

Trusting for a Turnaround

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[0 : 0 0] Well, good afternoon, everyone. It's so good to see you all, and welcome to our Wednesday Lunchtime Bible Talk. If it's your first time, you're particularly welcome. I understand you don't have little leaflets anymore, so just to inform you, you're going to be in 1 Samuel chapter 1, so it'd be great if you could turn that up. And just to say, whilst you're turning that up, next week there will be no Lunchtime Bible Talk because we have our Servants of the Word conference. So if there are people who aren't here today who would normally be here that you know, it'd be great if you could let them know that there will be no Lunchtime Talk next week, but it will recommence the following week.

Right, well, let me read 1 Samuel chapter 1. You'll find that on page 225. There was a certain man of Remethaim Zophim, of the hill country of Ephraim, whose name was Elkanah, the son of Jeroham, son of Elihu, son of Tohu, son of Zuth, and Ephrathite. He had two wives. The name of 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 of 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. 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 and would not eat. And Elkanah, her husband, said to her, Hannah, why do you weep? And why do you not eat? And 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 wept 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 to 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. 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've been pouring out my soul before the Lord.

[3 : 2 7] 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 worship before the Lord.

And they went back to the house at Ramah. And Elkanah knew Hannah, his wife, and the Lord remembered her. And in due time, Hannah conceived and bore a son. And she called his name Samuel. But 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 a 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.

And 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 is 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.

And he worshipped the Lord there. When life gets tough, what are you going to pin all your hopes on?

[5 : 38] It's a searching question, isn't it? For life is full of disappointments. Things in our personal lives don't always go to plan.

We have dreams and aspirations that aren't always realized. Life often doesn't end up like we hoped it would. We don't get the job we hoped for. Relationships sometimes go sour.

And we often just feel trapped by our own life circumstances or our own sinful natures. And disappointments aren't just constrained to our personal lives, are they?

For we often recognize that we need a big turnaround in our fortunes in our church life also. We long for our ministry at church to be far more fruitful than it is.

We long for people to come to know Jesus. As we long for our church to have a greater impact on the community around us. But these feelings, they're not new.

[6 : 37] This has been the experience of God's people at many points throughout history. Especially for those who were the first receivers of this book of 1 Samuel. The glory days were far behind them.

The golden days of David and Solomon were no longer. They're in the past. And Israel was slowly falling into decline. And that's why it's so fitting, I think, that this book of Samuel starts off with this story of Hannah.

For it's a story all about the reversal of fortunes. The thing that God's people back then craved in their day. As well as us in ours. This story is about both the reversal on a small scale.

In terms of Hannah's personal circumstances. But also on the larger scale. In terms of Israel's circumstances. God's people.

The situation they found themselves in. So let's delve into this gripping and emotionally charged story, shall we? Verse 1 and 2 set up a problem for us.

[7 : 44] There was a man from Ephraim called Elkanah. Who had two wives. Hannah and Peninnah. Peninnah had children. But Hannah had none.

Hannah was barren. As verse 5 and 6 put it. The Lord had closed Hannah's womb. And yes, barrenness was as devastating back then as it is in our world today.

But what made matters worse for Hannah was the fact that Motermouth, overly fertile Peninnah, used this as an opportunity to get one over on her.

Let's see this fork-tongued woman in action. Verse 3. Year by year, Elkanah and his family would go to Shiloh to worship and sacrifice to the Lord.

And then the family would sit down and have a family meal together. Sounds like happy families, doesn't it? Well, no. For this meal became the arena for great distress for Hannah.

[8 : 53] Elkanah would deal out portions of food to Peninnah and her children first. But then would give a double portion to Hannah because he loved her. And probably because he had sympathy for her because she didn't have children of her own.

But this favorable treatment of Hannah gave Peninnah the opening she was looking for to really jab her elbows into the side of Hannah. You can just imagine loudmouth Peninnah making a big show of things around the dinner table.

