

When something is transformed for the good, it would be instructive for us to consider what is behind it. We might learn something of what made the difference.

The story we find in the books of Samuel is one of these transformation stories. 1 Samuel comes immediately after Ruth but it flows seamlessly out of the story in the book of Judges. If you have read the book of Judges, you will remember that the spiritual culture grows increasingly dark as the book continues. The level of evil reached a point that is hard even to read. The recurring explanation for the chaos and immorality in Israel at that time is that they didn't have a king. The book concludes with the words, "In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes." (Judges 17:6; 18:1; 21:25).

Well, in 1 Samuel, Israel gets a king. From the book of Judges to the end of 2 Samuel Israel goes from extreme lows to some extremely high moments. It was not God's intention for Israel to have a king. But he did bless Israel through the ministry of the king. We can see 1 Samuel as a transition book. From having no king to having a king. From spiritual depravity to spiritual renewal. From cowering in winepresses for fear of the enemy to taking down an enemy giant in the name of God. It is a book of power. It is book of action.

It was the king that made the difference. But who made the king? God used Samuel to anoint both Saul and David. Samuel was the king maker. But who made the prophet? Before the prophet anointed the king there was a mother who raised the prophet. A transition that features three great men didn't start with a man. God sparked the transformation in Israel through a mom named Hannah. It was a godly mother that God used to initiate change among his corrupt people.

We can point to plenty of corruption in our world today. Yes, we need great men. But they all get their start with a mother. Mothers point our culture in the right direction. I don't know any role in society that has a higher impact than motherhood. It is a calling that shapes society. It is a calling that brings about the kind of transformation that we see between the book of Judges and the books of Samuel.

I have preached on 12 Mother's Day weekends. This is the first time I have preached a sermon focused on mothers. I was pushed in the direction of preaching this sermon by a thought exercise. It occurred to me that observing Mother's Day and Father's Day is an act of obedience to one of the 10 commandments, "honor your father and your mother". For the first time I recognized the significance of a national holiday that calls us to keep a commandment of God. I can't think of another national holiday that calls us to keep a command of God so directly. Thanksgiving may help us to not covet. Maybe celebration of the risen savior at Easter encourages you to have no other God's before

him. But to celebrate Mother's Day is to follow a direct command of God. I delight in the thought that hundreds of millions of people are obeying God this weekend by honoring their mother.

I share this message to help us honor our mothers and to encourage those who are mothers. Motherhood is more than a woman having a child. Motherhood is a calling from God. I don't know what it is like to be a mother. But I have a good one. And I am married to a good one. And I am blessed to know many other good moms. So I have been given a glimpse of how significant this calling is. I wish for all of us to honor those who have stepped into that calling. I want to encourage those who are struggling in that calling. I want to inspire those who will one day have that calling.

We will explore the calling of motherhood in the story of Hannah in 1 Samuel. You will want to grab a Bible because we will read all of chapter one..

### **Life Before Children** (1 Samuel 1:1-18)

Every mom has a life before kids. Children have a hard time imagining that their mom had a life before them. Some moms might have a hard time remembering that they had a life before kids. In Hannah's life before kids, we see a combination of joy and pain. It reminds us that moms got through a lot to get the point of being a mom. And the calling of motherhood doesn't start when the baby is born. This should give us a ton of appreciation for mothers. And it should give future mothers encouragement to know that God is doing a valuable work in them through all that they experienced before kids.

Read verses 1-7

**Verse 1** There was a certain man of Ramathaim-zophim of the hill country of Ephraim whose name was Elkanah the son of Jeroham, son of Elihu, son of Tohu, son of Zuph, an Ephrathite.

The story gets my attention immediately because it begins with a mountain man, Elkanah from the hill country. Notice just how male dominated this first verse is. It is a list of sons and fathers. It was a male dominated culture. And yet, the calling of motherhood was strong and necessary. Culture sets many wrong expectations and places wrong value for what it means to be a mother. But the calling of motherhood doesn't come from culture. It comes from a God who created women and designed motherhood. In his eyes motherhood is of high value and precious, regardless of culture.

Elkanah proves to be a blessing in Hannah's life before kids. We read that he was a worshipping man (verse 3). Future mothers, if you can find a man who worships God your experience as a mother will be greatly benefitted. We also read that he loved her (verse 5). The love was so strong that he gave her a double portion of the offerings. This was a cultural way of honoring her as a special person (Genesis 43:34). Again, if you can find a man who loves you and is not afraid to show it, you are blessed. These things will greatly help you in your call of motherhood. So, we see that life before kids was not all bad for Hannah.

