

Read 1 Samuel 1:1-20.

I am regularly baffled by the emotions that I can feel as a result of having had children. Emotions that I never realized I had, or were even possible, all of a sudden now are a regular occurrence.

I have two sons—for those of you who might not be aware. Elijah is eleven months, and Malakai just turned three. I like to tell people that I now have a ‘threenager’ at home—which is feeling more and more accurate.

Case in point, we have two doors going into our home—a regular door and then a screen door. And the other day I opened both doors and started pushing the stroller out to gesture that we were now leaving, and Malakai starts uttering these loud screeching sounds, gets all tense, and starts stomping his feet. Tears start rushing down his cheeks. His face is red.

Why? Because he wanted to open the door. So what do I do? I bring the stroller back inside, close both doors, and let him do it. Problem solved.

Now, I have always considered myself a fairly patient person. But somehow, God has orchestrated the human mind from a very young age to intuitively know exactly how to scream in such a way and at the exact decibel that every nerve in a parent’s body goes into panic mode.

There’s a lot of ‘fake pain’ these days in our household. And it’s enough to drive both Danny and I bonkers on a regular basis.

But all of that frustration fades away the moment one of my boys genuinely experiences pain. Whether it’s physical pain or emotional pain. It’s one of the clearest indications of God’s footprint on our human nature—that we instinctively grieve when we see children experiencing pain.

As if something within us says that innocence doesn’t deserve pain. That’s not the way it should be.

As if something within us is pointing us to the heart of the God who created us in His image, a Father who also aches when *His* children are in pain. A God who *remembers* us in our pain because His very nature is to do so.

I’m not sure if you’re aware of this, but children are an incredibly important aspect in many of our Old Testament stories. And that’s in large respect because—in the ancient world, and in ancient Jewish society—to bear children, especially to bear sons, was a sign of God’s favour.

Now, it wasn’t necessarily God’s intention for humans to believe that their worth was in their children and descendants. This is one of those cultural values that the Lord has to work within it. It’s perhaps one of the major reasons why He wanted His people to see *Him* as their Father.

But the fact of the matter was still that a married couple—and particularly the woman—would feel unseen and even purposeless if she could not bear children for her husband.

Now, Hannah's husband, Elkanah, doesn't seem to be bothered by Hannah's 'inability' to bear him children, but that's because he has another wife, Peninnah, whose handling that side of affairs for him. So he's free to love Hannah without needing her to produce children.

And before you start thinking that the Bible support polygamy, please remember that the Old Testament is filled with unfortunate circumstances and broken relationships. The world is not as it should be, and God's simply working with what He has. We have to understand this, otherwise we'll end up thinking that every character is somehow supposed to point us to God.

The vast majority of characters in the Old Testament, actually, are *not* people that we should emulate. Often the point of these stories is to show us how *broken* the world truly is, how *stubborn* human beings are *even when* they have God walking with them, and how *greatly* we are in need of a Saviour.

But there is the occasional character who stands out. Who demonstrates a posture—a Beatitude posture—before God, despite pressures around them encouraging them to think differently, pressuring them to be angry or bitter with God, and to look at their circumstances and think, “This God's doing nothing for me. I'll go somewhere else.”

Hannah is one such character who does not cave into the pressures. She's been harassed by her rival for years, ‘year after year’ the text says. And so it's worthwhile to just take a moment to consider the pain of her situation.

Infertility also is one of the hardest realities that a couple—and particularly a woman—will ever face. From the dawn of time, there's something deeply wounding about it. Trying, month after month, to get pregnant. And nothing.

I remember every single story of infertility that I've ever heard—from my high school principle, who with his wife struggled with infertility and miscarriage after miscarriage for nine years, to a pastor that I interned with years ago during my seminary days whose marriage struggled because of it, to friends today that battled it for years and have just recently received a child through adoption.

I remember all of these stories *because* of the acute pain that it caused.

Now, today we have medical specialists to tell us the likely reason for infertility, but back in Hannah's day, the ‘word around the block’ was simply that she wasn't a fertile body. Even more specifically, that “*the Lord [himself] had closed her womb.*” The LORD himself had closed her womb.

What does that even mean? Well, on the one hand, again, this was simply the way that our Jewish ancestors saw the world. That misfortune was a result of God's activity.

But on the other hand, the text does seem to indicate that in this specific situation, God did in fact have purpose in closing her womb. He had specific intentions for her, which she actually seems to be aware of.

Because even though her rival is provoking her, Hannah never fights back. She doesn't lash out at her rival. She doesn't argue with her or return insult for insult.

The text says, "*In her deep anguish Hannah prayed to the LORD....*"

In other words, she's weary. She's not angry. She's not bitter. She's *exhausted* from years of pain. And she runs to the only place where she knows that comfort might yet be available.

The whole family is feasting on the sacrifice that Elkanah had made. The fatty bits have gone to the priests, to Hophni and Phinehas, Eli the head priest is taking a nap by the door, and Hannah's sitting there with her double portion of meat and not able to touch any of it.

So she gets up, steps away from the feasters, goes to a different area of the tent, and simply starts praying. She takes her grief *to the only one who can do anything about it*.

And when she prays to the Lord, she prays 'in her heart,' which apparently wasn't a very common thing to do because Eli thinks she's drunk. It seems that it would have been more common for the Israelites to offer prayers in such a way that the priests could hear them and confirm their devotion.

But Hannah's concern, clearly, is not what Eli thinks of her. Her prayer has one audience, and one audience only.

She says to Eli, "*I was pouring out my soul to the LORD.*" I can just imagine her saying that with a bit of bite. An exasperated kind of bite.

