

“There Was a Woman”

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In the midst of our struggles we can know that the Lord Almighty is with us.

1 Samuel 1

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Stories in context

There’s something about a story that draws us in. Whoever put together the Old Testament books of 1 and 2 Samuel knew that. You have heard these stories since childhood. The Boy Samuel in the temple. David fighting a lion. David and Goliath. Stories are compelling, but they need context. That’s especially true of stories in the Bible. We’re not to read stories and think, “I should do the same thing.”

Bible stories need *cultural* context. If we read them through modern lenses, we become condescending toward what these characters didn’t know about human nature or even about God. We have to allow the characters to live in their own time and place.

The stories also need *historical* context. In the Hebrew Bible the books of Samuel immediately follow the book of Judges, which ends, “In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit” (21:25). The last chapters of Judges recount a civil war that decimates one of the twelve tribes of Israel, provoked by a horrible incident of gang rape. Judges overviews a season of moral anarchy. God needs to do something new.

Finally, these stories sometimes need *geographical* context. Shiloh, Ramah, and Ephraim are not as well known to Bible readers as Jerusalem, Bethlehem, and Nazareth. Jerusalem did not become the center of political and religious life in Israel until David conquered the city and his son Solomon built the temple.

Prior to that, the tabernacle, aka the tent of the Lord, had found a semi-permanent home in a place called Shiloh, about 18 miles north of Jerusalem. We know

surprisingly little about this location, considering the importance of the tabernacle in the books of Moses and the temple from the time of Solomon on. We know that there was an annual party there, with virgins dancing as part of the celebration (Judges 21:19-21). We know that this is where Jews made their annual pilgrimages before the temple was built. Most importantly, Shiloh is where the sacrificial system continued.

Grace and Grief

1 Samuel begins, “There was a man,” but we quickly learn that chapter 1 is mostly about a woman. Hannah, whose name means “Grace,” was the kind of girl who attracts the kind of man who can choose any girl he wants. I’m sure she was charming and very attractive, probably a teenager when she fell in love. She captured the heart of a man with pedigree, money, and character. Theirs was a beautiful love story. His name was Elkanah, which means “God’s got him.” Let’s call him “Elkan” for short.

The chemistry between Elkan and Hannah was powerful and comprehensive – body, soul, and spirit – but their love didn’t produce any babies. Not in year 1. Not in year 2. Not in year 3. No one except a woman who has dealt with years of infertility can understand what that was like for Hannah.

Somewhere along the way, Elkan did what men of pedigree and wealth in that situation. Their version of In Vitro Fertilization was to bring another woman into the family. I can’t imagine that Hannah liked this idea, but like her spiritual ancestor Sarah, I rather suppose she supported it, maybe even initiated it. She may have been involved in the selection of the second wife. This expanded family would be hers as well.

The surrogate mother knew her role from the beginning. Her name was Peninnah, which means “corner.” We’re just going to call her Penny. The family had turned a corner. Babies would be around the bend.

And they were. Sons (plural) and daughters (plural), we’re told. We’re not told how many or how much time passed, but it sure seems like a brood of kids and a lot of time. I imagine that Hannah was thrilled with Penny’s first baby. And Elkan was so happy now. A second baby followed, then a third, and a fourth. Hannah and Elkan still had that spark, that bond of a lifelong love. Elkan never seemed to stay long in Penny’s tent, but every trip seemed to produce another baby.

I know their family seems odd to you, but they were still a family. Every year Elkan would take his whole family from Ramah, where they lived, about a day’s journey (10 miles or so) to Shiloh for the annual festival. It was their version of a trip to Disney World. There were people everywhere. Kids played games with other kids. There were campfires. The dances were fun. The barbecue was plentiful and wine flowed.

One of the reasons the food was so good is that meat wasn’t a luxury in everyday life. But when the family went to the annual festival, Elkan (like other dads)

brought sacrifices – maybe a lamb or two, maybe even a cow. If it was a sin sacrifice, the whole animal was burned. If it was a thank offering, and Elkan was surely thankful for his growing family, the priests at the temple got some of the meat but some returned to Elkan. Imagine thousands of pilgrims in Shiloh with their nightly feasts.

Elkan loved these times with extended family and his kids all around. Hannah, meanwhile, hosted and coordinated the meal with all the grace you'd expect from the matriarch. When it came time to eat, everybody got a proper share of chops and steaks. Hannah's plate was piled higher. Everyone knew she was Elkan's only true love.

