

## **I Samuel 1 The heartache of ‘unanswered’ prayer**

### **Introduction**

Have you ever struggled with what is often called ‘unanswered’ prayer? The choice of wording is not really accurate but we all know what is meant by it. It concerns a specific issue of great importance for you, or for someone else, or for some people you know that you have brought to God, but the specific answer sought has not come to pass. There are occasions when a clear negative answer appears to come in response to our prayers with which we may struggle to come to terms, but on other occasions there appears to be a silence in which we continue to wait for an answer without any clear response. Maybe there are a few of us here who cannot recall any particular instances like this but if this is true for you then I suspect you would be in a minority in the room. For most of us here whether for ourselves or for someone else we know there are times that we pray earnestly for something to happen and the answer so earnestly sought and anticipated does not appear. The range of circumstances is legion. It can be over relationships desired that never came to pass or over those that broke down that could not be restored. It may be over health issues or bereavements; or work or career disappointments. Life at times for many people contains things over which we struggle, sometimes physically, often emotionally but also mentally and spiritually. We can wonder what we have done wrong to ‘deserve’ such trials –but such thoughts are often inappropriate because life just is very hard at times. On occasions our own inappropriate words or actions have contributed to our difficulties, but on many others no discernible reason for our predicament can be found.

A simplistic response to these observations was given in the Book of Job by some of his friends who claimed that ‘good things happen to people who lived good lives’ and ‘bad things to people who had made bad choices’ in their lives. That lengthy book was written to counter that appalling and pastorally disastrous theology. We might wish that life was so simple but it hasn’t been in the past and almost certainly will not be so either in the present or foreseeable future either! In the Bible large sections of its contents cover people’s stories of how they handled a variety of different life circumstances. How God enabled them to live with or overcome various trials and by implication how He can assist us also as we face the challenges of our own lives today. The story recorded in I Samuel chapter one provides an opportunity not only to reflect on the choices made by those individuals but also to serve as a springboard for our own reflections on our lives at the present time.

### **1. The heartache that Hannah experienced (I Samuel 1:1-8)**

*There was a certain man from Ramathaim, a Zuphite from the hill country of Ephraim, whose name was Elkanah son of Jeroham, the son of Elihu, the son of Tohu, the son of Zuph, an Ephraimite. <sup>2</sup> He had two wives; one was called Hannah and the other Peninnah. Peninnah had children, but Hannah had none. <sup>3</sup> Year after year this man went up from his town to worship and sacrifice to the Lord Almighty at Shiloh, where Hophni and Phinehas, the two sons of Eli, were priests of the Lord. <sup>4</sup> Whenever the day came for Elkanah to sacrifice, he would give portions of the meat to his wife Peninnah and to all her sons and daughters. <sup>5</sup> But to Hannah he gave a double portion because he loved her, and the Lord had closed her womb. <sup>6</sup> Because the Lord had closed Hannah’s womb, her rival kept provoking her in order to irritate her. <sup>7</sup> This went on year after year. Whenever Hannah went up to the house of the Lord, her rival*

*provoked her till she wept and would not eat.* <sup>8</sup> *Her husband Elkanah would say to her, 'Hannah, why are you weeping? Why don't you eat? Why are you downhearted? Don't I mean more to you than ten sons?'*

(a) **A familiar predicament** The story recorded at the beginning of the book of I Samuel is one that is easy for many people in twenty-first century Britain to identify with; the presenting issue of a couple longing to have a child but being unable to conceive a child by natural means is increasingly common at the present time. Although modern IVF techniques together with less advanced approaches will benefit some of these couples there are still a significant proportion of those seeking assistance who will ultimately be disappointed. When we read through the Bible this specific issue looms large through its pages. In Genesis alone the struggles of Abraham and Sarah are centre stage in their life story; Isaac and Rebekah in the next generation had to wait over twenty years of marriage for their first child and their son Jacob's together with his wife Rachel faced the same issues as well before Joseph was born. It is not unknown in the New Testament era either. Zechariah and Elizabeth married as teenagers and could have been around forty years old when finally John the Baptist was born. Is there a common thread running through these stories in the biblical narrative? In the births of Isaac, Joseph, Samuel and John the Baptist an individual was brought into the world that played a significant role in the purposes of God for his nation. In each case devout believing people had to wait years before their God-honouring legitimate prayers received the answers they had sought for so long. This pattern is clearly visible over the centuries and not just in biblical times amongst God's people. It, therefore, gives a very big hint to us about our own perseverance in prayer concerning issues that God has laid on our hearts.

