

STRAIGHT TO
THE HEART OF

1 & 2 Samuel

60 BITE-SIZED INSIGHTS

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Introduction: The Kind of Person God Can Use

The Lord has sought out a man after his own heart and appointed him ruler of his people.

(1 Samuel 13:14)

If you want to understand the basic message of 1 and 2 Samuel, then you may find it helpful to think of Thomas Edison. He may not have been the original inventor of the light bulb, but he built tirelessly on the work of others to find the kind of filament which would make it an invention all the world could use.

Thomas Edison's experiments in 1879 were very much like the book of Judges, which covers the two and a half centuries leading up to the start of 1 Samuel. He passed electricity through many different filaments in the hope of finding one which burned brightly in the darkness. Many of them failed to do so – like Barak, the man God called to display his glory during a Canaanite invasion in around 1257 BC. He was so unwilling to let God use him that God had to show his power through a foreign woman instead.¹

Other filaments shone as brightly as Thomas Edison intended, but failed to burn as long and consistently as was needed. They were like Gideon, who displayed God's saving power when he defeated the Midianites in about 1210 BC, but who quickly succumbed afterwards to the sins of idolatry and polygamy. They were like Jephthah, who shone brightly for the Lord when he routed the Ammonite army in about 1107 BC,

¹ Judges 4:8–9 makes it clear that this was shameful in his culture. The song of praise which follows blesses Jael, not Barak.

yet knew God so dimly that he went home and made a human sacrifice of his daughter in a misguided attempt to glorify him.

Finally, the Lord told a barren mother that she would conceive and give birth to Israel's twelfth and greatest judge so far. Samson would "*be a Nazirite, dedicated to God from the womb*" and he would "*take the lead in delivering Israel from the hands of the Philistines.*"² He would be like the filament which Thomas Edison produced from carbonized cotton thread and which made him so excited that he filed for a patent for his light bulb at the end of 1879. Like that filament, however, Samson also proved to be as flawed as the eleven judges who had gone before. When the power of God came upon him, it revealed he was still governed by his lust and anger instead of by the Lord. Thomas Edison's cotton filament destroyed itself after only thirteen hours. He had still not found the kind of filament he could use.

Thankfully, the message of 1 and 2 Samuel is that God did not give up on his search. He was determined to reveal his glory by finding the kind of person he could use. We read in 1 Samuel 1–7 that he found *a humble person* in the form of the fourteenth and final judge, Samuel, and that he used him to do everything which Samson had failed to do. We read in 1 Samuel 8–15 that he looked for *an obedient person* and that when the first king, Saul, failed to be such a person God revealed a better candidate in a shepherd-boy named David. In 1 Samuel 16–31, we discover the lengths God went to in order to make David into *a pure person* so that he would be the kind of person God could use.

The story continues in 2 Samuel 1–10, as David begins his reign and proves himself to be *a person who loves God's name*. He is as different from Saul as Samuel was from Samson, like the filament of carbonized bamboo which Thomas Edison discovered in 1880 and which burned for over 1,200 hours,

² Judges 13:5. Unless we understand the failure of Samson, we cannot understand the success of Samuel.

marking the invention of the first commercially viable electric light bulb. God has finally found the kind of person he can use, and 1 and 2 Samuel look like they have reached a happy ending.

But they haven't. David sins, and badly. He fails the Lord more dramatically than Barak, Gideon, Jephthah, Samson and Saul put together. The story ends with 2 Samuel 11–24 telling us that God is looking for *a repentant person* who admits his sin and looks to a better, brighter Saviour than King David.³ The Hebrew Old Testament groups 1 and 2 Samuel with the books that are known as “the Former Prophets” because the writer always intended us to receive his work as more than just a history book. He prophesies the coming of someone far greater than David, God's *anointed one* – the word in Hebrew is *messiah*. He prophesies that David's dynasty will produce a greater Son who will perfectly fulfil the message of these chapters and become the ultimate Person God can use.

1 and 2 Samuel must have been completed some time after 930 BC, since they refer repeatedly to “Israel” and “Judah” as two distinct kingdoms.⁴ They must also have been completed some time before 925 BC, since they tell us that Ziklag belonged to the kings of Judah “*to this day*”, and we know that Ziklag was annexed by the Egyptians in that year.⁵ This means that the readers of 1 and 2 Samuel had 400 years to wait before God gave them a commentary on its meaning after the Jews returned

³ It is one story because 1 and 2 Samuel form one book in the Hebrew Old Testament. It was split into two books by the translators of the Greek Septuagint because Hebrew was written without vowels and therefore fitted more onto a scroll than Greek. Just to confuse things further, the Latin Bible labelled them “1 and 2 Kings” and labelled what we call 1 and 2 Kings “3 and 4 Kings”!

