



Session 1

1 Samuel 1

Caravaggio, "David with the Head of Goliath" c 1607
oil on wood, 35.6 in × 45.9 in, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna

A Study Guide for Park Street Church Small Groups



Study Guide for Session # 1



I. READ and PRAY over 1 Samuel 1

Stop and pray after each sentence.



II. INTRODUCTION

When 1 and 2 Samuel was originally written in Hebrew, it was a single book, or more accurately, a single work written on a single scroll of papyrus or leather, which was probably about 26 feet long. This is close to the normal maximum length for a scroll. Books, with pages, were invented only toward the end of the 1st century AD and came into common use a couple of centuries later. The division of Samuel into two parts took place in the 2nd century BC, when it was translated into Greek. The early Greek translation of the Old Testament is called the Septuagint (a word related to the Greek word for “seventy,” which reflects a tradition that this translation was the work of seventy scholars).

1) Why is it helpful to know that 1 and 2 Samuel was originally just one book?

2) The vast majority of words in Hebrew consist of two or, more commonly, three consonants. Can you guess why the Greek translators decided to divide the book of Samuel into two parts?

It is not certain who wrote 1 and 2 Samuel or when. Although scholars debate these issues, there is reasonable evidence in support of the traditional view. On this view 1 and 2 Samuel was put together some time in the 10th century BC (after David ruled), based on the writings of three prophets, Samuel, Nathan, and Gad. 1 Chronicles, which quotes Samuel, refers to these three prophetic sources in 1 Chronicles 29:29. It has long been recognized that the contents of 1 and 2 Samuel suggests that its author or authors must have been prophets. For this reason the book of Samuel is located in the section of the Hebrew Bible called the “Former Prophets” (along with Joshua, Judges, and Kings, all of which also bear many indications that they were authored by divinely inspired prophets).

3) Based on what you may know of the concerns of biblical prophets, mention one example from 1 Samuel 1, or from anywhere else in 1 & 2 Samuel, that may reflect a prophetic perspective?

The events of 1 Samuel 1 and the early chapters of this book took place around 1100 BC. This was a period in Israel’s history of extreme spiritual and moral decay – the same period that is described toward the end of the book of Judges. In fact, it appears that Samson and Samuel ministered at about the same time in different parts of Israel (Samson to the south and Samuel about 50 miles to the north).

4) What evidence do we see in 1 Samuel 1 of the dire spiritual and moral decay of Israel during this period when God was about to answer Hannah's prayer, and the prayer of anyone who might have in anguish over that decay, with the birth of Samuel who one day would lead Israel into a significant spiritual revival?

III. DIGGING DEEPER

A. Polygamy

Readers sometimes imagine that the Old Testament approves of polygamy (more than one spouse) or, to be more precise, polygyny (more than one wife), simply because it reports this practice. It is true that the Old Testament does not criminalize polygyny, just as it does not criminalize prostitution. This, however, does not mean that the Old Testament approves of either practice.

Scholars have shown that polygyny was not very common in the ancient Near East. It was mainly practiced by kings and chieftains, who acquired multiple wives (always foreign women) as a means for sealing diplomatic alliances with other nations, and by men whose first wife proved to be infertile. For example, we happen to have extensive marriage documents from Egypt covering an 800-year span from the 11th to the 4th centuries BC. Excluding examples of royal polygyny, there are only two documented instances of polygyny among ordinary people across this entire period! It is not surprising, then, that major biblical figures like Joseph, Moses, and Joshua, whose lives reflect Egyptian cultural influence, were all monogamous, and that God used this cultural background so that the inspired writings of Moses would reflect monogamy as the unquestioned ideal.

Polygyny based on infertility of a first wife is more commonly attested in ancient Mesopotamia, where the status of women was significantly lower than it was in Egypt. Despite this greater toleration for polygyny in Mesopotamia, legal texts and numerous private marriage documents from that culture stipulate that if a husband takes a second wife after his first wife has borne a child, this unexcused polygyny renders a husband liable to significant penalties. He can forfeit his wife's dowry, additional financial penalties can be assessed, the wife is permitted to leave her husband, and, in some texts, the father-in-law is authorized to beat the unfaithful husband.

