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1 Samuel 1:1-20

Second Message

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# GIVING BIRTH TO A NEW ORDER

*SERIES: THE CROSSING FATES*

In our introductory message from the book of Judges we examined the impact on the nation of Israel of 400 years of unending compromise. The grand finale of Judges is summarized in two appendices setting out the tragic events that took place in the hill country of Ephraim. Both stories depict the depth of depravity which the priests of Israel had fallen into. The events are almost too chilling to tell. But the narrator doesn't hold back. He is adamant that we take a hard look at the social anarchy that results in a community whose spiritual leaders forsake God's word for the idols that make the world go around.

The first story begins with the words, "Now there was a certain man of the hill country of Ephraim whose name was Micah" (17:1). Micah was a childhood thief. He believed that if one has enough money he could buy anything, even God. When a young priest from Bethlehem passes by his neighborhood, Micah offers him a handsome salary to be his personal rent-a-priest to bless his idolatry. It was a wonderful arrangement; the mutual love of money made them like father and son. But when the love of money drives relationships, there is always a higher bidder, with more muscle and clout, who takes your money and your priest. If you object, he merely smiles and says, "Might makes right."

The final story also begins with "a certain Levite staying in the remote part of the hill country of Ephraim, who took a concubine for himself from Bethlehem" (19:1). This is the most gruesome story in the Bible. This priest is an uncaring and abusive husband, a bigot toward foreigners, and a glutton with an insatiable appetite for food and drink. Traveling through Gibeah, he is threatened with homosexual rape by a group of "worthless men." Rather than praying to God for deliverance, he forces his concubine out the door to save his own skin. Finding her in the morning "lying at the doorway of the house with her hands on the threshold," he shows no emotion, but simply grunts, "Get up." Assuming she is dead, he cuts her body into twelve pieces and sends the pieces to leaders of Israel's twelve tribes. This unspeakable horror set off a national rage that almost annihilated the entire tribe of Benjamin.

In the terrible aftermath not one woman survived, so the elders of Israel had to think of a scheme to give Benjamin a future. Their solution was to devote the city of Jabesh-gilead to destruction so they could abduct all the marriageable virgins. They rationalized this horror by saying that Jabesh had not fought with their brothers against Benjamin (perhaps they were the only sane ones). A massacre ensued on the unsuspecting city, and 400 marriageable virgins were carried off to Shiloh to be united in holy matrimony to the survivors of Benjamin. Knowing that Saul's mother was likely one of these young women gives us a clue as to why he had little taste for religion.

When these numbers proved to be insufficient, the elders were left with the additional dilemma of providing wives for the 200 remaining men. Where to find another 200 unsuspecting daughters? Not wanting to enact another holy war, they decided to use one of the yearly festivals (perhaps the grape harvest) as a cover for mass abduction. The plan was to have the remaining bachelors hide in the vineyards surrounding Shiloh just prior to the annual festival. When the Homestead High School drill team (the regiment of young dancers, "the daughters of Shiloh") came into the vineyards (unaccompanied by their parents), these Benjaminite bachelors were ordered to abduct one of the girls and carry her home as his wife. Later, if their parents objected, the elders would back these extreme tactics as the lesser of two evils. The book ends with the chilling verse, "In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes" (Judg 21:25).

Talk about a nation in desperate need of change! My task today is to help us see the "where," the "who," and the "how" of God's new order. Our text is the well-known story of Hannah.

## I. The Place and Players God Chooses (1 Sam 1:1-3)

**Now there was a certain man from Ramathaim-zophim from the hill country of Ephraim, and his name was Elkanah the son of Jeroham, the son of Elihu, the son of Tohu, the son of Zuph, an Ephraimite. He had two wives: the name of one was Hannah and the name of the other Peninnah; and Peninnah had children, but Hannah had no children. Now this man would go up from his city yearly to worship and to sacrifice to the LORD of hosts in Shiloh. And the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were priests to the LORD there. (1 Sam 1:1-3 NASB)**

### A. The place God chooses

The narrator sets the stage by giving the geographical setting and the leading players that God will use to initiate his new order. It opens with a certain man (lit. "one man"), Elkanah, who comes from Ramathaim ("two heights") in the hill country of Ephraim. Elkanah's name, "God has created," plants a seed of hope within the reader for new things. So does his impressive genealogy. His ancestry goes back four generations, something the narrator normally reserves for royalty.

