

## 1 Samuel 1: Desperate Housewife

Many couples long to have children but can't. Infertile couples are like people trapped in a maze. Their grief is akin to that we experience on losing a loved one. Being infertile is a misery for many. Some blame themselves for being infertile and feel they are somehow lesser people. Some lose control over themselves and their feelings and become very bitter. Some find it hard to be grateful for anything. Some constantly think about their infertility day and night. Often such people isolate themselves since they feel so depressed when with so-called normal people who have kids. The first chapter of 1 Samuel stresses the misery endured by an infertile woman, Hannah.

Couples with children can be very insensitive when speaking with infertile couples. A mum might complain how her child keeps her up at nights to a wife who'd give her right arm to have a child. Or, with good intentions, someone might cause great hurt by suggesting the couple consider adopting a child. Adoption was certainly not an option for Hannah and it is not an option for most infertile couples in NSW. Indeed, the Docs website indicates it costs around \$40,000 for a couple to adopt a child in NSW. But Hannah did not merely have to endure the insensitivity of others. Elkanah's second wife, Peninnah took pleasure in goading and taunting Hannah about her infertility. It was impossible for Hannah to isolate herself. Every day she was confronted with the reality of Peninnah's children and the ceaseless insults. Life was a misery for Hannah.

### Samson and Samuel

But there is more to the story than Hannah's barrenness. Look how the story begins in 1 Samuel 1:1. Literally it reads: "There was once a man." How do you begin when telling a bedtime story to kids? "Once upon a time." Just as these words are familiar to children so the words "There was once a man" are a familiar introduction to some stories in the book of Judges. 1 Samuel starts up where the book of Judges left off.

One story in Judges introduced by the words "There was once a man" particularly stands out - the story of Samson (see Judges 13:2). In 1 Samuel 1 these same words now introduce the story of Samuel. There are four things these stories had in common:

1. The introductory formula "There was once a man" (Judges 13:2; 1 Samuel 1:1).
2. Both were born miraculously from mothers who are barren.
3. Both were dedicated to the Lord as Nazirites from birth, that is, as men who would express their complete devotion to God in unusual ways, e.g. not letting their hair be cut nor drinking alcohol (see Numbers 6).
4. Samson's mother was required to abstain from drinking wine (Judges 13:4). Hannah corresponds to this when, responding to Eli's misinterpretation of her behaviour, she insisted that she had not drunk any wine (1 Samuel 1:15).

What striking similarities there are between the story of Samson, the last judge in the book of Judges, and this great new leader, Samuel! Samson had more strength in his little finger than you or I have in our entire bodies. Yet he never once lifted a finger to do anything for God's people. He exemplified what was wrong with all the leaders who followed Joshua. God used them to rescue his people and deal with their enemies. But these judges were sinful men who made matters worse. The life of Samuel begins in similar vein to the life of Samson. But this time things are different. For Samuel will be revealed as the greatest leader God's people have had since Moses himself.

### Hannah, Elkanah and Peninnah

1 Samuel 1 emphasizes in all sorts of different ways the profound distress and bitterness of spirit Hannah experienced because she was infertile and incapable of giving birth to a child, let alone the son for which she craved. Look at verses 10-11:

In bitterness of soul Hannah wept much and prayed to the LORD. 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 on razor will ever be used on his head."

Do you know the Bible so well that when you pray you pray Scripture? Hannah did. She prayed using language from Exodus 3:7. There the LORD tells Moses that he has seen the misery of his people in Egypt and will deliver them. Hannah identifies her own suffering with that endured by God's people in Egypt and she cries out for God to yet again look down upon and see her own private misery as one of God's people.

Just as Moses was the answer to the Israelites' sufferings in Egypt so Samuel will be the answer to Hannah's distress and, indeed, a new Moses, a monumental leader standing at the threshold of the next great historical era for God's people. The book of Judges ends by saying "there was no king in Israel", explaining that's why people did what was right in their own eyes, engaging in idolatrous and amoral practices that were evil in God's eyes. Also the book of Ruth, between the books of Judges and 1 Samuel, ends with the anticipation of the reign of King David. The books of 1 and 2 Samuel are primarily concerned with the beginnings and development of God-provided kingship, especially through David.

