

Part 3: A Priest Better than Samuel

Tyler Velin | Samuel 1:1-20

December 17, 2022

From Christmas songs to holiday specials, the this season is marketed as a time of relational nearness and familial warmth. But beneath the veneer of parties and mixers, lurks the reality of relational pain.

Divorce, death, and distance separate many of us from our holiday ideals. For many, every mistletoe kiss we witness or family Christmas card we receive is like a dagger into the heart of our isolation and discontent. For others, it is being together with our family that brings up feelings of bitterness and jealousy. We long for a better family, a more functional one, a closer one. Maybe your life is lived out in the classic line, "And mom and dad can hardly wait for school to start again."

But maybe even in affirming that, you're struck with the prick of guilt. Why is parenting so hard? Don't I love my kids? Why are relationships so painful? If we are honest I wonder if our culture is drawn to Hallmark movies where everyone is happy and together because most of our lives are closer to Home Alone—we feel forgotten, abandoned, and left to fend for ourselves. Our only relief is the dark laughter of seeing the heads of our enemies on fire, or sending them careening down a flight of icy stairs.

Did you know that the Bible is a story about relationships? It presents a history of humanity which makes sense of our high and lows in our own relational lives. It is the account of relationships threatened and lost only to be restored in the hope we celebrate this Advent season—the birth of Jesus Christ. In other words the story of scripture is that we all have a relational problem and that problem is solved ultimately in Jesus Christ.

Few stories illustrate this better than the one we will look at today. It's in the story of Hannah and the birth of her son, Samuel, that we see a glimpse into the staggering significance of the birth of Jesus Christ and his relational restoration.

Our main point today is going to be this: **Jesus brings relational renewal between God and man.** We will see this by examining two points in the story of Samuel: **The problem of relational barrenness**, and **The need for better priests** and finally we will look forward to see **The peace of Jesus our priest forever.**

What was just read for us in 1 Samuel 1 is the context and setting of the scene that we need this morning to understand our first point, that is, **The problem of relational barrenness.**

We are introduced to Hannah as one of the two wives of a Jewish man named Elkanah. Now when the Bible reports the details of polygamy it no more approves of it than a newscaster who reports the details of a bank robbery approves of the robbery.

Unlike other religious texts, the Bible never commends, approves, or recommends polygamy. To read this story and to think the Bible presents such a lifestyle as beneficial is to miss the incredible dysfunction and pain that comes when we reject God's ideal for marriage.

As we read in verse two, it's in the context of this family that strife begins to take root. Peninnah has children, many children, verse four says she has sons and daughters. Hannah on the other hand had no children.

And before the temple was built, faithful Jewish families would travel annually to the Lord's sanctuary in Shiloh and offer sacrifices to God before his priests there. As part of this tradition, Elkanah would give Hannah extra portions to sacrifice because he loved her even though the Lord had closed her womb.

This lead Peninnah to respond in a sinister sort of way, look again at **1 Samuel 1:5-8**.

Just as they would begin to go up to the sanctuary Peninnah would begin her devious provocation. Year after year, step after step she would irritate Hannah. About what? Her barrenness.

If we don't already see the problem of relational barrenness, then we don't see our own hearts properly. Yes, we can write beautiful love poems, and wax eloquently about the warmth of family, but aren't we also fully aware that in our own persons we have the destructive temptation and ability to afflict pain on those around us? The Bible has a category for this: sin. It's not how we were made, but it's the result of Adam and Eve's rejection of God that brings relational hostility into our hearts.

The hostility of Peninnah is understood with greater weight when we notice when she would begin her mocking. It wasn't until the family set out to go before the Lord that Peninnah ramped up her hatred toward Hannah.

You see in Jewish culture there was not only the deep pain of not being able to have a child, but there was a sociological shame of not producing and offspring. But on top of all that the Jews perceived barrenness to be the result of spiritual displeasure. Barrenness was thought of as a curse from God himself.

Though God controlled Hannah's womb, the Bible never says that barrenness means someone is cursed. In fact God often chooses to work his greatest miracles through barren women.

