

# 1 Samuel 1-20

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Date: 20 October 2019

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[ 0 : 00 ] Amen. This morning we were given a peek into heaven, or the new heaven and the new earth.

And for those who weren't here this morning, just to give the background, we're making our way through the book of Revelation, and this morning we were considering the first few verses of chapter 21 of that book, where you have John sharing with us the vision that he is granted of the new Jerusalem, that holy city coming from God, the new heaven and the new earth.

And as we peeked into heaven, we heard the loud voice from heaven that John records for us, the voice of the Alpha and Omega declaring of that place, there will be no more death, or mourning, or crying, or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.

And it is a thrilling and deeply comforting prospect, but it is a prospect. It is not our present experience.

Today we do die and mourn and cry and endure pain. It is the prospect of a future home where death and suffering is no more, of any present help.

[ 1 : 35 ] And I think it is. The Bible encourages us to draw present comfort from our future inheritance and home. Listen to how Paul expresses himself just on a couple of occasions when he writes to the church in Rome in chapter 8 and verse 18.

We read, I consider that our present sufferings, that are real, are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. And so Paul draws comfort from what awaits.

In similar vein, as he writes to the church in Corinth, in 2 Corinthians in chapter 4, we read there, Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day.

For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. Paul speaks of his present troubles that we know.

We know something of his life and we know of his troubles. They were not insignificant, and yet he describes them as our light and momentary troubles. And yet, our present suffering, though momentary in the grand scheme of things, still hurts, and it can hurt deeply.

[ 2 : 56 ] I was just reflecting on that as we were singing the hymn, Abide With Me, and there in one of the verses it speaks of how our tears hold no bitterness. And it sounds good, but in our experience, that's not always so, is it?

Often our tears do hold bitterness for us. They can be bitter tears. This side of eternity, we do experience pain, and sometimes deep pain.

Our tears, the blood drops of a wounded soul, have not yet been wiped away. Again, as we look ahead, we look forward to the day when God Himself will wipe away every tear.

But that is a future day. That is not today. What to do as we confront the reality of pain and suffering? To whom can we turn?

I want to spend a little time this evening learning from Hannah and from her experience, from a woman who speaks of or who is described as suffering or enduring bitterness of soul.

[ 3 : 59 ] It's a very evocative description of her pain, bitterness of soul. And what can we learn from her as one who knew what it was to suffer, who knew what it was to endure profound pain in her life and in her circumstances.

And as we think about Hannah, we are going to consider what we want to say under these headings. And I'll just mention what they are and then we'll just work our way through them. First of all, we want to meet her and recognize her as a troubled soul and just acknowledge that as we see what is said of her in the passage that we read.

A troubled soul. Also just notice that in her life there was one who we might describe as an inadequate comforter. Somebody who wanted to comfort her. One who meant well, but who fell short.

An inadequate comforter. But then, and here's where we'll maybe detain ourselves a little bit longer. A God to turn to. In her bitterness of soul, Hannah turns to one who can help and who does help. And we want to just reflect on the nature of that turning to God for help. And then we end with the outcome of it all. A woman who is presented to us as a troubled soul is at the close of the account. [ 5 : 23 ] One we could describe as a tranquil soul. One who is no longer downcast. She begins downcast. But at the close of the account we find that she is no longer downcast.

So let's think about this account along these lines. First of all then, Hannah as a troubled soul. Picture the scene. Elkanah and Hannah marry.

It was a happy occasion, I'm sure. A day of celebration and festivity. Rejoicing. Happy couple. But also their loved ones and families remembered the day with great delight.

And there was, I'm sure, great excitement as the couple and many around them eagerly awaited signs of the arrival of their firstborn.

There was great expectation as to when that day would come. But nothing. Year after year, nothing. How would Hannah feel in those circumstances?

[ 6 : 31 ] Can you try and imagine what that would feel like? She would have been, well we know, we're told, about her bitterness of soul.

Sad. Anxious. Maybe she felt worthless. Maybe she felt that she didn't, was of no value. She wasn't able to provide a son, a daughter, for her husband who she loved.

Maybe she was looked on by others as worthless. Maybe no words were said or maybe words were said. We know of one who spoke words to her and we'll come to that. But maybe many others would have looked down on her because of these circumstances.

