Sorrows of Life and the King to Come
1 Samuel 1:1-20; 2:1-10

Today we're starting a new series on the life of David – the man who became Israel's greatest king. And we might do that to get a better understanding of the Old Testament, or to learn lessons of life and leadership from his life.

But I've got something else in mind. You see, David was a genuinely great man. He began life as an unappreciated, all-but-ignored younger brother and shepherd boy. But he became a giant killer, and famous military leader, whilst at the same time being a poet and hymn writer *par excellence.* He became son-in-law to the king, and a hunted outlaw of the king, before becoming the king by whom all other kings of Israel would be judged.

But David also became an adulterer, and a murderer, and his own family was torn apart by sin. So, whilst David was a great hero, he was also a great sinner and a man of great repentance. He was great, but he wasn't the Greatest. And his story leaves you longing for another – a King in his line who will be *truly* great, an ultimate king and warrior and saviour and champion of his people.

And 1st and 2nd Samuel tell us the story of how God chose David and, despite all his failings, established through him a dynasty from which that Ultimate King, David's greater Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, would come.

And we're going to start today by looking at David's backstory. And for the people of Israel, things have totally fallen apart. The Book of Judges tells us that Israel has descended into moral and civil anarchy, and depravity and brutality rule the day. And what little national leadership there is, is self-serving. And Israel is helpless in the face of her enemies.

And as the Book of Judges draws to an end there's this repeated refrain: 'There was no king in Israel' (18:1, 19:1). Until, the book ends, and in it's very last line the writer says, 'In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes' (Judges 21:25).

And that's why these books are so timelessly relevant, isn't it. You see, when a society – ancient Israel, or less-than-ancient Europe, or wherever, abandons God as their ultimate authority, it's not that they cease to have a god, it's that people exchange God for another, lesser god. And in Israel then, just like today, personal freedom, 'do what's right in your own eyes, be true to yourself, if it feels good, do it', took God's place as god, with tragic results.

And so, whilst Israel thought their problem was that they didn't have a king, their real problem was their refusal to acknowledge God as their king – to find in him the values and the virtues on which a thriving society can be built.

But all that was wrong with society left them longing for strong leadership, for a king, for a strongman, who would lead and protect. And the parallels with today are fascinating, aren't they? In as much as people today long for and vote for strong political leaders, what they're revealing is their deeper longing, for an ultimate king, who won't let us down.

But how does God go about answering that longing? Well, that's the extraordinary backstory to David. And it began with the birth of Samuel, as Sim read to us - the man who guided Israel into the next phase of her life.

The Sorrow of Life

And the writer begins by telling us, 1 Samuel 1:1, that 'there was a certain man of Ramathaim-zophim of the hill country of Ephraim whose name was Elkanah.' So this isn't a 'once upon a time in a land far away' kind of story, is it? It's a story rooted in a place and a family. And in a time when Israel was in moral chaos, this man, Elkanah, stood out. Look at v3: 'Now this man used to go up year by year from his city to worship and to sacrifice to the Lord of Hosts at Shiloh', which was where the Tabernacle and Ark of the Covenant were.

And he doesn't go alone. Verse 2, '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.' And that line – *but Hannah had no children* – is the crunch line, isn't it. It's the deeply personal, even tragic issue on which everything that follows hangs.

And in that culture, a childless woman was considered a failure. And Hannah is humiliated, and ridiculed at home, by the woman she shares her her husband with. And not just at home. When they made their yearly pilgrimage the writer tells us, v6, that 'her rival [Peninnah] used to provoke her grievously to irritate her.' Tragic, isn't it? Peninnah's unkindness seems to be worse in the place of worship. It's a reminder that there's a kind of self-satisfied self-righteousness that comes with religion that can make someone worse, rather than better.

And yet, Peninnah, who comes across as pretty unpleasant, is blessed with kids; whilst Hannah, who loves and fears God, and who married a good man, and whose name means 'favoured one', isn't. And so Hannah is a living, walking, hurting example of the age-old question: Why do good things happen to bad people and bad things happen to good people?

