May 12/13, 2012

A Prayer in the Midst of Her Pain

5 Prayers That Rocked the World

1 Samuel 1-2

Pastor Bryan Clark

Five weeks ago I asked us the question: Do you believe prayer moves the hand of a sovereign God? I'm not asking you what you think the right answer would be on a quiz. I'm asking you, deep in your heart of hearts, do you still believe that prayer moves the hand of a sovereign God? I believe many Christians, if they were to be honest in their heart of hearts, would say that, "Somewhere along the way I think I stopped believing that." We always arrive at that conclusion in the midst of our pain. Think of it like this: Most of us know, as good Christians, we should pray. Probably many of us have a prayer list and we go through the prayer list: Bless the missionaries; pray for Aunt Sally or Uncle Joe; pray for this; pray for that. We are very sincere in doing that but the truth of the matter is, if God doesn't answer that prayer, it really isn't going to rock my world. I don't have a lot of skin in the game with those prayers. But in my hour of need, in my hour of pain, in my hour of disappointment, when my life is coming unraveled and I cry out to God, and it's day after day, it's week after week, it's month after month, and God seems nowhere to be found, I reach the conclusion that prayer just doesn't really work. Now maybe I've come to believe that God just doesn't listen; He just doesn't care. But more likely what I've come to believe is God is sovereign and God is going to do His thing and there's nothing I can do to change that. Both of those conclusions are false—and we arrived at those conclusions in the midst of our pain.

One last story this morning, as we close our series on prayer, is a prayer day after day, week after week, month after month, year after year was uttered in absolute pain. If you have a Bible, turn with us to 1 Samuel, Chapter 1. Just a little bit of background: Immediately preceding what happens in this chapter is a period of time called the period of *The Judges*. The period of The Judges may very well have been the darkest, most sinful, rebellious time in the history of the Hebrew people. Several years ago when we were preaching through the Book of Judges, when we got to these last few chapters of Judges, it was actually very difficult to know how to handle the material with children in the room. It's at least PG-13. It is horrific material, trying to capture how absolutely horrible the period of the Judges really was. So now as we open 1 Samuel, technically we are still in the period of The Judges. This is the overlap into the period of The Kings. So the nation is dark; it's far from God. It's rebellious and this story then appears.

> **Now there was a certain man from Ramathaim-zophim in 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.** (*NASB, 1 Samuel 1:1-2)

Elkanah had two wives. We see this often times in the Old Testament. God never embraces this; He never endorses this but it was fairly common in the culture. There was tremendous pressure for a Hebrew wife to have children, specifically to have sons. It was believed that if a woman had children, she was blessed by God. Conversely, if she had no children, she was believed to be cursed by God. So it was very important that she have children and, specifically, that she have sons in order that her husband might carry on the family name. If, after a period of years, it became obvious she's not going to have children, it was not at all uncommon that the husband would take a

second wife—not because he loved her, but in order that she might have children for him. So that is clearly the situation here. Elkanah marries Hannah. He loves Hannah but Hannah has no children for him so he takes on a second wife, not because he loves her but simply in order that she might have children for him.

> **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. 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.** (Vs. 3-5)

Probably several times a year—three or four times a year—Elkanah and family would go to Shiloh in order to celebrate the national feasts or celebrations. It says that he went up in order **to sacrifice to the LORD of hosts**—L-O-R-D in all caps. Now this is a common name for God in the Old Testament. It's used over three hundred times but it's worth noting this is the very first time in the Old Testament that this name is ever used for God—and it's used several times in this text. **LORD of hosts** means *God of the armies, God of the armies of Heaven*. It carries the idea that this is the God that ultimately always wins because He controls the armies of Heaven.

The story seems to be interrupted by this introduction of Eli and his two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, who were priests in the nation. I would call that a *teaser*—it interrupts the story. We are introduced to these guys and then the story continues. There's clearly more to the story to be told.

We can tell by the details of the story that this is the Feast of Tabernacles. This was in the fall after the harvest was in. This was a time of a tremendous celebration. This is a very happy feast—the harvest was in! Everybody would head to Shiloh and there they would worship God, but they also would celebrate just being together. The harvest was in; there was a period of time before the work would begin again. It was a wonderful time of the year. So in the midst of a celebration that typically was all about joy, you have a story of tremendous pain.