But before our expectations get carried away, the narrator inserts two dissonant notes that evoke tremors of heartache from Israel's memory. Geographically we are thrust back into "the hill country of Ephraim," a place laden with memories of mafia thugs, mass rape, and abduction. In today's world it would be like saying "a certain man from Auschwitz-Birkenau," or closer to home, 911's "Ground Zero." God breaks into our world to inaugurate his work of redemption in the very place where memory is the darkest. Bethlehem, which also figures prominently in the book, will carry the dual memory of the birth of Jesus alongside the "slaughter of the innocents."

### B. The players God chooses

The narrator adds a second note of discord with the fact that Elkanah had two wives — a reminder of the patriarchs Abraham and Jacob whose home life was rife with conflict. Hannah, whose name means "grace" or "gracious," was the number one wife. Because she could not have children, Elkanah took a second wife named Peninnah. Her name "is a metaphor which suggests a beautiful exterior, whether the word means ruby or pearl"<sup>1</sup> For Elkanah to marry a beauty queen whose fertile womb gave him all the children he wanted must have been extremely painful to Hannah, driving home her sense of worthlessness with every new birth. It is to our great surprise that God's instrument for change will not be Elkanah, or any other male. He quickly fades into the background, while Hannah, his barren wife, is in the spotlight in every scene. With compelling and extraordinary initiative she becomes the human instrument who gives birth to the new order that all of Israel was waiting for.

Finally we have a snapshot into the family's regular routine of worship. Despite the horrors of abduction, and a corrupt priesthood associated with Shiloh, Elkanah and his family continue to worship there, making their journey to the yearly festival<sup>2</sup> annually. Elkanah is a pious man ruled by strong religious convictions. In our terms he would be a coat-and-tie fundamentalist, faithful to maintain his regular duties of worship, never missing a single Sunday or a holiday service. When his family arrives at church, not one of them is missing; they are all well dressed and seated in the front row.

But what looks like the perfect family on the outside is a very dysfunctional and abusive home on the inside.

## II. The Process of Pain God Uses (1 Sam 1:4-8)

### A. The yearly cycle of pain (vv 4-7)

**When the day came that Elkanah sacrificed, he would give portions to Peninnah his wife and to all her sons and her daughters; but to Hannah he would give a double portion, for he loved Hannah, but the LORD had closed her womb. Her rival, however, would provoke her bitterly to irritate her, because the LORD had closed her womb. It happened year after year, as often as she went up to the house of the LORD, she would provoke her; so she wept and would not eat.**

From this yearly regular routine the narrator draws us into “when the day came.” The yearly cycle is interrupted as we watch the different “way” Elkanah “gives” to each of his wives. Robert Bergen describes the cultural background to this climactic moment in Israel’s festivals: “A climactic event of Israel’s religious celebrations was the slaying of sacrificial animals, followed by the consumption of a lavish meal...Meat, a rarity in the typical Israelite diet of that day, was apportioned to each wife in proportion to the number of the children she had produced so she could share it with her children.”<sup>3</sup>

Elkanah dutifully follows the prescribed order, giving to Peninnah and her children each their due. But when it’s time to give Hannah her portion, knowing how painful this moment is for her, Elkanah attempts to offer comfort in the place of her sorrow by giving her “a double portion.” What is this double portion? The Hebrew term is difficult. It is the dual form of “nose, face.” Literally, it says, “he would give a portion of one pair of two noses.” Most translators understand this dual form as one special, personalized portion. Fokkerman elaborates: “On the one hand he goes by the book, one portion for one portion, on the other hand he wants, with the narrow boundaries of this, to give a sign of consolation, so that the phrase more or less says: [it is true only] one portion, [because there was no other way, but nevertheless one] of a special kind.”<sup>4</sup>

