he exalts.
He raises up the poor from the dust;
he lifts the needy from the ash heap
to make them sit with princes
and inherit a seat of honor.
For the pillars of the earth are the Lord's,
and on them he has set the world.
"He will guard the feet of his faithful ones,
but the wicked shall be cut off in darkness,
for not by might shall a man prevail.

The adversaries of the Lord shall be broken to pieces;

against them he will thunder in heaven.

The Lord will judge the ends of the earth;

he will give strength to his king

and exalt the horn of his anointed."

[1 Samuel 2 v 1-10]

The Anointed King

Did you notice verse 10? The Lord will judge the world, give strength to his king and exalt the horn of his anointed. We are at the end of the times of the judges here. We haven't yet thought about the idea of Israel having a king, and this is the first reference to the anointed king. Later on in the book Samuel is going to anoint David as future king, but here already his mother is prophetically looking forward to the coming Messiah.

The God of reversals has turned Hannah's life around. But she finishes her prayer by looking forward to the coming king who will turn the world around. Jesus is the Anointed King who came to judge, but also to rescue the world. That's why this book isn't just a bit of history and some nice poetry. It continues to draw a line that came from Eve, through Moses, Abraham, Ruth, David, and his descendants down to Jesus. And that line of the promises of salvation, ultimately fulfilled in Jesus' death on the cross, extends down to us: our lives can be turned around by him.

I don't know whether your summer has been a summer of wasps or a summer of butterflies. But God is at work, using the times we go through to glorify him and to lift us up. We're going to learn that as we follow the story of Samuel in the coming weeks.