

Providence and Prayer

1 Samuel 1

I find it fairly easy to get discouraged by the drift in our society away from the Word of God.

Years ago I would probably have described it as a gradual drift, but over the last ten to fifteen years the rate of drift has been speeding up dramatically.

If it were only outside the walls of the church it would be bad enough, but many churches have drifted as well.

Whenever I come to what Paul writes in **2 Timothy 3:1-4** I can't help but hear a description of our own time. Listen to what it says...

It is not just liberal theology (though there is plenty of that) and it is not just outward immorality (though there is a lot of that as well), it is a deadening of spiritual affections that seems to plague us.

A genuine love for God and for one another is increasingly rare in our day.

Because of that it is easy to become discouraged.

While that is understandable, as believers we are not to wallow in despair.

It will not always be like this, it is true it may be like this for our lifetimes, but it will not be like this forever.

Jesus is coming back to set everything right again.

Not only that, but revival is always possible as well.

It is very much within God's power to revive both the church and society through the work of the Holy Spirit.

That has happened in the history of the church and it has happened in the history of the bible.

If we look to the example of the people of Israel we can see a repeated pattern of drifting away from God, suffering the consequences, turning back to the Lord, and being restored.

The book of Judges is an example of this.

Time and again the people move away from God, come under His judgement, turn from their evil, and are rescued.

By the end of the book it is clear that each instance of rebelling against God is progressively worse.

The book closes with these words, "In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit."

That is not a good place to be. When everyone does their own thing it is an absolute train wreck for the world.

Thankfully, the end of the book of Judges is not the end of the story.

This morning we are beginning our journey through the book of 1 Samuel.

This book begins where the book of Judges leaves off.

The spiritual condition of the nation of Israel is not good to say the least, it has become clear that the era of the judges is not going to bring about any kind of lasting renewal amongst the people.

1 Samuel tells the story of how God is moving His people out of the time of the judges and into the time of the kings.

That is not to say that the time of the kings is without its problems, there are plenty.

Nevertheless, the era of the kings is a decisive moment in God's plan of redemption which is finally fulfilled in the King of Kings, King Jesus.

For that reason I'm calling this series of sermons, "People Need The King."

[We begin our journey this morning in 1 Samuel chapter one. Samuel himself is not a king, but he is the one whom God uses to appoint the first kings of Israel who are supposed to point us to The King and that is why the book bears the name Samuel. In chapter one we meet several characters including Samuel's parents and we learn about how God brought about Samuel's birth. From this we learn about God's providence and how it relates to the prayers of His people. The lessons here are as true for us as it was for them and we would be wise to give our attention to them. I am going to point to three lessons about providence and prayer in this text. The first lesson is this...

Point #1 – God directs all of life, even things that cause us grief. (Verse 1-8)

A biblical worldview rejects the idea of random chance. Things happen in life on purpose. That is tough to take when sorrow overwhelms us, but it is a truth that believers must learn to embrace.

As is often true in the Bible Samuel's story begins with his parents.

His father's name according to verse 1 in Elkanah from a town called Ramathaim (most often referred to as Ramah).

It was located in the hill country of Ephraim and so he is called an Ephraimite.

We know, however, from 1 Chronicles 6 that Elkanah is a descendant of Kohath, the son of Levi (the tribe that has no material inheritance but was instead dedicated to the service of the LORD at the Tabernacle).

He is called an Ephraimite because he lives there but he is a Levite according to his ancestry.

Elkanah has two wives which tells us he was a man of some means and also that he has some problems in his life.

God's design for marriage is one man and one woman, the two becoming one flesh.

Every time we read in the scriptures of a deviation from God's design for marriage we find significant problems in such families.

That is the case here.

Elkanah's wives are named Hannah and Peninnah.

Hannah is the wife Elkanah loves, and Peninnah is the wife is able to have children.

That is recipe for trouble and sure enough there is trouble.

The writer tells us about the problems by telling us about this family's annual trip to a place called Shiloh to worship the Lord.

Whatever this man's failing are, he has some sense of his need to worship the LORD according to the word of God.

Listen very carefully to the description of the situation (**Verses 4-8**).

Peninnah feels the pain of being unloved and takes it out on Hannah who is feeling the pain of infertility.

Elkanah's question at the end of verse 8 is a foolish one. He makes her grief about him and he is under appreciating the pain of her situation.