Moms, God has given you some wonderful things before kids. It is good for us to praise him for the blessings that have shaped us for the calling that he gives.

For all of us, as we honor our moms we can praise God for these blessings that have shaped them into the mother they are today.

This story focuses most on those things that were difficult for Hannah in life before kids. The problems begins in verse 2.

**Verse 2** He had two wives. The name of the one was Hannah, and the name of the other, Peninnah. And Peninnah had children, but Hannah had no children.

We learn of two major problems in this verse: Elkanah had two wives and Hannah had no children.

No matter how loving the mountain man was, having two wives would make things hard at home. Having two heads might be more noticeable for life in public but not any more difficult for life at home. Even worse is that the problem of two wife was likely the result of the problem of not being able to have children. It was not just that Hannah didn't have kids but that she couldn't (the Lord closed her womb). It is likely that Elkanah took a second wife because Hannah could not have kids. The two problems are related. Every time life got difficult because of the second wife it was a reminder to Hannah that Peninnah was only there because Hannah could not provide for her husband the children he wanted. That would be painful.

It was hard for Peninnah too, seeing her husband's love for Hannah. So Peninnah took it out on Hannah. She provoked her about her barrenness to the point that Hannah wept and would not eat (verses 6-7).

So many can relate to Hannah's pain. All of us have been provoked by someone. The rate is not much lower for infertility. According to a report of the World Health Study, 1 in every 6 adults globally suffers with infertility.<sup>i</sup> I've heard some of these stories. There

is a huge amount of pain associated with not being able to have children. My wife and I didn't struggle with fertility, but we felt a related pain when we lost two of our babies to miscarriage. It is a sick feeling. These are the kind of struggles that many of you and many of your parents faced before kids. The call of motherhood is a call to endure much difficulty. Praise God for every mom who has endured emotional pain for the love of their child.

If you are discouraged about infertility it may be encouraging for you to know how the story ends, Hannah has a baby (1:20) and then 5 more (2:21). In prayer she declares, "Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread, but those who were hungry have ceased to hunger. The barren has borne seven, but she who has many children is forlorn." (2:5). She recognized that God can do anything. If God has given you the call to motherhood, infertility can't stop it. He has a plan. Consider the great leaders that God brought from barren women:

- Isaac (Genesis 21:1-8)
- Jacob (Genesis 25:19-2)
- Joseph (Genesis 30:1-4; 22-24)
- Samson (Judges 13:2-3, 24)
- Samuel (1 Samuel 1:20)

God may intend, instead, to give you the gift of acceptance. There is a call to motherhood and there is a call to not having children. There is a call to singleness. If God has given you that call, then he will bless that path. The text says that the Lord closed her womb. It was intentional. He is the authority over infertility. We can trust him. But it doesn't take away the pain.

Hannah's story helps us see just how intense this pain can be. First, find her weeping and not eating (verse 7). It is pretty heavy when it keeps us from eating. In this next section there are more descriptions that help us see that Hannah's emotional stress was extreme.

### **Read verses 8-18**

Notice these descriptions of her pain: "She was deeply distressed and prayed to the Lord and wept bitterly." (verse 10); "I am a woman troubled in spirit... I have been pouring out my soul before the Lord." (verse 15); "I have been speaking out of my great anxiety and vexation." (verse 16). And when there is finally some relief we read, "Then the woman went her way and ate, and her face was no longer sad." (verse 18). Hannah lived a lot of her life with a sad face. She experienced anguish in her life before kids and it was specifically because she could not have them.

In that pain she was misunderstood and poorly comforted. To start with, Elkanah was a good man but not a great comforter. Would you be helped by his comforting question, "Am I not better to you than ten sons?". I am arrogant. Do you know how I know that? I have incredible self-awareness. I have more self-awareness than 10 sons(I risk sounding incredibly arrogant for the sake of humor so I am hoping you get the joke). But in all truth, I am aware that I am arrogant. I think way higher of myself than is healthy. But I think I would have better sense than to ask that question of my wife in her grief over her barrenness. Elkanah was trying but he didn't understand Hannah.

Consider how misunderstood you would feel when the man in the highest place of spiritual leadership rebukes you for being drunk when you are pouring your heart out to God. Hannah was doing a holy and beautiful thing in bringing her anguish to God and when she did, she was misunderstood as being a wicked woman. Eli saw her lips but couldn't see her heart. Your accusers don't see your heart either.

