

1 Samuel 2: The Great Reversal

Many people are uploading highly intimate detail about themselves onto the internet. One man was appointed as the CEO of a major company. He realised that as a youngster he had spent many years openly telling his friends about his problems on the internet. Now he was worried that business competitors would use this gossip to embarrass him. But how does he make sure that all of that embarrassing data will be deleted and not come back to haunt him.

You may or may not be able to delete embarrassing information about yourself uploaded to the internet. If you were hiding from a powerful criminal organisation you might change your identity, remove all records of your past, try and start a completely new life in a completely new place. But did you know that a record is kept of everything you have ever said and done and that it is impossible to erase that data? In 1 Samuel 2:3 Hannah warns, "*Do not keep talking so proudly or let your mouth speak such arrogance, for the LORD is a God who knows, and by him deeds are weighed.*"

Note that arrogant words are included in the "deeds" weighed by God. God is constantly assessing everything you and I say or do. In verse 10 Hannah says that "*those who oppose the LORD will be shattered. He will thunder against them from heaven; the LORD will judge the ends of the earth.*" The combined capacity of all our computers is pathetic compared to the mind of God. He remembers and assesses every word and deed of every individual that has ever lived and when the time comes for God to pass final judgment on you and me, and all the other billions who have walked this earth, he will judge you infallibly. You and I are biased and so our self-evaluation can't be trusted. We have highly selective memories. But God is totally impartial and that's frightening. Everything you have said and done is perfectly remembered and used in God's assessment of what kind of person you are, what kind of person I am.

What is God looking for as he assesses your words and deeds? He assesses whether they express pride or humility. Confucius rightly observed, "Humility is the solid foundation of all the virtues." For God it is the key to assaying the worth and quality of your character and mine. That's why Hannah warns, "*Do not keep talking so proudly or let your mouth speak such arrogance*" (v3a). That's why she devotes much of her prayer to the way that God humbles the proud and exalts the humble.

A bishop, a priest, and a peasant were in a great European cathedral. The bishop approached the altar rail, beat on his chest and declared, "I am nothing! I am nothing!" Then the priest approached the altar rail, beat on his chest and declared, "I am nothing! I am nothing!" The humble peasant was moved to imitate the bishop and the priest, so he approached the altar rail, beat on his chest and declared, "I am nothing! I am nothing!" The priest furiously hissed into the bishop's ear, "Who does that nobody think he is?"

This is a useful anecdote, reminiscent of Jesus' story of the Pharisee and tax collector as told in Luke 18. You can say "I am nothing" all you like but it's not for you or me to assess whether those words express humility or not. God is the Judge and he alone does the assessing. You can appear to speak and act humbly and yet in God's eyes be like the self-righteous Pharisee, reeking with the garlic of arrogance.

Peter may have been thinking of Hannah's prayer in 1 Samuel 2:1-10 when he exhorted, "All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because, 'God

opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.' Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you. (1 Pet 5:5-7). Similarly, James exhorts, "Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up" (Jas 4:10).

Hannah's prayer in 1 Samuel 2:1-10 is sandwiched between two statements which tell us that Samuel worshiped the Lord. It is also followed by a narrative which stresses how those responsible for leading God's people to honour him, namely, Hophni and Phinehas, actually "*had no regard for the LORD*" (v12). Indeed, "*they were treating the LORD's offering with contempt*" (v17). The fact that they reject their father's attempt at correction (v25) clearly indicates their arrogance and ultimate defiance of God himself. The story tells how God judges these arrogant sons and brings them down. In parallel with this, God continues to exalt his humble servant, Samuel.

Last week I spent three days dealing with an immigration problem. One of our non-English speaking background pastors and myself met with an immigration lawyer. She rang a bureaucrat who pig-headedly refused to listen to reason. The pastor's family should have their permanent residency but after almost two years his son and daughter still can't enter university courses, because they can't afford to pay the fees expected of international students. Because the application for permanent residency classes them as dependants nor are they allowed to engage in any employment which would make them no longer dependants. It is all grossly unfair. The family is suffering because of one arrogant, puffed-up petty bureaucrat.