Not surprisingly, since Abraham came from Mesopotamia and Jacob lived there for a period of time, both of these patriarchs fell back into their pagan cultural mindset in choosing to have more than one wife, and in both cases a wife's infertility is a significant factor in their polygyny (Genesis 30:3, 9), although in Jacob's case there is also the issue of Laban's deception. In no case, however, does God approve these arrangements, and the Bible goes out of its way to record how polygyny was a source of major domestic conflict. In fact, the technical term in Hebrew for a second wife is the term "rival"!

Although the Old Testament does not criminalize polygyny, it does establish monogamy as the indisputable norm for marriage in Genesis 2:24, "a man will leave his father and mother and cleave to his wife, and they will become one flesh." Furthermore, whenever the Old Testament considers marriage as a topic, it invariably assumes monogamy as the norm (see, for example, Proverbs 31:10-31). Not surprisingly, the first mention of polygyny is found in the apostate line of Cain in Genesis 4:23 and 6:2. Pointedly, the Old Testament explicitly removes from Israel the two reasons that were accepted as justifications for polygyny by the surrounding pagan cultures, namely infertility (God promises Israel



that if they are faithful to Him, their wives miraculously will all be fertile: Exodus 23:25-26; Deuteronomy 7:12-15; 28:4) and the practice of kings to seal foreign alliances through marriage (God prohibits any foreign alliance: Exodus 34:17; Deuteronomy 7:3; Joshua 23:12; 2 Chronicles 18:1; 20:35; Isaiah 30; 31; Hosea 14:3). Finally, it should be noted that two texts explicitly prohibit polygyny, Deuteronomy 17:17, which prohibits Israel's kings in particular from polygyny, and Leviticus 18:18, which, when properly translated, prohibits polygyny for anyone: "And you shall not take a wife in addition to another, as a rival, uncovering her nakedness while the other is still alive."

5) Hannah's name is mentioned before Peninnah's. Since Elkanah stresses how much he loves Hannah (1 Samuel 1:4, 8), what was the probable reason for his decision to marry Peninnah as a second wife?

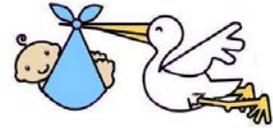
6) If someone thinks that 1 Samuel 1 shows that God approves polygyny, what evidence would you use from this same chapter to suggest that the opposite is the case, that, if anything, God disapproves polygyny?

The NIV translates "year after year" in 1:3 and in 1:7. The underlying Hebrew expression in 1:7 is explicitly "year after year," but in 1:3 the Hebrew is literally "from days to days." While this more general expression in 1:3 could refer to an annual practice, such as one of the great annual pilgrimage festivals, especially the feast of Tabernacles (as many commentators favor), it may be preferable to stick with a more literal translation. Accordingly, the New American Bible, for example, translates this expression in 1:3 as "regularly." [Similarly the term in 1:21, translated by the NIV as "annual," is literally in Hebrew just "days," and better translated with the NAB as "customary" or "regular"] In favor of this more general reference ("regular" or "from day to day") option is the lack of any hint in this chapter of the presence of large crowds in the Tabernacle, as would be expected during one of the annual festivals. Also, it should be noted, the Tabernacle was located in Shiloh, only 15 miles away from Hannah's home. The implication is that this family regularly visited the Tabernacle and that the sharing of "portions" in 1:4 refers to this family's sharing in an ordinary "peace offering" or communion meal (see Paul's use of this to explicate the Lord's Supper as a communion meal in 1 Corinthians 10:16), which was designed to express communion with God and among those who share this sacred meal.



7) Hannah may have been reasonably content most of the time with the fact that she did not yet have any children. What things, however, happened during these regular visits to the Tabernacle at Shiloh (just 15 miles away) which made her infertility especially heart-breaking and painful on these occasions?

8) Some commentators (usually written by men) hypothesize that Hannah's distress is based on the theory that in the ancient world a woman supposedly would feel worthless if she could not bear children. What do you think are the real reasons for Hannah's desperate desire for a baby?



9) Given all the monumental events recorded in 1 & 2 Samuel, including accounts of the accomplishments of Israel's last judge, Samuel, and her first two kings, Saul and David, why does this book begin by relating the private misery of an obscure woman named Hannah?

10) We often naïvely assume that the best way to foster domestic tranquility is for a family to go to church and worship God together. Ironically, it was the experience of shared worship which made matters worse for Hannah. In your experience, what are some ways in which shared worship can actually intensify the distress we feel, interpersonal conflict, and a lack of peace?

