

Grace in Transition | The Book of Samuel

Hannah's Song

First Samuel 2.1-13a

8.30.20

Then Hannah prayed and said, "My heart exults in the LORD; My horn is exalted in the LORD, my mouth speaks boldly against my enemies, Because I rejoice in Your salvation. ² "There is no one holy like the LORD, Indeed, there is no one besides You, nor is there any rock like our God. ³ "Boast no more so very proudly, do not let arrogance come out of your mouth; For the LORD is a God of knowledge, And with Him actions are weighed. ⁴ "The bows of the mighty are shattered, But the feeble gird on strength. ⁵ "Those who were full hire themselves out for bread, but those who were hungry cease to hunger. Even the barren gives birth to seven, but she who has many children languishes. ⁶ "The LORD kills and makes alive; He brings down to Sheol and raises up. ⁷ "The LORD makes poor and rich; He brings low, He also exalts. ⁸ "He raises the poor from the dust, He lifts the needy from the ash heap to make them sit with nobles, and inherit a seat of honor; For the pillars of the earth are the LORD'S, And He set the world on them. ⁹ "He keeps the feet of His godly ones, But the wicked ones are silenced in darkness; For not by might shall a man prevail. ¹⁰ "Those who contend with the LORD will be shattered; Against them He will thunder in the heavens, The LORD will judge the ends of the earth; And He will give strength to His king, and will exalt the horn of His anointed."

¹¹ *Then Elkanah went to his home at Ramah. But the boy ministered to the LORD before Eli the priest. ¹² Now the sons of Eli were worthless men; they did not know the LORD ¹³ nor the custom of the priests with the people. (1st Samuel 2)*

Today we begin a new series, the Fall Series, on The Books of Samuel. Bible readers will be familiar with many of the characters and events in this long story. It all takes place about 1000 BC between Abraham and the birth of Christ... Samuel overlaps with The Book of Judges: Samson seems to have been born at the same time as the title character of this book.

It's a time of transition and change... very similar to our own time (THAT should interest us in this book). Israel was ruled by the Philistines but it's transitioning to Israelite rule. The form of government – goes from Judges to Kings, from a loose confederation of tribes to a nation/capital city, a centralized government and a succession of leaders: Eli → Samuel → Saul → David → Solomon... from Tabernacle to Temple. Transitions.

Life (if you haven't noticed) is basically a series of transitions... We hope for smooth transitions from kindergarten to first grade, from Middle School to High School...parents...could be a transition of marital status... job, location, health... career to retirement.

AND there are meta-transitions taking place in our time. The pandemic (and its aftermath), politics, public opinion (changes), demographics, international relations – a world in transition.

And this book instructs us in coping with transition and change using that most engaging form of communication – the STORY. It’s not a manual or a treatise (like Wisdom Literature) but a series of highly intriguing tales... not morality tales... not fables... but history told in a way that patterns and symbols seem to emerge... and the trick (if I could put it that way) is to recognize these types/symbols/patterns and then learn how God’s Story unfolds (His method)... and to enter into HIS Story (history is HIS-story) and placing ourselves IN His Story is the key to not only surviving transition... but thriving and growing in it.

So let’s look at this song (Hannah’s Song) and see:

- 1) Backstory
- 2) BIG Story
- 3) YOUR story

Eugene Peterson (died 2 years ago) said there’s no form of communication more universally appealing than the story... but a close second is SONG... A N D this passage is a song within a story. Why Hannah sings ...is the Backstory.

The book begins with the words, “Now there was a certain man...” and the reader assumes the story is going to BE about this man, Elkanah... but it’s not!

It’s actually about his wives...polygamy was tolerated for a variety of reasons (shortage of men/war etc.) but it never seems to be a happy situation and this was no exception. All Israelite women knew that the salvation of the world would come from “the seed of the woman” a mysterious Figure introduced in Genesis CH 3 so every woman wanted to contribute to the line/genealogy/family-tree of this Anointed One... and the first wife, Peninnah was really doing her part (for the national destiny) she had children.

But Hannah was infertile – “the LORD had closed her womb” (1.5) and Peninnah lorded her children over Hannah. She was called Hannah’s “rival” (1.6). Elkanah seems to love Hannah and he feels for her, which seems to infuriate Peninnah... and she becomes really mean...makes a lot of snide comments and shames Hannah and provokes her (as sometimes happens in blended families even to this day).