⁴ 1 Samuel 11:8; 17:52; 18:16; 27:6; 2 Samuel 5:5; 24:1–9. This is one reason why it is a misinterpretation of 1 Chronicles 29:29–30 to think Samuel was the primary author (that and the fact he dies halfway through!), and a misinterpretation of 2 Samuel 23:1 to think David was the primary author.

⁵ Other similar clues can be found in 1 Samuel 5:5, 6:18, 9:9 and 30:25, and 2 Samuel 4:3, 6:8 and 18:18.

from exile in Babylon. He gave them 1 and 2 Chronicles, the last book of the Hebrew Old Testament,⁶ which the Greek Septuagint translation simply entitles “The Things Which Were Omitted”. The author of 1 Chronicles intended his writing to serve as a supplement to 1 and 2 Samuel, and he deliberately fills in some of the blanks in order to help us understand its underlying message. He takes a selective view of the same incidents in the life of David and uses them to point to a better Messiah who will be the greatest filament of them all.

So get ready for the message of 1 and 2 Samuel, which are as much a personal biography of Samuel, Saul and David as they are a national history of Israel and Judah. If you read them and respond to their message – imitating Samuel's *humility* and David's *obedience, purity, passion for God's name* and *repentance* when he sinned – then God will enable you to take your own place in the great drama which he is still performing through Jesus, his Messiah. He will fill you with his power and make you glow brightly in this dark world to the praise of his all-surpassing glory.

Get ready to be part of God's great salvation story. Get ready to let him shape you into the kind of person he can use.

⁶ 1 and 2 Chronicles are also one book in the Hebrew Old Testament, as are 1 and 2 Kings. The Hebrew Old Testament orders the books differently from English Bibles, placing 1 and 2 Chronicles right at the end.

Why God Makes People Cry (1:1–28)

In her deep anguish Hannah prayed to the Lord, weeping bitterly.

(1 Samuel 1:10)

I was recently reading the Roald Dahl novel *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* to my young children. If you've never read it, it's the story of an eccentric chocolate manufacturer who invites five lucky children to visit his factory with a view to installing one of them as his heir. While Charlie is polite and instantly loveable, the other four children are definitely not. The greedy Augustus Gloop gets swept away by a chocolate river, the spoiled Veruca Salt gets thrown out with the garbage, and the gum-chewing Violet Beauregarde comes to an appropriately sticky end. At this point, one of my children turned to me and said, "I really hope that Charlie is the one left at the end and not Mike Teavee." It suddenly dawned on me that my children didn't know the unwritten storybook rule: bad things only happen to bad people, and good things only happen to good people.

I know the rule. You know the rule. But that makes the first chapter of 1 Samuel all the more surprising. It appears that, like my children, God doesn't know this unwritten rule, or if he does know then he decides to break it in this chapter and very often in our own lives too. If God is good then why does he make so many good people cry?

Think about it. Peninnah means *Pearl* or *Ruby*, but there was nothing beautiful about the second wife of Elkanah. She taunted Hannah for her infertility and made her life a misery,

yet God blessed her with many sons and daughters. Hannah means *Grace*, and she lived up to her name, yet God rewarded her with trouble and a monthly cycle of disappointment. She thought she had married a godly man¹ – one of the few men in backslidden Israel who still came to worship at the Lord's Tabernacle in Shiloh² – yet after their wedding he embraced the same polygamy as his neighbours³ and proved crassly insensitive towards her pain in verse 8. Even Eli, Israel's high priest and thirteenth judge,⁴ accused Hannah of drunkenness and tried to throw her out of the Tabernacle. The writer wants us to react against this apparent injustice, so he shocks us twice in verses 5 and 6 by telling us that "the Lord had closed Hannah's womb." It wasn't chance and it wasn't the Devil. It was the Lord, and he did it for a reason.

Hannah wasn't the first woman in the Old Testament whom the Lord had made infertile. He had done the same thing to the wives of the three great patriarchs – Sarah, Rebekah and Rachel – as well as to the mother of Samson and the great-grandmother of David.⁵ In fact, a straight reading of the Old Testament so far suggests that anguish and infertility are often part of the training programme God devises to create the kind of women he can use.

