

1 Samuel 1:1-20 - A Sovereign God and Severe Tragedies

Just a fair warning before we get going here: because there is so much to talk about in our passage this morning, it's going to feel a little like when someone first learns to drive a stick shift. It's going to take us a little bit to get going because there's a lot to cover in terms of background. Then just as it starts to feel smooth and like we're heading somewhere, we've got to shift gears and it gets dicey again. So bear with me.

1 Samuel is my favorite book in the Bible. It's filled with many of the stories we are probably familiar with. The calling of young Samuel into the ministry at the Tabernacle. The ark of the covenant being captured by the Philistines. The havoc that God wreaks on the Philistines while the ark is in their land. Israel demanding a King so Saul is made king. There's the downfall of Saul. The anointing of David as the true King. David and Goliath. David and Jonathan's friendship. Saul trying to kill David. The witch of En-Dor. Saul's death.

But as we look through these I want us to remember that this book is not just a list of interesting stories in Israel's history. And it's not even a book about the story of Samuel or Saul or David. It's the story of God. And how God is graciously working among his people to ultimately accomplish redemption through Jesus Christ.

How do we know the LORD is the center of the story? We could look at it a few ways. God's covenant name - Yahweh (I am that I am) - is used 315 times in this book. More than 10 times per chapter. The word "God" is used 101 times. This is a book about God.

Zooming out a little bit, we also see a way in which this book is about God. We see that just in the overwhelming amount of times the Lord is referred to, but we see that in the bigger picture as well. How many of you have read the same book over and over? Or watched the same movie over and over? More than 10 times? More than 20?

Why do we do that? Why do watch the same story over and over? We know the outcome, we know the plot line, we probably know most of the script and can quote the lines precisely. There's no surprise ending anymore. Why keep watching? Because it's not just the ending that's intriguing. It's watching things unfold and the drama of it all.

To some extent, God is the same way. There is one overarching story that the Bible tells. And it's the saving work of Jesus Christ, the King of kings and Lord of lords who redeems his helpless people who then give him praise for doing so. And God uses history and people to tell this story over and over.

I'll just give you 2 examples. Samuel is born to parents who are barren. They can't have children. Once Samuel is born we realize he's the last of his kind: he is a judge/prophet. And although he has a significant ministry to God's people, his greatest act is to anoint the true King of Israel, king David. Once he does that, his role in Israel fades away into David's kingship.

Fast forward to John the Baptist. He was born to parents who were barren - they couldn't have children. John the Baptist is the last of his kind: he's the last of the OT prophets. And although John has a significant ministry, his greatest act was to anoint the King of kings as he baptizes Jesus. And once he does that, his role fades away into Jesus's ministry.

There's no verse in Samuel that says: this whole thing is a picture of Jesus but when you step back and see the whole landscape the similarities are striking. God is telling a prototype story of the True King to come.

Here's a second example: David and Goliath, that we'll read about a little later in 1 Samuel. We've probably heard something like: we need to be more like David and trust God and then we can destroy any enemy no matter how big. Just get 5 smooth stones - which are prayer, Bible reading, and whatever 3 other things are people make up - and go kill our giants in the strength of the Lord. But is that really the point of David and Goliath?

What if we stepped back and said: Here's Israel, the people of God, who are held captive by an enemy they can't possibly destroy on their own. And the most unlikely of people - David who is mocked and rejected by his brothers - comes in and against all odds destroys their greatest enemy. And as a result the people of God

praise David for delivering them out of bondage to this enemy. The people of God literally sing David's praises in the streets.

Doesn't that sound a lot like what Jesus did when he delivered us from sin and hell and death and Satan? Jesus, the man of sorrows, rejected by his family, came out of nowhere to accomplish something we couldn't possibly accomplish for the people of God and now we sing his praises.

The point of David and Goliath is not that we need to be like David and trust God to kill our giants. The point is that we can't kill our giants. We're like Israel cowering in fear. We need someone who can destroy the enemy for us and deliver us. And praise God we have that King.

By the way, this story is told over and over. The story of Joseph is almost identical to David. Joseph is rejected by his own brothers - the heads of the tribes of Israel. He's rejected by them and ultimately ascends to the throne and secures the protection and salvation of the people of God. It's the same story over and over. Leading up to the grand story of the Lord Jesus Christ who is the true embodiment of this redemption story.

So as we go through this book, we need to make sure we don't get so bogged down in the details that we miss the bigger picture.