Saying things like this. Now, has everybody got their food? Everyone, children, have you all got your food? Oh, there are just so many of you. It's just so hard to keep track of you all.

Hannah, oh, I guess you have no idea what I'm talking about. And then one of Peninnah's, no doubt, lovely little children pipes up and says, Mommy, why doesn't Hannah have children of her own?

Oh, I'm sure she'd love to have children. And I'm sure Daddy would love to have children too. But you see, Hannah keeps disappointing Daddy. She can't have children of her own.

[10 : 07] Why? Well, because God won't let her. I'm not one to speculate why. But you can come to your own conclusions. Hannah was repeatedly barraged by these venomous and unwarranted attacks.

Notice, year by year, Hannah would go up to worship, verse 3. And year by year, verse 7, Peninnah would provoke her grievously.

The cruelty was as certain and as regular as Hannah's devotion was to the Lord. And, of course, this absolutely devastated Hannah.

If it wasn't bad enough, not being able to have a child, the one thing that she desired above all else, indeed what she rightly thought she was designed and created to do, it was made worse by the fact she was mocked and demoralized by a rival who seemingly had everything that she wanted.

Just notice how many times Hannah's grief is mentioned in this opening chapter.

[11 : 24] Verse 7, she weeps and her heart is sad. Verse 10, she's deeply distressed and wept bitterly. Verse 15, she was troubled in spirit and poured out her soul.

Verse 16, she was in great anxiety and vexation. Hannah had hit a breaking point. And implicitly, we're asked as the audience the following question.

Where do you look to when you've hit such levels of despair? Where can hope be found? Well, let's look at our first point.

We must seek God who reigns supreme. Peninnah's jibes that year were the straw that broke the camel's back. Elkanah's well-intended words were no comfort to her at all.

So Hannah races to the temple of the Lord and weeps bitterly before the Lord in verse 10. She recognized that God was the only one who could bring her comfort and reverse her fortunes.

[12 : 36] If the Lord was the one who had closed up her womb in verse 5 for reasons that she could not comprehend, then surely he was the only person who could open it up again.

He is the all-powerful God, the one who rules heaven's armies. That's why she calls him the Lord of hosts in verse 11.

It literally means the one who has all heaven's armies at his disposal. He has the power. And if you look near the end of her prayer in chapter 2, verse 8, she says this.

The pillars of the earth are the Lord's and on them he has set the world. God made this world. He established it. And therefore Hannah knows that he has complete control over absolutely everything that goes on in it.

From the rising and fallings of nations to the circumstances of a seemingly unimportant barren woman who you'd think would barely register in world history.

[13 : 38] If you're desperate for circumstances to change, if you are feeling afflicted like life spiraled out of control, gone in decline, then there's only one place you can turn to.

And if we find ourselves ever disappointed at how our mission is going as a church, here or in the churches you go to, then there is only one person who can turn around those fortunes.

For that's what the Old Testament church reading this letter would have gleaned from this opening story. The people of Israel who read it years later. The books of Samuel are pretty hard to date.

They could have been written any time between the dividing of the kingdom under Rehoboam into exile, a time frame of around 400 years. So it's difficult to apply this letter to a specific incident that was happening in Israel's history.

But what is certain is that the glory days were well behind Israel. It was written sometime between the dividing of God's kingdom and exile, a period of great decline.

[14 : 48] And with that decline, I think it would have been really tempting to have thought that God had lost control and that he wasn't interested in the welfare of his people anymore.

But Hannah's story here preaches to us that that isn't true. He really does care. He really is in control. And he really does care about his people and listens to their prayers.

For it would be a problem, wouldn't it, if God was all-powerful, but utterly disinterested, disengaged with the world that he's made and the people he's made covenant with.

But Hannah's passionate prayers teach us that can't be the case. Why pray if you don't think God is interested? And notice what she prays in verse 11.

She says, You might think that Hannah's call for the Lord to remember her and not to forget her shows that she is uncertain about the character of her God and his willingness to act in her life.