Elkanah would give out the portions. You'd bring the sacrifice; part of it would be burnt as the offering and part of it was to be consumed. So he would give out the portions to Peninnah and notice the plural: **to her sons and her daughters**. We don't know how many children she had, but clearly she had multiple sons and multiple daughters. But he would give a double portion to Hannah. Why? The text tells us: *Because he loves her***...but the LORD had closed her womb**. Now the idea of the LORD closing her womb is going to come up several times in this story.

The best way to understand this story is to realize this is about two stories running concurrently—and that's always the way it is. There's the personal story that we all live and then there's the God story and both of those stories are running together. The God story is the story of the nation—the period of The Judges. It's dark; it's rebellious. The people are far from God. Eli and Hophni and Phinehas represent part of the God story—the national story. But in the midst of that there is the personal story—the Hannah story. And God, in order to address the God story, is doing something in Hannah that she doesn't understand and it's causing her significant pain, year after year after year. Imagine the dynamics in this family. First of all, you have a wife that is dearly loved but she cannot have children. She's believed to be cursed by God and her heart is broken. There's significant pain there. Then you have another wife who's not loved and she lives with the pain of not being loved. She's lonely; she's left out; she's unloved—but she has children. The intensity of the story picks up. Verse 6:

> **Her rival** *(very strong term),* **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. Then Elkanah her husband said to her, "Hannah, why do you weep and why do you not eat and why is your heart sad? Am I not better to you than ten sons?"** (Vs. 6-8)

If it isn't bad enough, Peninnah, probably out of her pain—her pain of not being loved, of being the wife that was forgotten and neglected—she takes out *her* pain on Hannah. She provokes her. They become **rivals**; the word means *adversaries*. She's doing it on purpose in order to irritate her, to rub her nose in it that, "You don't have children; I have children!" out of her own pain. So you have Hannah in pain; you have Peninnah in pain; and clearly you have Elkanah in pain and like a typical husband, he's trying to fix it. It'd be interesting to take a little poll among the men and the women in terms of Elkanah's response. The men would probably say, "Yeah, those are logical questions. 'Hey, what's the deal, Honey? Why are you so sad? Cheer up! I mean, come on, check it out, aren't I better than ten sons?' " And the guys are saying, "Well, that makes some sense." But the women are appalled, saying, "This man is a clod! (laughter) What she needs is someone to feel her pain, someone to enter into what she's feeling and try to somehow meet her in her place of pain." But, clearly, everybody in the story is feeling it. This is a very gut-wrenching story.

> **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** *(God of the armies, there it is again)***, 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."** (Vs. 9-11)

So, as she does every year, Hannah goes to the temple to pray and she pours out her heart before God. One of the things to notice in this story is the emphasis on prayer. It comes up over and over and over again. She says, "God, if You give me a son, I'll give him back to You for all of his life." When it refers to the **razor** and the **head**, it's a reference to what was called the Nazarite vow. Typically the Nazarite vow was for a period of time. In this case, she was saying it would be a vow would define the entirety of his life. *"If You just give me a son, I promise I will give him back."*

> **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." But Hannah replied, "No, my lord, I am a woman oppressed in spirit** *(bitter 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." 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.** (Vs. 12-18)

So Hannah goes to the temple. She's praying. Eli thinks she's drunk, probably a commentary on what was happening a lot at the temple those days, and probably also some insight as to Eli's spiritual discernment. So he confronts her and she says, "I'm not drunk. Man, I am in pain; I'm pouring out my heart. I'm bitter of soul; I'm pouring out my soul before God that He might give

me a son." And Eli responds by saying that God is going to give the asking you have asked of Him. That's literally what the Hebrew says—a tremendous emphasis on the fact that *she asked* and *God is going to give* the asking that she has asked of Him. Clearly that's what she understands because suddenly she cheers up. She eats; she smiles and she's ready to move on. Verse 19:

> **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."** (Vs. 19-20)

It's always interesting in these Hebrew narratives when the technique is kind of this *rapid-fire* through the details. She has been praying for years—probably well over a decade for a son. She's in unimaginable pain and then the text just goes, "Boom! Boom! Boom!" There's a son! But the point is: this is no problem for God. There's a God story going on and there's a personal story going on. There's no way Hannah could understand what the God story is, but both of the stories are going on and, when it was time for God's hand to move, God responds to her prayer—gives her a son. That's no problem for God.