Just a little background on this book. This takes place about 1,100 - 1,000 years before Jesus. And the events happen really at the end of one of the most disgusting times in Israel's history. The first 5 books of the Bible - Genesis through Deuteronomy - take us from creation to when Israel was just about to enter the Promised Land. The book of Joshua recounts the Lord's work bringing Israel into the Promised Land. And the book of Judges recounts the depravity of unregenerate Israel. There's one little high spot in Israel's history during the time of the judges and that's the book of Ruth. But aside from Ruth, after you read the book of Judges you want to take a hot shower to purge all the evil you just read about.

Samuel is the last of Israel's judges. There was Othniel, Ehud, Gideon, Deborah, Jephthah, Samson, so on. Samuel is the last of these quasi-national military-ish leaders. So Samuel begins on the tail end of one of the darkest parts of Israel's history. And although Samuel probably wrote some of the book, we know he didn't write all of it because it and 2 Samuel record events that happen after Samuel's death. The book is probably called Samuel because of the prominent role Samuel plays in this transition time of Israel from judges ruling the people to kings ruling the people.

Side: In the Hebrew Bible, the order of the books is different than our English Bible. There's nothing sacred about what order the books appear. The Hebrew Bible also has different names for some of the books. 1 and 2 Samuel and 1 and 2 Kings are called 1-4 Kingdoms in the Hebrew Bible. That's probably more helpful because in these 4 books we see God establishing the formal Kingdom of Israel. And we also see the collapse of the Kingdom of Israel because of Israel's rampant wickedness.

Interestingly, when we see John the Baptist come on the scene in Matthew's gospel he's preaching: "Repent, for the Kingdom of heaven is at hand." Jesus preaches the exact same thing. The point of John and Jesus is that, through Jesus, the **true** Kingdom of God has come and it is a heavenly Kingdom not an earthly one. There's a sense in which heaven has come down in the person of Jesus who is creating a new Kingdom of God.

And although I said that's a side note, what I really want you to understand from the OT is that these stories are not unrelated to the NT. They're not just interesting things that happened a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away. These are the stories of God preparing his people - our people - all through the ages for the King of kings who would save us from our sins.

As we look specifically at our passage this morning, what I want us to walk away with is one thing: the sovereign plan of God is not hindered by difficult situations. We're going to look at this section and it is filled with complexity and tragedy and yet God blesses through all of it. We're going to see polygamy, barrenness, jealousy, anxiety and extreme sorrow. We're going to see a faithless priest who is prejudiced and harsh. And we're going to see Yahweh who is sovereignly working all things for good for those who love him and are called according to his purpose.

Let's tackle this:

1) God works in spite of the tragedy of sexual immorality. **Read 1-2**

So we're introduced here to a man named Elkanah. Elkanah is probably a well-to-do man given by the fact that he has 2 wives. More on that issue in a minute. If you remember from the book of Joshua when Israel came into the Promised Land the land was divided up among the different tribes. Judah had an allotment, Ephraim had an allotment, Simeon, Asher, Gad, so on. And each tribe was to live in their allotment. The reality, of course, is that they wandered around. Just because someone was from one tribe didn't mean they stayed there. And tribes intermarried all the time so tribal connection became somewhat vague and confusing very early on.

Elkanah lives in the hill country of Ephraim. Ephraim was just north and west of Jerusalem, sort of in the middle of Israel. That's where Elkanah lives. But when we read his pedigree - his family line - we see that he's actually from Ephratha, which is another name for Bethlehem. **Read 1**

So we get his family lineage - we don't know much about who these guys are - but we pick up that his family is originally from Ephratha. Ephratha is another name for Bethlehem. His family may have known Boaz's family from the book of Ruth because Boaz lived in Bethlehem as well.

How do we know Elkanah is probably well off? Well, because he has 2 wives. In ancient times, if you married a gal, the expectation was that there would be children and that you would give them your estate as an inheritance. Sadly, if there were no children a well-off husband would often take another wife - or sometimes a slave/wife called a concubine - and have children through the second wife. That's what most scholars believe is the case here. And this happened all the time in the ancient world.

Abraham was married to Sarah, and they couldn't have children. What did Abraham do? He and Sarah concocted a plan to have children through Hagar, Sarah's maidservant. That was a tragedy. Same thing happened to David. David married Michal - that was his wife's name - and we read later he had additional wives. Why did he do that? Well, we find out that Michal never bore any children. David probably saw additional wives as a means to have children. Elkanah seems to be no different. As we'll see, he seems to have a special affection for Hannah although she is barren. He probably married Peninnah later in order to have children.

Now, can we just stop for a minute to address the obvious: what do we do with polygamy in the OT? Or sexual immorality in general? Because it's rampant. All your favorite characters were immoral in this area. Abraham, Jacob (the 12 tribes of Israel were sons from Jacob's relations with 4 women), Gideon, Samson, David, Solomon. And to make matters more difficult, all of those guys are listed in Hebrews 11 in the Hall of Faith. We're going to see these guys in heaven.

