

1 Samuel 1:1-20

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[0 : 00] If you would please open your Bibles with me to the passage we read in 1 Samuel. It's 1 Samuel chapter 1, and that was on page 271 of the church Bibles.

Israel is in something of a crisis. They're in the promised land, but that is about as far as the good news goes.

If you were to look back a couple of pages to the book of Judges, you would find a pretty miserable story. The last couple of chapters of Judges are some of the most grim in the whole Bible.

And the book ends with the repeated phrase, In those days Israel had no king. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes. Israel had strayed away from their God, the God who had delivered them from Egypt.

They had left the God who had given them the land that they now dwelt in. Israel had forgotten their Redeemer. What was the big problem, according to the book of Judges?

[1 : 17] Israel had no king. Israel had no leader. They had no one to look up to. This wasn't poor leadership. This was no leadership. And they had enemies to worry about too.

The Philistines were looming ominously over the horizon, ready to sweep through Israel at any moment. But Israel had no one to lead them. They had no one to defend them.

You might wonder, what about the priesthood? They might not have had political leadership, but surely they still had their spiritual leaders. And here we do find poor leadership. We can start with Eli.

We find Eli sitting outside the temple in verse 9 of 1 Samuel 1. Eli is sitting outside the temple, watching Hannah as she weeps. We find out later on that Eli is getting physically blind.

But the first two chapters of 1 Samuel suggest that Eli is getting spiritually blind too. He sees Hannah moving her mouth outside the temple and assumes she must be drunk.

[2 : 22] And whatever the reason for Eli's conclusion, this is a pretty sad indictment of the state that Israel is in. Was the presence of a drunken woman outside the temple so par for the course that any other explanation seemed improbable?

Or was Eli simply unable to discern prayer from drunkenness? Either way, Eli appears to have far more vigor for rebuking a penitent woman than he does for rebuking his own genuinely wicked sons.

Hophni and Phinehas, Eli's sons, they are the high priests of Israel. These two make up the core of Israel's spiritual leadership.

These are the men responsible for ensuring that the people of Israel are worshipping their God. And that they are doing so in the way that God has ordained. But Hophni and Phinehas have little regard for God and they have little regard for his people.

If you just flick over to chapter 2 and look down at verse 13, we read that Eli's sons were wicked men. They had no regard for the Lord.

- [3 : 34] And the following verses in chapter 2 go on to tell us how these men, the high priests, would ask worshippers to give them the parts of the sacrifice that belonged to God.
- And if the worshippers would not give it freely, the high priests would take it by force. And if that wasn't bad enough, verse 22 tells us that Hophni and Phinehas would regularly sleep with the women who served at the entrance of the temple.
- These men had no regard for God. They did not care whether he was worshipped. They did not care about his commandments. They did not care about his people.
- The people who were leading God's people had no regard for God. This was the makeup of Israel's spiritual leadership at this time.
- There was no one to guide the people back to their God. No one to take a lost people back onto paths of righteousness. They were living in a broken nation, being guided by people with no regard for God, in part of a very broken world.
- [4 : 44] And things don't seem much different today, do they? We live in a very broken nation. We have leaders who don't have much regard for God. And our world is very, very broken.
- And the book of 1 Samuel shows us God's solution to Israel's problem. A solution which foreshadows God's solution to the world's biggest problem. Because God provides a king for his people.
- Somebody to guide his people in paths of righteousness. But this wonderful story of redemption starts somewhere quite unexpected. Because the camera goes from taking in the whole of Israel in the book of Judges, to zooming in to one woman bitterly weeping in the temple.
- And through this woman, God does not show us how we can fix a broken world. God, through Hannah, shows us how we can suffer in it.
- We're not given a step-by-step guide to redeeming this broken world, but we are shown here in 1 Samuel 1 what we are to do when we are suffering in this broken world.
- [6 : 00] So we'll walk through the story here in chapter 1, looking first at the cause of Hannah's suffering, and then at how each of the characters in the story relate to that suffering.
- So if you turn back to 1 Samuel 1. And first of all, Hannah. Hannah was a God-fearing woman. She's the wife of a loving husband. She's part of a family of good social standing.
- But Hannah, you see there at the end of verse 2, Hannah could bear no children. Now in this category, she's not without biblical company.
- Think of Sarah, or Rachel, or Samson's mother, Elizabeth. All had struggles with childbearing. But these associations would have been little comfort to Hannah.
- Barrenness is, in any culture, I'm sure, more than enough, for any one person to carry as a burden. But in Israel, it also carried with it the stigma of a curse.
- [7 : 05] A curse which brought shame and dishonor. Because barrenness, in the book of Leviticus, is a punishment for sexual immorality. So barrenness was seen as a just curse, a just punishment for an oporrent sin.
- And on the other hand, children were rightly seen as a great blessing from God. And Peninnah, Ocanna's other wife, she had plenty of children. This was a terrible burden which Hannah had to bear.
- The source of great sorrow for her. And when people suffer, like Hannah, they need help, like we all do. Sufferers need support.
- And Hannah has a number of people around her. We can look at each of these people in turn. We'll start with Hannah's husband, Elkanah.