I have been praying here out of my great anguish and grief. Don't take me for a wicked woman. I'm pouring out my soul to Yahweh. I'm pouring out my soul to the Lord.

Working with this passage reminded me of a song that was done by a group called Indelible Grace, featuring Sandra McCracken, called "Dear Refuge of My Weary Soul." I was introduced to this song during a time in my graduate studies when I had been suffering for months with insomnia.

The lyrics go like this (think of Hannah...):

Dear refuge of my weary soul
On Thee, when sorrows rise
On Thee, when waves of trouble roll
My fainting hope relies
To Thee I tell each rising grief
For Thou alone can heal
Thy Word can bring a sweet relief
For every pain I feel

But oh! When gloomy doubts prevail
I fear to call Thee mine
The springs of comfort seem to fail
And all my hopes decline
Yet gracious God, where shall I flee?
Thou art my only trust
And still my soul would cleave to Thee
Though prostrate in the dust

Hast Thou not bid me seek Thy face
And shall I seek in vain?
And can the ear of sovereign grace
Be deaf when I complain?
No still the ear of sovereign grace
Attends the mourner's prayer
Oh may I ever find access
To breathe my sorrows there

Hannah, I feel, embodies this song. She's sharing her grief with the Lord. She knows that only He can heal. She knows that only He can bring relief. He's the only one that she can flee to. He's her only trust.

She finds the space to breathe her sorrows in His presence. She has pressed into her pain in a way that she brings it before the Lord, drops it at His feet, and invites Him to consider her situation.

Because look at how she prays to Him. *"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."*

If you will only look on my misery and *remember* me. And Hannah walks away from that prayer with her face no longer downcast. Not because Eli granted her peace but because she is confident that the Lord has heard her. She is confident that the Lord will *remember* her.

That's a very significant phrase. Because the whole story of Scripture, I might argue, is the story of God remembering His people.

Genesis 8:1. God has sent rain on the earth for 40 days and 40 nights, to destroy all living things because the world is just too broken.

But then this: *"But God remembered Noah... and he sent a wind over the earth, and the waters receded."*

Genesis 19:29. After Abraham pleads with God for the righteous who are in Sodom and Gomorrah—we looked at that passage a couple months back—God has made up His mind to destroy the city because of the evil within it, yet *"he remembered Abraham..."* and so he brought out of Sodom Abraham's nephew Lot and his family.

Exodus 2. The Israelites are groaning under the weight of slavery in Egypt, and the text says that *"God heard their groaning and he remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob."*

Genesis 30. Rachel who hasn't been able to bear children literally screams at her husband, 'give me a son or else I'll die.' And then a chapter later we read that *"God remembered Rachel; he listened to her and enabled her to conceive,"* because she too had been painfully waiting for a child.

Hannah probably has Rachel in mind in this scenario, because Rachel was in a similar situation. And so Hannah asks God to do the same thing that he did for Rachel: to remember her.

Because again, the LORD God is very aware that this world is not as it should be. That things happen all out of order and in a context of brokenness.

For instance, when we mourn the loss of someone, or the loss of someone not-yet-come-into-being, as Hannah did, the deep ache within us proves that things are not as they should be. That *we* are not as we should be. The world is not as it should be. Our bodies are not as they should be.

Hannah has a Beatitude legacy that foreshadows the words of Jesus in Matthew 5 because she knew that her grief needed to *go somewhere*. Jesus said, *"Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted."*

When we talked about that verse together this past summer, I mentioned that Jesus is getting at something deeper than just the reality of grief. He's inviting us to consider *how* we grieve.

He's inviting us to consider how we grieve in light of being remembered by God *through* Him; in light of being in a new covenant where God has remembered us *through* the suffering of Jesus.

In light of the fact that all of our suffering is now held in the suffering Christ, who has taken off the edge of suffering because our suffering is now placed in the context of *His*, of His great love *for* us.

Hannah of course doesn't know yet of Jesus, but she knows enough about God's faithful activity in and through His people to know that this is a God who shows up. Who doesn't leave His people alone. Who hears. Who listens. Who—as Psalm 9:2 puts it—“*does not ignore the cries of the afflicted.*”

Earlier I talked about how it's instinctive as adults to grieve when we see our children—or any children—in pain. And it's given me a more acute lens into how God responds to *our* pain. To *His* children's pain.

Because Scripture unashamedly portrays God as a Father who has emotions just like any parent or any one of us would. A Father who is troubled, who grieves, who hears His children's cries, who shows compassion, who *feels deeply*.

A Father who remembers. Who remembered Hannah. Who remembers you.

And in the ultimate moment of God showing how He has remembered us, how He has been mindful of us, mindful of our brokenness, mindful of the pain we exist in, look at what He does.

In the gospel of Luke, Jesus gathers with his disciples around a table to explain to them that there's going to be a new covenant, and what does He say?

“Remember me.” In other words, just as I have remembered you, now I ask you to remember *me*.

Remember who I am. Remember that *I* have suffered. Remember that my suffering is expansive enough that I can hold all of your pain, your emotions, your loss, your disappointment, your anger, your grief. I can hold it all.

In Jesus, you are now invited into a covenant of remembrance with God. To remember that He has already remembered you. That He sees you. He hears you. He knows you. He knows when you lie down and when you get up. He knows when grief is so heavy that you *can't* get up.

He knows exactly how you feel. Which is a wild thing to think about; but it's true. He knows exactly how you feel. He knows your pain.

So let your face, like Hannah's, be no longer downcast. Whatever it is that might be causing you grief today, remember that the Suffering Lamb is on the throne, and His Spirit of Comfort can fill every hole in your heart with His peace.

Because our God is a Father who remembers His children.

And as He promised, He will make all things new.