

The Weight of the Crown

On Loan to God

1 Samuel 1

Mark Vroegop

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 was 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 worshiped the LORD there (1 Sam. 1:24-28, ESV).

Over the weekend, our elders met for our annual retreat to worship together, pray together, and seek the Lord for the Spirit's direction of our church. Over the next few weeks, we'll be sharing more about some priorities and focal points. I'm excited to share where we believe the Lord is leading us in terms of faithful weekly ministry, discipleship initiatives, church planting, and reaching our neighbors with the gospel. More to come!

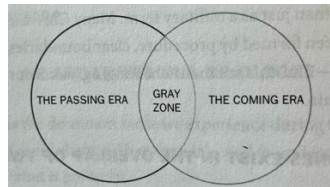
One thing that we've been working together on is how to most effectively shepherd and care for you through the unique challenges that we're all facing together. I've studied, read, and written on grief and lament. There comes a time after the intensity fades that you begin to figure out "the new normal." It's disorienting because the core ingredients of life are the same. But nothing's the same. The new normal is not normal. And that makes it hard.

It used to be that there were challenges with individuals or families or maybe a group of ten to fifteen (like an extended family). But now it feels like there are challenges everywhere and all the time. It feels like it's not just a bad weather system but that there's a cultural climate change happening. Our pastors and elders feel this personally, and we also see it in our congregation.

So, one of the things that we've been doing is reading a book together about how to shepherd through seasons like this. I've mentioned it before. It's called *A Non-Anxious Presence: How a Changing and Complex World Will Create a Remnant of Renewed Christian Leaders*. The bad news is that life and ministry is harder today than it's been in our lifetimes. The good news is that our experience is not unusual in the history of the church. It's unfamiliar to us, but not unusual historically.

The book suggests that we are living through a gray zone which is the overlap of a passing era with the advent of a new era. Fifty years from now, we'll be able to see clearly what is happening and what it means. But right now, we only know that we're in the middle of something. Mark Sayers writes this:

"Gray zones exist in the overlap of two eras. They contain the influence of both the passing and the forming era; this makes gray zones confusing and contradictory."¹

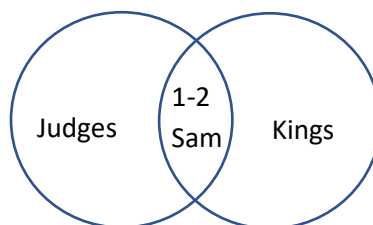


This presents an uncomfortable but powerful moment for the church if we can embrace the moment, learn the lessons God has for us, and embrace the potential for renewal. Sayers writes:

"... gray zones are seeded with the potential for renewal. Unformed moments and chaotic spaces force us to leave behind the ideas and idols of the passing era. With God, every moment is seeded with the possibility of rebirth. . . . We must see it not as a disaster but as an opportunity for rebirth, renewal, and revival."²

The Gray Zone of 1-2 Samuel

The reality of a gray zone is why I chose 1-2 Samuel for our next sermon series. It's an important record of a major transition in the history of Israel. The book traces the sovereign hand of God through the lives of Samuel, Saul, and David. It's the record of the transition from an alliance of tribes with judges who bring about reform to the time of kings as Israel establishes herself as a nation.



After Joshua led the people into the promised land, there were about two hundred years of extraordinary social upheaval with no established authority over the nation.³ The book of Judges records this era with its cycles of disobedience, punishment, and renewal. God raised up momentary and regional leaders, but it was a time characterized by this verse in Judges:

¹ Mark Sayers, *A Non-Anxious Presence: How a Changing and Complex World Will Create a Remnant of Renewed Christian Leaders*, (Chicago: Moody Publishers: 2022), 23.

² Sayers, *Non-Anxious Presence*, 15.

³ John Woodhouse, [*1 Samuel: Looking for a Leader*](#), Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2008), 19.

In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes (Judg. 21:25).

1-2 Samuel are transitional book. It's a biblical gray zone with lots of lessons for us to learn. It doesn't contain every lesson; you need the entire Bible for that. But it does help us see the providential hand of God at work with messy and complicated people. It shows us the weightiness of leadership and the priority of a heart for God. It's the record of how God works in surprising ways: "The bows of the mighty are broken, but the feeble bind on strength" (1 Sam. 2:4).