And that's the story behind the greatest story. And God begins it with a humiliated, hurting woman. And think about that. Because, after all, what hope is there in barrenness? What future is there in infertility? And yet, it's from this no-hope, zero-future brokenness, from the 'nothing' and humiliation of Hannah's life, that God begins to work salvation.

But Elkanah wants Hannah to accept life as it is. Verse 8, 'And 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 more to you than ten sons?"'

Now, I don't think he means by that 'hey, babe, you've got me, what more could you possibly want?!' Instead, he's telling her he loves her, and her barrenness doesn't alter the fact of his love for her. And when they go on pilgrimage he gives her a double portion of meat from the sacrifices.

The problem is, her longing goes much deeper than hunger, doesn't it? And maybe you know what that feels like: the inner pain of an unfulfilled longing: maybe for marriage, or children, or career, and it can be very deep.

But ask yourself, why is she barren? Why does she have to hurt like this? Well the writer tells us. In fact, he tells us twice. Which means he wants you to see this. Verse 5 and 6, 'the Lord had closed her womb.' So Hannah's not barren because of some

biological role of the dice. Hannah's barrenness, and the pain that flowed from it, was God's doing.

Why does the writer wants you to know that? So that in all the tumultuous events that follow, and in our own lives, we understand that God is sovereign over everything, even the intimate details of the lives of his hurting people.

And yet, reading something like 'the Lord had closed her womb' can feel like a slap in the face, can't it? And you think, how could God allow her, let alone cause her, to suffer like this? And how could he allow, let alone cause, hard things in my life?

But what if that were not true? What if God was not behind, and in charge, of everything, even hard things? Then you'd be at sea in a world that's ultimately meaningless, where your suffering has no meaning, or where you're mere collateral damage in a battle of cosmic powers. If God is not in supreme control, and does not have a loving, fatherly purpose behind the hurts and the humiliations of our lives, then we're simply at the mercy of events, or other people, or our genes.

But Hannah's life, and your life, and Hannah's pain, and your pain, and Hannah's barrenness and your singleness, or your hard marriage, or your health issues, or your parenting troubles are not meaningless. None of it's random. He's in control of it all.

And so often in the Bible, pain and suffering and difficulty and challenges, are God-given, and they become the ground in which faith grows. A faith watered by tears. And God takes Hannah's barrenness, and our powerlessness, and makes it the starting point for his work. Because Christianity is not, 'You can do it! I believe in you!' It's, 'You cannot do it, but Christ can, believe in him!'

So look what Hannah does. She doesn't settle for Elkanah's advice. And she refuses to accept a life of victimhood imposed on her by Peninnah. She doesn't listen to friend or foe. Instead, v10, 'She was deeply distressed *and prayed to the Lord* and wept bitterly.'

Her heart is broken; v15: 'I am a woman deeply troubled' - but she also prays. And she prays because she knows that ultimately it's not the loving words of her husband, or the barbs of her enemy, that are sovereign over her. She knows that she needs another voice to speak words of life. And so she knows to whom she must turn.

And look how she addresses God, v11: "O Lord of hosts." It's the first time anyone in the Bible has addressed God like that. 'O Lord, God of the armies of heaven. You're the supreme King, you're the power above every power; there is nothing and no-one, no sickness, no circumstance greater than you, O Lord of hosts.'

And so Hannah defies the culture of her day, doesn't she? When just about everyone else in Israel is abandoning God, and living as they please, Hannah believes. She trusts. She holds on to God when everyone else is letting go. When everyone else might tell her – 'How could a good God allow bad things to happen to you? Give up your faith, Hannah,' she doesn't. Instead, she believes that this King, who is sovereign over everything, cares for her, and will listen to her, and will act on the behalf of a barren, childless, humiliated nobody. And that's *faith*. Because she trusts, not just in the power, but *the character* of God. That as well as being all-powerful, she knows He's loving, and kind, and merciful, and gracious, and ready to help those who call upon him.