And I think it'd be fair to say that Elkanah comes across as a pretty good guy. He appears to be a loving husband who cares well for his two wives. He might have reservations about calling a bigamist a good man.

[8 : 14] But the historical circumstances, a woman without a husband was in an incredibly vulnerable position. For many women, sharing a husband was a far better proposition than having no husband at all.

The genealogy in verse 1, which I'm not going to try and read again, that this shows that Elkanah's descendants, it's a fairly reputable line.

His family is by no means the best of the best. They're not the cream of the crop. But there was certainly no shame in sharing this lineage. Elkanah also, he took his family regularly to worship.

Look down there at verse 3 with me. Year after year, this man went up from his town to worship and sacrifice to the Lord Almighty at Shiloh.

In spite of the pretty dreadful state that Israel was in, this man, he faithfully took his family year after year to worship their God. And as well as the good social standing, the consistent worship, Elkanah appears to be a loving husband.

[9 : 23] He gives Hannah, well, he gives Peninnah portions, and then he gives Hannah double portions. And his words to Hannah in verse 8, they're certainly well intended. Look down there.

Hannah, why are you weeping? Why don't you eat? Why are you downhearted? Don't I mean more to you than ten sons? Elkanah sees that his wife is suffering, and rightly, Elkanah doesn't want his wife to be suffering.

So he tries to comfort her by pointing out the good in her life, taking a sort of count your blessings approach. I know that you want a child, Hannah, but at least you've got me.

Now, there are plenty of times in life when we just don't know what to say. Maybe a close friend has lost a loved one. Maybe you know someone in exactly the same situation as Hannah.

Knowing the right thing to say can be far from easy, and I'm sure I'm not alone in having messed up more than once. So I don't think we should be too critical of Elkanah.

[10 : 29] And I think his heart is in the right place. But I think it's really important that we recognize people's suffering for what it is. And don't try to brush it aside or make it out as no big deal, something that can just be forgotten about.

It's a really easy thing to do. I think we even do it ourselves sometimes. We imagine that we or those around us have no right to feel as though we're suffering because there's always people with it much worse.

There's always people in the world who will be suffering more than me. Because in the grand scheme of things, we're really pretty well off. And for most of us, that's true.

And it's true that we do take things for granted, and that's not right. But no matter how much someone has, no matter how well off they are, no matter how supportive a family they've got, no matter how good their job is, everyone, every one of us, is susceptible to and should expect to experience very genuine, very real suffering at some point in our lives.

And we've got to be aware of that for ourselves and for others. I think we've got to be aware of individual circumstances too. Because some people can cope with far more than others, some with far less.

[11 : 58] We need to be so careful, and more importantly, so loving, when we are dealing with people's suffering. Whether it's bereavement or illness, barrenness, depression, stress, loneliness, anxiety, even tiredness.

Every person has different struggles. Everyone has different limits on what they can manage. Some people might struggle to work eight hours a day. Others are fine with 12.

Some mothers struggle to raise two children. Others are fine with six. Some people are quite happy being single. Others find it really difficult. Someone might quite enjoy their own company.

Other people might find being alone a really hard thing. No matter the circumstances, everyone who lives in this sinful world will know suffering of some kind at some point, and we can't expect to be able to relate to all of it.

And as we shall see shortly, the only solution is to always point people to God and His Word. Because that is the one place where everyone, no matter their circumstances, everybody can go to God with their suffering.

[13 : 15] Suffering on its own is hard enough. But what will make suffering even less bearable than it already is, is the Peninnas of this world. Peninnas was a loving husband who did his best to comfort his wife.

But Peninnas, Hannah's rival, she had no such intentions. She goads Hannah for her barrenness. And this was no one-off slip of the tongue that happened in the heat of the moment.

We see in verse 6 that again and again, Peninnas would aggravate Hannah's grief. Because the Lord had closed her womb, her rival kept provoking her in order to agitate her.

Why? What would possess someone to relentlessly torment someone about so sensitive an issue? It's hard to know the exact reason in Peninnas' case.

