

THE FIRST BOOK OF SAMUEL

2. Hope in Despair (1 Samuel 1:1-28)

Everyone did right in his own eyes. That was the statement that describes the age in which Elkanah's family lived. That was the statement at the end of Judges we looked at last week. Sometimes statements like this are generalisations because in all situations like this in scripture, there were always the few that were found faithful when the rest forsook the Lord - Abraham, Moses, Jeremiah. There was always the faithful remnant.

Always beware generalisations because the world is never as black and white as we'd like it to be. Neither are people. How often we come across generalisations: all Methodists are liberal, Baptist ministers don't preach the word, Welshmen are shifty, all politicians are criminals, the French have always been our enemies, all asylum seekers are bogus. Or we do it to individuals. We say it about Christians too. If someone has a weakness we condemn everything about them. If a preacher says or does something we disapprove of, we rubbish his whole ministry. Remember - we are all fallen and whatever our virtues, we do have a sinful nature and it drags us down.

As we look at these characters in the first chapter of Samuel, they are all people we can't generalise about. They all worshipped God, but they all had their weaknesses, some more than others. But in themselves and certainly in their combination, were used by God to further His purposes.

● Elkanah

And in the darkest days of early Israel was found this family who despite all the pressures around them to worship the Baals, they continued to go to Shiloh to worship. Everyone around them I'm sure said "Shiloh - that's so passé. The ark and sacrifices - so old fashioned." We know from this chapter that Shiloh was referred to as the temple. How much of a solid structure there was we don't know but we can assume that because it had been there for years so a more permanent structure had replaced the material of the tabernacle.

Be that as it may, Elkanah went up to worship regularly even though things at the temple weren't quite right because we are told that *the two sons of Eli, were priests of the LORD*. These two guys were men that displeased God as we'll find out next week and eventually brought disgrace. That was the background: Elkanah continued to worship even though it was clear that the priests involved were less than worthy of the office.

It's always good to remind ourselves that when we come to worship, we do so to worship God. Yet isn't it so easy to lose our focus to someone else? "I don't like the way he does this or that." "I don't like the hymns". "I don't like the preacher". This is even more so in a world where the Christian faith is in decline. God calls us to be faithful through thick and thin as Elkanah did because in Elkanah's faithfulness, God worked His purposes out.

We're here to worship God, to honour Him and bring Him the glory. Maybe things are not quite as we would like them, but God calls us to be faithful to Him and serve Him -

and God uses us in that. We are called to be the bringers of change - not me - all of us. All God does is call us to be faithful to Him. We may feel inadequate in ourselves, but together in the power and will of God, He will work out His ways to His glory.

● Hannah

4 Whenever the day came for Elkanah to sacrifice, he would give portions of the meat to his wife Peninnah and to all her sons and daughters. 5 But to Hannah he gave a double portion because he loved her, and the LORD had closed her womb. 6 And because the LORD had closed her womb, her rival kept provoking her in order to irritate her. 7 This went on year after year. Whenever Hannah went up to the house of the LORD, her rival provoked her till she wept and would not eat. 8 Elkanah her husband would say to her, "Hannah, why are you weeping? Why don't you eat? Why are you downhearted? Don't I mean more to you than ten sons?"

Hannah's story starts as a sad one. Whereas Elkanah was the God-fearing man, Hannah's spiritual life was blighted by a personal problem. Here was a woman who was barren - a real cause for shame in those days. Elkanah as a loving husband tried to comfort her but it was quite clear as the years went by, her childlessness got on top of her. I don't find this surprising, having been through the same experience as Elkanah and Hannah. In many women the maternal urge is very strong and the ability not to have children is a burden that becomes too hard to bear.

In those days there were no fertility clinics or even adoption agencies. Husbands with barren wives just acquired another one. There was even a clause in the Law that allowed men to divorce barren wives although there is not much evidence that it was particularly used very much. It was heartbreaking and depressing if a woman could not produce a son and heir - or any children for that matter.

What's interesting is that Hannah went to breaking point before she ended up on her knees before God. How far do we have to go before we bring God into the equation? In our society, self-dependence or dependence on other people tend to rank more highly in our minds than prayer. So if we have a problem we pick up the phone, or call on a friend, or see the doctor or whatever, before we pray. What a pity that we so often don't pray first. Or maybe it gets to breaking point before we get God involved. We see that Hannah's prayer and promise did result in blessing in the end but at what pain.

So here she is in the temple at Shiloh praying

10 In bitterness of soul Hannah wept much and prayed to the LORD. 11 And she made a vow, saying, "O LORD Almighty, if you will only look upon 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, and no razor will ever be used on his head."

Hannah's prayer in the end led to bitterness and tears. But at least she was honest! I don't think she was bitter towards God as the next verse suggests but with Peninah. As we come before God, we need to be people who are honest and say how we are thinking. There is always a tendency for Christians to pray to God to tell Him what he thinks they should do here. At least Hannah had got to the point where that's just not the way she felt. But look carefully, she at least accepted that God was sovereign in this situation *"O LORD Almighty, if you will only look upon your servant's misery and remember me .*

Hannah was desperate to be a mother which makes her prayer even more amazing because she offers to give up the motherhood that God may give her almost as quickly as she gains it by dedicating the boy to the Lord.