[16 : 11] But rather, she's holding God to his word in faith. For these words echo the words at the start of the book of Exodus. Do you remember how the book of Exodus started?

The Israelites were being afflicted in Egypt and they cried out to the Lord. And this is what the writer comments in Exodus chapter 2. God heard their groaning and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob.

God saw the people of Israel and God knew. God remembered, he saw, he knew. And as we know, he acted to turn around the fortunes of Israel back then as they were miraculously rescued from slavery and brought into a land of their own.

Hannah knew the character of her God. She knew he was powerful and she knew that he wasn't far off and aloof, but rather intimately involved in the lives of his people and in the history of this world.

God cares. And that's why in chapter 2, verse 2, she says this about him. There is none holy like the Lord. There is none beside you.

[17 : 31] There is no rock like you. You see, God is unique. He's not only uniquely powerful, but he's also uniquely the only one who can meet our needs at the levels that we desire.

There is none beside him. There is no rock like him. And Hannah knew that. And the Israelites living in less favorable days after the great kings needed to know that too, as do we.

And seek him. For nothing else in this world, no other coping strategy, no political movement, no new initiative that you put forward as a church, is capable of helping us like the Lord.

Nothing we do, nothing else we trust in, can turn around our circumstances but the Lord. God is uniquely qualified to work in our lives and change our circumstances.

And he loves to turn things around, as we'll see in a moment. Well, our second point for this afternoon. We must serve our God who raises the steadfast.

[18 : 44] It's hard to miss Hannah's devotion and service to the Lord in this chapter, isn't it? She goes to the temple year by year.

She reveres the Lord, calling him the Lord of hosts. She makes vows to the Lord, promises to give up the son she desires above all other things to his service, if you'll answer her prayer.

She will ensure that her son becomes a Nazarite, dedicating him to the service of the Lord at the temple. And the interaction with Eli also works to display Hannah's godly character and her loyalty to the Lord too.

Eli sees Hannah distraught, and he just assumes that she's drunk. Presumably because lots of people who were coming to sacrifice at the temple that time of year, the time of feasting, were drunk.

But not Hannah. This encounter gives the reader the chance to see what's going on in her heart, what she's like, the depth of her intimacy with the Lord, her devotion.

[19 : 51] She wasn't drunk, but she was busy pouring out her soul to the Lord, verse 15. She's a servant of God, verse 16. Not a worthless woman.

She's a loyal servant of God. And when Eli sees this, he has confidence that the Lord will grant her petition, in verse 17. For the Lord loves to bless those who humbly serve him and rely on him.

Hannah knew that. Both Hannah and Eli knew the book of Deuteronomy, that God promised to bless those who were faithful to him and his covenant, and curse those who weren't.

And that's why the story turns in verse 18. Up until this point, there has been only a misery, heartache, and tears. But from this moment on, there is no mention of grief or upset any longer.

The writer simply says, Then the woman went on her way and ate, and her face was no longer sad. Hannah could have confidence in her prayers because God loves to bless those who love him and serve him.

[21 : 09] And indeed, our God in heaven, the Lord of hosts, remembered Hannah, didn't he? Verse 19. She conceived, and she bore the son that she so desired, and called him Samuel.

But notice that her loyalty and devotion didn't stop when she got what she wanted. She may not have been able to go up to the temple of the Lord the following year because she was still weaning Samuel.

Verse 22. But she was still concerned about fulfilling her vow to God. Hannah's mind was fixed on bringing Samuel to appear before the presence of the Lord and for him to dwell there forever.

And when she had weaned him, verse 24, read with me. 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.

And 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.

[22 : 20] For this child I prayed, and this Lord, 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, and he worshipped the Lord there.

She fulfilled her vow. She gave up what was most precious to her, just as she had promised that Samuel might serve the Lord. And the author wants us to see, but the Lord's blessing on Hannah's life is inextricably linked with Hannah's loyalty towards God.