The call to motherhood is full of misunderstandings. Your noble efforts aren't seen. Your good intentions are taken wrong. Someone is judging. Someone is going to think you are a wicked woman like Eli thought of Hannah. Someone is going to question your relationship with the child's father. Someone is going to have wrong ideas about your intentions for having a child and they are going to be critical about your ability to be a mom. She is too young, too selfish, too lazy, too poor, too worldly, too disorganized, too drunk. When you start parenting it feels like everyone has an idea for how you should be doing it better. Moms you have been through this like no one else. We thank you for it. We admire you for enduring the pain of being misunderstood. We honor you for having good intentions that go unseen. We recognize you for pouring your heart out to God and being misunderstood for it. For, those of you who are in this stage, we encourage you. God was faithful to Hannah. He is faithful to you.

The call to motherhood is a call to being judged, misunderstood, and largely unnoticed and undervalued for the good you do.

I remember those days when I would come home from work and my wife would be overwhelmed. The house would be a disaster, the kids would be crying, and she hadn't stopped serving all day but somehow she felt like she was a failure and had nothing to show for her hard work. It was disorienting. She didn't know if she was succeeding at an incredible task or failing a simple task. Those are the times when the devil will speak in an accusative way like Eli, "How long will you go on drinking?". How long will you be lazy? How long will you feel exhausted? How long will you act grumpy? How long will you take to correct that parenting issue? The message to moms when they are giving their all is that they are not enough, in fact they are wicked. Hannah faced this. Maybe you have too. Maybe you are right now. We want to thank you for giving your best in

the incredibly hard call of being a mother. We praise God that there are moms who have faced this kind of anguish for us.

In the pain, we can't miss what Hannah was doing. She was praying! Praise God for praying mothers. Prayer is a place you can go when you have pain and you are misunderstood. Hannah is a great example in that she continued in prayer (verse 12). The call of motherhood takes persistence in prayer.

The thing she prayed about is significant as well. She made a vow. Her vow was that if God gave her a son she would give the son back to God (verse 11). Oh praise God for mothers who have committed their children to Jesus. In vowing to never use a razor on his head she was taking, for her son, the Nazarite vow (Numbers 6, Judges 16). This was a vow of complete consecration to God. There is nothing more important a mother can do than to lead her children to be consecrated to God.

The calling of a mother doesn't start when you have a baby. It already started with the abuse you experienced, with your struggles in school, with your financial hardships, with all your difficulty in life before kids. God was using it to shape you. The calling starts before it is publicly recognized. All that you are before you are a mom shapes who you are as a mom. And God is good enough to use the difficult things to make you a better mom. Your past does not have to limit to our ability in the call of motherhood. Your past can be redeemed to shape you into the mom God calls you to be.

And this is all just life before kids. Moms also have a great deal of influence in their time with a child.

### **Life With Children** (1 Samuel 18-23)

#### **1 Samuel 18-23**

Like Elkanah, Hannah was a worshipper (verse 19). Technically this time of worship happened before Samuel was born. But the worship continued and was modeled for Samuel. The way you worship is formative for a child.

We read that "the Lord remembered her" (verse 19). We can be assured that this does not mean that the Lord ever forgets us. Biblically, when God remembers people, he is acting in a way that brings an end to their distress (Genesis 8:1; Exodus 2:24-3:10). God has never forgotten a hurting mother. Hannah named her son Samuel because she asked the Lord for him. Samuel means "God hears". When she prayed her lips moved but no sound came out. Eli didn't hear her prayer. But God did. Mothers, he hears every

prayer, whether it comes out of your anguish or your joy. Hannah recognized more than most that her child was a gift from God. He was an answer to prayer.

Samuel's name is not the only one that has significance to this story of the barren giving birth. Elkanah's name means "God creates". That would be a frustrating name for a husband who could not get his wife pregnant. But remember, the name means "God creates" not "Elkanah creates". Children are a creation of God. And Hannah's name means "grace". A constant reminder of God's gift to her.

**1 Samuel 1:22-23** "As soon as the child is weaned, I will bring him, so that he may appear in the presence of the Lord and dwell there forever." Elkanah her husband said to her, "Do what seems best to you; wait until you have weaned him; only, may the Lord establish his word." So the woman remained and nursed her son until she weaned him.

Hannah's time with Eli was short. She nursed him until he was weaned and gave him away. Scholars say that the standard time for being weaned was three years, maybe older. In those years, Hannah poured a lot of love and training into her son.