And then, as time passes, we don't know how long, but the time came when her husband marries again. How would that have felt for Hannah? To have had to endure that pain of her husband, the one she loved, marrying another woman, adding another wife to the family.

And to add insult to injury, she has to endure the taunts of the one we maybe could describe as her rival. I don't know if that's really the right language to use, but let's go with it.

[ 7 : 41 ] Penina, taunts her. And the taunts, we're told, are constant. We read there in verse 6, because the Lord had closed Hannah's womb, her rival kept provoking her in order to irritate her.

Kept provoking her. You can imagine this as a constant experience that Hannah had to endure. And the intention of the taunts is very clear.

There was a malicious intent. There was a cruel intent. She did so, we're told, in order to irritate her, in order to make her feel bad and worthless and down.

That was her intention, and everything suggests she was successful in that intention. We're going to come back to Hannah, who is our principal concern this evening, but just for a moment, if we just step aside and ask a question, what about this other woman, Penina?

Do we sympathize with her in any way? Or do we think of her, as maybe we often do, as the nasty one who deserves nothing but our contempt because of her behavior towards the hero of the story, as it were, Hannah?

[ 8 : 56 ] And yet, when you think about Penina, she also suffered. She was unloved, certainly less loved. It's very clear that it is Hannah whom Elkanah loves most.

And in a real sense, here was a woman who was a means to an end. Why did Elkanah marry her? Because he wanted a son.

He wanted descendants. That was the reason he married this woman. She was a means, a tool, a way of achieving, an objective.

How must that have felt for her? Maybe it was that hurt and resentment that in some measure explains the way she behaved towards Hannah.

It's not to justify her behavior, but maybe to try and understand it a little. And maybe just a reminder that life is complicated. Things aren't always as they appear.

[ 9 : 55 ] It's not always easy to divide the world into goodies and baddies. Our circumstances are complicated and so many causes there can be for our behavior or the behavior of others.

And it's good to maybe just reflect on that and be sensitive to that. But back to Hannah. Who was responsible for her pain? Was it her husband? Well, her husband I don't think could be deemed

responsible for her pain.

Her rival, well, her rival accentuated, deepened her pain, but she wasn't the cause of the core reason for her pain. Was God responsible for her pain?

It's striking the manner in which her circumstances are described there in verse 5. In the second half of the verse we read, and the Lord had closed her womb.

It speaks in really quite deliberate language of something that God had done. It's almost as if we're to understand this not to be some unfortunate circumstance.

[11:03] You know, that's life. These things happen. What can you do? But no, it states quite explicitly God had closed her womb. What a difficult truth to digest.

If it's difficult for us, how much more difficult for Hannah? Maybe that's something we can also just reflect on in our own life and circumstances. There are often times when we confront very difficult truths.

And it's difficult for us to understand, well, why can that be? Why is it that God has done this? Why has God acted in this way? Why has God so ordered my circumstances that this is what I am confronting?

And we face difficult truths that we don't often understand and we struggle to get our heads round. Well, that was true for Hannah, I'm sure, as she reflected on this reality.

In her life that the Lord had closed her womb. And so, not surprisingly, we have Hannah described as one who suffered bitterness of soul. Bitterness of soul.

[12:08] A troubled soul. But also, and moving on and just more briefly, we meet in this account one I'm describing as an inadequate comforter. And I'm thinking about her husband.

Her husband, Elkanah, was not a bad man. He acted foolishly in taking a second wife, but there is much to commend Elkanah. He is spoken of in very positive terms in the account.

He is described as a pious man or certainly the manner in which he carried out his life was marked by that. In verse 3, we read, year after year, this man went up from his town to worship and sacrifice to the Lord Almighty at Shiloh.

He was a pious man. He was a man who worshipped God. He was a man who took seriously his responsibilities towards God and his worship of God.

He was a loving husband. That much is very clearly said in verse 5. We read, but to Hannah in the context of the sacrifices that were being offered, but to Hannah he gave a double portion because he loved her and the Lord had closed her womb.

[13:19] Now we can question the wisdom of giving to Hannah that double portion, but we can't question the motivation for it that is told. Very clearly, he loved her. This was a man who loved his wife.

