The Story Begins with a Woman of Great Courage

Courage to Lead Series

I Samuel 1:1-2:11

Bryan Clark

Year after year after year she poured out the pain in her soul before God. Years and years and years of heartache and disappointment, but either God didn't hear her or He just didn't seem to care because year after year after year nothing changed. To make matters worse, she had a rival that took great joy in intentionally provoking, irritating, and mocking her year after year in her pain. She realized at this point in her life, the only hope was a miracle. So she had nowhere else to turn but again and again to pour out her soul before God. Over those many, many, many years of confusion and heartache and pain, there is simply no way she could have understood that God was up to something, and God would need to cultivate in her a character and prepare a nation for the birth of one who would bring a nation back and affect the lives of millions of people.

That's the story we want to talk about this morning. If you have a Bible, turn with us to 1 Samuel, Chapter one. This morning we begin a study through the book of 1 Samuel. It's kind of a long study. It will take us actually into the first couple weeks of June. Samuel, in my opinion, is a book about a lot of things, but primarily it's a book about leadership. It's a book about God's call to people to lead—covers about 110/115 years—somewhere in there. It's the story of Samuel, the last judge, a prophet, and a priest. It's the story about Israel's first king, King Saul, and it's the story about Israel's greatest king, King David. When we talk about leadership through this series, I want to define leadership just as generally or as broadly as possible. In its simplest form, leadership is about influence. It's not about titles. It's not about education. It's about influence. As Christians we are called to be stewards of the gospel. It's all about influencing others for Christ. As a matter of fact, sometimes we even use the language "*lead* others to Christ". So whether you're a stay-at-home mom with little kids, whether you're a middle school student influencing your peers or whether you're the president of a company that oversees hundreds of employees, it's about leadership and influencing others for Christ.

To understand really the backdrop, especially of these early chapters in 1 Samuel, it's important to understand what was going on in the nation. The book of Joshua is about Joshua and the Hebrew people finally getting into the land of promise and beginning the process to conquer the land. And for a while things seemed to be going well, but as time goes on, they get tired of the battles; they get tired of fighting, and at some point they decide, "Let's just settle and see if we can get along with the pagans next door." So they do not conquer the land but rather they just settle among the pagans. That is a decision that would affect the Jewish people right up until today's news.

The book of Joshua is followed by the book of Judges. Judges is probably the darkest, most immoral time in the history of the Hebrew people. It's a time when the nation actually wasn't a nation at all. They had no central government; they had no central leaders; they had no central army —they actually weren't a nation. They were pocketed in regions and they battled various nations that were also settled in the land. So through the book of Judges God would raise up judges who were military and political leaders that God would use to deliver the people, but they would cycle right back into idolatry and immorality. All those stories in the Judges are very regional; they're

very pocketed. So when we open up 1 Samuel, this is the condition. The book of Judges describes the times as, "*Every man did that which was right in his own eyes*." In modern terms, it was dominated by *relativism*—everyone doing their own thing, far from God and filled with immorality. In the midst of such immorality and pagan worship and darkness is this glimmer of light that there may yet be hope. And in a book all about leadership—and powerful leadership—the story starts with a Jewish wife with a broken heart because she had no children. Chapter one, verse one:

> **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.** (*NASB, 1 Samuel 1:1-2)

So those are our main characters for scene one. Elkanah is an Ephraimite by region, or by geography; that's where he lives. But 1 Chronicles chapter six tells us that he was a Levite by lineage, which means he was within the line of those who could be a priest, which then becomes an important part of the story. He has two wives. Having multiple wives was relatively common in the ancient Near East. It was never God's plan; God never endorses it, but it was relatively common. There was such an emphasis on having children. As a matter of fact, it was believed that that was the wife's highest calling—to have children, and especially sons. It was about surviving. It was about protection. It was about growing a clan. It was about growing a clan to live, to survive, to protect and even grow a nation. So it was a big deal. If a man married a woman and she was unable to have children, if you had the means, it was common that he would take on a second wife simply to produce children. In every biblical account where this is the story, it *always* leads to disaster, which again is the case here. The Bible doesn't endorse it, doesn't really comment on it, just states it as a fact. Hannah is the wife that Elkanah loved, but she had no children. Peninnah was the wife that he took on in order to produce children. So they're introduced twice in that first paragraph. The first time, Hannah's name is first because she's the wife that he loved. But the second time, Peninnah's name is named first because she's the one that has children. So it sets up the tension. We can kind of figure out where this story is going. Verse three:

> **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. 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. 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. 3-8)

So, there's a lot of drama in that paragraph. Elkanah is a godly man. Again, you have to understand, in a time when most of the nation had turned to pagan gods, immorality, idolatry, here was Elkanah among the remnant that still worshipped God. As a matter of fact, God is referred to as **the LORD of hosts** in verse three. It's a familiar title for God. God of the armies of heaven—God Almighty is basically the title. It's used over three hundred times of God in the Scripture, but it's worth noting

this is the very first time it shows up in the Old Testament, and it will show up several times in the beginning of 1 Samuel, which helps us understand this is the theology of the beginning of 1 Samuel. The title Lord—Yahweh—used for God is used sixty times in the first three chapters. So the main character is God, and the story is played out through Elkanah, through Peninnah, through Hannah, through Eli.