However, though Elkanah’s intentions were honorable, his act of consolation only served to accentuate Hannah’s sorrow. The special attention Elkanah pays to her provokes Peninnah’s feelings of inferiority. It rubs her nose in the fact that no matter how many children she bears for Elkanah, she is never good enough to earn his love. As she witnesses Elkanah’s sickening display of affection every year, she vents all the putrid puss and vile hatred upon Hannah. In describing this unrelenting attack, the narrator selects the verb *ra’am* (“to irritate”), a word that sounds similar to *racham* (“womb”). It is as if she took pleasure in harassing Hannah with a petty, painful rhyme to remind her that her “womb is a tomb,” or, “I have children not love, you see, but barren forever you shall be.”

If Peninnah is beautiful, that beauty has become “like a ring of gold in a swine’s snout.” In her treatment of Hannah she proves the proverb:

Gold there is, and rubies (*peninim*) in abundance,  
but lips that speak knowledge are a rare jewel. (Prov 20:15 TNIV)

Peninnah is an example of people who have physical blessings but lack the love of God in their hearts and therefore scorn others who are less fortunate. Hannah was no match for the aggressive Peninnah. Whenever she had to endure this barrage of bitter scorn from her rival, she always ended up in tears and completely shut down. She could neither speak nor eat. Imagine the tension around the table. Every year it was the same terrible scene. With the same sick family dynamics each and every year, Hannah must have come to hate the holidays. Families never seem to change, or do they?

### B. Breaking out of the cycle of pain (v. 4)

Finally Elkanah has had enough. He is fed up with Hannah’s depressive silence that casts a gloomy cloud over all the festivities, and her incessant non-eating that is an embarrassment to the family. As a typical male, Elkanah is going to fix the situation. To break this paralyzing cycle of depression he fires four rhetorical questions at Hannah in rapid succession.

“Hannah, why do you weep?

Why do you not eat?

Why is your heart sad? (lit. “why is your heart *bad*” = “resentful”)

Am I not better to you than ten sons?” (v 4)

Sadly, he knows the “why” of each question. Instead of consolation, Elkanah has blasted Hannah with insensitivity and self-pity, driving her pain deeper with each question. The fourth and final question, “Am I not better to you than ten sons?” pushes her pain past the breaking point. Now she realizes that Elkanah is no longer concerned about her grief but with his need for affirmation. It’s not about her, it’s about him. Hannah could have shot back the same question, “Well, wasn’t I good enough to satisfy you as a wife without giving you sons? Apparently not, you took another wife!” Fokkerman sees Elkanah as driven by “self-pity” of the worst sort:

...in his heart [Elkanah] wants to be told by her that he is her darling little boy. Actually it is he himself who is asking for affirmation, while he appears to be affirming her...“The child in” Elkanah is talking and addresses the parent (the mother!) in his wife Hannah, in order to get a pat on the back. He has failed to summon up what very few people are capable of summoning up, and that is being able to keep on their feet in the face of unremitting grief. He does what most people do when confronted with great affliction: drift off into their own history of distress and traumas...and from this position try to stave off the negative by manipulative means. In the end what is so hurtful in the contact between Elkanah and Hannah is that he invokes the mother figure in a woman who has been stricken with childlessness...What Elkanah actually does at that moment is to blame Hannah for his not feeling well in the face of so much grief.<sup>5</sup>

Though Elkanah is religious, he is sorely lacking in faith. In his quest to have children he violates his name (“God creates”) by taking another wife, who gives him all the children he ever wanted but becomes destructive to the one he loves. He loves Hannah, but his love has no backbone. Unlike Isaac, he does not intercede in prayer for her, nor does he intervene to shield her from Peninnah’s abuse. Like the leaders in the days of Judges, he is a passive male who refuses to confront evil within his own home. For him, life centers on taking care of his own needs. Rather than having the honesty to admit that he is powerless to change the situation, he makes Hannah responsible for his distress.

