

1 Samuel 2

Hannah is happy! This song in 1 Samuel 2 makes that abundantly clear.



V1

And it is not surprising. As we saw last week she was childless, she prayed, and the Lord gave her a child – Samuel.

But she hardly mentions childlessness in this song. Instead she paints a much broader and far reaching picture of her reason for her happiness, which is rooted in the way that God works. It is as if the birth of her son has become a small example of a vast pattern of God's providence applying to all people, in all times and all places.

And this song serves that general purpose in the books of 1 & 2 Samuel. The story of the birth of Samuel doesn't just serve as the beginning of the narrative it serves to introduce a vital theme of 1 & 2 Samuel, which this song in chapter 2 highlights. At the end of 2 Samuel there are also a couple of songs – this time written by King David – And those songs follow similar themes.

This song, then, is not just a private thank you to God from Hannah, it is a public proclamation, and for the author who wrote down this story, an introduction to the whole of 1 & 2 Samuel.

You could say that it is not just about how Hannah became happy but how anyone can be happy. And that's important.

Ever since the early days of Greek philosophy it has been recognised that this is the most fundamental question for everyone – how can I be happy? It drives our behaviour in big things and small.

@@@@@pascal quote

And everyone is singing about it. A quick search for "happy" in the iTunes store turned up songs by everyone from the Rolling Stones to Leona Lewis, via Bruce Springsteen, the Carpenters and the Corrs.

Today there is a pretty standard narrative about how to be happy. Basically you fight as hard as you can for your own happiness – you fight your way to the top in your

chosen career, you fight for your chosen partner, and if that relationship does not work out you owe it yourself to find a better one. It's a dog eat dog world.

In a book released this week the philosopher Mary Midgley lays a large part of the blame at the feet of Charles Darwin's modern disciples – especially Richard Dawkins. Charles Darwin described how all organisms compete so that only the fittest survive but today that idea has gone far beyond a limited scientific observation – it has become the moral atmosphere we breathe. In 1976 Richard Dawkins wrote *The Selfish Gene*¹ in which he proposed that we are all simply driven by our genes to compete, to be selfish. The idea seemed to capture a mood so that now it is so universal you can't see it.

But it doesn't work. That is what Mary Midgley is pointing out. In her book *The Solitary Self*² she points out that it leaves us horribly alone and miserable. The Darwinian rhetoric hasn't created happiness, at its worst it has atomised society into a swirling cauldron of individuals fighting tooth and nail, and all of them ending up less happy.

So how can we be happy? This is where this ancient, simple, humble woman, Hannah, can help us more than all the philosophers, all the media personalities, and all the pop stars put together. To be happy you have got to see the way the world works. There is something deeper going on than simply survival of the fittest. God is working in a most extraordinary way.

That is what Hannah is singing about in verses 4-10. We will look at those verses first before we come back to verses 1-3 to look at the conclusions she draws.

So let's look at how the world really works.

1. How the world really works

In verses 4-5 she describes what has happened.

What has happened



Vv4-5

¹ Richard Dawkins, *The selfish gene* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976).

² Mary Midgley, *The solitary self: Darwin and the selfish gene* (Durham: Acumen, 2010).

Her own experience is now in the background and she sees a whole series of reversals going on.

Reversals of power. Powerful warriors humbled. Weak stumblers armed with strength.

Reversals of wealth. Well fed plutocrats brought low to become ordinary labourers. Hungry people fed.

Reversals of joy and fruitfulness. And proud women, boasting about their amazing families, - perhaps like her rival Peninnah - pining away. Barren women bearing seven children.

In verses 6-8 the emphasis is on who has done it.

Who has done it?

It is the Lord.

The Lord controls our wealth.



V7

The Lord determines our status.



V8a

The Lord rules even life and death.



V6

Because it is the Lord, who made this universe.



V8b

Of course most of us will respond something like this. “It’s all very well for you to say that. And I can see to a certain extent what you mean about the emptiness of a “survival of the fittest” way of living. But I certainly don’t see this other thing happening. By and large rich people stay rich. Oppressors often die peacefully in their beds. Poor people starve. It looks to me like Hannah has just a bit overexcited because she has got a baby. This is not the way the world always works.”

Let me say to you a couple of things.

First of all let me say that the Bible is absolutely clear that this is not the *only* way the world works. The Bible is actually full of people who raise legitimate questions about

this picture which Hannah paints. A classic objection of that kind is found in Psalm 73 for instance.



Psalm 73:3-12

And the resolution to his objections is very important.



Psalm 73:16-19

He sees with new eyes when he enters “the sanctuary of God” – when he enters into God’s presence. Then he sees what Hannah sees here.