It could have been out of envy. Verse 4 and 5 suggest that maybe Elkanah loved Hannah more than he did Peninnas. Maybe Peninnas was upset at the favour that Hannah was shown.

[14 : 21] Maybe Peninnas just didn't like having to share a husband. Maybe she was trying to highlight Hannah's weakness to gain Elkanah's love. Maybe she was simply a wicked person who took pleasure in the misfortune of others.

Whatever the reason, her actions are wicked, spiteful, and cruel. But not all that uncommon. Of the few places I've worked, they've all had their Peninnas.

Maybe not quite so blunt. But there always seem to be people who will belittle others either to demoralise them or just to try and elevate themselves. And unfortunately, I think there are Peninnas in the church too.

I think there can be a bit of Peninnas in all of us. There will always be people who we just don't quite get on with the same way as others. People who just rub us up the wrong way. Maybe someone you just don't connect with.

If you can tell me there's never been a time in your life when you've heard of someone struggling with something and thought to yourself, serves them right. They had it coming. I'll teach them.

[15 : 31] And you're doing pretty well. When a brother or sister is suffering, how often is our reaction immediately one of compassionate love? There's a reason that Paul in the New Testament urges the church to speak kindly to one another.

To have nothing to do with malicious talk, but to build one another up, to encourage one another. This is how our words are to be, full of grace and full of love.

There will always be those who talk like Peninnas, those who seek to undermine and deride those around them. So where can Hannah turn for her comfort? Where can she turn for refuge from her suffering?

Her husband lovingly offers consolation, but to little effect. Her rival is actively trying to drive her into despair. The political leadership of Israel is non-existent.

The spiritual leadership is a mess. And so Hannah turns to the one place where we should all turn in our times of sorrow. Because Hannah turns to her God, the Almighty Lord in verse 11.

[16 : 47] And Hannah turns to a God she knows. O Lord Almighty. She knows the greatness of God, the creator of the universe, ruler of heaven and earth.

Hannah knows the greatness of God, but she also knows the love of God. She acknowledges him as Lord overall, and then asks this great Lord, this great God, to remember her in her misery.

She knows that the Lord of Lords cares for every individual amongst his people. In her suffering, Hannah turns to God. And that's a pattern we should seek to follow.

to turn to God in our times of struggle and despair. But so often we turn aside to other things.

We might turn to the comforts that this world offers us. To food or drink, alcohol, drugs, sex, porn, gambling. We deal with our suffering by turning to the fleeting pleasures that this world offers us.

[17 : 54] Or maybe we try and lose ourselves in another world. Maybe you bury yourself in social media or games or films or TV and deal with your suffering by shutting yourself off from the world around you.

Digging yourself a cave of comfort in another reality. We hide from our suffering in the hope that it will just go away or maybe just to feel a moment's freedom from it.

But in our suffering we must turn to God because God alone can offer us a certain hope. Something to look forward to.

Something worth enduring for. Because God has ensured that there will come a time when we shall no longer know pain or suffering or tears or sorrow.

and there's this hope that he is steadily working towards no matter how desperate things might look to us. What can Hannah do about Israel's problem?

[18 : 58] On her own not a whole lot. But that's okay. Because where Hannah is weak God is strong. God can fix Israel's problems and he will do so through Hannah and through Hannah's suffering.

Because Hannah's suffering is part of God's bigger plan. And more often than not God works extraordinary things through very ordinary things. Through the tears of Hannah God begins to restore a nation.

He raises up Samuel to lead the people back to their God. But the immediate reception of Hannah's prayer doesn't exactly inspire the greatest confidence does it?

Hannah pours out her soul before the Lord begs for a son vows to devote his life to the Lord and she gets berated for her drunkenness. Seems incomprehensible to Eli that someone would take all their pain and sorrow and pour it out before the Lord.

It's a rare thing that Hannah did. It's still a rare thing. It's a strange thing to many but it's the right thing. We should follow Hannah's example but I think we should refrain from saying that we should always expect the same results because Hannah's prayer is wonderfully answered by the Lord.

[20 : 26] Look down there at verse 19. Early the next morning they arose and worshipped before the Lord and then went back to their home in Ramah. Elkanah lay with Hannah his wife and the Lord remembered her.

So in the course of time Hannah conceived and gave birth to a son. She named him Samuel saying because I asked the Lord for him. This is wonderful news and it turns out this is wonderful news for more than just Hannah because this is wonderful news for all of Israel.

But why did God answer Hannah's prayer? Was it because of the earnestness of her prayers? What do we then say to someone who pours out their soul wishing to be freed from cancer?

What do we say to someone who yearns with all their heart to no longer be ensnared by the shackles of depression? What do we say to a parent who prays day and night for the conversion of their child?

