

Always winter and never Christmas

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[0 : 00] Has my microphone suddenly gone off? I don't think people can hear me. Perhaps they turned it down because the clapping was so deafening. How's that? Better? 1 Samuel chapter 1, and Bob is going to be preaching on this passage.

It's a long one. We're going to read through to chapter 2, verse 11. And it begins with a bit of geography with tricky names.

So let's see if we can manage it. There was a certain man of Ramathim Zophim of the hill country of Ephraim, whose name was Elkanah, the son of Jehoram, son of Elihu, son of Tohu, son of Zuth, an Ephrathite.

He had two wives. The name of the one was Hannah, and the name of the other Penina. And Penina had children, but Hannah had no children. Now this man used to go up year by year from his city to worship and to sacrifice to the Lord of Hosts at Shiloh, where the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were priests to the Lord.

On the day when Elkanah sacrificed, he would give portions to Penina, his wife, and to all her sons and daughters. But to Hannah he gave a double portion, because he loved her, though the Lord had closed her womb.

[1 : 26] And her rival used to provoke her grievously, to irritate her, because the Lord had closed her womb. So it went on year by year.

As often as she went up to the house of the Lord, she used to provoke her. Therefore Hannah wept, would not eat. And Elkanah, her husband, said to her, Hannah, why do you weep?

Why do you not eat? Why is your heart sad? Am I not more to you than ten sons? After they had eaten and drunk in Shiloh, Hannah rose.

Now Eli, the priest, was sitting on the seat beside the doorpost of the temple of the Lord. She was deeply distressed, and prayed to the Lord, and went bitterly. And she vowed a vow, and said, O Lord of hosts, if you will indeed look on the affliction of your servant, and remember me, and not forget your servant, but will give your servant a son, then I will give him to the Lord all the days of his life, and no razor shall touch his head.

As she continued praying before the Lord, Eli observed her mouth. Hannah was speaking in her heart, only her lips moved, and her voice was not heard. Therefore Eli took her to be a drunken woman.

[2 : 50] And Eli said to her, How long will you go on being drunk? Put away your wine from you. But Hannah answered, No, my Lord. I am a woman troubled in spirit.

I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink, but I have been pouring out my soul before the Lord. Do not regard your servant as a worthless woman.

For all along I have been speaking out of my great anxiety and vexation. Then Eli answered, Go in peace. And the God of Israel grant your petition that you have made to him.

And she said, Let your servant find favor in your eyes. Then the woman went her way and ate, and her face was no longer sad. They rose early in the morning and worshipped before the Lord.

Then they went back to their house at Ramah, and Elkanah knew Hannah, his wife, and the Lord remembered her. And in due time Hannah conceived and bore a son.

[3 : 50] And she called his name Samuel. For she said, I have asked for him from the Lord. The man Elkanah and all his house went up to offer to the Lord the yearly sacrifice and to pay his vow.

But Hannah did not go up, for she said to her husband, 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. And when she had weaned him, she took him up with her along with a three-year-old bull, an ephah of flour, and a skin of wine.

And she brought him to the house of the Lord at Shiloh. The child was young. Then they slaughtered the bull, and they brought the child to Eli. And she said, Oh my Lord, as you live, my Lord, I am the woman who was standing here in your presence, praying to the Lord.

For this child I prayed, and the Lord has granted me my petition that I made to him. Therefore I have lent him to the Lord. As long as he lives, he is lent to the Lord.

[4 : 59] And he worshipped the Lord there. And Hannah prayed and said, My heart exalts in the Lord. My strength is exalted in the Lord.

My mouth derides my enemies, because I rejoice in your salvation. There is none holy like the Lord. There is none besides you. There is no rock like our God.

Talk no more so very proudly. Let not arrogance come from your mouth, for the Lord is a God of knowledge, and by him actions are weighed. The bows of the mighty are broken, but the feeble bind on strength.

Those who are full have hired themselves out for bread. Those who are hungry have ceased to hunger. The barren has born seven, but she who has many children is forlorn.

The Lord kills and brings to life. He brings down to shale and raises up. The Lord makes poor and makes rich. He brings low and he exalts.

[6 : 04] He raises up the poor from the dust. He lifts the needy from the ash heap to make them sit with princes and inherit a seat of honor. For the pillars of the earth are the Lord's, and on them he has set the world.

He will guard the feet of his faithful ones, but the wicked shall be cut off in darkness. For not by might shall a man prevail.