1-2 Samuel vividly point to the need for another king—the Messiah. He will be the ruler that God's people need. He'll be entirely different—everything people need. He'll fulfill the role of prophet, priest, and king. And his kingdom will never end. No more gray zones.

But until then, there's a lot to learn.

Crisis

The books of Samuel do not begin with a famous verse that captures the mood of era. There's no "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times . . ." kind of introduction. Instead, the book begins with a personal crisis.

Verse 1 tells us about a "certain man" who lived in the hill country of Ephraim. His name is Elkanah, and while his lineage is listed, there's nothing noteworthy about it, except perhaps that he was from Ephrath, a name that was eventually changed to Bethlehem.

We get a hint about the crisis in verse 2. We learn that Elkanah had two wives. Hannah is listed first, and some commentators suggested it was because she was his first wife. Peninnah is listed second. And then we learn that Hannah has no children. It may have been the situation where Hannah's inability to conceive led to Elkanah taking a second wife, something that brought numerous family troubles throughout the biblical record.

What an intriguing way to start a book about the national and bumpy transition from the judges to the kings of Israel. 1 Samuel begins, not with a survey of the national scene, a battle, or political intrigue. It begins with an obscure family and a woman who is not able to bear children. 1 Samuel begins in a deeply personal way.

But there's more to this crisis. In verse 3 we learn that Elkanah took his family to Shiloh every year to worship. Shiloh was about thirty miles north of Bethlehem, and it was the semi-permanent location for the tabernacle. Joshua set it up there according to Joshua 18:1.

We also learn about the two sons of Eli: Hophni and Phineas who were priests to the Lord (v. 3). We'll learn more about these two in the chapters to come. They're corrupt and wicked. But it's noteworthy that the text leads with them and not Eli. The names of these sons seem to highlight the spiritual crisis of the day.

We get a sense of the internal family crisis in verses 4-5. Imagine this large family feast with sons and daughters from Peninnah, and Hannah is alone. Well, not alone. But, yes, alone with no children of her own. Elkanah tried to honor Hannah with a double portion. Elkanah dearly loved Hannah. However, she was in crisis because “the Lord had closed her womb.”

Now, let me just pause here because I know there are women who deeply resonate with the kind of pain, loneliness, and hurt that come from the inability or lack of opportunity to bear children. The birth announcement of a friend, the sound of a crying baby, or the cute giggles of little children can be conflicting. You can be in a crowd, a congregation, or a fellowship meal and feel deeply lonely.

This is a deep pain, and it’s interesting how often barrenness is a part of God’s story of redemption. Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Rachel, the mother of Samson, and John and Elizabeth all have barrenness in their background. God uses deep pain for redemptive purposes.

Hannah’s situation is worse than being barren. Peninnah rubbed it in grievously (v. 6) and with provocation year after year (v. 7). Elkanah didn’t help the situation as his comfort in verse 8 seems deeply insensitive. Hannah is hurt, disappointed, mocked, provoked, and scolded.

The book beginning this way is intentional. Dale Ralph Davis writes:

Hannah, therefore, shares in a fellowship of barrenness. And it is frequently in this fellowship that new chapters in Yahweh’s history with his people begin—begin with nothing. God’s tendency is to make our total inability his starting point. Our hopelessness and our helplessness are no barrier to his work. Indeed our utter incapacity is often the prop he delights to use for his next act. This matter goes beyond the particular situations of biblical barren women. We are facing one of the principles of Yahweh’s *modus operandi*. When his people are without strength, without resources, without hope, without human gimmicks—then he loves to stretch forth his hand from heaven. Once we see where God often begins we will understand how we may be encouraged.⁴

Remember the theme of 1 Samuel: “The bows of the mighty are broken, but the feeble bind on strength” (2:4).

Faith

Crisis moments can create opportunities for faith. And we see this in Hannah. In her desperation she cries out to God. But even then, she’s misunderstood and accused. Verses 9-18 tell us that she poured out her heart in prayer in the tabernacle/temple area. She was “deeply distressed and wept bitterly” (v. 10), while making a vow to the Lord:

⁴ Dale Ralph Davis, [*1 Samuel: Looking on the Heart*](#), Focus on the Bible Commentary (Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 2000), 16.