So we're told that this is a godly man who goes up to worship, to Shiloh. Now they lived in Ramah, which is about fifteen miles north of Jerusalem, right on the spine of the hills there. Shiloh would have been about another fifteen miles farther north. During this time Jerusalem was not what we think of as Jerusalem. Jerusalem wasn't even really settled into the hands of the Hebrews. That doesn't really happen until David conquers and settles it. David makes it the religious and political center of the life of the Hebrew people. At this time that's not Jerusalem; it's Shiloh. So the tabernacle is there. The Ark of the Covenant is there and that is where they go to worship. We are introduced to Eli the priest and his sons, Hophni and Phinehas. That's all we're told, and that won't be significant until next week when we pick up the story, other than there's a little teaser there, in that the names Hophni and Phinehas are not Hebrew. They're Egyptian names and already we're starting to wonder what's going on. So Elkanah, either once a year, maybe several times a year, goes to Shiloh to worship. He gives Peninnah and her sons and daughters—so multiple children—their portion, but he gives Hannah a double portion. Why? The text is clear—**because he loved her**, **but the LORD had closed her womb**.

Now, it's important as we go through this story, to understand this text is not a text to teach everything you need to know about why a woman can't have children. It's the story of Hannah. It's not a recipe for what you should do if you're having trouble getting pregnant as a woman. That's not what it is. But rather it's the story of Hannah, and in Hannah's case the LORD had closed her womb because God was up to something big. And for that to be accomplished He needed to prepare Hannah, Elkanah, and the nation for something big. It's also important to remember that this is not a story where Hannah has great faith, goes and prays before the LORD and she gets her miracle. It is year after year after year after year of agony and disappointment and confusion. If Peninnah has sons and daughters, plural, then it's likely that we're talking well over ten years. Maybe between ten and twenty years of pouring out her soul before God in her confusion and disappointment, "Why doesn't God care?" Again, with no way of knowing, God was up to something big.

Now imagine this scene: Elkanah has two wives. It's a bit problematic from the beginning. One he loves; one not so much. One has children; one does not. Peninnah wanted what Hannah had. She wanted Elkanah's love. Hannah wanted what Peninnah had. She wanted children but she was barren. And so the dynamics, the tension, is very obvious. To make it worse, Peninnah decides, out of her hurt, out of her bitterness, out of this feeling that she's never really been loved by her husband, to provoke and irritate and mock Hannah every time they go up, to make her life miserable, to be an outlet to her own pain and struggle. So Hannah takes this on and she feels the pain year after year after year. I always smile when I read Elkanah's response. The thought *insensitive husband* does come to mind. We should probably put this line on the list of things for husbands *not* to say to your wife when she's in deep pain. "Honey, **am I not better than ten sons**?" One can only imagine what Hannah was thinking in that moment. But poor Elkanah, he's a godly man; he loves his wife. Like lots of us as men, he's just trying to fix this thing and he doesn't know what to do because there's nothing he can do to change it.

Verse nine:

> **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.** [The language is really strong here of how much pain she is in.] **She made a vow and said, "O LORD of hosts,** [there's our name there] **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)

Now that language may seem really odd to us, but it's what was referred to as a Nazarite vow. Samson's mom took the same vow. While it may seem odd to us, it was actually a very noble thing to offer your son back to God and to His service for a lifetime. So that's essentially what Hannah is doing. The thing that she wanted more than anything else in the world, she was willing to give back to God if God would just give her a son. Verse twelve:

> **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; 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, the tabernacle, to pray. She goes by Eli into the tent. Eli sees her praying. Her lips are moving; no words are coming out. He assumes she's drunk and he rebukes her. Now some say that he was just spiritually insensitive. Maybe that is the case. But I think the intent of the writer is to reflect the condition of the nation. I would say it's highly likely, given what we know of the condition of the nation, that it was not unusual, especially during a festival time, for people to come intoxicated to the temple. And it kind of reflects him seeing that over and over again and he's weary with that. He just assumes this is another one of those stories and he rebukes her. Hannah responds. Her language is actually very poetic in the Hebrew. What she says to him is, "I have not poured out wine for myself. I have poured out my soul before God because I am a woman in pain." Eli then responds and tells her that God has heard her and God will answer her prayer.