She names him Samuel. The name Samuel does not mean *God is sovereign. He did it anyway*. It means, *because I asked*. Now the name Samuel, technically in the Hebrew, doesn't mean that, but this is not at all uncommon that parents in the Old Testament are a little free and loose with the language. She is saying: that's what it means to her. Because she asked, God has given her a son. Again, notice the emphasis—it's a response to her *asking* that God has given her a son.

> **Then the man Elkanah went up with all his household to offer to the LORD the yearly sacrifice and pay his vow. But Hannah did not go up, for she said to her husband, "I will not go up until the child is weaned; then I will bring him, that he may appear before the LORD and stay there forever." Elkanah her husband said to her, "Do what seems best to you. Remain until you have weaned him; only may the LORD confirm His word." So the woman remained and nursed her son until she weaned him. Now when she had weaned him, she took him up with her, with a three-year-old bull and one ephah of flour and a jug of wine, and brought him to the house of the LORD in Shiloh, although the child was young. Then they slaughtered the bull, and brought the boy to Eli. She said, "Oh, my lord! As your soul lives, my lord, I am the woman who stood here beside you, praying to the LORD. For this boy I prayed, and the LORD has given me my asking which I asked of Him. So I have also dedicated him to the LORD; as long as he lives he is dedicated to the LORD." And he worshiped the LORD there.** (Vs. 21-28)

So Hannah has a son. Elkanah is going back to worship and Hannah says, "I'm not going to go back until he's weaned." —in that culture, probably three or four years of age, "Once he's weaned, I will take him back; I will fulfill my vow; I will give him to God forever." The language is literally, *"I will lend him to God but I will lend him to God forever"*. So when the son is weaned, Elkanah and Hannah, true to her word, take Samuel back. And she tells Eli, "This is the boy! I poured out my heart and you said God would answer, and here he is! And my promise was that I would lend him to God forever. " So she gave Samuel to Eli and he worshiped there.

Starting in Chapter 2, there is this wonderful prayer by Hannah. We could spend a whole week just on that alone but, for the sake of the storyline, I want us to skip that and go to verse 11:

Then Elkanah went to his home at Ramah. But the boy ministered to the LORD before Eli the priest.

At this part in the text, which you have to notice is, God is starting to make us more aware that there is a God story which involves the nation and there's a personal story that involves Hannah and those two stories are starting to intersect in a significant way. It's becoming more and more obvious God was up to something all along. Just notice the structure of the text. We've been talking about Samuel. Now in verse 12 it shifts completely to Eli and his sons.

Now the sons of Eli were worthless men; they did not know the LORD.

Now that's a problem when the priest doesn't even know the LORD and goes on to describe how wicked these boys are. Verse 17 summarizes it:

The sin of the young men was very great before the LORD, for the men despised the offering of the LORD.

But now we shift back to the Samuel story, verse 18:

Now Samuel was ministering before the LORD, as a boy wearing a linen ephod. And his mother would make him a little robe and bring it up to him from year to year when she would come up with her husband to offer the yearly sacrifice. Then Eli would bless Elkanah and his wife and say, "May the LORD give you children from this woman in place of the one she dedicated (lent) **to the LORD." And they went to their own home. The LORD visited Hannah; and she conceived and gave birth to three sons and two daughters. And the boy Samuel grew up before the LORD.** (Vs. 18-21)

So we do the Samuel story but now it shifts back to the Eli and his sons' story.

Now Eli was very old… (Vs. 22a) And it goes on to describe how, because he had not dealt with his very evil sons, that God was going to deal with him—that his sons were out, that his family line was out and God would replace Eli and his sons with someone who was committed to Him. But in the midst of all of that, you have verse 26, the Samuel story:

Now the boy Samuel was growing in stature and in favor both with the LORD and with men.

Then back to the Eli story: Eli's out; the boys are out. We need a new priest; we need a new judge; we need a new prophet; we need a new priest. Chapter 3: Who do you think that is? The call of Samuel—the convergence of the two stories comes together. No question that's what the writer is trying to help us understand. It's this story...it's this story...it's this story...and finally the two stories come together.