And the message is that if we want God to be active in our lives and in our church's lives, then we must really love him, and we must really serve him. Now let me clarify what I'm not saying.

I'm not endorsing salvation by works, that God blesses us for things that we do. Neither am I endorsing the prosperity gospel that God blesses us proportionally in return for the service we render him.

Any relationship we have with him and any blessing we have in our lives flows from his divine benevolence towards us. It's not of our doing. And that isn't just true of the initiation of that relationship when we first become Christians, but all through our Christian lives.

[23 : 45] But picture for a moment an earthly king. Not one of the kings we have today, but a powerful king like you read about in the Old Testament. Think Xerxes or Ahasuerus or David or Solomon.

Do you think they were keen to grant the request to their subjects who were found to be disloyal to them? No. Kings don't bless those who rebel against them, but those who strive to serve them and their kingdom.

And it's no different with our king. You can't expect God to kindly bless your life if you're living in rebellion against him.

It's just ludicrous. But neither does it mean that this kind of works mechanistically. Just because we serve God the king doesn't mean that everything will go well in our lives.

We know that, don't we? And that's obvious from Hannah's story. She was barren for many years despite, I presume, being unswervingly faithful towards the Lord.

[24 : 54] God hasn't just set up some kind of impersonal system to distribute blessings and curses in proportion to human faithfulness. No, it's more nuanced and complicated than that.

But nonetheless, as a general rule, obedience does lead to blessing in our lives and the lives of our church. One of the nuances that we need to appreciate is that kings also have the right to withhold blessings from those who seemingly deserve them to the higher purposes that we are not given insight into.

Just like the Lord seemingly gives Penina lots of children here in this chapter in Hannah Norton. A king can do as he wishes to advance his kingdom purposes and bring him glory he has the prerogative to do that.

Sometimes God withholds great blessings from even his most steadfast servants because of his purposes that he hasn't chosen disclosed to us. And you know when that happens it is hard to come to terms with.

But the good news is that none of us will question his actions when we meet him face to face. We just have to trust him. But just because God has a prerogative to do as he wishes wishes.

[26 : 17] Let's not allow that to lure us into a state of apathy and just think well God's going to do what he wants to do anyway so what do my actions what part do my actions play at all? No let's become people that we know the Lord loves to bless.

And if we're doing so then we have every right to expect God to be at work in our personal lives and in the lives of our churches too transforming us and blessing the work that we're part of.

And finally just to say we might never see the turnaround we so desire in our lifetime despite being loyal to God all our days.

But the good news is there will be perfect justice in the end and God will bring about the biggest turnaround at the end of time. Those of you those of us who are loyal to him now will one day experience unrelenting blessing in the new world and those who oppose him will face unrelenting curses and therefore it's worth remaining devoted to the Lord right to the end of life even though it remains hard even if you don't see the turnaround you hope for in your own personal circumstances for it will be worth it in the end.

So when life isn't as you'd hoped it would be where are you going to pin your hopes? Well hopefully we've seen today there's only one place we can pin them and that is on the Lord.

[27 : 49] Seek him. He's the one who reigns supreme. He's the one who is all powerful over all our circumstances and serve him faithfully.

Be steadfast to him because he loves to bless those who love him and serve him. Let's pray together. Father God we do thank you that you are sovereignly in control of all things.

That everything that goes on in our lives and in the lives of our churches is ordained by your hand. Lord and Father we pray that you'd help us to be a people who seek you who lean on you and trust in you and not in other things.

We recognize when things don't go as planned in life we turn to so many different things to cope. We trust in so many different things to bring the turnaround that we hope for.

help us to see Lord to see that you are the only one with the power to meet our needs at the deepest levels.

[29 : 09] And help us Lord we pray to take our responsibility seriously. Help us to serve you steadfastly even though things might seem to carry on going into decline.

and trust that you are a king who knows what you're doing. You're a king who will bring about his kingdom in the end. And we thank you for that. We pray this in Jesus' name.

Amen.