

## 1 Samuel 1 – Blessed are those who mourn

In every age, in every place, in every culture, in every civilisation, in every family, every person's life there are always two great competing forces at work. Of course there are the forces of good and evil. But I want to talk about something more subtle than that.

The fifth century theologian Augustine, described the two forces that I am talking about as “the city of man” and “the city of God.” The city of man is all about power, pride, and self-assertion. It is not entirely bad. Power is often used for just purposes. Power, pride and self-assertion can create great civilisations. But they are always flawed. They have a horrible dark side. And they always fall.

And then, said Augustine, there is a city of God. Something very different. It is characterised by weakness not power. By self-giving, not self-assertion. By humility, not pride. It always looks pathetic against the city of man, and yet the city of God is an eternal civilization, living under the radar – always reviled, usually ignored, and yet its people – people of faith – prevail.

The city of man always falls. The true city of God will never fall.

Jesus gave succinct expression to this in his series of sayings which are called today “the beatitudes”.

<sup>3</sup> “Blessed are the poor in spirit,  
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

<sup>4</sup> Blessed are those who mourn,  
for they will be comforted.

<sup>5</sup> Blessed are the meek,  
for they will inherit the earth.

(Matthew 5:3–5)

In our evening Gatherings this autumn we are going to be looking at the beatitudes one at a time, and considering what they have to say to us. Come along if you can.

But those principles are not just revealed on the lips of Jesus. They are fundamental to the way that God always works in the world. To the way that God works throughout the pages of scripture. The meek are exalted, the poor inherit kingdoms, those who mourn are comforted. Everywhere in scripture you see the city of man – power, pride, self-assertion - and you see the city of God – humility, weakness, self-

sacrifice, faith. And you see God himself putting down the city of man, and raising up the city of God.

In the mornings for the next few months we are going to be looking at 1 Samuel 1-8 and I have called the series “the beatitudes of Samuel” because we are going to see those great reversals that Jesus talked about, embodied in living history in the book of Samuel.

Today we are going to start by looking at this heart rending story of Hannah in chapter 1. The lesson is this – blessed are those who mourn.

The first thing that I want us to learn from this chapter is that we will suffer.

### 1. We will suffer

Hannah’s suffering is not unique – it is an example of a universal reality. Things are not the way we wish they were, not the way they were supposed to be.

Nor is Hannah’s suffering due to some sin of hers. There is no indication of it here. True she is a second wife, in a polygamous marriage. The Old Testament is quietly critical of such arrangements, but it was not unlawful in Israel. Only in the New Testament do we find clear assertions that marriage should be monogamous. Here there is no indication that Hannah has sinned, or that her childlessness is due to sin.

And let me say for a moment Christian teaching that claims that all suffering is the direct result of specific sins, is a nasty and pernicious distortion of the truth. It is increasingly common today to hear so called “health and wealth” teaching in churches. People teach that, if we have enough faith and renounce all sin then we will always be healthy, rich, and live long lives. What about Job? What about the countless godly and holy saints who have suffered terribly? Jesus was once confronted with a man born blind and asked “who sinned, this man or his parents?”<sup>1</sup> his emphatic reply was “neither.”

Let me tell you frankly you will suffer. Not necessarily due to some specific sin of yours, but simply because we live in a fallen world. If you haven’t suffered yet, just live a bit longer and you will.

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<sup>1</sup> John 9:1

1 Samuel 1 describes Hannah's suffering in poignant vignettes. First of all we learn that she is childless.



## V2

Here is agony in itself. I have stood alongside many childless couples, or sometimes single women longing for a family of their own, and I can tell you, for some especially it is a deep agony. Others like Peninnah produce child after child and she has none.

And that aching is never really compensated by other blessings. Dear old Elkanah, he tries his best.



## Vv4-5

I remember a story of John Stott – Christian leader who remained single all his life. One day on holiday he was happily walking hand in hand with a small child when suddenly he was brought up short, crippled with a deep sadness. He had no children. He would have no grand-children. Nothing completely removes that pain.

And then there are people who intentionally make it worse. The other wife, Peninnah, loved to provoke Hannah.



## Vv6-7

If a turkey or a chicken in a pen of birds sees a spot of blood on another bird, it will peck at it and produce more. All the others will then peck at the wound until the bird is dead. Sometimes human beings are no better.

And people will misunderstand you. Elkanah is a typical man. He has all the sensitivity of a lump of cold porridge.



## V8

Elkanah, you may be a very nice man, but get real! She is grieving, and you can't just wave a magic wand and make it better.

And then there was Eli, the priest at Shiloh, where people went to worship God in those days. Hannah prays passionately to God about her childlessness in view of Eli, and he completely misinterprets what is going on.