The adversaries of the Lord shall be broken to pieces. Against them he will thunder in heaven. The Lord will judge the ends of the earth. He will give strength to his king and exalt the power of his anointed.

Then Elkanah went home to Rama, and the boy ministered to the Lord in the presence of Eli the priest.

Amen, and may God bless to us this, his word. Well, thank you very much, Willie, for your welcome.

[7 : 12] It's great to be with you again. It's always a pleasure and a privilege to meet with you people in St. George's Tron and to worship together with you and study God's word.

Now, if you could have your Bibles open, please, at 1 Samuel, chapters 1 and 2. And let's ask the Lord's help as we begin to look at this passage.

Let's pray together. As we've sung our Father, we say, Come then with faith and contemplation.

See how in Scripture Christ is known. Father, we pray that you will take my words, that you will use them faithfully to unfold the written word, and so lead us to the living word, Christ Jesus, in whose name we pray.

Amen. There are not many films I go to see twice, but the recent film of The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe deserved that kind of attention, and indeed we've now bought the DVD.

[8 : 27] I know that's rather sad, but it's a wonderful film. Many of you will have read the book. And if you have, you'll know where we've got the title for this sermon today, Always Winter and Never Christmas.

Mr. Tumnus says to Lucy, Narnia is under the grip of the White Witch. The land is under a curse, under a spell, and that means it's always winter and never Christmas.

What Mr. Tumnus doesn't realize at that time, but Mr. Beaver does, is that Aslan, believed to be absent, and believed indeed by some to be dead, is on the move.

It is winter, it's not Christmas, but Aslan is on the move. And that leads us very directly into this situation in 1 Samuel. In the story, as it unfolds in 1 Samuel, it is certainly winter, and there is little sign, if any, of God's presence, and yet we know that he is active.

The times are bad times. 1 Samuel begins a very long story that runs on to the end of 2 Kings, which tells us about the rise of the kingdom, of its splitting into two after Solomon, and of its eventual downfall, the northern half going off to Assyria, and the southern half to Babylon.

[9 : 53] It's a disastrous story, a story of breakdown, a story of decline, a story of winter, with only the occasional glimpse of Christmas. We're round about 1050 BC, as the story opens, and the story

runs on from the book of Judges, and the total breakdown of the life of the nation, including its church life, including its religious life.

Indeed, if you read the book of Judges, the last few chapters, you can scarcely read in public. So appalling is the situation. We've got gang rape, we've got violence, we've got the total corruption of the faith that had been given to Moses.

We have absolutely no hint at all that God is at work, and four times we read these words, in those days, there was no king in Israel, everyone did what was right in their own eyes.

Very much like our own land, is it not? Everyone does what is right in their own eyes. We give it fancy titles like post-modernism, but in fact, that's what it is.

Everyone does what they want to do, everyone has their own agenda. Why is it that this has happened? Why did it happen then? Why does it happen now?

[11:16] Two hundred years before, Joshua had led the people into the promised land. And we read a significant text at the end of Joshua in chapter 24.

As the story of Joshua comes to an end, as Joshua bows out of the scene, we read this in Joshua 24, verse 3. The people did what was right in the eyes of the Lord all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders who outlived Joshua, who had seen the works of the Lord.

You see what happens? Moses trained Joshua. Joshua trains the elders, but at a very early period, something had gone wrong, and they had not trained the new generation.

The new generation were forgetting the mighty acts of God. That's why it's so important for every generation to train its successors. That's why it's so necessary to have the biblical word given to every new generation.

Biblical knowledge is not a kind of capital from which we can draw endlessly. Don Carson says, the church is only ever one generation away from extinction.

[12:32] That's why Paul says to Timothy, pass this on to faithful men who can teach others. And we know that at a very early stage, that was lost as well. So we're here in a situation at the beginning of Samuel, as we are in our own land, in a situation where in very many places and in very many cases, the new generation have not been taught, the word has not been unfolded, and this is the situation we find.

And the books of Samuel and Kings, we've got to remember, are stories. Not everything that's recorded is approved of. This is something you must remember when you're reading biblical narratives.

Simply because something happened doesn't mean it ought to have happened, and that it was right it should have happened. In the muddle and clutter of living, in the development of plot and characterization, these books set out what it means to live for God in a world which is where it's always winter and never Christmas.