(b) **A particular context** This story is set around 1100BC, approximately a century before the reign of the great King David. Israel is a decentralised tribal society with a small centre for the worship of the God of Israel in a little community called Shiloh. In a society where travel was difficult as there were hardly any roads or proper paths to follow and in a social context where people expected to live and die if not in the same village in which they were born, at least in that local area, social mobility was most uncommon. Some genuine believers may never have made it to the place of worship at Shiloh worshipping exclusively within their extended family circle. Others more commonly would have visited three times a year to offer sacrifices to God in obedience to the instructions given in Exodus 23:14-17: *'Three times a year you are to celebrate a festival to me.'*<sup>15</sup> *'Celebrate the Festival of Unleavened Bread; for seven days eat bread made without yeast, as I commanded you. Do this at the appointed time in the month of Aviv, for in that month you came out of Egypt. No one is to appear before me empty-handed.'*<sup>16</sup> *'Celebrate the Festival of Harvest with the firstfruits of the crops you sow in your field. Celebrate the Festival of Ingathering at the end of the year, when you gather in your crops from the field.'*<sup>17</sup> *'Three times a year all the men are to appear before the Sovereign Lord.* Until the time of David and Solomon it is unlikely there was the concentration of very large numbers of worshippers at the central place of worship. From the very limited knowledge we have it seems most likely that people felt most comfortable staying in their tribal districts apart from these official visits to Shiloh. Elkanah is presented as a man who has a degree of wealth as he can afford to have more than one wife in a community and country where that was a common practice amongst its wealthiest members, despite Genesis 2:24 indicating that God's preference was for marriage to consist of one man and one woman for life. Deuteronomy 21:15-17 in the Law of Moses provided guidance for households where a husband has married more than one wife. *If a man has two wives, and he loves one but not the other, and both bear him sons but the firstborn is the son of the wife he does not love,*<sup>16</sup> *when he wills his property to his sons, he must not give the rights of the firstborn to the son of the wife he loves in preference to his actual firstborn, the*

son of the wife he does not love. <sup>17</sup> He must acknowledge the son of his unloved wife as the firstborn by giving him a double share of all he has. That son is the first sign of his father's strength. The right of the firstborn belongs to him. This advice hints at tensions and conflicts in polygamous marriages. In the wider culture of the time polygamy was the norm where men had the wealth to afford it, but amongst the Jewish people of God the temptation to follow this practice ought to have been resisted. In every generation God's people face temptations to compromise their faith – the question we need to face is this: how will future generations of Christians view this era –should the Lord's return be delayed for a few more generations? What temptations do you / do I have to compromise our faith in the values we hold or in the choices we make? We may need time to reflect on what issues each of us may potentially be challenged.

Elkanah is portrayed as a devout man who lived a good life in his local community. There is no indication that he had the slightest qualms about polygamy. We must allow our conscience to be informed by God's Word or there could emerge issues in our day to which we might not be as sensitive as we ought to be. His ancestry was from the tribe of Levi. The Levites were the helpers to the priests in the carrying out of their duties in the worship of the tribes of Israel. At that time the behavioural standards of the priests was at an all-time low as I Samuel 2:22-25 reported. In those verses the sons of Eli who were holding the leading positions in the worship services of the nation were behaving in a most reprehensible manner. *Now Eli, who was very old, heard about everything his sons were doing to all Israel and how they slept with the women who served at the entrance to the tent of meeting.* <sup>23</sup> *So he said to them, 'Why do you do such things? I hear from all the people about these wicked deeds of yours.'* <sup>24</sup> *No, my sons; the report I hear spreading among the Lord's people is not good.* <sup>25</sup> *If one person sins against another, God may mediate for the offender; but if anyone sins against the Lord, who will intercede for them?' His sons, however, did not listen to their father's rebuke, for it was the Lord's will to put them to death.* If this standard of conduct was tolerated in the nation and only an elderly man in his mid-90s was concerned then things were in a desperately poor state. If numbers had not dropped at services in Shiloh then it would have been a miracle. Yet the central figures in our story sought to honour the Lord and attend with the degree of frequency recommended in the Scriptures they possessed. They did not allow the behaviour of other people to determine their own. This is a principle immediately applicable in every generation to all of us. It has been suggested by some Bible commentators that the account of the visit to Shiloh here was an additional one to the set festival services. This would account for the quietness of the time that allowed Eli to notice Hannah and interact with her that day.