The sense of the text here is that Hannah is the most godly character of everyone in this scene.

There is no indication that she retaliates against Peninnah even though she likely could have to great effect.

She simply is struck with grief to the depths of her soul, to the point of not even being able to eat.

Now comes the most important question of these verses. Why is this woman in this situation?

For clarity and emphasis it is said twice and the end of verse 5 and the beginning of verse 6.

It says, "The LORD had closed her womb."

This is yet another example of the Scriptures teaching that God is the author of life.

That has massive implications for us in our society.

Much of our society, in particular many in the medical profession see humans as being the ultimate authorities on matters like this and that has led to a number of procedures that show complete disregard for the LORD in the area of pregnancy.

Multitudes of human embryos frozen, significant attempts at making designer babies, using genetic material from more than 2 people to create an embryo, and the list can go on.

Now, not every medical intervention is immoral in this area, but as believers we need to be very thoughtful about what we participate in.

Just because we can do things, does not mean we should.

We must live as though we believe God is in charge of the womb, because He is.

That is clearly stated here. God is the one who put Hannah in this painful position and that applies to more than just this woman in this situation.

God governs all of life. That is what we mean by the word providence.

We are where we are because God has willed it.

[That is tough for many people to understand let alone accept, but that is a fact of life. I want to be very careful to avoid saying that without compassion. Even when we come to accept the reality of God's providence, we still feel real sorrow and real pain. We should not come to people like Hannah and say, "God's in charge quit your whining." No, the bible tells us to mourn with those who mourn. In those tears, however, the Christian who knows the truth of the LORD's direction over all of life and can find tremendous hope in that reality. Because if God is directing all of life, then He has a purpose, a good purpose, for everything that happens to those that belong to Him. This is the second lesson from our text this morning, that...]

Point #2 – God's design for grief is to turn people to Himself. (Verses 9-18)

Every human being is growing in their heart attitude towards the LORD. People are either growing in their love for God or hatred for Him. God's purpose in all things is for His people is to deepen their love for Him.

We don't know how many years Hannah endured her situation, but we know it was more than a few.

Peninnah is said to have sons and daughters in verse 4, which means she had at least 4 children while Hannah remained childless.

Her children are also described as receiving portions of meat from their father which indicates they are at least into their toddler years.

That means that 7-10 years of this is likely the minimum that she endured.

That is a long time to deal with a situation like this.

After years of this we are told this in **verse 9-11.**

She address God as "LORD Almighty". Other translations use the phrase "LORD of Hosts".

She is calling on the God Who commands the armies of heaven. Thousands upon thousands of angels, beings of tremendous power, all of which wholeheartedly employ their power to carry out God's commands.

God's power is over all of that. She wholeheartedly believes that God has the power and authority to change her situation.

That is a tremendous way to pray.

The heart of her prayer is, Lord if you give me a son, I'll give him completely to your service.

This is an incredibly deep and heartfelt prayer.

She is utterly broken pouring out the depths of her soul to the LORD.

We know this because of how the scene is described here.

Eli the high priest sees her lips moving but can't hear her say anything.

That was super weird in the ancient world and so he thinks she is drunk.

She explains that her situation is one of a heart full of grief being poured out to the LORD.

Hannah is well named. Her name comes from the Hebrew word for grace.

She has come to a point where she knows that her situation is fully in the hands of God and if it is going to change then He needs to be the One to change it.

In her grief she has turned to the LORD, which is exactly what God intends for her to do.

[Imagine for a moment you are canoeing down a river. You are paddling along enjoying nature and everything seems great. All of the sudden you hit a jagged rock that puts a huge hole in your canoe and it sinks to the bottom. Are you happy? I'm not. Let's imagine you make it to shore and find a trail and start walking. You walk a couple of KM and run into an electric fence that is impassible and you have to turn around. Are you happy? I'm not. After back tracking you finally find a road and make it back to civilization mostly dry, tired, and still and little upset at how the day has gone. Here is what you didn't know. Around the next bend of the river was a water fall that you couldn't have avoided if you had gone farther than where your canoe sank. On the other side of the electric fence there was a pack of hungry wolves. The only reason you made it back was because your boat sank and you walked several kilometers out of your way. The things you thought were bad led you to the place you needed to go.]

That is how it is with the providence of God.

His direction over our lives is leading us where we most need to go except it is not to a place, it is to a person named Jesus who died and rose again to give us eternal life through faith in Him.