I want to suggest that this story we've read develops in three stages. We have, first of all, human failure. That's the situation as the plot opens.

Secondly, we have God's unseen presence. And thirdly, we have a song of praise. And that seems to me not only true of this story, but that's true of the books as a whole, and it's true, indeed, of our situation.

[14:06] So let's look first, then, at human failure. And we begin in verse 1 and 2 with a man of some standing. The fact that four of his ancestors are named proves that.

Now, I know, long lists of names are not most people's favorite reading. If you don't like long lists of names and Willie decides to expound 1 Chronicles, then you'll find the first 10 or 11 chapters are simply a list of names.

But they're enormously important. Our New Testament opens with a list of ancestors. I heard about a Chinese gentleman who read Matthew 1, 1 to 17, the bits we tend to ignore, the list of names, and that was the beginning of his journey of faith.

He said, a man with so many ancestors must be worth taking seriously. See, this is a living word.

Even when it's a list of names, God is saying things to us. God is speaking to us.

And in this situation, in this situation of human failure, there are two particular elements. First of all, there is the domestic situation.

[15:16] Verse 2, he had two wives. It's interesting, there is no text anywhere in the Old Testament that says, you shall not commit polygamy. It's not actually, it's not actually in the Ten Commandments.

Although it's very clearly incompatible with the exclusive love envisaged in Genesis 2. And this is the way narrative works. What the Old Testament does is it doesn't so much say, don't commit polygamy, it says, when you do, look what happens.

And here, on a domestic scale, the misery, the unhappiness, the backbiting, the sheer human capacity to make life miserable for others is all seen in this home here.

Later on, we're going to see its disastrous consequences if you read this story in the life of David. And then, in the life of Solomon, on a colossal scale, with Solomon's many, many wives and concubines.

Basically, polygamy attacks God's plan for one man and one woman in lifelong fidelity as the context for loving companionship and also the context or the bringing up of children.

[16:34] One of the devil's strategies, then as now, is to attack that basic building block, if you like, of society. We have a phrase nowadays, dysfunctional families.

The truth of the matter is, all families are dysfunctional apart from the grace of God. The Bible does not present the little house on the prairie, all sweetness and light.

The Bible presents sinful men and women living together by the grace of God. And you see, one of the results of a nation, one of the results of a church turning its back on the word of God, is profound domestic unhappiness.

And we know all about that in our society. We know all about it on a big scale. We know all about it on a small scale. And there's a fascinating little detail in verse 7 about Peninnah, the depressingly fecund Peninnah, while Hannah was unable to have children.

So it went on year by year. Her rival used to provoke her, verse 6, grievously, and to irritate her because the Lord had closed up her womb. Notice when this is done.

[17:49] This is done when Peninnah is punctiliously observing worship. She's going to church. But that's not preventing her being a nasty and unpleasant gossip.

So the first thing is the domestic situation. The word of God has been ignored. The standards that God has set down for human happiness and fulfillment are set aside.

And who can doubt that is the devil's strategy today. And this civil partnerships issue is simply another example of that. So the first element in the human failure is the domestic situation.

But also the national situation. And the national situation is dire. And the reason it's dire is because of weak and corrupt leadership.

It's actually impossible to exaggerate the damage done to a church by weak, by bad leadership. leadership. But there are two types of bad leadership.

[18:50] We didn't read on. Maybe you can read it later. The reading was already long enough and I shudder to think if I had asked for the whole of the first two chapters to be read. But anyway, if you read on from chapter 2, verse 12, we read that the sons of Eli were worthless men.

They did not know the Lord. This is the kind of leadership, scandalous leadership, of the people of God by people who do not know God.

By unconverted people. By people who are in it for their own gain. And that's what, and the next few verses tell us that's exactly the truth about them.

They were in it for what they could get out of it. They were using it to line their own pockets and indeed their own stomachs. And later on in verses 22 and following, Eli was very old.

He kept hearing all that his sons were doing in all Israel and how they lay with the women who were serving at the entrance of the tent of meeting. Shameless, godless immorality. It's no accident, is it, that when people abandon the truth of the word of God, soon the whole ethical dimension of their lives goes out the window.

[20:06] It's absolutely no accident that those who are pushing for non-biblical sexual patterns of behavior are also those who deny the virgin birth, deny the resurrection, deny the divinity of the Lord Jesus Christ.

This always happens. And when that kind of thing happens, we have apathy and cynicism. And who can doubt that's happening in our own land. So that's the first type of bad leadership.