Hannah probably handled these annual feasts pretty well, but as the years passed something happened with Penny. Maybe it was the insecurity of being the unloved surrogate. Maybe she resented being a nurse and nanny to children while Hannah had a relatively carefree life. It probably started with teasing. Hannah may even have smiled at the joke. Then the jabs became more direct, more common, even more hostile. These feasts could easily turn into wild parties, and maybe the wine loosened Penny's tongue. "I see how much he gave you to eat. I know he loves you more. But he still comes to me to bear children. You're never going to have any."

The taunting was cruel, and it made Hannah cry, a lot. She began to dread these festivals. Who knows how many had passed? She'd go with the family but she began to refuse the food piled on her plate. No filet mignon would soothe her soul. Elkan would say to her, "Sweetheart, why are you crying? Eat with us. Don't be so sad. You know I love you most. Don't I mean more to you than ten sons?"

One particular year it became unbearable for Hannah. The nightly feast was over with her plate untouched. She was bitter – resentful of Penny, mad at Elkan because he didn't understand, and now angry at God, "Why don't you hear my prayers? Why have you closed my womb? Why are you so unfair? Why don't you care?"

She had passed by the aging priest Eli into the temple itself. There were others there that night, but she stood out. She broke down with heaving sobs and cried out to God, "O LORD of hosts, please! I can't take this anymore. I can't live like this. Please, please, give me a child. Look at me. Remember me! I'm your servant.... God, I mean it! If you'll give me a little boy, I'll...I'll give him back. He'll be a Nazirite. I'll not touch a drop of wine while I'm pregnant, nor will he all his life. He'll never cut his hair."

All these were silent prayers, but the sobs were not. The heaving shoulders were evident to everyone around her. She was distracting other worshipers. Eli noticed her. He didn't get it either. "Are you drunk like half the 'worshipers' who come here for the festival?" This is a house of prayer. Pull yourself together." Imagine what it felt like for Hannah to have taken a vow of abstinence and be accused of drunkenness.

"Oh, no sir," Hannah stammered, now very aware that her usual grace and composure were not evident in this moment. "I haven't been drinking. I'm just really,

really sad. I was pouring my soul out to God. Don't judge me. I'm overwhelmed with how horrible my life has turned out. I never would have thought this."

Eli softened. "Go in peace. And may God answer your prayer." Something about those moments in the temple and the words of comfort from the head priest gave Hannah new strength and faith. She went back to the family, and ate her dinner. Her face was radiant. She was Grace again.

The next day was going-home day. The family packed up the tent and worshiped at the temple. They went home, and Hannah was at peace. She had released her resentment. It wasn't Elkan's fault, after all. She let her heart and her body be drawn to her husband again. Before long, she missed her monthly cycle. "Could it be?"

Soon there was a baby bump, then some kicks in the belly. "Elkan," she said, "I want to call him Samu-el." He knew it meant: "Heard by God."

Not long after Samuel was born, it was time for the annual festival again. Hannah didn't go. Maybe others thought it was too painful. Elkan, faithful man that he was, returned as usual with Penny and all the other kids. Hannah told him, "Give me a couple of years. When Samuel is weaned, I'll go with you. Elkan, I promised the Lord I would give this boy back to him. I plan to keep my word."

"Ok," was the gentle reply from Elkan. "It's up to you. It will be hard, you know. May the Lord help you keep your promise."

We don't know how much time passed. Two more years, maybe? It might have been five. Weaning took longer in those days and Hannah wasn't in a hurry. Then it was time. She would do this with grace. She and Elkan brought their usual offering – the flour, the wine, and the bull. And this time, they would bring the boy.

"Remember me?" she asked Eli. "You saw me crying my eyes out to God. You spoke tenderly to me. I desperately wanted a baby boy. Meet Samuel, my lord. God answered my prayer. I'm going to lend him back to God. Samuel bowed in worship.

God's surprises

Stories are compelling. They draw us in. The Bible's stories are varied, from Jesus and the little children to Noah and the ark to David and Bathsheba. Here's what every Bible story has in common: every story is about God. This one's not about Hannah, or Elkan, or Penny, or Eli. It's about God.

That does not imply, however, that everyone in the story – even the heroes of the story – fully understand God. They live with their own baggage and with their generational blind spots. Bible stories can be easily misunderstood and misapplied. This one, for example, might lead you to conclude that whenever a couple can't conceive it's because "God closed the womb." Or that the way to get your prayer

answered is to strike a bargain with God. You don't have to read many other Scriptures to debunk those myths about God. No, this story teaches us about God in three areas.