But Peninnah took that cultural legalism and leveraged it to her benefit. "Hannah, you can't even make your husband a father. You are letting him down. You're letting his father down. And more than that, here we are approaching Yahweh and he doesn't care about you. You disappoint him. He's displeased with you. Everywhere you go, you leave a trail of shame. You might have twice as much to offer as me, but what has it gotten you. God doesn't care."

Have you ever felt yourself in such a similar spot? You look around at what you lack, and what others have and you come to a profound conclusion of guilt and condemnation: God doesn't care about me. Or perhaps for those who sit on the outside of faith: "There is no God." If there were a God wouldn't he care about me? Would he fix my problems? Wouldn't I feel better than I do right now?

Notice the emphasis of Hannah's prayer in **1 Samuel 1:9-11**.

Let me present to you the maturity of Hannah's prayer. She prayed from a position of real pain. In verse 16 she describes the pouring out of her prayer as "great anxiety and vexation." Perhaps you can relate. Provoked by a rival, barren in the flesh, there seemed to be relational distance and strife at every corner. And though she prayed to God for a son, what was she willing to do with her son? Give him up!

How can that be so? Think of the felt need of your life right now? Think of what Instagram says your life is lacking, or what your spouse says contributes to the lack of intimacy in your marriage, or what your boss says you need to achieve. Now imagine attaining that only to willingly give it up! To let another enjoy it, to surrender your claim to it and give it to the Lord.

If Hannah's primary need, if our primary need for relational intimacy and wholeness is in the physical realities of the world, then what Hannah did would have been reckless and foolish. But what was central to her prayer? Yes, she prayed for a son. But her hope was not in a son was it? We see her hope in verse 11: that God would not forget her—that God himself, would remember her. If she were to be given a son, she would willingly give him up. Why? Because she was no longer forgotten! God would have noticed, she would know that God was not displeased with her, she would feel his intimacy even when Elkanah was divided and Peninnah devious.

How easy is it for us to pray for a child, to pray for a spouse, to pray for a physical relief and then to cling to the fragility of human flesh! But Hannah's hope was not in the gift but the giver. Hannah knew what each and every one of us must see, and that is behind the barrenness of our relationships it is our relationship to God which matters most.

This realization was so powerful to her that after she offers this prayer, verse 18 says that she went her way and ate and her face was no longer sad. In going to God she had hope, even against hope, that God heard her prayer. That even though she was barren, God was listening. Baby or no, God heard her.

The story continues in **1 Samuel 1:19-20**.

After all Hannah had been through, after Peninnah was brutal, after Elkanah was frustrated, after Hannah was barren, after God's own priest was disapproving—God remembered Hannah. And she bore a son. And faithful to her vow in the latter part of chapter 1, Hannah brings Samuel to Eli and gave her son to the service of the house of the Lord.

But as Hannah's relational barrenness was solved, the scene shifts to a different sort of barrenness. Barrenness we already saw displayed at Shiloh when Eli the priest judged Hannah poorly and harshly.

God's priests were meant to be relational stewards between God and his people. They were to mediate a holy God and his sinful people. Through sacrifices and prayers they accepted and reminded broken individuals of a God who makes a way through the mess of life. But Eli already showed his lack of clarity to see what was in Hannah's heart.

The priestly office itself was barren. We see this more when we look at Eli's sons who also served as priests: **1 Samuel 2:12**. These men were worthless men! Priests who didn't know the Lord!

Look at what is said in **1 Samuel 3:1**. What's the problem? Israel herself is barren. The priests are broken. The same people that were meant to bring Israel into a deeper relationship and confidence with the Lord were failing at their job. More than that, on account of Israel's barrenness the Lord himself was withholding his word—The Lord wasn't near, he wasn't speaking, he seemed absent!

Hannah might have had a child, the Lord might have remembered her, but what about Israel!

Remember the context for the book of Samuel is the book of Judges. Our events in Samuel pick up right after the book of Judges ends. And if you want a taste of hopelessness, read the last few chapters of Judges. Drunkenness, rapes, sexual assault, civil war, murder. Why? The author of Judges lets us in on the cause in **Judges 21:25**.