We live in a world in which, from time to time, we all experience injustice. Hannah had tasted the bitterness of living a life that seemed very unfair. She had experienced what it was like, as an infertile woman in the culture of her day, to be treated as a worthless and despised member of society, the butt of jokes and cruel insults. Yet God had heard the cry of her heart, demonstrating in her life that he is a just God, concerned to put things right. He had delivered her from the taunts of those who had treated her like an enemy. God had satisfied the hunger of her heart. He had enabled her to have not just one but many children. He had given her new life. He had given her a respected place in society as a fertile mother. Full of wonder at what God has done for her she voices her joy in the prayer recorded in 1 Samuel 2:1-10.

It quickly becomes apparent that Hannah is not merely delighting in what God has done for her personally. She has developed such an immense view of the greatness of God that she has become convinced that he will put right everything that is wrong, not just in her own country, but throughout the entire world. One waitress's favorite customers are parking rangers. "When they're done," she says, "I get to give them their ticket and they have to pay it before they can leave." Hannah looks forward to the day when tables will be turned and the Great Reversal will take place. She gives illustration after illustration of how God will humiliate those who take pride in their success and show contempt for God's, whether breaking arrogant warriors who despise God's seemingly weak forces or reducing well-fed women who are indifferent to the needs of the hungry among God's people to prostitution or causing proud mothers who despise infertile women among God's people to waste away. But she devotes even more space to telling how God exalts his humble, suffering people.

Aesop lived in Greece in the 6th century BC. He was a slave and many think he was deformed and extremely ugly. But the Athenians erected a noble statue of Aesop, sculptured by Lysippus, to honour Aesop for the moral teaching he gave through his fables. Not every lowly person is

honoured in such a way. But Hannah begins her prayer, telling how her heart finds joy in the Lord because, she says, "*my horn is lifted high*" (v1). She ends off her prayer by saying that God "*will give strength to his king and exalt the horn of his anointed*" (v10b). So her prayer begins and ends with this metaphor of 'lifting the horn'.

What does "lifting of the horn" mean? In Psalm 92:10, having been saved from enemies, the psalmist says, "*You have exalted my horn like that of a wild ox; fine oils have been poured upon me.*" The exalting or lifting of his horn means that God has placed him in a strong and honoured position. The image is probably of a horned beast adopting an intimidating pose, asserting its strength over any would-be enemies. Following the birth of Samuel Hannah feels that she is in a strong and honoured position. So she speaks of how God has lifted her horn high with respect to her enemies. Similarly, she ends off her prayer by speaking of how God will give the king a strong and honoured position with respect to his enemies. So, she speaks of how God will exalt the horn of the king.

But what is so staggering about what Hannah prays? At the time Hannah prays, as the end of the book of Judges has made clear, "there is no king in Israel." So Hannah in her prayer is anticipating a completely new political development, the introduction of monarchy for the first time in Israel's history. Yet in Chapter 8 when the Israelites ask Samuel to give them their first king they are rebuked for it. They are not rebuked for asking for a king, for as Hannah's prayer makes clear it was indeed God's plan to give them a king. But they are rebuked for placing their dependence on a human king rather than on God. Right from the word "go" the Israelites treat human kingship not as the means through which God exercises his own kingship but as an end in itself, as though the human king removed from them any obligation to rely on God himself.

The books of 1 and 2 Samuel belong together. In 2 Samuel 22:3 David says, "...my God is *my rock*, in whom I take refuge, my shield and *the horn of my salvation*. He is my stronghold, my refuge and my savior— from violent men you save me." In calling God both his Rock and the horn of his salvation David uses the same images of God as his source of strength and Rescuer from enemies as Hannah used. There are many deliberate parallels between Hannah's prayer in 1 Samuel 2 and David's prayer in 2 Samuel 22 to show David was God's chosen king through whom God models what true justice looks like. David's greatness consisted in the fact that he recognized that God indeed was the source of his strength. John Ruskin said, "I believe the first test of a truly great man is his humility." David was a great man because he discouraged people from depending on himself and encouraged his people to place their ultimate dependence on the God who ruled through him. It is through a king far greater than David himself that God will create the perfect society - the greatest man who ever lived, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Formally speaking, the Queen of England is the Queen of Australia, represented by the Governor-General. But she is monarch in name only and we don't look to Elizabeth II to right injustices in our society. Indeed, we might say that our society bears some similarity to that described at the end of the book of Judges: "In these days Australia has no real king or queen; Australians pretty well do whatever is right in their own eyes."

