

Dedication of Samuel – 1 Samuel 1

3rd January 2010 (am)

Good morning and happy new year to you all. I hope you enjoyed seeing in the new year however you did it. Of course, many of you said goodbye to 2009 and hello to 2010 right here at our new year party and midnight service. I understand that Andrew Bradley did a lot of the organising for it so if you came and had a good time, I'm sure Andrew would be grateful of your encouragement. And would you believe that after that he had to be up early the next morning because he was marching in the New Year parade! Others of you may have celebrated with family, as Ruth and I did. Thousands of people in London gathered along the banks of the Thames on New Year's eve to watch the annual fireworks display. And it was a similar story around the world as fireworks lit up the sky around the world... almost. There were a few countries this year where alternatives were used instead of fireworks. In Tokyo people released balloons into the air with New Year messages tied to them. In Paris, the sky was lit up by a laser light show centred on the Eiffel Tower. And in New York, instead of fireworks, ticker tape was released from high above the gathered crowd.

However we celebrate the New Year, it is something we like to mark. It is a significant time of the year that we like to celebrate. This is a time of the year when we look back over the last 12 months; the things we have achieved, the things we are proud of, the fond memories we have of 2009. It is also a time when we look forward to a new year. Perhaps a fresh start, perhaps there are plans you have for this year, things you hope to achieve, things you are looking forward to.

At the beginning of the book of Samuel we are told of an annual family celebration (v3). A special time once a year when the family would travel to the house of the Lord at Shiloh to worship and to offer sacrifices. This could have been the festival of booths but it's not necessarily that. Either way, it is a significant annual celebration. It was a time when this family would reflect on the things of the past year as they offered their sacrifices to God to atone for the things they had done wrong, this was known as a 'guilt offering'. They would also look back over the last year at the things they had to thank God for and it would be the usual custom to sacrifice animals in addition to the guilt offering as a 'thank offering' to God. A big difference between the guilt offering and the thank offering was that when you gave your guilt offering, you generally didn't get any of it back to eat yourself. But you often got quite a large portion of the thank offering back and this was eaten as a symbol of the restored relationship between the offerers and God. It was a shared meal between the two, a celebration of being united with God. It is likely that this is where we see Elkanah giving portions of meat to his wives, Peninnah and Hannah (v.4-5).

As Elkanah dished out the meat to his family, we are first told that he gave a portion of meat to his wife Peninnah and to all her sons and daughters. This would have undoubtedly made Peninnah swell with pride at the blessings God had poured out on her, displayed in the children she had around the table. Children were considered to be a blessing from God, something of a status symbol. A woman who had many children could hold her head high knowing that she would be well thought of in the

community as someone favoured by God. Children also meant security for the future. They would look after you in old age and they would be a source of financial stability, not only for their family, but for the economy. It was considered a woman's duty to bear children for her husband. In cases where a woman could not fulfil her requirement she was obliged to offer her maid servant to her husband to bear children for him on her behalf. Such was the importance of having children. So for Peninnah, this annual meal would be a proud moment as she could thank God for the blessing of all her children.

But for Hannah, the annual celebration was a painful experience. Looking back over the last twelve months was a painful reminder of another twelve months of longing for a child without result. Another year when her prayers had gone unanswered. Another year of disappointment. Why had God blessed Peninnah with so many children and not her? A very difficult time for Hannah. And perhaps Elkanah was trying to help. We are told he loved Hannah (v5) and so perhaps he wanted to cheer her up a bit, perhaps he wanted to bless her because she felt so unblessed. So he gave her a double portion of meat because he loved her and because she had no children.

We only have an outline of what happened so we have to guess a little at the details and we can only imagine what might have taken place, but I wonder if Elkanah had the same problem that most men suffer from, in trying to help, we just make everything ten times worse. We can't do right for doing wrong. When I read this, I imagine Elkanah dishing out the meat. "There you are Peninnah, a portion for you, and one for our first born son, and for the second, and for our eldest daughter and her younger sister... etc." "Oh Hannah, don't be so downcast, you know how much I love you. I tell you what; beings as you don't have any children, have two portions of meat."

For Peninnah this must have been ammunition with which to attack her rival Hannah. "I see you have two portions of meat again Hannah to share between you and your children... oh, silly me, you don't have any children. How strange that God has blessed me with so many sons and daughters and has not given you even one. Well enjoy eating that baby goat, it's probably the only baby you'll have again this year!" The result was that Hannah was reduced to tears and was so distraught that she couldn't eat (v7).