And she promises God that if he gives her a son, she will give that son back to God. You see, Hannah doesn't want a son for a plaything, she wants him for God. She knows that like all God's gifts, this boy will belong to him. And so she's asking for a son who will serve God and glorify God as the highest good, for his whole life, in an age when no one else wanted to do that.

And that's how she prays, and Eli the priest blesses her, and v18, 'Then the woman went her way and ate, and her face was no longer sad.'

Don't you think that's remarkable? I mean, nothing has changed, has it? She still doesn't have a son; she's still ridiculed. And yet, *everything* has changed, because she knows she's been heard! She's a living example of Philippians 4:6-7, that as we take our anxieties to God in prayer we can experience 'the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding.'

And they go home. And she and Elkanah sleep together, and v20, 'In due time Hannah conceived and bore a son, and she called him Samuel.' And his parents stay faithful to their promise, and when he's old enough they take him back to Shiloh and give him back to the Lord.

And so, the point of Hannah's story is not that we'll always get what we pray for. It's that God is the One who brings hope from hopelessness, and fruit from fruitlessness, and life from the dead. And as he takes one of Israel's weakest, most insignificant – even despised – people, a barren woman – and brings from her a great prophet and leader, who will turn Israel's history, God's telling Israel, and us, hey, I'm your ultimate leader and saviour and hope.

You see, as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 1, God chooses what is weak in the world's eyes to shame the strong; he chooses what is low and despised, things that are not – things like barren wombs – to bring to nothing things that are, so that no one can boast in his presence; so that everyone knows – it's God who saves; it's God who provides; it's God who is sovereign.

But imagine Hannah's emotions when she realised she was pregnant! How do you think she reacted? We're not told, are we? What we are told is how she reacts when she gives her little boy back to God.

The Lord of Reversals

And if Hannah's story begins in tears, it ends in joy. If it starts in sorrow, it ends in song. Look at chapter 2:1, 'And Hannah prayed and said, "My heart exults in the Lord; my horn [my strength] is exalted in the Lord. My mouth derides my enemies, because I rejoice in your salvation." And on first glance it looks like this is all about her, doesn't it? – *my* heart, *my* horn, *my* mouth, *my* enemies. But in reality, it's all about God, and she exults, she knows triumphant joy, in God. You see, when you know what Hannah knows, deep in your heart, that God is the Lord of Hosts, the power above every power, *and* that he's good towards those who have no power, you have to exult. And the power, and the answer to all our longings, is God, but the joy and the worship are ours.

And to Hannah, God is simply incomparable. Verse 2, "There is none holy like the Lord: for there is none besides you; there is no rock like our God." Everything else changes: your health, your relationships, your success. But not God. He alone is holy. He alone is in a league of his own. He is the one dependable thing that never changes.

The problem is, it's so tempting to find a kind of triumphant joy in something other than God, isn't it? In what you do, or have, and, especially, in comparison to others. And that's the trap Peninnah fell into. She thought she had life sewn up, that she could define and value people by what they did, or didn't, have - by the success of their outer lives. And Peninnah exulted in herself, and her family, in comparison to Hannah. But Hannah knows there's a much better judge of life: v3, "Talk no more so very proudly, let not arrogance come from your mouth, for the Lord is a God of knowledge, and by him actions are weighed."

And in v4-8, she gives example after example of how God overturns all the stuff that we might boast in: power, possessions, sexual potency, are all overturned; and the powerful are broken, but the weak grow strong. The full go hungry, but the hungry are filled; the barren become fertile but the fertile are forlorn; the rich are humbled but the poor are lifted up, and it's all God's doing, because he's the God of Reversals. Including the greatest reversal of all, v6, "The Lord kills and brings to life; he brings down to Sheol [the place of the dead] and raises up."