A couple of things. 1) We know for sure that God has always designed marriage to be between 1 man and 1 woman until death do you part. That has always been God's pattern and design from Genesis 2 onward.

2) Although the OT nowhere condemns polygamy, it's pretty clear it's a bad thing. There's nowhere in the Bible that says arson is a sin. But I'm pretty sure most of us know that burning down some else's property is wrong even if it's not spelled out for us. God has told us exactly what marriage is, he doesn't have to describe 52,000 things it is not. And every time you see polygamy in the Bible it's basically a train wreck.

3) We need to understand that God shows grace with sexual sin just as much as he shows grace with other sins. That's not to condone it, or soft-pedal it, but sexual sin is something God saves from, sanctifies from and uses people in the mean time.

By the way, God is still bringing polygamists into the Kingdom. There are people all around the world who have multiple wives and come to faith in Christ. This is actually a very sensitive topic that potential missionaries have to wrestle with. What do you do when the chief of some tribe in Papua New Guinea comes to faith in Jesus and has 4 wives? Does the missionary force him to divorce the other 3? Which 3 would he divorce? What

about his children? What about wife 2 and 4 who become Christians but wives 1 and 3 aren't having anything to do with Jesus? Which ones lose all protections and the tribe kills them and the kids? This is a huge deal in tribal situations and in some Islamic situations and even in some Mormon situations. This is not just theory.

In our own country polygamy is probably just a few decades down the line. We've already redefined marriage to be whatever we want it to be. All the same arguments for gay marriage are the arguments for polygamy. Fast forward 30 years down the road, how are we going to minister to the man who has 3 wives and comes to faith in Jesus?

What I want us to remember is that we can be black and white on issues like sexual immorality. We really can. We can stand fast on what is right and wrong. But we also need to be wise and gracious as we work through some of the more complex issues that might be repulsive to us. God was wise and gracious to people who, frankly, are repulsive to us.

God was gracious to the polygamist Abraham to give him 2 sons. God was gracious to the polygamist Jacob to give him 12 sons. God was gracious to the polygamist David to give him many sons. And the one Son that truly matters, Jesus, came through an adulterous relationship with a lady who later became the mother of Solomon who was also a polygamist on a massive scale.

God works through these situations. Can I give you some encouragement here? Maybe we're not polygamists, maybe we're not sexually immoral in ways that we see on TV. But we are wretchedly sinful. And God in his mercy and grace still uses us in his Kingdom. It's the same holy and gracious God who blessed Hannah that blesses us.

2) God works through the tragedy of barrenness. Read 3-8

So out of the frying pan into the fryer. As I mentioned polygamy is not just sinful, it's seriously a bad idea. What woman would want to share the affections of her husband with another woman? Or what husband would want to share a house with another man?

But there's another problem here. Hannah is barren, she cannot have children.

We know from **Gen. 1:28-29** that God has given what is called the creation mandate. **Look** back at **Gen. 1** for a minute. This is the very beginning of creation; Day 6 to be precise. **Read 26-28**

Man and woman are created by God, we are creatures just like birds and fish. We are told to multiply on the earth. Just like God expects the fish and birds and whales and creeping things to multiply and have babies, God expects humans will have babies. This is part of what God has designed. The difference is that we bear the image of God and exercise dominion over creation.

But part of our being God's creatures is that we multiply. And it didn't end with Adam and Eve. **Look** at **Gen. 9:7**. This is after the flood. After God himself drowned the entire planet minus 8 people. What's his command to Noah and Noah's family? **Read 7**

Nothing has changed. Be fruitful and multiply and increase greatly and multiply. Four ways of saying the same thing. But what about over population of the planet? When that becomes a problem, I think God might give us a signal. In the mean time the entire planet's population could live in the state of Texas with each person having about 1,000sf all to themselves.

What about the world getting so bad? I don't want kids in this generation. Every generation thinks they're the worst generation. But that doesn't affect God's mandate. And even if it were really bad, you know what God told Israel as they were being dragged off to pagan Babylon? Keep having babies, keep increasing. (**Jer. 29:1-14**)

Listen, don't buy into the lie that being fruitful and multiplying has somehow ceased as God's intention. There's no indication from the Bible that that is the case.