There was no King in the land and people did what was right in their own eyes. What does this have to do with Hannah and Israel? Because where the voice of God is rejected as the rule over his people, human hearts rule and the product is the barrenness of relational pain.

It was because Israel wasn't ruled by the word of God that Elkanah rejected God's boundaries for marriage and took a second wife wounding everyone involved. To be relationally isolated from God and ruled by the voice and desires of your own heart is a terrible place.

We are smitten by relationships because it is in our DNA, being made in the image of God we are meant to find a place outside of ourselves which helps define us. If we lose an external vantage point, chaos ensues.

Did you know that this is what led da Vinci to paint such ethereal masterpieces? He knew that if we lost some sort of universal relationship, we would be nothing more than machines competing against each other. So he tried to paint these values, he presented his picture of what this would look like, as a goal to spare humanity the pain of competition, provocation, and anarchy.

History has shown that the turn inward, the turn into our own heart hasn't led to flourishing, but to pain—it is to celebrate human life and tolerance until it conflicts with my internal values. At that point we take up weapons, we silence, slaughter and shame those who are opposed to us. Our consciences are seared by the constant flow of media and we are left being shaped by what Paul calls, "the prince of the power of the air."

While some of us may be aware to varying degrees the weight of the barrenness in our flesh, the birth of Samuel is actually showing a greater problem that plagues each and every one of us—that is barrenness of the word of God. Where God's word is silent, relational disharmony abounds.

This is our second point this morning: **The need for better priests**.

We are going to do some Bible study this morning and my hope is that you might learn how to study the Bible well yourself by learning one really helpful tool: contrasts.

Read with me and see if you can find these contrasts yourself: **1 Samuel 2:12-17, 21**.

Did you see it? Let's read again: **1 Samuel 2:22-26**.

Did you see it? Samuel is being contrasted at every turn with Eli's two sons Hophni and Phinehas.

You see here were the priests of God, the ones who were meant to fix Hannah's problem. The ones who are instructed in the law to take the burdens of the worshipping masses and bring them to the Lord, to sacrifice their offerings and to turn to the people and say: "The Lord has atoned! You are forgiven, you are not forgotten!"

But instead what are they doing? They are preying on the people at every step. They spiritually abuse their position and take the women who went to serve at the tent of meeting and they sleep with them.

It was prescribed in the law that the priests were to get their food as a portion of the offering people brought to the Lord. That was not only allowed, but commanded. But what did Hophni and Phineas do? They began to pick the best of the portions. They stole from the people's offering. In so doing did you see what they did? They treated not only the people with contempt, but they treated the offering of the Lord with contempt.

Why did they do this? Well didn't we already see this in verse 12? They did not know the Lord?

The problem was relational.

Brothers and sisters, we cannot find relief from the conflict we have between us and other humans, we cannot find hope between the barrenness between us and the Lord if we constantly turn to those who do not know the Lord. This is true inside the church and outside of it. While Hannah seemed to have the curse of the Lord, she alone understood that it was intimacy with the Lord that mattered most. And here we have Hophni and Phineas who had all the external markings of the Lord's blessing but intimacy with the Lord was the furthest thing from their mind. The result, more harm, more disappointment, more brokenness.

But God acted. In chapter 2, an angel of the Lord appears to Eli and rebukes him for not removing his sons from their priestly office. It is prophesied that Eli's house will be cut off from the office of priest, but look at what is said in **1 Samuel 2:35**.

There is a new priest which will come. God will remember his people and he will restore relational access to him. This is what makes the events of 1 Samuel 3 so important for us today. In the spiritual ecosystem of the day, no one could know the Lord. But then God spoke, he re-entered the narrative.

Look at what unfolded in **1 Samuel 3:10-14, 19-21**.

What happened? The Lord remembered. The Lord who heard Hannah's prayer to enter into her barrenness was also entering into Israel's barrenness. How? Through the work of the same son, the faithful priest. It was through Samuel that the word of the Lord, the presence of the Lord, the voice of the Lord came to rule God's people. The word of the Lord slowly began to heal the barrenness of the people.

God's relationship was restored. There was a priest who had come not to prey upon the people's hope, but to uphold it before the Lord.