11) Why does the honest recognition that worship at church can, at times, cause us greater distress, not mean that we should therefore find ways to avoid church?

13) In Hannah's day, Eli was the high priest serving at the Tabernacle. We may like to think that our religious leaders are more spiritual and more spiritually discerning than the rest of us. In the next chapters, 1 Samuel 2-3, we will learn about the moral and

spiritual failures of Eli and his sons, who served as priests. In 1 Samuel 1 are there any hints of these problems, and what evidence does Hannah have that Eli may be more spiritually blind than discerning?

14) Share an example where you, or someone you know, was falsely blamed or criticized by a spiritual leader. Compare your response, or that person's response, to Hannah's.

15) Hannah shows an amazing faith in God's ability to use a very imperfect and unworthy priest, namely Eli, when he blesses her with the words, "Go in peace, and may the God of Israel grant you what you have asked of him" (1 Samuel 1:17). Hannah is not naïve. She knew to reject Eli's earlier words as false, but when she hears these words, she takes them to heart and is transformed and filled with joy. This episode is rightly used, along with other biblical texts like

Matthew 7:22-23, to argue that the efficacy of a wedding, baptism, communion service, or any other ministerial act (including the pronouncing of a benediction) does not depend on the faith or worthiness of that minister. It depends, instead, on the grace and power of God and the faithful reception of His people. How does Hannah's response to Eli's words apply to you?



16) Some people in Hannah's day may have thought that there was nothing they could do to solve Israel's spiritual darkness, apostasy, and moral decadence as long as those terrible leaders, who were abusing their office, were still around. How does the story of Hannah prove that anyone who was thinking that way was wrong?

17) Hannah's vow in 1 Samuel 1:11 promising that, if she were given a baby, no razor would ever be used on his head, was a promise for this child to be a life-long Nazirite. What other biblical hero does this remind you of? What do you think symbolized by this odd-sounding prohibition against the use of a razor?

18) If Hannah was so eager to have a baby, why does she promise in 1 Samuel 1:22, 28 not only to present her child to the Lord, but to allow him to live there at the Tabernacle always?



V: PRAYER¹

God of Israel, LORD of Hosts, Friend of Abraham, Hearer of Hannah's Prayers,
Our hearts REJOICE in you, we delight in your deliverance!^(1 Samuel 2:2)

For as we have Poured out our souls to YOU— ^(1 Samuel 1:15)

in ALL the darkness, the bitterness of our hearts,

the misery, the great anguish and grief

in our DEEP trouble ^(1 Samuel 1: 10, 15,16) and

AGAIN AND AGAIN, relentlessly,

you have REMEMBERED us ^(1 Samuel 1: 11)

and have ANSWERED our prayers

because you KEEP your promises

to your friend, Abraham,

to bless ALL of us, his children.

There is NO ONE HOLY like you;

there is NO ROCK like YOU, our God! ^(1 Samuel 2: 2)

So we STOP

and THANK YOU

here in the Tent of Meeting,

in the Shiloh of Your Presence.

Our Savior, Refuge, Rock, Shield, and Solace ^(“What a Friend” & Hannah’s Magnificat)

when the prognosis is infertility

when discord divides our house

when the roof burns down over our heads

when the doctor says, “It’s cancer” and the blood freezes in our veins.”

when our fellow Christians are trapped in war zones.

¹ Prayer from Stuart DeLorme.

We ASK for pray for
PEACE in our families
children for the childless
for Abigail, Jamie, and John after the fires which took their homes
for Armen, Cyrilla, Rhonda, Shane, Tim in the darkness of cancer to
walk in your light, and good rehab for Grace, Lois, Martha, Len, and
Ruth.
for Aleppo Baptist church in Syria-under bombardment from shells
and with little electricity and water, and for Andrew serving in
Afghanistan
for the children of our workers in the Middle East and Central Asia,
unsettled by the violence and the unrest they feel around them
Mike and Caroline's infant daughter Lily
Damian and Grace's little daughter Mei Mei
for peace by day and sleep by night.
for Sarah as we send her out to a place of uncertainty.

Father, we pray with confidence
for as we express OUR needs,
we, like Hannah, are speeding
the coming of YOUR Kingdom.

Hannah asked for a son;
you gave your people a mighty servant.
As we ask for our most personal needs,
your Kingdom comes
to a dark world
waiting for the dawn. Amen!