“If humans are to imitate God, then creating life is a basic part of that task. A man and a woman can produce a living soul. This privilege is part of their blessing from God, a blessing that includes divine enablement. For believers, childbirth is an act of worship, a sharing in the work of God, the one who created life.” (Ross, A. P., *Creation and blessing: a guide to the study and exposition of Genesis*, pg. 113)

Are there exceptions to this? Of course there are. Someone who doesn't get married is not obligated to fulfill the creation mandate. They can't. A married couple that battles extreme complications getting pregnant or during pregnancy and childbirth I don't think is necessarily obligated to fulfill this.

But one way I think we know that it is God's design is because, like Hannah, it is often a sad tragedy when people cannot have children. **Look** back at **1 Sam**. Here's how complicated this is. **Read 5**

Who's responsible for Hannah's barrenness? The Lord. The Lord closed her womb specifically. She may have known that, she might not have. The author of Samuel did.

I thought God wanted us to have babies. Why is her womb closed? We don't know. Why are some ladies without children now? Why are some men sterile now? We don't know. Is it the Lord's fault? You guys, these are questions we really have to wrestle with. When you see a family with no children our first instinct should not be that they're just riding the cultural wave of permanent empty nesting. There might be tragedy on the level we can't imagine and we better be careful when we talk about it.

A friend of mine in the Tri-Cities couldn't have children. We prayed for years that the Lord would grant them children. And one day he did. Not through pregnancy, but through a beautiful little girl who was born on the other side of the country who was adopted into their family.

Is the Lord sovereign over the womb and all life? Of course. But we don't know **why** some struggle with pregnancy and others do not. And we dare not say that this is the Lord's doing or that this is some kind of punishment for something. We don't know that. Why could the author of Samuel say it? Because the Holy Spirit said it through him.

And we need to also be careful what we say and how we try to comfort people in tragedy. God bless Elkanah but giving his wife second helping of dinner isn't going to cure her sorrow. **Read 5 & 8**

“Hey cheer up. I'm here!” This is the husband version of Job's wife. Mr. I-Can-Fix-All-Things with Food. It doesn't work. It's probably almost as bad a Peninnah kicking her while she's down.

When your heart longs for children, it just longs for children. You know what can work? Patiently walking with someone through the tragedy. And prayer. The only one we see who prays in all of this is Hannah. **Read 9-11**

She's in Shiloh, that's where the Tabernacle was. And she pours out her heart to God. She actually vows to God. Give me a child and I'll give him right back to you.

She's not selfish. She doesn't want babies to parade around in Baby Gap clothes. She doesn't want a caretaker when she's old and Elkanah's gone. She wants godly offspring to grow up and serve the Lord. That God Almighty would be magnified through their lives. Whatever children she might get aren't hers anyway, they're God's.

Here's an interesting note: God will give Hannah a son, we know that. But what tribe were the priests in Israel from? Levi. What tribe are Hannah and Elkanah from? They are Ephrathites, remember? From Bethlehem in Judah. Priests couldn't come from that tribe. But it seems as though God makes provision for Samuel to function as a prophet and priest as a result of Hannah's plea. God not only miraculously gives her a child, but by divine order qualifies him for a service he should never have had. All because she prayed.

Listen, when you're going through tragedy and it feels like all you've got a monkeys around you accusing you and insulting you and telling you to don't worry be happy. God won't necessarily give you what you want. But know for sure that Yahweh - the Lord God Almighty - hears you. And will work your tragedy for good.

3) God works through the tragedy of sinful leaders. **Read 12-18**

So Eli doesn't know her from anyone and while she sits praying her heart out, he accuses her of drunkenness. That's awesome. We're going to find out that Eli is a corrupt priest. He has 2 adult sons who serve at the Temple with him and their wickedness is unparalleled. They steal meat from those bringing sacrifice. They sleep with the women coming to the the Tabernacle. They bullied and threatened people and Eli did nothing. And when he was confronted about it, he didn't repent.

What we see is that just like God orchestrates tragedy in the lives of the most faithful, sometimes he orchestrates blessing through the least faithful. Eli blesses Hannah and essentially gives an "amen" to her prayer. Later Eli will basically raise Samuel, even as Samuel foretells Eli's demise. **Read 19-20**

God heard her prayer and answered her prayer.

Listen, a lot times we get this idyllic reality in our head that the only way God will use anyone or bless anyone is if the world is in a nice, neat little package that all lines up with everything he says. Can I tell you something? Our lives and our world will never line up precisely with what God has said. Should we strive for godliness and righteousness in our lives? Absolutely. But will we ever attain that in this life? No chance. Will God still bless his children despite our failings? Yes because he's although we're fickle petty, his steadfast love endures forever.

And although the written record of God's work among his people in the Bible has been finished, his work among his people won't end until Jesus comes back. And the story will be pretty much the same until then: God graciously working among a sinful people who praise him for his grace.

Pray