There is godless, unbelieving leadership from Hophni and Phinehas, Eli's sons. Well, the second type of bad leadership comes from Eli himself and that is weak leadership.

All that it needs for evil to happen is for good people to do nothing. And that's what's happening here. Eli indulgently looks on what is happening.

Notice, by contrast, that little episode back in chapter 1, verse 12. Hannah is praying.

[21 : 12] Eli observed her mouth. Hannah was speaking in her heart. Only her lips moved and her voice was not heard. Therefore, Eli took her to be a drunken woman. Eli does not recognize genuine spirituality when he comes across it, but he simply is indulgent on his own sons and their hangers on.

In other words, he's harsh on the real seeker, but he indulges the bully and the cheat and the liar. What is the mark of a true leader? According to Jesus in John 10, a true pastor, a true shepherd, not only feeds the sheep, a true shepherd fights the wolf.

Eli is the kind of guy who would say, oh, it's really just a dog. We must make friends with it. That's what Eli is doing. Eli is making friends with the wolf and by doing so, he is failing to feed the sheep. He's interpreting enthusiasm for the Lord on Hannah's part as fanaticism. So you see, the national situation has reached the state it is because of bad leadership.

Bad leadership of unbelievers, ungodly men who are only there using it as a position and bad leadership from Eli who has simply ceased to have any spiritual discernment and simply allows things to happen.

[22 : 33] Always winter and never Christmas. That's the situation here. And I want us to move on now to the second movement of the story which I've called God's unseen presence.

They say Aslan is on the move. Well, Aslan is on the move here as he is on the move in our time as well. And that's why in verses, looking back now at chapter 1, in verses 10 to 14, the link between the wintry situation and the presence of God is prayer.

Verse 10, Hannah was deeply distressed and prayed to the Lord and wept bitterly. Probably the taunts of Pinanah ringing in her ears.

And there's an important principle here, isn't there? Hannah is not praying because she's found a calm and peaceful place. She is praying not because she feels like praying but because she has to. We need to pray when our need is great. And to whom is she praying? Verse 11, she said, O Lord of hosts.

[23 : 44] This is the first time this title of God appears in the Old Testament and, or rather, it appears first time in this chapter, you see it back in verse 3, to sacrifice to the Lord of hosts.

What does Lord of hosts mean? Lord of hosts means that this God has at His control, at His disposal, all the resources of the universe. There is nothing in heaven and earth.

There is nothing outside His control. Nowhere and nothing is beyond Him. And we need to remember that when we look round at the wintry landscape of contemporary Britain.

It is indeed a challenging, a desolating landscape that makes our hearts fail with fear. And that's why we need to pray not just to any God but to the Lord of hosts, the Lord who is in control.

And to that God, Hannah says, if you will indeed look, verse 11, on the affliction of your servant and remember me and not forget your servant but give to your servant a son then I will give him to the Lord all the days of his life.

[24 : 53] Some of the commentators say she is making a crude bargain with God. It's nothing of the sort. She is saying, if you listen to me, Lord, the rest of my life will be yours.

It's not a one-off bargain. It's not saying, if you do this for me, I'll do that for you. She is saying, all my life is yours and if you give me a son, that son's life will be yours as well.

A lifelong memorial for Hannah of the prayer that she had made in the temple. I will give him to the Lord all the days of his life and no razor shall touch his head.

Referring to the Nazarite vow that we read about back in the book of Numbers, Samuel is going to be wholly devoted to the Lord. Now, remember, Samuel is a unique figure.

This is not necessarily a prayer, which is a model prayer for everyone. Nevertheless, it is true that as we pray for our families, we need to dedicate them to the Lord.

[25 : 57] I think it's interesting when we look at what do we pray for our families. We pray, of course, that they'll be happy. We pray they'll do well in their jobs. We pray they'll marry well, if that's God's will.

They'll marry good Christian people and bring up a family. And that's all good. That's all right. But we need to pray that their whole lives will belong to the Lord. That they will grow up into men and women of God whose lives will tell for him, whose lives will be significant for him.

So Hannah prays when she's desperate. Hannah prays to the Lord of hosts, whom she knows can do this. And Hannah's prayer is the beginning of a lifelong commitment and a lifelong vow.

The other thing to notice about Hannah's prayer, I've mentioned it already, is she's not put off by Eli's crass misunderstanding. We saw this in verses 12 to 13.

