

“The Rock Who Remembers”

Introduction: This past summer I spent a significant amount of time uncovering an old stone wall on our property in NH. It runs for nearly 100 yards, but has been well-hidden by years of growth of trees and various underbrush. I had great fun doing it except for the one moment when I was climbing around on the wall and rested my weight upon a rock that I assumed was firm and secure. It wasn't! And I went down in a rather inglorious heap. Weeks later, my left knee still reminds me of that fall, and maybe that's not a bad thing. We all need to be reminded to take stock of what it is we build and rest our life upon. What is the foundation of our life? Will it hold us safely and securely? Will it support us when all else around us seems shaky and unsteady? Will it guide us well to live well?

The books of Samuel, which we've just started to look at last week, detail the search of God's people for a king. What they're really looking for is a foundation that they can build their life upon, a rock that is steady and secure in an age when everyone was doing as they saw fit (Jdg. 21:25). The point these books will make is that there is no other foundation than the rock who is known as the LORD. Now Rock is a significant metaphor used by the biblical writers to describe God. By my rough count, God is referred to well over 50x as Rock in the OT, many of them in the books of Samuel, and in the psalms. Significantly, the books of Samuel open and close with this metaphor (1 Sa. 2:2; 2 Sam. 22:2; 23:3).

Last week we considered Hannah's longing for a son and her turning eventually to the Lord, and not a child, for meaning and purpose, security and significance in her life. But Hannah is eventually blessed by God with a son. What does that mean? I don't think it means that if every woman who is experiencing barrenness would just pray, like Hannah prayed, then they too would get pregnant. Rather, what we are led by Hannah to see is that she is part of a much larger story, a story in which neither she, nor Samuel, nor Saul, nor even David is the main character; God is the main character. Hannah points us to this God who is the Rock who remembers, the God who is faithful to his promises. He is the One we need when all around us seems shaky.

I. The LORD who makes good his word

A. We pick up the action in the midst of Hannah finally conceiving her first child. Right there, we read: “and the Lord remembered her.” Then, after the birth of the boy she named Samuel, Hannah told her husband that she would be giving this boy over to the Lord's service, as she had vowed (v. 11) after he had been weaned. Elkanah agreed (it's never good to disagree with a woman who has just given birth. After observing that process twice, give her whatever she wants, I say!), and said, “only may the LORD make good his word.” Now, on the surface, that's kind of an odd statement. What word is Elkanah talking about? Since there is nothing said by God in the immediate context, some manuscripts change the “his” to “your,” thinking that it's talking about Hannah needing to make good on her vow.

B. But perhaps better is to link the Lord making good his word with the Lord remembering Hannah. You see, when the biblical writers say that the Lord remembered, they're not saying that he had previously forgotten something. Like, “whoops, I must enable Hannah to get pregnant; I had forgotten to put that on my to do list!” Rather, when the Lord remembers, it means that he is about to act in accord with his covenant promises to carry forward his plan to bring about the redemption and renewal of the world.

C. So we see that the Lord remembered Noah in the ark during the flood, and that he remembered Israel during her slavery in Egypt, and that he remembered her again during her exile in Babylon (Ge. 8:1; Ex. 2:24; Ps. 106:45). In each case, he acted to carry out his promise to bring blessing to all the nations of the world through the descendants of Abraham (Ge. 12:1-3). That is the word—that larger promise—that I think is being referred to here. In remembering Hannah, God has determined to act in love and faithfulness at time of moral barrenness when everyone was doing as they saw fit. Hannah's son, Samuel, would be the one through whom God would bring his people a king, king David in the immediate future, and king Jesus, of the seed of Abraham and the lineage of David, in the distant future. Hannah is a part of, and points us to, this larger story of the Lord who makes good his word.

II. The LORD who brings life out of barrenness

A. But not only does Hannah point us to the Lord who makes good his word. She also highlights that the way he does this is by bringing life out of barrenness. Know that Hannah was not the first barren woman we read about in the Bible to bear a child, nor would she be the last. Each of the patriarchs of Israel, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, those through whom Israel was to come, had a wife who was barren. Kind of interesting that God promises to develop a people who will one day bring blessing to the nations, but if their founding couples can't have children, then the promise goes nowhere fast! Yet, we see God opening the wombs of Sarah, Rebekah, and Rachel. Time after time, it seems, God chooses barren women to play a key role in the bloodline of the Savior to show that from beginning to end, his salvation will be accomplished only by his power and by his grace. As Paul summarizes in his letter to the Romans, this is "the God who gives life to the dead and calls into being things that were not" (4:17).