Do we tell them you're not praying hard enough? You're not praying with enough vigor? Of course not. God does not give Hannah a son because of the sincerity of her prayers.

[21 : 40] Nor should we say that Hannah's prayer is answered because she makes a vow to God. God is not there to be bargained with. We cannot offer him something in the hope that he'll pay us a fair price for it.

Hannah's vow is not a bargaining chip. It's an offering given out of the deepest thankfulness. Hannah was surely not the only barren woman to have prayed such a prayer in the history of Israel.

Surely Hannah was not the only childless woman to have wept at the entrance of the temple. Hannah's prayer was answered because it was part of God's plan to do so.

We should follow Hannah's example in suffering but just as importantly we must trust God's plan in our suffering. In our suffering we turn to God and then we trust his plan.

But let's be clear on something. Trusting God's plan is not some magic medicine that makes the pain disappear. Knowing that God is in control is a great comfort and it's something that gives us hope but it does not mean that all the pain suddenly vanishes.

[22 : 57] we don't need to look any further than Jesus to see this. Jesus who created the world who knew everything that was going to pass yet he still knew suffering.

But in his suffering he trusted the plan. When he found out that Lazarus died he knew he would raise him again in a few days and yet he wept when he heard of his death.

Jesus knew the plan for redemption he knew of his own resurrection and yet he knew suffering in the garden of Gethsemane where Luke tells us he wept tears of blood and asked Father if you are willing take this cup from me yet not my will but yours.

He knew the purpose of the cross but it didn't take away from the pain of it. We suffer because we live in a sinful world but suffering is not sinful.

And being a Christian in no way immediately frees us from the sufferings we experience. Usually it goes the other way. The life of a Christian is often full of pain and sorrow but in our suffering we can hold on to the hope that we have in God.

[24 : 16] knowing that he has a plan. Sometimes even when we hold fast to that hope that the suffering doesn't pass and sometimes the suffering won't pass until we get to a new heaven and a new earth.

Knowing the end point doesn't make the pain disappear and we should never pretend that it does. That when we hold on to the gospel when we show others the purpose of this life then we can at least know that our suffering will not endure forever.

When we look at the first chapter of 1 Samuel we see how God works through people suffering in a sinful world. In our own suffering we follow Hannah's example and we trust in God's plan.

We must turn to God and when those around us are suffering we must turn them to God. not because that's the easiest way to rid ourselves of unwanted pain but because the word of God is the one place where we can find true comfort in the midst of those sufferings.

That means coming to God in prayer. It means spending time in God's word. That's not always where we want to go which is why it's so important to have people around us people who point us in that direction.

[25 : 43] It's why we must help others by pointing them in that direction by reading God's word with people by praying with them. The church is one body and the individual parts are there to build one another up to encourage one another to know when other parts of the body are struggling and need help.

Sufferers need help we need help and the people around us need help and we must trust in God's plan. I don't know what you think of when you look around the world when you watch the news when you see atrocities when you see the anger the confusion chaos maybe you wonder if God is really at work and if you looked at Israel 3,000 years ago you would have felt the exact same thing but God was at work hearing the prayers of a weeping woman in the temple and starting his plan for redemption.

If you looked at the world 2,000 years ago you would have thought the same thing again and yet there in the womb of the Virgin Mary was the beginning of the end of all suffering for God's people but that end has not yet come and it might not come for some time but we can patiently in the midst of our sufferings wait for the return of the Lord knowing that one day he is working all things according to his will and that one day one day there will be no more tears no more pain no more suffering but until that day we turn to Jesus and the plan that he is out working in us knowing that he understands our suffering let me close with the words of Hebrews 4 therefore since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven Jesus the son of God let us hold firmly to the faith we profess for we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weakness but we have one who has been tempted in every way just as we are yet he did not sin let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need let us pray together

Lord we know that you are in control of all things that all of creation is working towards the purpose which you have ordained Lord help us in our time of need keep us from putting our trust in worldly things keep us from seeking refuge apart from you Father we pray that we might follow Hannah's example in our own suffering that we would turn to you our almighty creator God that we would seek your word that we would turn our hearts to you in prayer that we would cast our anxiety upon you and Lord help us to be sensitive and loving towards our brothers and sisters in Christ give us compassionate hearts that we may love one another as you have loved us help us to be aware of each other's struggles and to point one another to you and Father we pray in all these things that we would trust in your great plan no matter what the personal cost may be for us for we know that we have a certain hope a future without pain or tears or sorrow and Lord we look forward to that day with eager expectation but until then strengthen us by the power of your spirit

Amen