There is a lesson here in the effect our words can have on others. There is a saying we used to say as children: "Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me." Here's the thing though, IT'S NOT TRUE! Words do hurt and here we have a Biblical example of just how much words can hurt. What Peninnah said to Hannah was not untrue, it was just unkind. I wonder if Peninnah was perhaps a bit jealous of Hannah. She may have had all the children but the text tells us that Elkanah loved Hannah. Children may have meant security but perhaps here we see something of Peninnah's insecurity as she viewed Hannah as a threat and a rival. So she did everything she could to tear Hannah down, and it worked. But if Peninnah was attempting to come between Hannah and Elkanah, I'm not sure she achieved it. But it did have an effect on Hannah's ability to worship properly. Hannah couldn't eat the meal because of Peninnah's taunting. The meal that was a

celebration of restored fellowship with God. Because of Peninnah's words Hannah was unable to take part in the meal.

What we say to others and the way we say it can have a huge effect. We see an example of the opposite effect of words a few verses down. Hannah is in deep distress and with bitter tears she pours her heart out to the God in prayer. At first Eli thought she was drunk (probably something he had to deal with a lot), but when Hannah explained what she was doing look at the difference that Eli's words made to her. Eli took time to listen to her and most importantly, he did not look down on her like everyone else did. He did not judge, he didn't blame her, he didn't even try to explain it. What he did do was encourage her. Eli's words were enough to lift Hannah's spirit and look at the difference in her.

"Then she went her way and ate something, and her face was no longer downcast." (v18)

What a difference a few words can make. As you look back over 2009, what sort of things have you said to people? Have you said things that have been unkind? Have you said things that tear others down? Have you said things to people that paralyse them spiritually or hinder their worship?

The Apostle Paul has a good formula that he shared with his churches. Paul told the Thessalonians:

"...encourage one another and build each other up..."
(1 Thess 5:11)

And to the church in Ephesus he said:

"Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen."
(Eph 4:29)

Perhaps that can be something we aspire to in 2010. There are too many people who have walked away from church and turned their back on God, not because they have lost faith but because of the way they have been made to feel by other Christians. Don't seek to tear others apart, it may not only be their relationship with you that suffers, you may also be responsible for damaging their relationship with God. Let's encourage one another and seek to build each other up. Just as Eli did.

And if you look back over the last year with disappointment of the things you have been praying for that have still not been answered, take encouragement from the example of Hannah. In spite of her circumstances, Hannah prayed to God. She poured her heart out to the one who she knew was in control of all these things. Hannah never lost faith that God could answer her prayer. In spite of the years of disappointment and hurt, Hannah never gave up asking and she knew that God was not only a God of military power, but a God who is able to change personal situations. A God who has an intimate knowledge of us so much so that he even knows the number of hairs on our head, or in my case, he knows how many have

fallen out. And a God who is in control of ALL things and is able to change impossible situations. In fact a God who specialises in impossible situations.

There is a history of women before Hannah who were unable to have children and for whom God changed things:

- Abram and Sari were unable to have children (Gen 11:30) yet Sarah gave birth to Isaac (Gen 21)
- Isaac and Rebekah were unable to have children (Gen 21:21) yet Rebekah gave birth to Jacob and Esau
- Jacob and Rachel were unable to have children (Gen 29:31) yet Rachel gave birth to Joseph
- There is also the mother of Sampson who was not able to have children (Judges 13:2) yet gave birth to Sampson.

So Hannah was in quite good company even if she didn't know it. God has always changed impossible situations. This is the stuff that God does. God changed Hannah's situation and she gave birth to Samuel and God can change your situation.

And how do we respond to all of this? Well, Hannah's response was to give back to God:

"I prayed for this child, and the LORD has granted me what I asked of him. So now I give him to the LORD. For his whole life he will be given over to the LORD."
(v27-28)

Hannah recognised that God had given to her and out of gratitude she wanted to give back to God. So she gave Samuel back to God. Remember what we said earlier about the place of children. Hannah was not only giving her son, she was giving God her whole future. All her future security was tied up in Samuel. In giving her only son to God she was not only demonstrating her gratitude to God but also her trust in him for the future.

It was a big sacrifice for Hannah to make. It is a clear demonstration of the gratitude she had to God for all he had given to her. The fact that Hannah takes a bull with her to sacrifice may say something of her gratitude to God. A much smaller animal would have probably been enough but Hannah wanted to offer God more. And of course, Hannah gave God the son that she had prayed for for so many years. All she had ever wanted was a son, and when she finally has the thing she had prayed for for years, she gave it back to God.

So let us also think about the things that God has done for us. What do we have to thank God for and how will we show our gratitude to him? Will we offer the bare minimum, things that don't really cost us anything to give? Or will we be like Hannah and offer God our all? After all, he gave his all for us and because of that, he has given us life. Will you follow Hannah's example and give it back to him?