In the West many assume democracy is the best form of government. Many quote Winston Churchill's famous words: "Democracy is the worst form of government, except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time." George Bush talks about establishing democracy in Iraq. The former president of Iran, Mohammad Khatami branded US attempts to

import Western-style democracy into Iraq as “a great joke”. He commented, “Democracy is not something to get exported.” You might be inclined to rubbish anything that might be said by any Iranian leader. But look at it from a Muslim viewpoint for a moment. Don’t they have good reason for reservation if by “democracy” is intended the encouragement of values prized in the US? Don’t devoutly religious and moral Iraqis have some warrant for resisting the development of a so-called “free” society in which immorality and promiscuity are rampant?

Hannah recognizes that God will create the perfect society, humbling the proud and exalting the humble, through his anointed king. Obviously King Jesus is the ultimate fulfillment of this. He is the One who humbled himself to even death on a cross and who has now been exalted to the highest place with a name above all names. One day we will all bow before his throne and he will pass God’s final judgment on us. But the trigger for Hannah’s prayer is the birth of her son Samuel, the son she whose life she dedicated to the Lord. So, there is an essential link between the birth of Samuel and the emergence of this God-provided king for Israel. Samuel will be the one God uses to appoint Israel’s first kings, Saul and David and especially through David God will begin to model what he will ultimately accomplish through King Jesus.

What is the basis of Hannah’s confidence that God will create a perfect society through his chosen king, that he will exercise judgment and effect these great reversals? Verse 8 provides the answer: “*For the foundations of the earth are the LORD’S; upon them he has set the world*”. The world, the Earth, is like a solid building that will not crumble or be swept away because it is built on strong foundations laid by God himself. These foundations are invisible, hidden.

The Every Nation website tells the story of the Leaning Tower of Pisa. There is a huge ad in Singapore showing the Leaning Tower of Pisa with the tagline: “Good facade, bad foundations.” Similarly, many people have a good façade – they look OK on the outside. But they are tilted, dangerously leaning because of bad foundations. The Leaning Tower began to gradually lean immediately after completion in 1370. By the 1980’s it was tilted over 4.5 metres. In 1990 it was closed to tourists, fearing that if “one more overweight tourist ascended to the top of the 190 foot tower, it would topple.” It took 10 years of work, costing US\$27 million for the Tower to be permanently anchored with a lean of 4.1 metres.

Just as I have moved from speaking about the foundations God laid for the Earth to the foundations upon which our lives are based so does Hannah, saying, “*He will guard the feet of his saints, but the wicked will be silenced in darkness*” (v9). The God who ensures that the Earth-building stands on sure ground is well able to ensure there is sure footing for his saints. God is the only sure foundation for life. The second largest bank in France has been humiliated after losing track of billions of evaporated dollars. Hollywood stardom and accolades didn’t give Heath Ledger sure ground to stand on. Only God, the One who laid the foundations of the Earth, is able to ensure your feet are guarded, your walk through life secure. But, says Hannah, the arrogant voice of the wicked will be swallowed up in the overwhelming darkness of chaos. The saints, God’s humble people, belong to the God-dependent order of creation.

Let’s recap. God himself is the Rock or foundation of our lives. But only for those whom he classes among “the humble”, his true people. He is a God who “knows”, who remembers everything you and I say or do and he is constantly assessing our words and deeds to determine whether we are lowly servants like Samuel who truly depend on our God and live to honour him or whether we are in reality proud people, resisting his Will, digging our feet in and stubbornly refusing to budge, perhaps presuming we enjoy

God's favour, like the self-righteous Pharisee, when, in reality, we are more interested in our own standing and wellbeing than we are in the Lord's.

It is a great privilege to be under the authority of God's chosen king, the Lord Jesus, whom God has exalted above all others. Thoreau observed, "Humility like darkness reveals the heavenly lights." Just as the stars shine brightly in darkness so our Father and the Lord Jesus are glorified when we live lives of humility, depending on our God and delighting in him, like Hannah. The day is drawing nearer when, through Jesus, God will judge the world, humbling the proud and exalting the humble. May you and I, like Hannah, have such a profound understanding of God's greatness that we will see ourselves and our lives in true perspective and live accordingly!