Every time we face a situation that causes us grief, situations like Hannah is facing here in this text, we have a choice.

We can turn to the LORD or away from Him.

Wherever you may find yourself this morning, even in the depths of despair you can turn to God.

[Hannah does that and when she hears Eli, the high priest, give his blessing upon her request she goes away encouraged. I believe there is encouragement for us here as well. I believe it is important to say that what God does for Hannah here is no guarantee that we will get everything we ask God for. The fact is our prayers are not always in accord with God's plans and

purposes. When they are, however, we can be sure that God will answer. That is what we learn from what is written from verse 19 to the end of the chapter. We learn that...]

Point #3 – God hears the righteous prayers of His people. (Verses 19-28)

The LORD has chosen to use the prayers of His people as a means of bringing about His plans in the world.

We see that happen in Hannah's life here in verses 19-20.

She poured out her soul before the LORD asking for a son to be born to her and God answers her prayer.

When he is born she gives Him the name Samuel which likely means “God hears” or “God has heard.”

That is saying something more than the LORD is aware of a prayer prayed, it means He has taken action to grant what has been asked for.

It is very important at this point in the text to ask a question.

Why does God answer her prayer for a son?

We might say because of her sincerity or faith.

While those things are very important, this text drives us to something deeper.

We need to remember God's providence in this whole situation.

When we really start to understand that God is directing our lives every day, we may start to wonder why we should bother to pray.

After all if God has it all planned out and He knows what we are going to ask ahead of time and how He is going to respond then why bother at all because God is going to do what He wants anyway.

When we begin wrap our minds around the greatness of God's power and knowledge it is understandable that some of us go there in our thinking.

Those are good questions and to answer them we need to see that they are missing a very important aspect to the plans of God.

The missing piece is that God in His eternal wisdom has made the prayers of His people a significant part of His plans.

We can see that with Hannah.

To answer the question why does God grant her request we have to step back and think about why she prays like this in the first place.

She prays like this because God in His governing of her everyday life (that is His providence) brought such grief and despair into her heart over being childless that she was willing to offer a son to the LORD for his entire life.

Would she have prayed like this if she had children early on in her marriage?

Probably not! God wanted her son to be set apart to Him, He wanted to bring about the birth of this boy through the fervent prayers of his

mother, so He created the circumstances in her life to bring her to the place where she would pray like this.

This would not have happened apart from her prayer. That makes her prayer tremendously important.

This vital prayer was arrived at by the work of the LORD in her life.

[Does anyone here this morning own a hammer? Anyone own more than one? I do as well. Let's say you have to drive some nails into a board. You go to your drawer of hammers and pick one out. Would you agree you could have chosen to use a different hammer? Of course you have several, but you chose one hammer to drive the nail. Let me ask you, does the fact that you could have chosen a different hammer make the hammer that you did choose any less important to the task? Not at all, that hammer is necessary to drive the nail.]

It is the same with prayer and the God's work in the world.

Can God bring about His will without the prayers of His people?

Absolutely!

It always upsets me to hear people use language like, "When we pray it allows God to do His work."

Listen, God doesn't need our permission to do anything.

Rather, we should say, God commands us to pray and when we pray in accordance with what He desires He hears those prayers and acts in mighty ways to accomplish His glorious purposes.

That is what happens here.

Hannah prays for a son and commits to setting him apart to the Lord for his entire life.

God answers and she makes good on her commitment and that is how Samuel is born and ends up in the service of the LORD from a very young age.

It is God's plan brought about because of the prayers of a godly woman.

That is still happening today brothers and sisters.

Some might say, "God never answers my prayers!" If that is true then you are never praying what God wants.

I'm talking about something much more than tacking the phrase, "Lord if it be your will" onto the end of a prayer.

I get the heart behind that, but I believe our text this morning and the Bible as a whole drives us to something much deeper.

It drives us to desiring the work of God in our hearts, even if its costly, to such a degree that when we pray we pray from the depths of our hearts according to the will of the LORD.

How amazing would that be?

It's possible! God is still in charge of everything in the world. He is still directing our lives even moments of grief.

He is still wanting us to turn to Him in everything.

And He still hears the righteous prayers of His people and answers in amazing ways.

Do we believe that? Do we trust in that? Do we desire that?

Let's pray together towards that end.