His love had not grown cold because of the circumstances, because of her being unable to provide him with a son or daughter. He still loved her. He comes across as one who is sensitive and concerned for her welfare.

when he recognizes her pain and her bitterness of soul, he seeks to comfort her. In verse 8, we read, her husband, Elkanah, 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? He's concerned for her. He's not a bad man. But he was inadequate.

He was unable to comfort his wife. And this was a task that was beyond him. It's not really something that maybe if he'd made a bit more of an effort, he could have done it. It's not that, well, he just didn't approach it the right way.

[14:22] It's not as if we could look and say, well, Elkanah, if only you had done it this way, if only you'd approached the matter this way, then maybe you would have been able to comfort your wife. I think the conclusion we come to is that there was no way he could have comforted her.

The cause of her pain was such that there was nothing he could do to remove that pain. There was nothing he could do that would have provided adequate comfort. He, as all of us, was limited.

There was a limit to what he could do even with the best intentions. And that's true in our lives.

There are circumstances and trials and pain where even the most well-meaning cannot help, be that when we seek to help others or when others seek to help us.

we're confronted by our many limitations. But as we continue looking at the account, we turn to the next thing that we want to think about, and that is the God to whom Hannah turns in the midst of her bitterness of soul.

I just want to notice some of the features of Hannah's approach to God and God's disposition towards Hannah. The first thing that strikes me is the intimacy of Hannah towards God.  
[15:34] As she prays to God, there is a real sense that Hannah believes that God is near and that God can hear her crying. We're told what she says as she approaches God.

In verse 11, and she made a vow saying, Lord Almighty, she's speaking to God, Lord Almighty, if you will only look on 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 she goes on. The point is that she speaks to God directly. She makes this vow to God directly. This sense that she has of God being near and able to hear and answer is all the more striking given the manner in which she addresses him.

She addresses him as the Lord Almighty or the Lord of hosts, the Lord of heaven's army. It's a very august and majestic, almost forbidding title. And she knows that this is the God she is approaching, and yet she feels able to do so.

It's just a curiosity of, I suppose, the revelation that God gives us. This is the first time that God is described or addressed in this manner, in the manner that Hannah does so, certainly as recorded for us in the Bible.

[16:52] Here is this woman who speaks to God directly, convinced and persuaded that he is near and that he can hear and that he will answer. When we think of that in the context of the Old Testament, you know, we sometimes reflect on the hoops Old Testament saints had to go through to approach God.

You know, the whole complex sacrificial system instituted by God, and yet Hannah, in prayer, seems to enjoy all the intimacy of one near to God.

Just as we kind of reflect on that, I suppose, theologically, it's a reminder of the efficacy of Christ's death that extends back in time, providing access to God's people even before his death, as well as its efficacy forward in time, encompassing us and opening up the way for us to approach God and to be received by God and to be heard by God.

So the intimacy, the nearness that Hannah senses that she is towards God. But then, really from the other direction, the sensitivity of God towards Hannah. We read that she is able to pour out her soul to the Lord.

That's the language used in verse 15 when she's explaining to Eli her conduct. I was pouring out my soul to the Lord.

[18:16] And the implicit assumption is that God is sensitive to her deepest pain as she pours out her soul. This bitterness of soul, that she pours out her soul in a way that perhaps she's not able to do with anybody else, not even with Elkanah.

I don't know if she had tried, maybe she had, and yet Elkanah somehow just, he didn't know what to do, he didn't know what to say, he didn't have an answer to her as she poured out her soul to him if indeed she did.

But she is able to, and she does, pour out her soul to the Lord Almighty. and he is sensitive to her cry, to her plea.

He is sensitive to her deepest pain, and of course that is also true for us. We can pour out our soul to God. You can pour out your soul to God in the assurance that he is sensitive to your needs, sensitive to your pain and your suffering.

He understands, and he responds. We're struck by the undivided attention of God towards Hannah. We're told in the passage that Hannah kept on praying to the Lord.

[19:28] I don't know if this is day after day or week after week or year after year, but the account certainly suggests that for years, years on end, Hannah prays, Hannah prays, Hannah prays, the same prayer.