You see, unlike Peninnah or Elkanah, Hannah was delivered from her backslidden culture through the abject misery which she endured. It turned her into one of the great praying women

¹ Elkanah means *Purchased by God*, and 1 Chronicles 6:25–38 clarifies that he merely lived in Ephraim and was actually from the godly tribe of Levi.

² Moses' Tabernacle had been turned into a semi-permanent building at Shiloh after Joshua 18:1, which is why it is called a *temple* for the first time in 1:9 and 3:3.

³ Even though the patriarchs took multiple wives, Genesis 2:24 declared it sinful, and one of the great themes of 1 and 2 Samuel is that polygamy always leads to trouble.

⁴ 1 Samuel 4:18 makes it clear that Eli was Israel's judge as well as high priest. It says literally that he *judged* Israel, just as in Judges 4:4, 10:2–3, 12:7–14, 15:20 and 16:31.

⁵ Genesis 11:30; 25:21; 29:31; Judges 13:2; Ruth 1:4–5; 4:13.

of the Old Testament, as she *poured out her soul* to the Lord in verse 15. She came to know God in verse 11 as *Yahweh Tsabāōth – the Lord of Armies, or Lord Almighty* – despite the fact that Israel had been overrun by the Philistines and the rest of her fellow Hebrews disregarded him as the weak and outdated deity of yesteryear. It caused her to pray such gritty, persistent, anguished prayers of faith that she became the perfect filament God could use to display his glory to the whole of Israel.

The chronology of the book of Judges suggests that the events described in this chapter took place at roughly the same time that Samson died as a prisoner of the Philistines. The writer wants us to notice the deliberate parallels between the baby Hannah was to conceive and the judge who had just failed. Samson had been born to a barren woman, had been called to be a Nazirite from his mother’s womb⁶ and had been called to lead Israel to freedom from the Philistines, but had failed. Samuel would be born to another barren woman, would be a true Nazirite and would succeed in delivering Israel from the Philistines in chapter 7. Even their names sounded similar, except that Samuel meant *Heard by God* and spoke of gratitude for prayers answered in the past and prophesied more answers to prayer in the future.⁷ If Hannah had not graduated from the Lord’s school of humility by learning lessons through her suffering, she would never have handed her little boy over to Eli to grow up in the Tabernacle without her.⁸ Because she did so, she became the kind of person God could use.⁹

⁶ Compare Numbers 6:1–21; Judges 13:7, 12–14; 1 Samuel 1:11, 22, 28.

⁷ There is also another play on words here in Hebrew, since Hannah uses the verb which is at the root of the name *Saul* to describe her *asking* God for Samuel in verse 27 and for her *lending* him back to God in verse 28.

⁸ In the Masoretic Hebrew text of verse 23, Elkanah wants *the Lord* to stick to his promise, but in the Dead Sea Scrolls Hebrew text and the Greek Septuagint he wants the Lord to make *Hannah* stick to her promise. Elkanah knew how difficult it would be for Hannah to hand over little Samuel.

⁹ We are meant to understand the reference to a *three-year-old bull* in verse 24 to mean that Hannah weaned Samuel and handed him over to Eli at Shiloh

Nobody except you fully knows the sorrows in your own life, but if God has made you cry like Hannah then I hope you find comfort in the promises of this chapter. I hope it helps you trust that God’s delays today are a sign that he has something far better in store for you tomorrow. I hope you notice that the writer doesn’t bother to name Peninnah’s sons and daughters, or the five children who were born to Hannah after she handed over Samuel in 2:21. Those children born out of ease and comfort had not been prayed for and blessed through the Lord making their mother cry. They were not like Samuel, who would become the greatest judge of Israel, the deliverer of God’s People, the Lord’s prophet and the kingmaker who would transition Israel from a loose confederation of tribes led by judges into a centralized monarchy. I hope this chapter helps you understand that God has made you cry because your tears are watering the earth of your life to produce a harvest of grace beyond your wildest dreams. After all, if God is big enough for you to blame in your troubles, then he is also big enough for you to trust him in the midst of them too.

If God grants you encouragement through this chapter, then follow Hannah’s lead in verse 18 when she responds to Eli’s blessing with faith and joy. Although nothing has changed visibly and she has only the word of God’s priest to suggest that her prayer has been heard at all,¹⁰ she dries her eyes and breaks her fast and starts worshipping the Lord.

As you worship alongside her, you will become the kind of person God can use.

when he was three years old.

¹⁰ Eli’s words in Hebrew in verse 17 can be translated in two ways. They can be a prayer, “*May the God of Israel grant you what you have asked of him*”, or they can be a priestly blessing that “*The God of Israel has granted you what you have asked of him.*”