But he doesn't do it for those who think they can do life on their own, does he? It's not for the self-sufficient, or the A-list celebrities, or those who think they can make, or save, themselves. Look at v8, "He raises up the poor from the dust; he lifts the needy from the ash heap to make them sit with princes." You see, just like Hannah, it's knowing that God is God, and you're not, that he's the one who holds everything in his hands, that opens the door to him doing world-upending, life-transforming work in your life.

But did you notice what's behind her confidence that it's God who can bring all this change about? Because she tells us. She lists all these reversals that are in God's power to bring about, and then she says, v8, "For…" – the reason this is all possible, the reason he's the one who can turn our worlds upside down for good is that "the pillars of the earth are the Lord's, and on them he has set the world."

You see, you can look at life, or your sin, or the unhappiness of your heart, and think, this is it; this is the way the world, or my life, is. Nothing is ever going to change. But Hannah says, 'no, this world is the Lord's, he's the creator, he's the sustainer, and he's the one with the power to turn lives upside down.'

And he does it for those who put their faith in him. Verse 9, "He will guard the feet of his faithful ones." And, again, it's 'not by might that a man will prevail'. In other words, victory in life doesn't come through our own strength, it comes from God.

Now, if that was all Hannah sang it'd be wonderful. And you could know hope, and certainty, and joy, and peace in the knowledge that God's in control, and as a result, like Hannah, you'd worship him. But that's not how her song ends. Instead, all this hope, all these blessings, all this faith is narrowed down to a person.

The King to Come

Look what Hannah prays in v10: "The Lord will judge the ends of the earth; he will give strength to his king and exalt the horn of his anointed", literally, of *his messiah*.

But hang on a minute! There's no king in Israel yet! We're years away from her son Samuel anointing Saul, or David, king. But Hannah gets something, doesn't she. She gets

that things are going to change, that God's king, his anointed one, his messiah is coming, and when he does, he really will turn the world upside down! And he'll protect the poor, and lift up the lowly, and execute justice, and bring deliverance from enemies.

The problem is that when the kings came they failed to deliver. And even David, the best of the kings, will leave us longing for a leader who won't let us down.

But it's precisely because God is the God of reversals, that a thousand years later, when Mary is told she's going to conceive, and bear a son, and call him Jesus – the Lord saves - that she takes Hannah's song and makes it her own in the Magnificat. Because when *the* Messiah comes, when God's ultimate king arrives, he really does turn the world upside down. And then, God went one better than using a barren woman, in Mary he chose a virgin – just to make it crystal clear, salvation is God's doing.

And here in v8, Hannah sings of the poor and lowly being lifted up to sit with princes, but when Jesus came he left his princely throne, and came and sat with us, the poor and lowly. And he came to our ash heap, that he might lift us up to his glory. And here, in v9, Hannah says that the wicked will be cut off in darkness; but at the cross it was Jesus, God's king and Messiah, who was cut off in darkness, as he took our place, and died the death of the wicked.

But then came the greatest of reversals. Because in v6 Hannah sings that "the Lord kills and brings to life; he brings down to Sheol and raises up." And God raised Jesus from the dead, and vindicated him, and then pours out his Spirit on all who trust him.

And when you know that *the* king, and *the* anointed one died for you, and rose again, and gives you his Spirit, you'll have the inner confidence and strength to endure trials and suffering and humiliations and unfulfilled longings. Because you know that the One who wills these things in your life does so for a loving, fatherly purpose; because you know he is 100% for you. As Paul writes in Romans 8:32, 'He who did not spare his own son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?'

In other words, if God gave his King, his Messiah, his Son for you, that you might find in him everything your heart longs for, there's no way he'll withhold the comfort, or the courage, or the help, or the strength that you need for what he calls you to. There's no way he'll fail to turn what others mean for evil into good in your life, just as he did for Hannah.

As Paul writes, 'We do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen' (2 Cor 4:16-18). Because it's through faith in this all powerful, all good God, that we can know joy in our trials, peace in our suffering, glory in our humiliations, life in our dying, and like Hannah, worship him through it all, because we know that Christ the King has come.