But there is no way that Hannah could have possibly understood year after year after year that God was up to something—something so dramatic that it would change a nation. It's really important to notice in the text that the writer says, *year after year after year after year*. We tend to get the impression on many of these Old Testament stories that: somebody prayed; God heard; problem solved. Why doesn't it work that way for me? What we missed in the process is: this was week after week, month after month, year after year, probably easily well over a decade of pain and struggle and disappointment and crying and bitterness and pouring out her soul to God, wondering,

"What is the problem; what is the problem that God doesn't hear me; what is the problem that God doesn't care?"

There is no way Hannah could have known that God was up to something big. She could not have possibly known that one day God would hear her prayer and it would move the hand of a sovereign God. And God would give her a son at just the right time and that this would be a son that would change a nation. This is a son that would be the last judge, would be the next prophet, would be the next priestly line. This would be a son that would anoint the first and second kings of Israel. This is a son who would end up in the Hebrews 11 *Faith Hall of Fame*. This is a son that would make such a difference in the world that thousands of years later, Christians would still be naming their children Samuel in honor of her son. There was no way, in the midst of her pain, she could have understood that God was up to something really big.

In this particular story, both we as the reader, but also Hannah and Elkanah, have the opportunity eventually to see the story come together. For every one of those, there are thousands where we never have that opportunity. I cringe when I hear well-meaning people tell people who are suffering, "Someday you will understand this." Says who...says who? For every story where finally, eventually, it makes sense, there are thousands where it won't. It doesn't mean there isn't a God story. It doesn't mean that God isn't up to something. It doesn't mean that there aren't reasons and things going on far beyond our ability to understand, but there's no guarantee that eventually we'll get that answer, that it will make sense, that we'll have an "Ah-hah" moment and say, "That's why I had all this pain in my life!"

Some of the greatest steps of faith we'll take is to choose to believe this is true, to believe that all things do work together for good to those who love Him. There is a God story and God's up to something big. But there's also my own personal story and at times it may be filled with pain and struggle and question and confusion, and sometimes I just have to believe, by faith, that God's up to something and I don't know what it is. I don't understand but I've got to hang on by faith. You say, "Where's the hope in that?" The hope is in the LORD of the armies of Heaven—**the LORD of hosts**—because that name reminds us that this is the God who always wins! And at the end of the day, the God story and my own personal story eventually merge together into one story in paradise forever. That I do know—and I believe that with all my heart.

But in the meantime this gets really hard sometimes. In the meantime we cannot stop believing. We cannot just roll over and give up and say, "God's sovereign. He's going to do His thing—nothing I can do to change that." There is absolutely no reason to believe that God would have given Hannah, Samuel, without her prayers. The emphasis in the text is over and over and over again *because she prayed...because she prayed*! She even named him: "I asked of God and God remembered me and God answered my prayer." There's every reason to believe if she would have rolled over and given up, that Samuel would not have come. I don't know how this story would have unfolded, but it's not correct to say God would have done that anyway. That's not what the text says. The text says God responded to the prayer of a woman in pain.

And this is what we must understand. We can't just roll over; we can't just give up; we can't just say it doesn't work. It is possible that that prayer that you have uttered day after day, week after week, year after year, that flows out of the pain in your heart, it's possible that just because God hasn't answered the prayer before, it is possible that for reasons only God fully understands, tomorrow, that prayer of pain may move the hand of a sovereign God and God may choose to rock your world! You can't let go of that. You can't stop believing that. You have to hang on—because prayer does move the hand of a sovereign God.

Our Father, we have to believe that. Lord, there would be many here this morning that say, "That's really hard to believe." We've cried out in the midst of our pain and it just doesn't seem like You are there, doesn't seem like You care. Or, Lord, maybe we just conclude You are sovereign. You are going to do Your thing. Lord, we want to have the courage of Hannah...can't stop believing. You want us to keep asking, to keep believing. Lord, we'll probably never know why many things are the way they are. But, Lord, we have to trust You and we have to believe. Lord, give us the courage to be people of faith. It's just possible that prayer uttered in pain, tomorrow may move the hand of You, a sovereign God, and You may choose to rock our world. Lord, this we pray in Jesus' Name. Amen.

*Scripture taken from the NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE
Copyright 1960, 1962, 1963, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1987, 1988,
The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.
Lincoln Berean Church, 6400 S. 70th, Lincoln, NE 68516 (402) 483-6512
Copyright 2012 – Bryan Clark. All rights reserved.