This world is a complicated and confusion tangle of things. The dog eat dog, survival of the fittest, Darwin and Dawkins, view of the world, is absolutely one aspect of the way the world works now. But it actually disappoints, and it actually doesn’t deliver what it promises. There is something else going on. The stories of rich people in miserable isolation are legion. Proud cultures do get brought low – this is the unending story of history. Poor humble selfless people do find happiness.

So what is the ruling narrative? What is the Story underneath the stories? Is Dawkins right? Or Hannah?

Hannah goes on, not only to talk about what she sees happening in the world, and who has done it. She goes on to describe what God will do in the world.



1 Samuel 2:9

“His saints” that just means people who trust him and are faithful to him. They will be protected, in their vulnerability. Not from every act of power. The bible is full of martyrs who pay the ultimate price at the hands of power. But it describes them enjoying a protection which transcends even death.



1 Samuel 2:10a

God will judge. Often in this life, always in eternity. There is no peace for the wicked.

Then in verse 10 Hannah says something remarkable.



1 Samuel 2:10b

There was no king in Hannah’s day. From time to time there had been talk of it, but generally there was suspicion of kings – they knew that power corrupts. Somehow Hannah sees both that power will not prevail, and that it will need a powerful king to

achieve that! Later in 1 Samuel we see God raising up kings, and even the best of them – David – is not good enough. But this song of Hannah wasn't forgotten. Indeed it inspired another song – over a thousand years later. On the lips of another humble woman who bore a child. She was called Mary, the song is called today the Magificat – it is found in Luke chapter 1 - and the child was Jesus.

Jesus is proof that Hannah's song is ultimately true. He was poor, he was powerless, he was oppressed, he was driven to the cross. And yet the cross was his victory. The cross was where he paid the price for our sin, where he set people free. And God raised him up, breaking even the power of death. So that now the risen Jesus says to all his people "never will I forsake you." And now he says to all his enemies "look on me and tremble, for you will not escape my judgment."

That's the way that the world really works. Right now, in this life, there is a mixture. But God is working to protect his humble people and to bring down his proud opponents. In this life we see it a bit, we see glimpses of it – enough to know that life is not just about survival of the fittest - but in eternity the victory of king Jesus will be complete.

So now we can return to our first question – How can we be happy?

2. The secret of happiness

We can be deeply indomitably happy if we see what Hannah sees and live by it.

Hannah has joy in her heart. V1

My heart rejoices in the Lord

She has found an inner strength from knowing God

In the Lord my horn [strength] is lifted high

She is no longer the victim of her enemies – even if they do win some minor battles

My mouth boasts over my enemies

Because she is rejoicing in eternal salvation – she has been set free.

I delight in your deliverance

William Wilberforce is of course mainly remembered for his successful work in abolishing the slave trade. But most of his life was characterised by failure. The

decisive bill for the abolition of slavery was passed a month after his death. But he was overwhelmingly a happy man. He laughed helplessly at jokes, even those at his own expense. He loved to play with children. He would spend his day humming joyful hymns, even the day after a bill of his had been defeated. His secret?

The gospel freely admitted makes a man happy. It gives him peace with God, and makes him happy in God. It gives to industry a noble, contented look which selfish drudgery never wore; and from the moment that a man begins to do his work for his Saviour's sake, he feels that the most ordinary employments are full of sweetness and dignity, and that the most difficult are not impossible. And if any of you, my friends, is weary with his work, if dissatisfaction with yourself or sorrow of any kind disheartens you, if at any time you feel the dull paralysis of conscious sin, or the depressing influence of vexing thoughts, look to Jesus, and be happy. Be happy, and your joyful work will prosper well.

But then here is Hannah's warning. And it is the warning that has been troubling me all week. It is the thing that I want you to take away if you take nothing else from this.

Pride kills this happiness.



1 Samuel 2:3

Pride fuels this other way of living. The way of self-assertion, the way of power, the way of brutal competition. Pride always cuts us off from God, because it says to God "I don't need you." And as Hannah has so eloquently said pride always leads to a fall.

In recent times I have come to see pride as my most crippling failing, and to be honest probably the most significant failing of most of us in our culture. Pride fuels a thousand sins:

It fuels arrogance saying – "You are great. Get out there and take what is yours."

It fuels self-pity saying – "You don't deserve your troubles. You have every right to sulk."

It fuels faithlessness saying – "Why should you believe the Bible. You are cleverer than those ancient simpletons. Trust yourself not them."

It fuels anger – "How dare they treat me like this. I will teach them a lesson."

Pride always cuts us off from God. “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.” And I want to be happy don’t you? I want the happiness of Wilberforce. I want the happiness of Hannah.

Jesus understood the whole of history from eternity to eternity. And he once summed all that up with those famous pithy sayings that we call the beatitudes. Blessed are so and so, blessed are so and so. You could equally translate that word blessed as “happy.” Here is how he began his beatitudes:

Happy are the poor in spirit

Don’t be proud, be happy.