God prepares us to understand the massive importance of Samuel by deliberately closing Hannah's womb, as emphasized in both verses 5 and 6. Hannah was utterly incapable of naturally producing a child. So Samuel's birth was supernatural to show he was extra special in God's plan. Hannah has no conception of this master plan. Henry Ward Beecher once said, "A babe is a mother's anchor." All Hannah experienced was the misery and shame of being a barren woman in a society that valued women by their ability to give birth to children, especially sons. We must be careful amid a small baby boom in our own church to reject such a value system.

Elkanah had two wives. One man has joked: *Why a man marries one wife is a mystery. Why he marries two is a bigamystery.* Hannah was Elkanah's first wife. He presumably married Peninnah because Hannah couldn't produce a male heir. The ABC Health and Wellbeing Website reveals one in six Australian couples is infertile. In 40% of cases the problem lies with the male, in 40% with the female, in 10% with both partners. For the other 10% the cause is unknown. Peninnah does bear children. So the problem of infertility lies with Hannah. Peninnah insults Hannah for being barren, probably assuming, like Job's friends, God disapproves of her. But it is wrong to assume such suffering is God's punishment. Christians today haven't advanced much in their understanding of God's sovereignty. One woman unable to have a baby was told by a Christian leader's wife that maybe she was infertile because of sin in her life. In verse 6 we learn that "year after year" Hannah was mercilessly taunted for being infertile.

There was a similar rivalry between Jacob's two wives, Leah and Rachel. Like Hannah Rachel was barren for many years. Eventually God opened up her womb. She became pregnant with Joseph and said, "God has taken away my disgrace", expressing the shame she had experienced as a barren woman. Elkanah, in seeking to console his

distressed wife, compares his love for Hannah with Jacob's special love for Rachel, when he says (v8): "Hannah, why are you weeping? Why don't you eat? Why are you downhearted? Don't I mean more to you than ten sons?" Remember that Jacob had ten sons before Rachel's barrenness ended.

### Hannah and Eli

Eli is introduced as the priest "sitting on a chair by the doorpost of the Lord's temple" (v9), with authority to judge and protect worship. The reference to "the doorpost" suggests the sanctuary in Shiloh was a reasonably permanent structure. It was where the ark of the covenant was located - the box that housed the Ten Commandments. It was the place where God's presence was located in a special way. That's why Hannah was there - to be in the presence of God and meet with him.

As a pious woman Hannah expressed her grief and bitterness in prayer to God at the sanctuary in Shiloh. We are told that Eli the priest watched her mouth:

Hannah was praying in her heart, and her lips were moving but her voice was not heard. Eli thought she was drunk and said to her, "How long will you keep on getting drunk? Get rid of your wine" (vv13-14).

It is significant that Acts 2 involves a similar misinterpretation. In both contexts the wrong construal of drunkenness is associated with a work of God effecting a radically new era of divine rule through God's anointed ruler (1 Sam 2:10b; Acts 2:33).

Eli, believing Hannah was drunk, rebuked her. This contrasts with Elkanah's loving response to Hannah's distress (v8). Elkanah understood Hannah's depression but was incompetent to help her. Eli, as the priestly mediator, was supposed to be able to help her but his competence was compromised by his inability to understand her. Eli was a faithless priest because he had neither a right relationship with God nor with the people of God. The closing chapters of Judges describe how profoundly ignorant Levitical priests led God's people to disaster. So too at the beginning of 1 Samuel the faithlessness of Levitical priests again resulted in catastrophe for God's people.

A man really loved a woman, but he was just too shy to propose to her. Now he was getting on in years and neither of them had ever been married. They had dated about once a fortnight for the past six years, but he was so timid he just never got around to suggesting marriage. But one day, he became determined to ask her the question. So he rings her on the phone, "June."

"Yes, this is June."

"Will you marry me?"

"Of course I will! Who's this?"