Following the Lord wherever He calls you to be or whatever He calls you to do is costly. For those of us who are older we kind of think that you get to a certain age and God no longer calls you. That's not true. By the nature of our church, we move forward with over half the membership over retirement age. Our state recognises retirement, unfortunately the Kingdom of God doesn't have retirement. We are all called to serve and play our role as God calls us. We'll find out in later weeks in the morning series that we all have a function, however small.

Hannah was prepared to go to the lengths of giving her son away to Shiloh - how far are we prepared to go in order to give God the glory? I might add that Hannah did as she promised and as a result of her faithfulness, God honoured her by opening her womb and she eventually had children.

God honours faithfulness. Hannah's faithfulness resulted in Samuel and a process of spiritual change in Israel. Both Elkanah and Hannah were small cogs in a big wheel. But because of their simple acts of faithfulness, God was glorified in Israel.

Let's be encouraged by this when we are feeling downcast in sickness, or discouragement or disappointment because we have a God who wants us to cast our cares on Him and know His blessing. Hannah even felt better after Eli had blessed her, before she received the miraculous answer to prayer. Sometimes we can't see the answer or the miracles, but we have a God who wants us to rest in Him, knowing that if we remain faithful, we are part of His purposes, even though we may not see the result now.

• Eli

Lastly we come to the priest, Eli. We know that Eli's sons were pretty dodgy, but scripture never tells us much about Eli himself. For the very fact that he had not curbed the activities of his sons would suggest that things were not all rosy in the house of Eli. But never judge a book by its cover:

12 As she kept on praying to the LORD, Eli observed her mouth. 13 Hannah was praying in her heart, and her lips were moving but her voice was not heard. Eli thought she was drunk 14 and said to her, "How long will you keep on getting drunk? Get rid of your wine." 15 "Not so, my lord," Hannah replied, "I am a woman who is deeply troubled. I have not been drinking wine or beer; I was pouring out my soul to the LORD. 16 Do not take your servant for a wicked woman; I have been praying here out of my great anguish and grief."

17 Eli answered, "Go in peace, and may the God of Israel grant you what you have asked of him." 18 She said, "May your servant find favour in your eyes." Then she went her way and ate something, and her face was no longer downcast.

Eli's first reaction was to think "what's this drunk doing here!!" He is quick to tick her off - what a pity he hadn't done the same to his sons! He quickly ascertains the situation and says a blessing over her - which was of course in her case quite prophetic.

However dodgy Eli was in his actions towards his sons, he did the right thing in this situation and in a couple of weeks we will find he did the right thing in another and after all, he was the man under whom Samuel studied.

Never be too quick to judge people for their failures. I remember many years ago I had a friend and as a teenager he lost his temper with someone at a church event and swore at them. Do you know how long it took him to throw off the reputation? As he went into his twenties, he was not trusted even though he had clear gifts as a leader and a teacher even though he had long since repented and curbed his temper.

How easy it is to make generalisations about people. Because we think they are wrong in one thing, we assume they are wrong and unworthy in everything. Remember this when you point the finger in this way, that three always point back at you. We are just as fallen and unworthy ourselves and we need to remember that. Look at the man or the woman and ask what God is doing - because in his mercy he uses us despite our failings. So when you see a failed leader, teacher or just any Christian, don't point but pray that God will bring them to repentance where necessary and still be able to use them despite their weaknesses. Let's remember that we are all inadequate, yet by God's grace, he can use us all. Eli for all his failings was at least aware that he needed to serve God's purposes and he became an important part of this story because of it.



If I wanted to sum up what I have said tonight, then it would be that even in our weakness and inadequacy, God still works His purposes out. All He asks is that we remain faithful and do His will - and leave the miracles to Him!

If I wanted a formula for what God is going to do with us in 2004 it is just this. We look at ourselves and our situation and see the problems. But we are called to be faithful and do God's will and count the cost - and watch Him do the miracles and bring glory to Himself and lives into His kingdom. Let me close by reading an article from a Victorian magazine which I have read before but I find it encouraging and challenging.

Prepare for Service (1890)

There was a brier growing in a ditch and there came a gardener along with his spade. As he dug around it and lifted it out, the brier said to itself, "What is he doing that for? Does he not know that I am only an old worthless brier?"

But the gardener took it into the garden and planted it amid his flowers while the brier said, "What a mistake he has made! Planting an old brier like myself among such rose trees as these!"

But the gardener came once more; and with his keen-edged knife, made a slit in the brier, and 'budded' it with a rose, and by and by, when the summer came, lovely roses were blooming on that old brier.

Then the gardener said, "Your beauty is not due to that which came out of you, but to that which came out of you, that which I put into you. Just so God can cause the most glorious roses even to grow out of such poor dried sticks as we all are."



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