I think Elkanah also grew in maturity in his time with young Samuel. We see him mature from saying foolish things like, "Am I not more valuable than 10 sons?" to wise things like, "Do what seems best to you." He learned a bit about how to talk to a wife!

I want to honor mothers for those years they spend with their kids. And offer encouragement for those who are with their kids now. Thank you for all the hours serving, teaching, feeding, cleaning, and raising your children.

I am not a mom, but I am in that stage of being with kids. I have been very aware that I have less than 10 years left. My first response is to panic. These moments are precious and quick. My better response is to savor the moments.

I know there are times when those moments don't feel so precious. This is part of the call of motherhood. By the grace of God use those moments with your child well.

There are some clues that Hannah did a good job in her short time with Samuel. The main one is that he turned out well. He became a child prophet and went on to be a judge and to anoint the kings of Israel. We might be convinced to give some of the credit to Eli because he had Samuel from such a young age. But Eli's sons turned out to be wicked. The author wants us to see this contrast. The sons of Eli are inserted into the story of Samuel at the beginning (1 Samuel 1:3) and they are described in their wickedness immediately after Hannah's prayer upon giving away Samuel (2 Samuel

2:12-17). Samuel was around their same dad. They did the same work. They grew up and served in the temple. The difference was a mom that had three years of full-time impact on her child. Those years make a difference. Children grow up and move on. But the love you give will go with them. We may worry about the wicked world that we release our children to. Hannah brought her child to a place we should think is safe but it wasn't. It had horrible influences. Spiritual leadership in Israel had become corrupt. The parenting of a loving mother has a stronger influence than the pressure of a corrupt world.

### **Life After Children** (1 Samuel 1:24-28)

Just as the call of motherhood doesn't start with the birth of the baby, it doesn't end when they move out. Mothers are always mothers. Hannah's path to launching her child was different than most. She went to worship and offered one ephah of flour, one skin of wine, 3 bulls, and a three-year-old. Verse 24 states the obvious, "the child was young". I am so grateful and impressed by the things you all give to the Lord. You make such generous offerings. It is a beautiful thing. But if your generosity leads you to drop a 3-year-old off at my office, I will not find it helpful to my ministry. I don't know how it worked for Eli and Samuel but it would have been a big deal to give such a young child away to the service of the Lord. As hard as it might have been for Eli, it was harder for Hannah. But stronger than the pain of giving up her child was the joy of giving him back. Hannah prayed again. She said that her heart greatly rejoiced (2:1). She warned not to talk proudly (2:3). She said this in recognition that it is God who gives. She praised God for his ability to turn situations around (2:4-5). Hannah had joy not because she gave her child away but because she gave her child away to the service of God.

It takes maturity to know that the child is given to you, but it is not given for you. Every life is created for God. We bless our children when we release them. We limit the blessing of our children when we attempt to keep them for ourselves. Children give us joy but they are not given for the purpose of making us joyful. That would be such a selfish way to look at it. Their life is for God, and we get joy in releasing them to God.

Part of the calling of motherhood is to release our children. It is hard but needed.

Even though she gave him away, she never stopped being his mom. She just changed how she did it. If we could get the full story, we would see the countless ways she continued to love her child. We see one of these ways in 1 Samuel 2:18-19.

*Samuel was ministering before the Lord, a boy clothed with a linen ephod. And his mother used to make for him a little robe and take it to him each year when she went up with her husband to offer the yearly sacrifice.*



The call of motherhood never stops. Hannah continued to serve her son after he left home.

This message hits each one of us differently. Maybe you are a mom who has regrets. You don't see yourself measuring up to Hannah. God is gracious and his calling for you is not finished. Maybe you don't have a child and like Hannah, your heart hurts for one. Trust that God hears you. That he can do anything. That he has a plan for you. Maybe you don't have a good relationship with your mother, or you struggle to honor her as though she were a godly mother that you never found her to be. Recognize that there is so much that goes into being a mother. Have compassion for the things your mom experienced before you came along and what she gave once you did. Maybe you are a young mother who is overwhelmed. Hold onto a God who will never abandon you in this call to motherhood. Maybe you are a young child and you don't see all that mom does. Know that she is incredible and let her know that you love her. Maybe nothing about motherhood from this study relates to you. I invite you to see in this story God's goodness to you. Praise God for the call to motherhood and for every woman who has accepted it.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/978920068315> and <https://www.who.int/news/item/04-04-2023-1-in-6-people-globally-affected-by-infertility#:~:text=Around%2017.5%25%20of%20the%20adult,prevalence%20of%20infertility%20between%20regions.>