## Vv12-14

I have to confess that we church leaders sometimes just make things worse. Any of you who has been in the church for a while will have your own Peter Comont story. We don't always pick up what is going on.

That is our first lesson: we will suffer, and often other people will make it worse.

If you are looking for some teaching that will enable you to avoid all suffering, then don't read the bible. Go and study the teachings of the Buddha. Follow some prophet, there are hundreds of them, who promises that his technique will give you health, wealth and happiness. Some of them even quote from the bible, but they are not teaching its message.

But if you want real help in the midst of suffering, then read on. If you want to understand that extraordinary saying of Jesus "blessed are those who mourn." Then read on.

The second lesson I want us to see here, is that prayer changes things.

## 2. Prayer changes things

Hannah prayed.



### V10

That verse warns us not to think that prayer is somehow some magic formula which immediately makes things ok. Hannah comes to the Lord in "bitterness of soul." That phrase has a sense of emotions out of control, of discontent, anguish, and sometimes aggression. This is not meek little Hannah saying her prayers – this is a woman ranting in her heart. She is bitter, she weeps.

When I say prayer changes things I mean this. When suffering comes you have a choice. You can try to tough it out on your own. You can look for the support of others – and perhaps some will be forthcoming, but they will as likely let you down as help – we have seen that. You can internalise it. Try to lock it away, forget it, ignore it. But boils fester until they are lanced.

Or you can choose to take it to God. There are a proportion of Christians who have an apparently happy and regular prayer life in good times, but in bad times simply stop praying. What's that all about? Have they not read the Psalms which seem to be

voicing complaints almost as much as praise? Perhaps God does seem a little more distant but when someone is a little way off you shout.

When suffering comes we have a choice. Either we choose to cope as best we can in our little miserable box. Or we open ourselves up to the possibility that, for all the pain and difficulty of it, there may be a God out there who actually cares, who actually listens, who actually is prepared to help.

Now don't get me wrong, I am not saying that prayer fixes all our problems. Hannah had been going up to Shiloh for year after year as it says in verse 3. She hadn't just started praying. And I have already said that Hannah's answer – the birth of a child – does not mean that everyone gets precisely the thing they pray for.

No, the path of prayer is a long path and it may not end at the destination that we had hoped. But it is the path of blessing.

The key which transforms Hannah's life is the kind of prayer she finally finds herself able to pray. That is our third lesson. First lesson – you will suffer. Second lesson prayer changes things. Third lesson – we gain through giving away.

### 3. We gain through giving away

Jesus put it like this.

Whoever loses his life for me will find it.<sup>2</sup>

This is the way Hannah put it.



#### V11

The lack of a razor indicates that she will dedicate this child to the Lord's service. (That is not the reason for my failure to wield a razor recently). She is going to give this child back to the Lord.

Of course he always was the Lord's anyway. Everything we have is simply a gift of God – her possessions, her family, even her life itself. But this child becomes the supreme test of whether she will live as Jesus calls us to – will she give him away?

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<sup>2</sup> Matthew 16:25

Parents your children are not your own – they belong to God. You are bringing them up on his behalf – but they belong to him.

Everyone here, your gifts, your skills, your job, your life situation, your money, your possessions, your sexuality, your body, your life itself, is a gift from God. Like all gifts you can choose to grab them like a spoiled child, scuttle away into a secluded place and gloat over them, guard them, enjoy them in inglorious isolation. Use what you have been given in just the way that you fancy – and probably ruin them.

Or you can lay them down before the giver. Ask how they work. Use them in the way that he intends. Enjoy them with him. The path to contentment is to offer the gift back.

At the end of the story Hannah had a child and she didn't own him – he belonged to God. And she was content.

God's purpose for you is that you should *have* wonderful things but *own* none of them. We gain through giving away.

So what are you going to do with your trials and difficulties? They will come. If you take them to God they will be transformed, but the transformation will be as much in you as in the circumstance. We gain through giving away.

The person facing loneliness prays – Lord, give me your comfort so that I can comfort others with the comfort you have given me.

The person facing difficulties at work prays – Lord, help me to bring glory to your name at work whatever the cost. This job is yours to give, and yours to take away.

The anxious parent prays – Lord help us to nurture this child so that they become the person you want them to be.

The person facing death learns to pray – Lord help me to live every day for you, for as long as you choose. Then take me to glory. My life is not my own.

Everyone here has an infinite eternal glorious wonderful life to gain – Jesus called it gaining your soul, gaining life, gaining your inheritance. And you gain it through giving it away. Then we find the truth – “blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.”