However, the rest of the story of scripture repeats itself. Samuel's own sons falter. Kings surpass prophets and lead Israel into sin and slavery. What happened to the promise of a priest who would forever serve the Lord's people?

But this is where we examine our third point this morning: **The Peace of Jesus our Priest Forever**

We've been working through the book of Luke here, and Luke's gospel highlights something drastically similar to 1 Samuel. It begins with a barren woman in Elizabeth who is promised a son who will proclaim the hope that God will once again visit his people.

A virgin conceives and just as Hannah sang an amazing song of praise in 1 Samuel 2, Mary sings a song that is almost a mirror image of Hannah's song. And notice what Mary says in **Luke 1:46-55**.

In the birth of Jesus Christ, the Lord remembered his people.

Just as Hannah presented Samuel was presented to Eli at Shiloh, Mary presented Jesus at the temple to an old priest named Simeon.

And look at what is said of Samuel in **1 Samuel 2:21** and of Jesus in **Luke 2:52**.

What's the point? Just as Samuel was the one who broke the barrenness of Israel in the days of the judges, Jesus is the one who breaks into the barrenness of humanity for all time.

And unlike Samuel who heard the word of God. Jesus was the word of God. More than that, Jesus is the eternal high priest who brings us to God. Never will Jesus die, for he has defeated death on the cross. He has risen so that those who have relational pain might daily run to the priest who will always hear.

Our world is broken on every corner. But each pain of brokenness is a prick that reminds us of where we can turn to find true healing—we like Hannah must run to the Lord. We must realize that apart from his gracious compassion, we will never find rest with him or with others.

Look at what the author of Hebrews says: **Hebrews 4:14-16**.

What does Jesus as our true and faithful high priest do? He gives us confidence to draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in times of need.

Right now, do you feel strife in your relationships with others? Perhaps you are fine with others and by nature a people person, but is your heart at peace with yourself? Or you constantly angry or frustrated with sins, weaknesses and deceit that lay in your own heart? Or is it that despite your best efforts to live at peace with others and to watch the desires of your heart you fear that God will not accept your offering?

Then come here, right now, to Jesus. He will not treat the appeal of faith with contempt. He will not take for himself for he has laid down his life for you, so that you might know right now, that through this faithful priest God has not forgotten you.

He himself is the priest who is also the offering. He takes away our sins by dying for them and so to run to Jesus is to run to the hope of restoration we need most in life.

How do we apply this to our own lives this morning?

First, we reject all counterfeit priests. When we seek to find peace, we must learn to identify and reject places of peace which is not the prince of peace.

A friend of mine texted me the other week a quote that said, "Pastors aren't meant to stand between you and God. Pastors exist to make sure nothing else does."

Do you realize that neither me, nor any of our elders, not your community group leader, nor your favorite Christian author, or worship band can bring you to God. None of us have the ability to say in a transformative sense: "You are accepted, you are loved, you are forgiven, you are healed."

But Jesus can. Only Jesus can. He is the only mediator we need. To be relationally restored to Jesus is to be restored to a deep sense of intimacy with God. Run to him right now. He will not steal your meat or abuse his power. Take his yoke upon you, and learn from him, for he is gentle and lowly in heart and you will find rest for your souls.

Second, know that in Jesus we are remembered.

Being remembered by God through faith in Jesus promises us eternal hope. It promises us a world unstained from the pain of relational barrenness. But part of the advent season is a waiting for that day still to come.

For some in this room, barrenness is no allegory but a daily reality. Brokenness, guilt, condemnation, shattered families and complicated histories hang around our neck. Some of us feel it, many of us are lucky enough to forget it until, like Hannah, others around us remind us of our wound.

But remember the words of Mary. In Jesus, God has remembered his people. He who is mighty as done a great thing. God has not forgotten you. If you confess your sins and place your faith in Jesus, you are not forgotten. You cannot be anymore forgotten than the Father can forget the Son!

The greatest relationship we need, the one that brings hope into every other sphere is this relationship with the Father through the Son. And this advent season we are reminded that God has made it possible in the birth of Jesus, our high priest forever.