Hannah was a desperate woman living in desperate days. But, unlike June, she cares very much who will meet her need. Notably, when Eli rebukes her he asks her, "**How long** will you keep on getting drunk!" Hannah describes herself as a "determined" woman and not, as the NIV puts it, "a woman who is deeply troubled" (v15a). She prays and prays and prays, determined to look to God alone for the meeting of her profound need.

Did Eli make an understandable mistake when he mistook Hannah's piety for drunkenness? The earlier mention in verse 3 of Hophni and Phinehas, Eli's two sons, anticipates what we will soon be told about the immorality and abuses that were perpetrated at this shrine. These had become so commonplace that Eli's expectations

are more geared to finding fresh evidence of wickedness than of piety. Hannah's own response supports this conclusion because she plainly feels he is regarding her as a "wicked" (v16), immoral woman. It was not normal for people to come to the sanctuary and pour out their hearts to God in earnest prayer.

Though Eli is responsible for the corruption of the worship system he is, by virtue of his office, the one through whom God mediates his blessings to his people. So when Hannah corrects him he speaks on behalf of God telling her that she may leave in peace, with the understanding that God will grant her what she has requested. Hannah, upon hearing Eli's word of blessing, automatically takes this to be a word from God himself. So her appetite is restored and her face is no longer downcast.

### Samuel

When Elkanah next had intercourse with Hannah "the Lord remembered her", responding to her prayer and honouring Eli's words. Hannah herself recognized that the boy was indeed a specific answer to specific prayer. She called him *Samuel*. She did this partly because the name *Samuel* sounds like the Hebrew for "heard of God". However, the name Samuel literally means "name of God." Think of God's revelation of himself for God reveals himself in his name. Samuel was someone in and through whom God revealed himself in a very special way.

On December 4, 1941 the US Navy Secretary, Frank Knox publicly declared, "No matter what happens, the U.S. Navy is not going to be caught napping," Three days later, on December 7, the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbour.

When Eli met Hannah he did not realize that God had begun a process that would result in personal disaster. Eli did not know what Hannah was praying. When he uttered his words of blessing to Hannah he unwittingly approved of God's plan to replace him with Samuel, the very answer to Hannah's prayer. Eli and his sons are not fit to serve in the presence of the Lord. After Samuel is born Hannah keeps him at home for the first three years of his life until he has been weaned. As she explains to Elkanah her goal is to prepare him for the time when she will present him "before the Lord", that is, "in the presence of God" to "live there always", that is, to live in the presence of God for ever. Being in the presence of God meant an enormous amount to Hannah. She can think of nothing better for her dear son than that he should spend his entire life living in the presence of God. Indeed, after Hannah fulfils her vow the chapter ends by simply stating: "And he worshiped the LORD there." This is a statement summarizing Samuel's life after he came to live at the sanctuary. Samuel's life was a life of living in God's presence and worshiping him.

Are you a leader? God insists on competent leadership. A competent spiritual leader is attuned to what God is doing in people's lives. A competent Christian leader lives his life in the presence of God, ever praising him and seeking to honour him.

Is your life a misery because, like Hannah, for year after year you have been denied something for which you yearn with all your heart? It is a misreading of the story of Hannah to think that God will bless every infertile Christian couple with a child if they persist in prayer. But we can say that all infertility and all dashed hopes are within the sovereignty of our gracious and loving God. Therefore, if you find yourself identifying with Hannah in her misery then do recognize that sometimes enduring long periods of

suffering is necessary to the outworking of God's wonderful will. Certainly, we must all take a leaf out of Hannah's book. Express your determination in prayer. Like Hannah don't hold back in prayer. Pour out your heart and tell God how you feel and the more you suffer the more you must pray, pray, pray.

In the Garden of Gethsemane, just prior to his crucifixion, Jesus urged his disciples to persist in prayer with him. However, sleep came more naturally to them than prayer. Jesus commented, "The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak" (Mt 26:41). But following his death and resurrection he has poured out his Spirit who dwells within us. While the weakness of our flesh may overpower our willing human spirit it is no match for the Spirit of Jesus. May we live Spirit-filled lives characterized by a determination to seek the face of God in prayer!