

Eastwood Baptist (AM, 1/7/'18) **“BECAUSE I ASKED THE LORD FOR HIM”** (1 Sam. 1:1 – 2:11)

Introduction Who likes a good story? I think that most people do. This morning we begin to look at a book of the Bible which contains several good stories. No doubt the best known is the story of David and Goliath, but there are several others, such as the story of God’s calling of Samuel, which we will look at in a fortnight. But the whole book is also part of a bigger story, the story of God’s dealings with his people Israel. It begins where the Book of Judges leaves off, at a time when Israel was not strongly unified, and when God raised up leaders for specific situations, leaders who are traditionally known as “judges”. Samuel is generally seen as the last of the Judges, and as the leader who bridges between their era and the era of the Monarchy. This is why the books which we call 1 and 2 Samuel (which were originally a single book) carry his name, even though Samuel’s death is recorded in 1 Samuel 25, and David has become by then the most prominent figure in the narrative. This morning we begin with a small story within the big story, the story of Samuel’s birth, which is also the story of an answered prayer.

The Prayer of a Childless Woman (1 Samuel 1:1-20) This new stage of the big story of God’s people begins with a small story whose central figure is a comparatively obscure woman, a childless woman called Hannah. This is a reminder that God is at work in all of history, not just in the famous events, and that God is interested in all his people, not just the celebrated figures. **Read 1:1-2.** The story begins with a man called Elkanah. He is a man of some wealth and status, but none of the names in his genealogy is prominent earlier in Israel’s big story, and the focus of this small story is soon to shift to his first wife. We soon learn that Hannah, his first wife, was childless, whereas his second wife was blessed with several children. Indeed, it is likely that it was Hannah’s childlessness which prompted Elkanah to take a second wife. **Read 1:3-8.** In some ways, Hannah could be considered to be a fortunate woman: her husband was a man of faith, who loved her deeply. Elkanah went up regularly to Shiloh, at that time an important centre of worship, where the Ark of the Covenant was housed. And he expressed his deep affection for Hannah both in action and in words. He gave her a double portion of the sacrificial meal, and sought to comfort her when she wept. But Hannah did weep. The second wife Peninnah was probably jealous of the favour shown to Hannah by Elkanah, and taunted her over her childlessness. Her childlessness was a great sorrow to Hannah. **Read 1:9-16.** Childlessness is a great sorrow to many women today, although the social pressure to produce children is not nearly as great as it was then. So it is not hard for us to understand Hannah’s sorrow, or her response to it. What did Hannah do? “In her deep anguish Hannah prayed to the LORD, weeping bitterly.” And she made a vow, promising that if God gave her a son she would give him back to God, to be dedicated to God’s service. Clearly this was no

conventional act of piety. Hannah's prayer was earnest and heartfelt. She did not pray aloud, as was normal at that time, but silently, perhaps because she felt that this was an intimate conversation between her and her God. Yet her feelings were strong and her lips moved observably, so Eli the priest thought she was drunk and rebuked her. To be rebuked publicly by this great man must have been intimidating for Hannah. But she speaks up for herself – this prayer is too important for her to allow herself to be intimidated. And this is the turning point in her story. **Read 1:17-20.** Eli regrets his mistake, and pronounces a blessing on Hannah. Hannah, whose name means “favour” or “grace”, responds respectfully by using that word, and she goes on her way feeling encouraged, no doubt hoping that the words of the priest will be followed by the favour of God himself. In time this is exactly what happens. Hannah becomes pregnant and she gives birth to a son, as she has so desperately desired to do. And she honours God for his answer to her prayer. The name “Samuel” actually means “name of God” or “his name is God”, but it also sounds like “heard by God”, and Hannah sees this similarity as meaningful, pointing to God's gracious answering of her prayer.

Hannah Keeps Her Vow (1:21-28) So the story continues, and the focus shifts from Hannah's request to her vow. **Read 1:21-23.** Hannah remembers her vow, and promises to fulfil it. Later. So there is tension in the narrative. The reason which Hannah gives for delay is a reasonable one, but at first we don't know whether it is entirely sincere. Could it be an excuse? Is Hannah one of those who make big promises to God, but fail to act on their promises? The answer is not long in coming. **Read 1:24-28.** Hannah does not try to get out of her vow, or even to minimise its implications. She takes her beloved only son to the house of the LORD at Shiloh, to live there as the LORD's dedicated servant. Hannah's faith in God is genuine, and expresses itself in faithfulness. In faith she has cried out to God, and now that God has answered her cry she keeps her promise to God.

Hannah Praises God (1 Samuel 2:1-10) Hannah has cried out to God, and God has heard her cry. Hannah has made a vow to God, and she has kept her vow. Out of her faith and God's grace there now comes rejoicing, a rejoicing expressed through praise of her gracious God. We have already heard these verses read out, so now I just want to highlight a few features of Hannah's praise of God. First, it is all about God. She doesn't have much to say about herself, or even about her precious son. She has a great deal to say about God. It is significant that she uses God's holy name (“Yahweh”) nine times in ten verses, and refers to him fourteen times in other ways. As to what she says about God, her foundational affirmation is of God's greatness – **read 2:2,10a.** On this foundation she builds her praise of God for what he has done for her, and continually does for people like her. She warns the arrogant that God is not impressed by them and the wicked that God will silence them, and she promises the

weak and humble that God delights to lift such people up. **Read 2:4-5.** These last words have particular relevance to Hannah's experience, but most of her praise of God is in general terms, terms relevant to any person who puts her trust, or his trust, in God. We can take the words of Hannah's praise and rejoicing and make them our own, especially when we are conscious of our own weakness and our need for God's strength.

Postscript (2:11) This morning's story concludes with a narrative postscript - **read 2:11.** Elkanah steps into the background, and Hannah with him, and Samuel steps into the foreground. He is only a young boy, but already he is serving God. His story is about to begin, and it will be the story of what God does with the child whom he gave to a childless woman who cried out in faith. By implication it will be about what God is ready and able to do with any life which is handed over to him. We are reminded that God can do great things with us, and with those for whom we pray. So let us be like Hannah, let us be consistent in praying to God, and let us keep our promises to God.