What else do we know about this time in Israel's history? The location is in the hill country of Ephraim in central Israel. It was a time of unusual peace and security in the land under the judgeship of a man called Tola from the tribe of Issachar (Judges 10:1-2). This period of more than twenty years was viewed with hindsight with favour as a prosperous time before the turbulent years that led to the ending of this form of governance in the land and the clamour for a king which would later result in the appointment of Saul as Israel's first king. The individuals at the centre of our story lived in a town called Ramathaim-Zuphim –usually shortened to Ramah (I Samuel 1:19); a place whose name was changed to Arimathea in New Testament times, mentioned in Matthew 27:57 (Ralph Klein, *I Samuel*, p.5). In this small community lived a family that despite the happy public image contained its private tensions and difficulties that Elkanah struggled to resolve.

(c) **Private pain** (I Samuel 1:6-8) *Because the Lord had closed Hannah's womb, her rival kept provoking her in order to irritate her.* <sup>7</sup> *This went on year after year. Whenever Hannah went up to the house of the Lord, her rival provoked her till she wept and would not eat.* <sup>8</sup> *Her husband Elkanah would*

say to her, 'Hannah, why are you weeping? Why don't you eat? Why are you downhearted? Don't I mean more to you than ten sons?' These few verses highlight the festering sore within this family circle. It is most likely that Elkanah married Hannah first and it was almost certainly a love match as well as an arranged marriage. Yet time passed almost certainly for some years and no children arrived. In a culture where social status, especially for a woman, was determined by the number of children she bore this was nothing short of disastrous for Hannah. My guess and it can only be that, is that possibly Elkanah might not have married a second wife Peninnah had Hannah been able to have children. Therefore, into this context comes possibly a younger woman who knows that this couple are deeply in love and that she has only been added to the family to produce children. It is a less than ideal scenario. Although the initial pressure on Peninnah is off when her first child comes along, followed by others, it does not release or ease the struggle of Hannah to conceive. Clearly the two women are not best friends as was the case with Sarah and Hagar in Genesis 16:1-5: *Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children. But she had an Egyptian slave named Hagar; <sup>2</sup> so she said to Abram, 'The Lord has kept me from having children. Go, sleep with my slave; perhaps I can build a family through her.' Abram agreed to what Sarai said. <sup>3</sup> So after Abram had been living in Canaan ten years, Sarai his wife took her Egyptian slave Hagar and gave her to her husband to be his wife. <sup>4</sup> He slept with Hagar, and she conceived. When she knew she was pregnant, she began to despise her mistress. <sup>5</sup> Then Sarai said to Abram, 'You are responsible for the wrong I am suffering. I put my slave in your arms, and now that she knows she is pregnant, she despises me. May the Lord judge between you and me.'* In the cultures around Israel the civic law made it clear that in the case of a couple unable to have children it was expected that the husband could take a second wife in order to produce an heir and also offspring to care for them in their old age. There is a lesson here for us to consider. How often do I seek to 'help God out' in resolving things when I need to be patient and leave a situation with Him? Am I tempted to be pragmatic and rationalize less than ideal choices in my behaviour on some occasions? There are times when the difficulties we face are the result of earlier legitimate choices, but not ones that are God's best options for us. Maybe if Elkanah had waited a few more years before contracting a second marriage he might have seen Hannah conceive her children and have his patience vindicated. The 'what if' scenario you and I might face this week or in the coming months or years most probably might be completely different to their choices but how we deal with the heartache of unanswered prayer can sometimes play a major part in shaping the future options open to us. Is there an issue you are struggling with? Are you tempted to seek to resolve it in a way that you would freely admit was less than ideal? There may be a good reason why God only permits but does not commend that option to you or me.