It's worth noting the language in verse 17 because this language is very repetitive in this story—that it is *because Hannah asked*. It is *because she believed.* It's *because she came back year after year after year.* That reflected her theology; it reflected her courage and faith and belief. She just kept asking. She needed a miracle; she had nowhere else to turn. The text is really clear. This wasn't a coincidence that she happened to get pregnant. It wasn't anything else but God hearing her and God rewarding her faith and giving her a child. So that language will be very repetitive in this story. There's no question that what Hannah hears from Eli is that, "God has heard you and God will give you a child." That's the whole point of her countenance changing. Imagine Elkanah when she returns and she's got a smile on her face. He maybe hasn't seen that for years and all of a sudden

she's like "My! What a lovely day. Let's go home now." But she believes that things are about to change.

> **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)

Again the repetition, "I asked. God heard me. God gave me a son." And that reflects the name of Samuel. This is such a typical Hebrew narrative where we as readers long for detail. We want this to read like a John Grisham novel. I want to know what happened, what they felt, what was going on, you know, all of the details, but that's not how it's written. It's one, two, three—pregnant...had a baby...on with the story. But there's a reason for that. It's actually a Hebrew narrative technique. It's a way of saying, "This isn't really the point of the story." The writer's not going to dwell there and fill out all kinds of details. The point of the story is God. And this is a reflection of God's faithfulness and God's power, and so it's one, two, three—she has a child—on with the story because we have to get to the point. That's the idea of the technique. So, we keep moving.

> **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** [look at the language] **beside you, praying to the LORD. For this boy I prayed, and the LORD has given me my petition 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** [Samuel] **worshiped the LORD there.** (Vs. 21-28)

So Elkanah, true to fashion, is going back to Shiloh to worship. But Hannah says, "I don't want to go. I want to stay here with my son until he is weaned and once he is weaned..." (which in that culture would have been around age three, four, maybe five, somewhere in there, probably closer to three) ... "I will take him, present him to the LORD and he will stay there forever." Now again, in our culture this may seem so odd but in that culture, such a noble act of faith.

As the story goes on and we look at it next week, we will see this was such a courageous act by Hannah, given the horrific condition of life at the temple. But she for years had trusted God with her own life and, now in faith she would trust her most prized possession, her son, into the hands of God. So she stays until he's weaned. She reminds Eli, "This is who I am; here is my son." And she presents him to the LORD. It's very interesting that that paragraph ends with a **he**...which is a reference to Samuel as a young boy...**worshipped the Lord there**. We will find out next week why that is such a significant statement. Year after year after year of pain and struggle was necessary to

produce a deep faith and character in Hannah to provide a context into which this young boy would be raised, in order to lay a foundation of faith that would cause him to be a man of God that would begin to bring a nation back to God and affect the lives of millions and millions of people.
We're going to ignore the chapter break. Chapter two, verses one through ten is a song—the song of Hannah. Typically in a Hebrew narrative like this, when you get a song—a poem—the purpose is to reinforce the theology of what has immediately preceded it. So that's the best way to think of this. They're telling a story. Suddenly there's a poem, the lyrics to a song, and the purpose is to reinforce that this was the point of the story. So, that's what this is about.

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.
"There is no one holy like the LORD,
Indeed, there is no one besides You,
Nor is there any rock like our God.
"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.
"The bows of the mighty are shattered,
But the feeble gird on strength.
"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.
"The LORD kills and [the LORD] **makes alive;**
He brings down to Sheol and raises up.
"The LORD makes poor and rich;
He brings low, He also exalts.
"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.
"He keeps the feet of His godly ones,
But the wicked ones are silenced in darkness;
For not by might shall a man prevail.
"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."

Then Elkanah went to his home at Ramah. But the boy ministered to the LORD before Eli the priest. (Vs. 2:1-11)

You can see a lot of kind of illusions to Peninnah and what Hannah went through and ultimately her core theology. It's important to realize: this is not what Hannah believed *because* God gave her a son. This was what Hannah believed all those years. This reflects her core theology. That is why, in her hour of confusion, her hour of need, her struggle, she understood in the midst of it all that she had nowhere else to turn. And year after year after year in her pain and her confusion, she continually poured out her heart before God because only this God could give her, her miracle. Against a backdrop of the pagan idolatry and immorality that defined the nation was this young woman in so much pain, but with such a deep, rich, courageous faith to believe, and all the while God was up to something with Hannah that would change the nation.