She doesn't stridently justify herself. In fact, she's very respectful. Verse 15, No, my Lord, I'm a woman troubled in spirit. I've drunk neither wine nor strong drink.

[27 : 04] You will remember, of course, that the disciples, that the Christians on the day of Pentecost were accused of having drunk too much wine. Spiritual enthusiasm in a world of apathy and cynicism is always derided.

And so it is here. But I have been pouring out my soul before the Lord. Do not regard your servant as a worthless woman. But I've been speaking out my great anxiety and vexation.

Since Hannah has done business with God, Eli is little better than an irrelevance. He's not doing his work properly. And then, of course, Eli feels, Eli more or less goes into automatic pilot.

Go in peace and the Lord God of Israel grant your petition. Almost a kind of liturgical phrase that trips off his lips. He's had nothing to say to help her spiritually. So he speaks the official blessing.

And she said, Let your servant find favor in your eyes. She's met God. Samuel, as I say, is one of the great figures. This evening, we're going to be looking at how God actually calls him.

[28 : 08] But the principles, as I say, apply in prayer. Dedicate our children to the Lord. And as they grow, still hold them before the Lord every day. So we have the human weakness.

The situation of domestic, the situation of national catastrophe and breakdown. But the sign that God is on the move, as so often happens, is that a woman is praying.

I mean, if there are vivals in the past, you find that they start off with groups of people, often women, who are praying. And God's unseen presence is working there. When these two things come together, when human weakness, when human weakness and sinfulness collides with the unseen presence of God, the result is a song of praise, which is Hannah's song in chapter 2, verses 1 to 10. And this begins to make clear, if you like, the whole place of this story in the big picture. Where does this story of Hannah and Peninnah and Elkanah and Eli and the about-to-be-born Samuel, where does this fit into the Bible story?

And it's this song in particular that shows us Hannah is moving beyond her situation and its solution to who God is and how he will bring about his kingdom.

[29 : 36] She has big thoughts of God and his purpose. That's what we desperately need in church today, isn't it? Preaching must deal with big thoughts, big realities.

We don't come to church to listen to banal platitudes about the weather or the state of the nation. If you want that, you can go for a ride in a taxi or go for a haircut. We come to church to hear big truths, big truths about God, big truths about humanity.

And Hannah's mind is filled and her mouth is filled with such great truths. As she moves from lament to praise, her first prayer was a lament.

It's important to realize what lament means. Lament is not whinging and complaining. That's sternly condemned in Scripture. That happened to the Israelites in the desert.

Indeed, so awful and so persistent was their complaining that a whole generation perished in the desert. And the great Psalm 95 warns about that today if you hear his voice.

[30 : 37] Do not harden your heart. And what does harden your heart mean? Harden your heart means an endless, whinging, complaining about God and about his ways.

And the author of Hebrews picks this up as well in chapter 4 while it is called today. Listen to his voice. There never is a day that's not called today. There never is a day when we don't need to listen to his voice.

So Hannah has moved from lament to praise and God himself is the subject. My heart exalts in the Lord. My strength is exalted in the Lord. God himself is the subject in the first two verses.

And what kind of God is he? This God is a saving God. I rejoice in your salvation. Now, once again, this helps us to place this in the whole story.

The word salvation in the Old Testament is especially associated with the great deliverance of the Exodus. Especially associated with Moses. God is the Savior who rescued his people and led them from Egypt.

[31 : 44] You see what Hannah is saying? I believe that saving God is on the move again. Aslan is on the move. God's salvation is about to appear again.

I rejoice in your salvation. And if you fast forward, so to speak, to the New Testament as Moses and Elijah speak with Jesus on the holy mountain, they speak of his Exodus.

That's the word that's used that he was going to carry out. God is a saving God. The great Exodus event which points forward to Calvary and the resurrection is the supreme Old Testament evidence of that.

But that God is on the move again. And he is a holy God. He is a God who is totally concerned that his people are holy.

Now, it's difficult to find an unholy situation in the situation at the end of Judges and the beginning of Samuel. There is none holy like the Lord.

[32 : 42] And the reason, of course, of the unholiness is that the priests, the leaders, don't know God. They don't believe in him. They don't preach him.

They don't love him. Here is a God totally untouched by the domestic and national evil and yet determined to do something about it. And this God also is the rock.