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 (1 Sam. 1:11).

This is more than bargaining with God. It takes faith to talk to God when you're disappointed and suffering. Pain can turn into disillusionment. But that's not Hannah. She appeals to God's majesty – "O Lord of hosts." She acknowledges her place – "your servant." The language she uses even connects back to the deliverance from Egypt. Her only hope was that God, in his goodness, would attend to her sorrow.⁵

Eli accuses her of being drunk without any inquiry. Hannah responds that she's a woman "troubled in spirit . . . pouring out my soul before the Lord . . . speaking out of my great anxiety and vexation" (vv. 14-16). Hannah left the painful exchange with Eli a different woman (v. 18). John Woodhouse writes:

She came away from bringing her request to the Lord a different person from the one Elkanah had tried to comfort back in verse 8. Now she was no longer weeping, no longer refusing her food, no longer sad. We may well say that she had cast all her anxiety on the Lord, knowing that he cared for her. Certainly she had humbled herself under God's mighty hand, and he had exalted her (cf. 1 Peter 5:6, 7).⁶

Hope

This first chapter is filled with hope as Elkanah and Hannah worship the Lord together the morning after the prayer. According to verses 19-20, the Lord remembered Hannah, a phrase often used of the Lord's intervention for his people in times of distress. What's more, we learn that Hannah conceived and bore a son. His name is important: "I have asked for him from the Lord." Even how the name "Samuel" sounds in Hebrew appears to be close to "asked for" or "heard of God."

Baby Samuel will grow into one of the most renowned judges and spiritual leaders in the history of Israel. He'll navigate the transition of the spiritual gray zone from the era of the judges to the era of the kings.

While Elkanah continued with the family journey to Shiloh, Hannah remained at home until Samuel was weaned and older. Hannah fulfilled her promise by bringing not only Samuel, but also a generous offering, to the Lord. After offering the sacrifice (v. 25), Samuel is presented to Eli.

Hannah's statement is incredible and full of God-centered hope:

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. For this child I prayed, and the LORD has granted me my petition

⁵ Woodhouse, [1 Samuel](#), 31.

⁶ Woodhouse, [1 Samuel](#), 32–33.

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 worshiped the LORD there (1 Sam. 1:26-28).

What an amazing verse and what an amazing act of hopeful obedience. This little boy will become the greatest judge in Israel’s history. Samuel will be God’s servant to walk with the nation through the gray zone of this historic transition.

Applications

As we consider this first chapter and the start of this series in 1-2 Samuel, what lessons and applications should we consider? Let me give you three:

1. **God works through deep pain.** The image of Hannah alone at a festival, harassed and accused while her heart is breaking is hard to read. And yet we see how God was still at work. Pain, sorrow, and struggle is often where God works. Over time God’s ways become clear and evident. But for now, we need to embrace crisis as the place that God can use.
2. **God works through small and unseen ways.** We tend to overemphasize the big forces, the big movements, the powerful means of change. But the record of the gospel is often the opposite. It’s the unseen, the small, and the quiet means by which God often works. So let us not neglect the small and unseen ways in which God is at work. Don’t underestimate the way God works over time.
3. **God works in surprising ways.** The story of 1-2 Samuel is the way that God breaks the bows of the mighty while the feeble bind on strength (2:4). And that’s not just here, it’s all over the Bible, including the story of Jesus. No one would have thought that the cross would have been part of God’s plan. But it was. Grace—the forgiveness offered to us through a relationship with Jesus—is amazing because it is undeserved, unearned, and completely unexpected. I read a helpful reminder this week: “Christianity is no stranger to unexpected resurrection.”⁷

1-2 Samuel show us the redemptive, unseen, and surprising ways that God works. And whether it is an uncertain year, a changing culture, or a personal crisis, this book shows us that if you look close or wait a little while longer, you’ll see God at work.

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⁷ https://mereorthodoxy.com/ten-years-evangelical-fracturing?utm_content=278800158&utm_medium=social&utm_source=twitter&hss_channel=tw-17721948