## III. Prayer Is Conceived (1 Sam 1:9-18)

### A. Laboring in prayer (vv. 9-11)

**Then Hannah rose after eating and drinking in Shiloh. Now Eli the priest was sitting on the seat by the doorpost of the temple of the LORD. She, greatly distressed, prayed to the LORD and wept bitterly.**

**She made a vow and said,**

“O LORD of hosts,  
if You will indeed look on the affliction of Your maidservant  
and remember me,  
and not forget Your maidservant,  
but will give Your maidservant a son,  
then I will give him to the LORD all the days of his life,  
and a razor shall never come on his head.”

What does Hannah do? After enduring Elkanah’s massive self-pity and intrusive accusations, she gives no verbal response; instead she merely gets up (see 2:8: “He *raises* the poor from the ash heap”) and walks away from it all. If someone isn’t sensitive, you can’t make them sensitive with reason. So she leaves “the treadmill of harassment” (Fokkerman). She takes all her grief and bitterness and makes it liquid in tears, pouring it all out before the Lord. Once again, Fokkerman captures the narrator’s incredible artistry:

It is difficult to withdraw from such hammering. The temptation to answer on the same level of argument, or with the same amount of energy, is great – but then you find you have fallen into the trap of being manipulated. Hannah does not react to words with words...She does not beg for understanding. Words are no longer necessary. Hannah presents a deed: she gets to her feet, in more than one sense...The manipulation, obscure appeal and the painful naiveté of Elkanah are such strong stim-

uli to Hannah that she breaks through the wall of endless lamentation which had meant dreadful stagnation...and she attains true strength. This strength is so great that God himself is impressed, and is about to co-operate without a murmur.<sup>6</sup>

While everyone was eating and drinking, Hannah gives drink to the Lord by offering him her sacred tears. Her assertive strength is evidenced not only by the depth of her expression (“crying and weeping”), but also by how she transforms the sorrow that robbed her of the ability to eat and drink, turning it into something positive. She offers her future son back to God to serve as a lifetime Nazarite (Num 6:1-5) who will not drink wine.

It is difficult to comprehend the magnitude and totality of Hannah’s surrender. What was it that allowed her to completely relinquish everything she was hoping for and give it back to God? How does a mother give away a son? The reason is discovered in her newfound connection with God. The fact that God truly sees her pained sorrow, that he cares about her and then publicly vindicates her, becomes the ground of her life rather than the gift. Being a surrogate mother for God’s future servant becomes the supreme privilege of her life. Nothing can take that away from her. Being a daughter who intimately knows the love of God in her heart is more important to Hannah than being a mother (Mark 5:34).

From this close up view of Hannah the narrator draws back his lens to give us a wider view of the sanctuary. There we find another insensitive male whom Hannah must overcome.

#### B. Prayer is misunderstood (vv. 12-14)

Now it came about, as she continued praying before the LORD, that Eli was watching her mouth. As for Hannah, she was speaking in her heart, only her lips were moving, but her voice was not heard. So Eli thought she was drunk.

Then Eli said to her,  
“How long will you make yourself drunk?  
Put away your wine from you.”

In contrast to Hannah, who is consumed in prayer, Eli (“exalted one”) is pictured as sitting on his throne. Eli is always portrayed as “sitting,” fat and “heavy” (4:18). He is the culmination of the materialistic, boorish priests of the book of Judges who pray for a price in order to eat and drink from the idols of the rich. He has found the priesthood a very lucrative venture; so lucrative in fact that he can hardly get around. Holiness for him is rote ritual. God never shows up with anything new or out of the ordinary until the day Hannah comes into Eli’s presence. Now after he is well stuffed with his Thanksgiving dinner, he is seated, guarding (“*watching*”) carries with it the notion of “*protecting, guarding*”) the sanctity of the sanctuary, when he is taken by a very unusual sight – a woman pouring out her heart to God.

At this point we learn that as Hannah was praying “*her voice was not heard.*” Her pain was so great she was not able to articulate words as the grief came pouring out of her soul. As Eli observed the inarticulate emotions of Elkanah’s wife, her demeanor seemed totally inappropriate to the “sanctity” of the place. But rather than questioning or drawing Hannah out to confirm his suspicions, he spits out another rhetorical question, accusing her of not only being under the influence but being a lifetime drunk (“How long?”). I speculate that it was Eli who was “under the influence,” evidenced by the fact that he exhibited no spiritual discernment. His words strike her like a whip. The irony could not be more pointed. Her husband accuses her of eating too little, while the priest accuses her of drinking too much. In reality, the only drink offered in that place was the one she gave to the Lord — a holy cup filled with her tears.