Dependable and strong foundations on which we can build. the Savior, the holy God and the rock. The answer to our situation in Scotland as to that situation back in ancient Israel.

We need a God like that, the Lord of hosts. Now, this God, the next few verses, verses 3 to 8, is a God who is also involved in human affairs.

He's not just out there and remote. He is down here working in the world. the proud, the arrogant, will be destroyed.

[33 : 45] And later on in chapter 4 and 5 you read about how Hophni and Phinehas, Eli's evil sons, were destroyed by the Philistines in Bethel. There will be a great reversal.

Verse 5, Those who are full have hired themselves out for bread. Those who are hungry have ceased to hunger. The barn has borne seven. He who has many children is forlorn.

Society is going to be turned upside down and it's going to be turned upside down, we know, by a God who took the form of a servant and humbled himself and became obedient to death.

So, God is deeply concerned with the affairs of the nation, with the affairs of the world. But the other thing about God is God is the God of the world to come as well.

The Lord kills and verse 6 brings to life. He brings down to Sheol and raises up. The Lord makes poor and makes rich and so on until verse 10 the Lord will judge the ends of the earth.

[34 : 57] He is the creator and one day he will be the judge. You see how this story is fitted into the whole sweep of God's purpose. He is the creator, the pillars of the earth, verse 8, are the Lord's and on them he has set the world and then in verse 10 the Lord will judge the ends of the earth.

Everything we do matters because everything we do can be of eternal significance. Every detail is in his hands. Food and shelter, money, work, exams, relationships, families.

All of these things matter because God is the creator and God is the one who will fulfill his purpose. He is the judge. He is the Lord of destinies.

He will give strength to his king, verse 10, and exalt the power of his anointed. Now that king, that anointed, clearly in context is first of all David himself.

David whom Samuel is later to anoint in chapter 16 David who is to be the Lord's anointed but clearly to it points forward to great David's greater son as in Montgomery's hymn Hail to the Lord's anointed, great David's greater son.

[36 : 13] Because this story goes right to the heart of the gospel. A thousand years later another Jewish girl is to hear with trembling hope and wonder that she is to have a child.

And this child is to be the saviour of the world. This child is to be someone greater than Samuel.

This child is to be the true king, the Lord's anointed, God's presence and his very self.

And she too bursts into song, the song we call the Magnificat. My soul rejoices in God my saviour, echoing this song but going beyond it.

So you see how in a sense nothing has changed here. Samuel is born but nothing has changed.

Eli's sons are still wicked. Eli is still hopelessly incompetent and ineffective but God is on the move.

The wintry landscape is about to change. And this is the way God works. If you read the story of the church, in the wintry desolate landscape of the 18th century for example, when religion and religion is the right word had degenerated a mere superstitious ritual, when pulpits were occupied by men who were more familiar with gambling than with preaching the word of life, more familiar with good eating and fast living than with preaching the truth of God.

[37 : 51] Bishop Butler wrote in his journal, the church in England as it now exists, nothing on earth can save. And he was absolutely right.

But it was only some months later that another man sat in Aldersgate, only a few months after the bishop's gloomy prophecy, he wrote something as well.

He wrote, my heart was strangely warmed. And God laid his hand on John Wesley from that day, on his brother Charles, on George Whitefield and others.

And within a few short years revival was sweeping through this country, through parts of Europe and into America. God is on the throne, God is on the move.

As we look around at the bleak, wintry landscape of our nation and indeed the church in the west in general, as we look at the landscape that appears to be given over totally to the white witch.

[38 : 52] We need to pray like Hannah. We need to pray that God will raise up Samuels, that God will raise up those who by his grace will see the turn of the tide and the rivers of God's grace flowing again.

Because that's what this story is telling us. This story is telling us that even when he seems to be absent, as Faber said in his hymn, God is on the field, when he is most invisible, in that confidence we need to go forward, believing that he who has begun a good work will continue it until the day of Jesus Christ.

Let's pray. Lord, we have no room for complacency as we look around on the bleak landscape, failing church, a nation with a gathering rush away from your word and from your principles, and our own hearts often filled with fear and filled with doubt and filled with dread.

But we pray that in these circumstances we may indeed worship you, the Lord of hosts, the one who works out everything according to the purpose of your will, that we may faithfully in our day, we good stewards of your word, that we live faithfully for you, that we may show the wonderful deeds of him who called us out of darkness into his marvelous light.

Amen. Amen.