## 2. **The prayer that Hannah offered** (I Samuel 1:9-18)

(a) **The heartache Hannah experienced** (I Samuel 1:9-10) *Once when they had finished eating and drinking in Shiloh, Hannah stood up. Now Eli the priest was sitting on his chair by the doorpost of the Lord's house. <sup>10</sup> In her deep anguish Hannah prayed to the Lord, weeping bitterly. <sup>11</sup> And she made a vow, saying, 'Lord Almighty, if you will only look on your servant's misery and remember me, and not forget your servant but give her a son, then I will give him to the Lord for all the days of his life, and no razor will ever be used on his head.'* Praise God that in the midst of her pain Hannah persevered in prayer. Whatever heartache you and I are experiencing right now please never entertain the thought of giving up on bringing the matter to God. Hannah still had no idea when God might answer her prayers, but she would not be put off from seeking Him. Perseverance is an under-

rated quality and is not the same as stubbornness! The latter is persisting in an attitude or conduct that we have been advised (correctly) is wrong. The former is continuing on the right pathway even when we have still no visible evidence of the success of following the right pathway. There are so many contexts where perseverance is required. If there are people we are praying for who are yet to come to faith in Jesus –keep on praying! There may be someone on your heart to invite to Christianity Explored and they have declined an invitation before. Don't give up it may be that the next time or a later time is the right one for them. If there is a work situation on your heart or a difficulty in your family circle –don't give up the resolution may yet take even more time but God's message to you today- is keep on praying; keep expecting God to act! Paul in Galatians 6:9 encouraged us with these words: *Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.* What a tragedy if we quit praying and ceased expecting God to work when a short time later the situation might be completely transformed. This does not mean that God will always work in the way we expect. On the contrary, I suspect for all of us there are surprises in store as God answers our prayers. Remember the words of Jesus in Matthew 7:7-11: ***'Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you.'***<sup>8</sup> *For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened.*<sup>9</sup> *'Which of you, if your son asks for bread, will give him a stone?'*<sup>10</sup> *Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake?'*<sup>11</sup> *If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask Him!* These are powerful words, but also most encouraging ones as well. Individually and collectively as a Church family may we be characterized as a people marked by our perseverance for God.

(b) **The misjudgement Eli had reached** (I Samuel 1:11-18)<sup>11</sup> *And she made a vow, saying, 'Lord Almighty, if you will only look on your servant's misery and remember me, and not forget your servant but give her a son, then I will give him to the Lord for all the days of his life, and no razor will ever be used on his head.'*<sup>12</sup> *As she kept on praying to the Lord, Eli observed her mouth.*<sup>13</sup> *Hannah was praying in her heart, and her lips were moving but her voice was not heard. Eli thought she was drunk*<sup>14</sup> *and said to her, 'How long are you going to stay drunk? Put away your wine.'*<sup>15</sup> *'Not so, my lord,' Hannah replied, 'I am a woman who is deeply troubled. I have not been drinking wine or beer; I was pouring out my soul to the Lord.'*<sup>16</sup> *Do not take your servant for a wicked woman; I have been praying here out of my great anguish and grief.'*<sup>17</sup> *Eli answered, 'Go in peace, and may the God of Israel grant you what you have asked of him.'*<sup>18</sup> *She said, 'May your servant find favour in your eyes.'* Then she went her way and ate something, and her face was no longer downcast. It is a place of worship and if someone cannot pray there without being suspected of behaving improperly then something is seriously wrong. It is clear that Eli must have seen intoxicated people in the Lord's House in Shiloh. If this was not the case then his behavior is inexplicable. Sadly in life there will be times for all of us, even within Christian circles, when our words and actions have been misjudged. But before we inflate with righteous indignation, may we never forget when we have been the one misjudging the other person's attitude or actions. When we seek advice from others it may be excellent and constructive, but on other occasions it might be inappropriate though genuinely given. Here was God's servant sincerely seeking His face making a serious vow that she would later follow though as a result of God answering her prayers. What is most important is that Hannah did not allow these ill-chosen words to deflect her from persevering in doing the right thing before the Lord. The old priest acknowledged his mistake and the matter was concluded, closed and not recalled. Again a good example to emulate when our own relationships with other people are less than they ought to be. Praise God for Hannah's perseverance. Hannah in the giving of her very best to God is a role model to us as she won the battle to overcome the heartache of

‘unanswered’ prayer. Although we can never pretend that the answers God will give will always be the ones we have asked for –what we can be assured of is that in His time and in the way that He believes best for us, our prayers will be answered for our good and for His glory, Amen.