#### C. Prayer is explained (vv. 15-16)

But Hannah replied,  
“No, my lord,  
I am a woman oppressed in spirit;  
I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink,  
but I have poured out my soul before the LORD.  
Do not consider your maidservant as a worthless woman,  
for I have spoken until now out of my great concern and provocation.”

Hannah’s response reveals increasing inner strength. She refuses to be censored by the errant priest. “Even though Hannah responds politely and with restraint, to what we may call a grave insult, her first reaction is brief, abrupt and very resolute: she repulses Eli outright, needing, for this purpose, one syllable which is not restricted by any predicate or complement: ‘no!’”<sup>7</sup> This is remarkable given how abusive is Eli’s inquisition. He accuses her of being “a worthless woman” (“*a daughter of beliyā’al*”) one of the most derogatory labels for an individual, one that described those who raped the priest’s concubine (Judg 19:22), and one the narrator will reserve for Eli’s sons (2:12).

Then she politely explains to him what is really going on in front of him. This is how God’s people who are in great distress pray to a God who empathizes with their weaknesses: they “pour out” their souls before him. The theological lesson she is giving to the priest is that God is not reached through ritual, but through a broken and humble heart that pours out all its pain before him. Therefore as a priest he should not judge someone on his or her outward appearance, but he should look deep within a person, into the heart (1 Sam 16:7).

#### D. Prayer is blessed (vv. 17-18)

Then Eli answered and said,  
“Go in peace;  
and may the God of Israel grant your petition  
that you have asked of Him.”  
She said,  
“Let your maidservant find favor in your sight.”  
So the woman went her way and ate,  
and her face was no longer sad.

Rather than humbly repenting for the pain he has caused her, in his embarrassment Eli quickly attempts to reposition himself in his proper priestly role with a curt, perfunctory blessing: “May the God of Israel grant your petition...” (The Hebrew is ambiguous. It can be translated either as a jussive, expressing a wish, “*May* the God,” or imperfect, expressing a future promise: “The God of Israel *will* grant your petition”). What Eli may have considered as cliché or loose change, Hannah takes as a life changing divine promise, one that transforms her countenance and alters her appetite dramatically. She responds with typical grace, offering the “exalted” priest what he really needs. By extending grace to this woman, whose very name is grace, Eli just might make contact with the God of grace before it is too late. As she leaves, we wonder: Who blessed whom?

### IV. A Prophet is Born (1 Sam 1:19-20)

Then they arose early in the morning and worshiped before the LORD, and returned again to their house in Ramah. And Elkanah had relations with Hannah his wife, and the LORD remembered her. It came about in due time, after Hannah had conceived, that she gave birth to a son; and she named him Samuel, saying, “Because I have asked him of the LORD.”

Elkanah and Hannah are finally joined together in their worship, though Elkanah is certainly secondary. Hannah is the heroine, becoming the object of the Lord’s “remembering” (*zakar*), which means that God acts on a previous commitment, and as a result, the kingdom of heaven comes to earth in life changing ways.

Samuel’s name (*shemuel*) is an ingenious combination of sha’al (“to ask”) with *me’al* (“from God”) which, when read in sequence, becomes “asked of God.” Hannah’s story began in barrenness, strife, and sorrow; it ends in fullness, worship, and joy. The means of such a transformation comes because of one act of faith: Hannah “asked.”

### V. The Mystery of Prayer Is the Mystery of Grace

Hannah’s story is an exposition of her name, a derivative of the term “grace,” or “gracious.” She exhibits how grace responds to the vindictiveness of her rival with silence, and to the self-pity of her husband with resolute action to draw near to God. At the feet of God she pours out all her grief

and bitterness; not one drop is emptied on her family. This is pure grace. As a result, she finds grace with God, who not only empathizes with her sorrow but readily responds to her need. This highlights the theme of Samuel, that the kingdom of God comes to earth via “prayer,” not through charismatic wonder workers or controlling power brokers as seen in the book of Judges. From Hannah’s story we are able to enter into some of the marvelous aspects of the mystery of prayer.