B. Skip ahead to the days leading up to the birth of Jesus and remember that Elizabeth, who we read about in Luke 1, was barren. Yet God opened her womb and her child, John the Baptist, was the one who prepared the way for Jesus. Notice the parallel between Hannah and Elizabeth. Both were barren. Both were enabled to bear a son. Both sons were preparatory figures. Samuel prepared the way for David while John the Baptist prepared the way for Jesus, the new David, the Son of David. Both reveal the Lord who brings life out of barrenness, who accomplishes his purpose by his grace.

III. The LORD who is worthy of our worship

A. Interesting to note that when God remembers Israel in slavery in Egypt, when he sees her misery and rescues her, what happens? Israel worships (Ex. 4:31). So, too, does Hannah worship the Lord after he sees her misery and rescues her. We hear Hannah's worship in chapter 2. It's a prayer, but it might actually be a song. Certainly, as we read it, it strikes us as much more than what a mother might write following the birth of a child. Perhaps it was a song or poem already in existence in Israel's worship, and Hannah knew it and could think of nothing more appropriate to give voice to her circumstances.

B. As we hear it, it reveals worship to be the glad response to goodness of God. Like Psalm 40:1-3 (which we heard earlier in the Declaration of the Good News), God has rescued us from the "pit" of sin and despair, set our feet on a rock, and given us a firm place to stand. What emerges from our heart is a new song, a hymn of praise to our God for all that he has done. What emerges from Hannah's heart is a song that celebrates the great character and deeds that come from this Lord as she "delights in his deliverance." In particular, those who have a lot, and are using what they have in haughty, arrogant, and harmful ways, from weapons to food to children, God humbles. But those who have a little or even

nothing, he strengthens and fills and brings life. He does so because he knows all things, and all things are his, down to the very foundations of the earth.

C. What's also worth noting is how closely linked Hannah's song is to the one Mary, the mother of Jesus, sang after pondering how God was going to fulfill his promises through the child to be born to her (Lk. 1:46-55). Though Mary was not barren, God seems to have taken things to another level still when it came to the birth of the Savior for Mary was enabled to conceive without the aid of a human father. Both the song that Hannah sang, and the one that Mary sang, point to a king, an anointed one, through whom God brings about great reversals, humbling the proud and exalting the humble, bringing us from guilt to glory, transferring us from death to life.

D. Now, I think this is all critical for us to remember, especially when we look around and see much that is going haywire, much that seems barren, much that seems so devoid of real life. Well might we ask, "God, are you there? If all authority in heaven and on earth have been given to Jesus, why are things so out of control?" I find myself helped in these instances by John the Baptist's experience. As we noticed, John had come to prepare the way for the one who he thought was the long-awaited Messiah. And yet John found himself in prison, having been arrested for pointing out the immorality that existed in king Herod's life. So what kind of Messiah was this, he wondered from his cell? If the Messiah is so great, why are my circumstances not?! When some of John's followers came to visit him in prison, he sent them to Jesus to ask: "Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?" (Lk. 7:19). It's such an honest question. It's one of my favorite questions in the Bible! "Jesus, if you're so good and in control, why are things so bad?" The response Jesus sends back is that the signs that were to indicate the arrival of the Messiah have been happening: some blind have started to see, some lame have begun to walk, some lepers are being cleansed, some deaf are beginning to hear, some dead have been raised, and the good news is being preached to the poor....so don't fall away" (Lk. 7:21-23; Cf. Isa. 29:18-21; 35:5-6).

So, how do we not fall away? How do we stand firmly upon the Rock? One very helpful way to solidify our footing is through worship. Sometimes, like Hannah, we worship as a glad response to the goodness of God. But at other times, we need to worship in order to remind ourselves of the goodness of God. In other words, there are times when we may not feel like worshipping and those are precisely the times when we need to worship, when we need to remember the faithfulness of God to his word, and the great reversals he has brought, and promises still to bring, about. While it may not change our circumstances, encountering the living God as we worship nurtures our relationship with God and changes our perspective on our circumstances.

In worship, God brings us the strength to persevere, the understanding that even though we walk through the valley of the shadows, he is with us. As we worship, we will be able to sing, along with David, "The LORD is my rock, my fortress, and my deliverer; my God is my rock in whom I take refuge" (2 Sam. 22:2). And along with Hannah, "There is no one holy like the LORD; there is no one besides you; there is no Rock like our God" (1 Sam. 2:2).