First, *God's surprises*. This is a wonderful twist in the drama of redemption. It follows a season of anarchy with mostly male and deeply flawed characters leading tribally based rebellions against marauders from neighboring lands. The stories that follow will be about men with varying degrees of flaw who lead Israel into its golden age of the united kingdom – Samuel, Saul, David, and Solomon.

The surprise of the opening chapter of God's work in this generation is this: "There was a woman" whom God chose as the pivot point. Without her grace, without her infertility, without her rival, without her bitterness, without her prayer, we don't turn a corner in God's great drama of redemption. Women get far too little credit in the Bible, throughout history, and now.

Women have received far too little credit in my own story. God has clearly given me a wonderful opportunity to serve him as senior pastor in this generation in this church. But it never would have happened with my mother's prayers and guidance, my sister's strength, without staff colleagues like Lori and Amy who brought wonderful gifts to this team, without lay leaders like Martha, Tracey, and Heather

Most of all it wouldn't have ever happened without my partner in life and ministry, Linda. She accepted a shared call into this local church and this denomination that was very different than either of us could have imagined when she promised her love and fidelity at age 20. For 25 years on staff she has initiated, coordinated, taught, led, persisted in ways often invisible to most people. Bob wouldn't have happened without Linda, and Samuel wouldn't have happened without Hannah. When God is doing something new, he's full of surprises.

God's time

We also learn in this story about God's time. Or should I say lack of time. The reason God's timing is not our timing is that God's never thinking, "Oh, it's been three days (weeks, months, years, decades, centuries, millennia) and I'm getting so worried."

This is not a new lesson in 1 Samuel 1. It's just a fresh application of a lesson human beings never seem to get. The question we ask, "Why doesn't God fix this?" really means, "Why doesn't God fix this *now*?" The answer is that with God there is no "now" if we mean vs. yesterday or tomorrow. More accurately, with God every moment is now. This means God is right now as fully present with Hannah in her misery as he is with Noah on the ark, with Jeremiah's tears, with Jesus and the children, with Martin Luther, and with you and me facing the pandemic and an array of problems.

So when I speak of God's time, I don't just refer to the decade or so of Hannah's agonizing wait to bear a child. When we become frustrated with what seems like God's

delays, it's usually about an unanswered prayer over the course of a day or a year or even most of our lives. Those are like stars in the sky – huge when seen up close, but tiny when hung in the expanse of God's universe.

Hannah's wait for a child – and let's not at all diminish her agony – is brief set against the larger story of Israel. God takes a millennium in our time from the promise to Abraham until the kingship of David, another millennium to Jesus, and two more to us and the story's still not over. Even these long stretches of time are fleeting to the one not bound by time.

We struggle with unanswered prayer for years or decades, but the whole point of Hebrews 11 is that so many heroes of the faith died without ever seeing results, without seeing promise fulfilled. And there's still God, still at work. We can trust God specifically because he is not bound by time.

God's hosts

The final lesson of 1 Samuel 1 is a new lesson, biblically speaking. There is a name for God that is used throughout the books of Samuel and extends into the Psalms and the prophets – a total of about 250 times. It almost disappears from the New Testament, but the Greek equivalent reappears in the book of Revelation.

This name for God appears for the first time in the Bible in 1 Samuel 1, first in connection with Elkan and then again in Hannah's prayer. In Hebrew it's YHWH Tzva'ot, or, as pious Jews would pronounce it, "Adonai Tzva'ot." In the King James Version and some other Bibles, it's translated "The LORD of hosts." In other translations, "The LORD of heaven's armies."

The idea is that there is a vast, invisible, powerful, even omnipotent army at God's beck-and-call at any moment. It is a biblical theme that there is spiritual warfare in the heavens, but we have nothing to fear over that because it's like pitting the military strength of the United States against the Taliban. We can have a thousand boots on the ground and they're not messing with us or our allies until we disengage.

Jesus makes reference to this invisible army of heaven when Peter whips out his sword in the garden of gethsemane to "defend" Jesus by cutting off somebody's ear. Jesus says, in effect, "What a silly thing to pull out a sword at a moment like this! Don't you know that I could in a moment call down twelve legions of angels to defend me?"

The whole image is one of infinite power at God's disposal. If he's not using it at the moment, it is for strategic purposes. But in the midst of our struggles we are to know that the God to whom we pray is infinite in power. We are to trust that he is "Adonai T'zvaot," the LORD Almighty. That's what this story is about. Amen.