And this is a devout family...they go on a yearly pilgrimage to Shiloh where the Tabernacle was (the portable worship tent – a model of Eden) and there they worshiped the God of Abraham.

But sadly the teasing was at its worst when they were on these pilgrimages (like family vacations will sometimes bring stuff to the surface) and we find Hannah FEELING her barren-ness acutely in these times and the other wife sort of pounced! Ugly situation.

And she was “greatly distressed” – i.e. she really felt like a fruitless, barren, unproductive, loser of a person and she eventually became convinced: she could do nothing to fix herself or make her rival stop.

So, on pilgrimage, before the place where God was symbolically present to Israel (Tabernacle) the infertile Hannah has a breakdown before God and wept bitterly and made a vow – “Only You, LORD, can open my womb... I’m desperate... I will VOW to give the son back to You - make him a Nazarite – but I can’t go on in this shame – I can’t eat – can’t live!”

The priest, Eli, a portly fellow, saw her weeping and praying silently... and apparently, he was NOT used to seeing people pray (shows you how low the spiritual condition of Israel was at this time) and he concludes that Hannah is drunk... and confronts her!

But Hannah says, “No! I’m not a worthless person – I’m PRAYING, distressed and desperate; I’m broken and barren; I’m tortured and teased – I’m pouring out my heart to the LORD! And Eli, the portly priest, doesn't really know what to do with this kind of person... so he gets... like ... spiritual... and says a blessing, “Go in peace and may the God of Israel grant your request...”

And Hannah went away happy... she ate...she believed the promise as coming from God Himself (and that was all she needed – God’s promise!) Next day, she got up early and worshipped God and the ride home... was not that bad!

Then she slept with her husband, got pregnant and gave birth to a son... And years later... she weaned the little boy... and on one of those yearly trips to worship... She placed him to be raised, a priest, at the Tabernacle in Shiloh...and THEN SHE SANG THIS SONG.

So that’s the back-story that prompted this song. Just two quick notes: 1) with all these high-power men leaders at the forefront of this action-packed book...it ALL GETS ROLLING by a woman. Her name means “favor” or “gift” or “grace” – Hannah. The two-volume book starts with a song and ends with a song – two brackets – but Hannah gets it going! She starts the transitions that lead to all this change!

2) She is placing her child in a kind of boarding school situation and she’s happy. You’d think she would be upset and distraught but there’s something about GRACE – her name means grace (God’s undeserved favor – getting rewarded for something you didn't do) there’s something about grace that makes giving and generosity free and delightful – God loves a cheerful giver and ONLY grace can produce that kind of sweetness that makes you sing even as you part with

something so valuable and normally hard to give. Grace received by faith leads to love – generosity with singing!

So she sings this song about the ways of God. She sees the BIG STORY – it all flashes before her – the way God does what He does... and in a word, God’s method is grace! The woman whose name is grace now sings about the God of Grace!

Hannah is herself, a symbol for Israel. The nation has sunk into a state of spiritual infertility. Israel is barren and fruitless – every man did what was right in his own eyes... but God is going to change that – God is the ONLY ONE WHO CAN CHANGE THAT – “there is no one holy like the LORD!”

God’s about to make His bride/Israel FRUITFUL - the One who can make dead and make alive (v.6) is now about to raise the dead: the Lord and Giver of Life!

All of sacred history flashes before her and Hannah realizes and celebrates, “I see it now – this is how God works! He takes the least-likeliest; He takes the distressed and desperate; the broken and barren; the tortured and teased. He leaves no room for boasting (like Peninnah) – v. 3 – “boast no more so very proudly; let no arrogant word come from your mouth...”

Hannah is singing about her own situation (like her rival wife – you didn’t make those children! So how can you possibly boast and be arrogant?!) but she also sings on behalf of arrogant Israel – “The LORD did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any of the peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples...” (Deu 7.7)

Hannah is singing this song on behalf of all Israel – she’s singing the big story – “All that God has ever given us was NEVER because we were qualified or deserving – it was all because of הַחֵן (Hannah = grace) – Let him who boasts, boast of the LORD!

Hannah is singing the Big Story and she’s boasting in the LORD! She now sees (v. 8) “The pillars of the earth are the LORD’S...” i.e. He has established how things are... and while for people, it’s “I’ll do for you only if you first do for ME!” – that’s NOT the pillars and foundations of God’s way! With Him, the bows of the mighty/qualified are shattered!