And the Lord is attentive to her as she prays. The Lord listens with a tender and undivided intensity. We notice also the understanding of God towards Hannah. We've already suggested that Elkanah, even though he may well have tried to understand, fell short. But what about Eli?

Would he not be one more able or more likely to understand? Well, quite the reverse. He falls even further short than Elkanah. He imagines that she's drunk.

He doesn't for a moment get a sense of the genuineness of her bitterness of soul. I wonder why he found it so difficult to recognize fervent prayer.

[ 20 : 35 ] And we wonder, given we know the spiritual climate at the time of Eli, we know the scandalous conduct of his sons that is spoken of in other parts of the Bible, things were not good in terms of the spiritual climate in Israel.

I wonder if fervent prayer had become so uncommon that even Eli doesn't recognize it when he sees it. And so he imagines that she must be drunk.

he doesn't understand. And if it is the case that fervent prayer was so uncommon, then perhaps Hannah's prayer, fervent prayer, is all the more to be commended.

But whatever the reason Eli doesn't understand, how often for us the loneliness of pain is accentuated by the absence of understanding on the part of others.

And we struggle to understand and sympathize with others. Even the well-meaning struggle to understand. But God does understand. And as we continue to just reflect on this relationship, we're also struck by the trust of Hannah towards God.

[ 21 : 52 ] Even in the absence, so it would seem, of any reply to her plea for a son, she prays and she prays and there is no answer seemingly. And yet she continues to pray. She continues to trust.

She continues to believe that the time will come when God will hear and God will answer. And of course, he does. Which brings us to the close as we meet her towards the close of the account and we can describe her as a tranquil soul.

She began downcast, but we're told that she was no longer downcast. Then in verse 18, when Eli had blessed her and she took that blessing as a promise from God, she understood it or viewed it in that way and she responds to Eli.

She said, may your servant find favor in your eyes. Then she went her way and ate something and her face was no longer downcast. I think we can safely presume that if her face was no longer downcast it's because her face reflected her heart.

Her heart was no longer downcast. Why is that so? Why was she no longer downcast? As we think of possible answers and we don't need to pick one of the possibilities, they may be all kind of overlap.

[ 23 : 10 ] I wonder if the very act of pouring out her soul brought relief to Hannah. Even in the absence of an answer to her prayer, just being able to pour out her soul to God and pour out her burdens to God, that in itself would have brought her, I'm sure, a measure of relief.

But also, of course, the hope given to her through Eli and Eli's words of blessing in verse 17, go in peace and may the God of Israel grant you what you have asked of him.

Even before the blessing comes to fruition, yet nonetheless, receiving that blessing is already a source of comfort to Hannah. But ultimately, of course, her greatest joy and the dispelling of her downcast state is to come by the birth of her child when she discovers that she is indeed with child and in due time the child is born.

So, in the course of time, Hannah became pregnant and gave birth to a son. She named him Samuel saying, because I asked the Lord for him. It was a normal practice in those times for the father to name the child.

But on this occasion we're told, I think deliberately and very explicitly, that Hannah named him. She named him Samuel. And I would suggest that even had we not been given that detail, even if it had not been stated that she was the one who named him Samuel.

[ 24 : 47 ] We could have, from the name that he was given, come to that same conclusion.

Samuel, heard of God. Who other than Hannah would have chosen such a name for her son?

Heard of God. God had heard her. God had answered her. And in her joy and in her gratitude, she commemorates God's faithfulness by granting to her son a name that would ever remind her and indeed others that God is a God who hears.

Samuel, heard of God. And in our own troubles, in your own troubles and trials and pains, momentary though they may be in the grand scheme of things, we are all Samuels.

We are all heard of God. God can hear us and will hear us and answer us. And so let us, with Hannah, in our pain, momentary though it may be, know what it is to cry out to him as the one who hears us.

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank you that you are indeed the God who hears, that we as your people are those who can be described as heard of God.

[ 26 : 00 ] When we were enabled to cry out to you for help, you heard us and you answered us and you continue to do so in any and every circumstance. You hear us when we cry out to you in

gratitude and joy and you hear us when we cry out to you in bitterness of soul.

We pray that you would help us to have that assurance and that confidence. And so, as your children, know what it is to ever come to you and find in you that comfort that is sufficient in every time and circumstance.

And we pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.