#### A. Genuine prayer is difficult

How often do we prefer living in the endless cycle of self-pity rather than initiating change through genuine prayer? Or how often are we more inclined to pour out our venom in slander than to go before the Lord? The text seems to indicate it takes more “labor” and effort by God to get us to pray properly than it does to give a child to a barren woman. Hannah must first labor with her own barrenness, then with her rival, then with her husband, then with God, and finally with the priest, who misinterprets her godly labors. In the end it is finally “poured out,” every last drop before God.

#### B. The mysterious goods to pray

As ironic as it may seem, it is often our enemies who do more to foster our prayer life than our friends. In Hannah’s case it was Peninnah’s endless vexing and Elkanah’s self-pity that finally pushed her over the edge to pray. The same would prove true for Israel’s king, David. Saul’s endless pursuit and the immature voices of the sons of Zeruiah forced David deep into God’s tent.

#### C. The power of prayer

The good news of this opening scene is that the kingdom of God can break into dysfunctional and oppressive families, churches, and nations through just one individual who takes the initiative to pray. Hannah didn’t drag her husband to counseling in order to be delivered from her oppression. She prayed, and God’s answer to that prayer so vindicated her that she became a radically new person whose well-being was no longer dependent on the behavior of her husband, or Peninnah, or the priest. With each encounter she grows stronger and stronger, more self-assured in who she is before God.

The grace of God so transforms her that she is consumed to live for the sole purpose of the kingdom of God. The joy in living for God allows her to thrive in a world dominated by weak men, blind spiritual leaders, and oppressive rivals. Prayer became the channel of God’s grace, opening the door to the future for both Hannah and Israel.

#### D. Passing prayer along

Given that this is the case, the text may be a rebuke to our tendency as parents to “rescue” our children from difficult situations. It could also be a censor to our obsessive desire to create “perfect” worlds for them to succeed. The parental inclination to protect and support, though springing from good intentions, may in some cases be a stumbling block to the opportunity for our children to experience God personally. What is success? In this text it is the result of being crushed in pain until we cry out to God who waits to be gracious to us. Through such prayer (modeled in Psalm 2) the kingdom of God comes to earth.

**Yes, my soul, find rest in God;  
my hope comes from him.  
Truly he is my rock and my salvation;  
he is my fortress, I will not be shaken.  
My salvation and my honor depend on God;  
he is my mighty rock, my refuge.  
Trust in him at all times, you people;  
pour out your hearts to him,  
for God is our refuge. (Ps 62:5-8 TNIV)**

<sup>1</sup> I have depended heavily on Jan Fokkeman’s outstanding and masterful work for my observations and insights on this text. J. P. Fokkeman, *Vow and Desire, Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel: A Full Interpretation Based on Stylistic and Structural Analysis* (Assen: Van Corcum, 1993), 17.

<sup>2</sup> There is some confusion as to what this “yearly feast” is referring to, since all Israelite men were required to appear before the Lord at the central sanctuary three times a year (Exod 34:23; Deut 12:5-7). Daniel Block suggests that “this vague expression creates the impression that they do not really know what they are talking of. In keeping with the narrator’s earlier comments that this generation does not know Yahweh or the things Yahweh has done for Israel (2:10), these festivals seem either to have been neglected for a long time or to have been transformed/debased beyond recognition.” Daniel Block, *Judges and Ruth* (NAC; Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1999), 580.

<sup>3</sup> Robert D. Bergen, *1, 2 Samuel* (NAC; Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1996), 66.

<sup>4</sup> Fokkeman, *Vow and Desire*, 24.

<sup>5</sup> Fokkeman, *Vow and Desire*, 30.

<sup>6</sup> Fokkeman, *Vow and Desire*, 31.

<sup>7</sup> Fokkeman, *Vow and Desire*, 45.