It's very interesting in a book about leadership and high-powered leadership that the story starts with this woman in pain and her deep, rich theology that caused her to go to God and pour out her heart and ask year after year after year. It was her view of God, her heart for God that created a context into which her son would be born that would lay the foundation that would give him what he needed to be the godly leader God had called him to be.

This reminds us, as we begin this study on leadership, the place to start is not with those that I might lead. It's to start with *me*. It's to start with my own heart before God. I cannot influence others for Christ somewhere where I myself am unwilling to go. I cannot reach out and help those who struggle if I myself don't have the faith to trust God when life falls apart and makes no sense. So it starts with me. I cannot lead others until I'm first able to lead myself.

I would suggest over this next week, a good assignment would be every day carve out five minutes and just read chapter two, verses one through eleven, Hannah's song. And ask yourself, "Do I believe this? Do I believe this in times when everything makes sense? And in times when the bottom drops out of my world...do I believe this is true? Do I believe this of God?" Because that's where the heart of a spiritual leader must begin: Do I really believe this is true of God?

We're also reminded that about eleven or twelve hundred years later there's another Jewish girl who would quote a good portion of Hannah's song in her celebration—that she had just been told that she too would have a son and He would be the Savior of the world. A good portion of Mary's *Magnificat* is drawn from Hannah's song. It's a reminder that the story of Hannah and her son is but a shadow of the fulfillment of the promise to come.

I would be the first one to tell you I understand that sometimes life makes no sense. Sometimes it seems like God is a million miles away and I can't figure out, "Why does my story have to be like this?" Trust me; I get that. But we cannot doubt the love of God and His commitment to your story because that is not religious theory. It is rooted in historical fact—that God loves you so much that God is so committed to you and your story He actually gave up His own Son to die on a cross, to provide salvation so that you might dwell with Him now and forever. You might ultimately one day experience everything that your soul longs for today. Whether you get that in this earth or not, only God knows. But at the end of the story, God has promised everything your soul longs for will be realized in Christ. So on our best days and on our worst days, we choose to believe and to trust that God tells the truth.

Our Father, we're thankful this morning that You love us. This is not just religious talk. This is rooted in historical fact. That You demonstrated Your love for us in that while we were yet sinners, you sent Christ to die for us. Lord, help us to understand, before we can influence others for Christ, we ourselves must choose to have the courage to believe. Lord, in these quiet moments speak anew and afresh to our hearts and remind us that You indeed are faithful. 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 2015 – Bryan Clark. All rights reserved.

The Story Begins with a Woman of Great Courage

Courage to Lead Series

I Samuel 1:1-2:11

Bryan Clark

Opening Discussion

1. What is your definition of leadership? What is necessary to lead well?

2. Why is it so hard to keep trusting God in painful circumstances when nothing seems to change?

3. Can you lead someone spiritually where you are unwilling to go yourself? Why or why not?

4. Based on your answer for question 3, where does spiritual leadership begin?

Bible Study

1. Review what you know about the period of the Judges. To really understand what is happening in the early part of I Samuel one must understand what is happening in the nation of Israel. Read Judges 2:11-23 for an overview.

2. Read I Samuel 1:1-8. Discuss what life must have been like for Hannah year after year. For Hannah the issue was having a child. For you it could be anything that breaks your heart and causes you pain and confusion year after year. What might that be for you?

3. Read I Samuel 1:9-18. The point in this part of the story is not that Hannah made some deal with God but rather year after year she had the courage to keep believing and asking God for a child. Why is it so hard to keep believing when the answers to our prayers don't come? What is necessary for us to coming to the LORD to pour out our hearts over and over again? What's the alternative?

4. Read I Samuel 1:19-28. Both Elkanah and Hannah emerge in this story as people of great character and faith in a time when the nation was far from God. Why do you think this book about leadership starts with this dramatic story of Hannah and her son Samuel? What are we supposed to learn from Hannah about leadership?

5. Read I Samuel 2:1-11. The Theology of Hannah reflected in the words of this song was true before and after she had a son because God doesn't change. How might this song help us understand what we are supposed to learn from Hannah? What kept her coming back pouring out her soul before God year after year?

Application

1. Leadership is influence. You can influence someone for Christ at home, school, work, peer group, neighborhood, etc… In that sense we want to all see ourselves at some level of leadership. At this time in your life, where are you able to have influence, where can you lead?

2. If it's true that before I can influence someone for Christ I have to be willing to go there myself, what is my starting point right now as a leader?

3. A very practical exercise would be to reread 2:1-11 every day this upcoming week and ask yourself if you believe those words are true? Do you believe them as much as Hannah believed them? If so, do you have the courage to keep coming back to God again and again no matter what you are going through in life?

Copyright 2015 – Bryan Clark. All rights reserved.