With HIM (Big Story!) – the feeble (v. 4) gird on strength – i.e. the weak are strong because THEY can only rely on an external Source (“extra nos” – from outside ourselves!).

v. 5 – “The full (like Peninnah, like the portly priest Eli and his arrogant sons) the full will have to hire themselves out for bread, but those who have nothing inside themselves but NEED (like Hannah!) – THEY will cease to hunger – even the barren, gives birth to seven (completion)”

It all depends on God and His grace, His “hesed”, His initiative – “He raises the poor from the dust and He lifts the needy from the ash heap...” Hannah is seeing that THIS is God’s way – to be desperate, barren, with no inner resources but NEED! This is the best place to be as we stand before this holy God. She is there herself – couldn’t make herself fruitful – and once she was forced to face it and turned to the ONLY HOLY ONE who could raise the dead and generate LIFE – once she truly came to the end of herself, she SAW THE BIG PICTURE, the big story.

Someone has said, “God’s office is at the end of your rope” (“Your strength is at the end of my rope”- song).

We could conclude: 1) Grace is not for the qualified and 2) No one is qualified. Hannah sees the Big Story and it makes her sing...and she’s informing us what to look for in The Book of Samuel – “Reader, you’ll see it OVER and OVER – the big, tall handsome guy who’s qualified and strong and noble and who has impressed everyone... especially himself ... he is not the guy! The arrogant and boastful, the self-confident and self-dependent are LOST... but the least-likelies, the adopted sons, the youngest and least experienced who (like Hannah) have nowhere else to go – they are the ones “after God’s own heart.” Look for it.

And the ULTIMATE expression of this – for which the whole history (HIS-story) prepares us – is this Man from a bad town, “a real nowhere Man sitting in His nowhere land”.

The embodiment of the Big Picture – the true Hannah who came to give grace to the unqualified is Jesus Christ of Nazareth. We should have recognized Him when He came because the song and the Big Story were training us what and WHOM to look for: “He was despised and forsaken of men, a Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; and like one from whom men hide their face He was despised, and we did not esteem Him.” (Isa 53.3)

But we should have esteemed Him because all the Hebrew HIS-story was training us to recognize Him – the Messiah – and when He was defeated and pinned to a cursed tree – we should have seen, “Ahhh! This is the Tree of Life... the LORD kills and makes alive... His death destroys my guilt and in His resurrection, He makes me alive...”

Now, how does this fit with your story (3rd Point) or really – how does YOUR story fit with HIS-story?

1st – Do you see how Hannah’s desperation created space for her to believe? She just couldn’t make her womb alive. She (like the whole nation...like us ALL) she couldn’t do it – she was unsuccessful, unfruitful and barren. In God’s story, that’s a good place to be.

AND it’s the place we hate to be. The world will turn from you when you’re in this place but when you turn to Jesus Christ in this posture – GRACE comes instantaneously... and it leads to

sweetness, generosity and blessed self-forgetfulness as it did for Hannah and the nation she represented.

2nd – Read the Bible this way. Look for grace because that IS God’s method in the Big Story... you’ll find things that seem to go in the direction of deserving but those are the exception that require explanation – the Big Picture (the interpretive grid) is GRACE given to the undeserving and disqualified. Look for it.

3rd - In the madness of OUR moment – do you ever shut the door and sit with God? Like Hannah did? Because, if you GET the Big Story (the way God deals with us in the counterintuitive way of grace/favor for the undeserving) and you get before God in quiet alone-ness... where you see the chaos and confusion of the world and DON’T SHY AWAY from seeing it in YOURSELF TOO – and THEN in silence, you ask God to show you how Jesus being cursed and defeated was for YOU and how it expresses that God actually loves and likes – and really delights in you... then, JOY will overwhelm the madness.

I love this old song by Bob Bennett (“Madness Dancing”):

In the middle of this madness I am dancing
 Though I'm not sure why just now
 I tried to be sober, tried to be logical
 But I could not stop my feet
 I know I have not turned off my mind
 I know there's evil all around
 But for now, it's outside
 And I am in my room
 And joy is like a crashing tide

A song came this morning and woke me
 And as I listened, then I found
 That I was not alone
 I was standing, moving
 Dancing, dancing
 On holy ground