

## *To God Alone Be The Glory*

It's too bad we have such a tiny snippet of Samuel's story before us. Then again, maybe it's a good thing we heard so little—because now the rest of the story is just begging to be told.

Our story begins in a tiny town four miles NW of Jerusalem, Ramathaim by name. That's where Samuel's father lived. Samuel's mother lived there too, of course, but she was very sad because after years of marriage she still had no children. In those days society calculated part of a woman's worth by how many children she had. This was long before children were described as "another mouth to feed," long before people felt shackled by the burden to provide their children with straight teeth and a college education. In those days having children meant God was smiling on you because most blessings came through work, and another child meant you had another worker to help with the family economy. A child also meant another offspring to help you form a network of alliances in your town through arranged marriages. If you had enough children and grandchildren, you might even become the leading family in your clan or even in your tribe. Everyone wanted babies, lots and lots of babies.

When our story begins, Samuel's mother still has no children. What sadness Hannah felt! Her childlessness bothered her the most when she attended religious festivals at the Tabernacle, the house of the Lord. A big part of the annual trip to the Tabernacle was talking about your family life and comparing your children. Not very enjoyable if you have no children. One woman even provoked poor Hannah to tears on purpose with all her nasty words. Can you imagine? "Hannah, come over and sit next to me, you and all your children. Oh, that's right. You don't have any. Well, come sit next to me anyway, by yourself." Can you feel Hannah's pain?

At first Hannah just cried. But then she did what we should all do in every trouble: she called on the name of the Lord—she prayed. In her pious prayer she made a vow. She promised that if the Lord blessed her with a son, she would give her son back to the Lord for all the days of his life. Wow—now that's a vow! "Give me a child, Lord, and I will give the child back to you as a servant for the church."

Do you take vows? Do you make any promises to the Lord? If you do, make sure they are the kind of vows you are

able to keep. It does no good to vow that you will stop sinning, or even stop a sin that you have a love/hate relationship with. But you can vow to read fourteen chapters of the Bible every week. You can vow to attend worship or Bible Class faithfully, with excuses limited to health matters only. You can say, "I'll give the Lord nine hours in the next 90 days to help one of my neighbors or to improve something at God's house." Or you can say, "I'm going to take on a ministry project for the Lord at my church and accomplish it before the year is over." You can vow or promise to commit a specific percentage of your income to the poor or for spreading the gospel of Jesus. Such vows can be a wonderful way to challenge ourselves to God-pleasing piety. The new year is coming. It's a great time to make a vow to the Lord. What vow will you make?

Hannah made a vow she could keep. After Hannah laid her concern before the Lord, she went back to the Tabernacle festivities with a happy face and a happy heart. She knew she could trust the Lord to do whatever would be best. So she put her anxiety completely out of her mind.

The Lord decided to take Hannah up on her vow. Soon Hannah was pregnant. When her son was born, she named him

Samuel. The Hebrew name "Shmu-AYL" means "God has heard." Every time Hannah called to her son, she was reminded that God had heard her prayer. "Come to supper, God-has-heard."

When Samuel was still quite young, somewhere between three and six years old, Hannah kept her vow. She showed up at the Tabernacle and gave her son over to the Lord. She put her son in the care of the High Priest, whose name was Eli. Can you imagine what Hannah went through—how her selfish side must have chided her for making such an expensive promise? Of course, her new self didn't consider the vow foolish at all. Hannah knew where children come from. She was going to honor the Lord, who gave her this son, and follow through on her vow no matter what. I wonder if the Holy Spirit had Hannah in mind when he caused the Psalmist to describe a godly person as someone "*who keeps his oath even when it hurts*" (Psalm 15:4). Hannah would be able to relate to parents today whose sons and daughters serve the Lord in the full-time work of the church, and for this reason are not home for the holidays. More importantly, if Hannah had lived after the first Christmas, she would have been able to relate, on a human level, to what our heavenly Father went

through when he sent his Son to earth to be our Savior from sin. \* One of our seminary professors told a story about his best Christmas ever. That Christmas morning he went into the bedroom to pick up his newborn, only to find his son had died during the night. When the professor was relating this story, he said, “I never knew how much God loved me until that day.” You see, he now understood what a great price the heavenly Father paid in order to win salvation for all sinners. Hannah would have been able to understand this too. That makes Samuel A LITTLE BOY LIKE JESUS.

Samuel came to serve the Lord at a spiritual low point in the history of God’s people. “*At this time Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit*” (Judges 17:6, 21:25). Sounds like a description of America, doesn’t it? Everyone pretty much does as they see fit, at least when it comes to morals. People seem to understand stealing only when it happens to them: “Hey, that’s mine! Why did you take it?” But when the shoe is on the other foot and an opportunity presents itself to steal, well then it’s, “They’ll never miss it,” or “They have so much,” or “I deserve it,” or “I want it.” The seventh commandment is clear: it teaches us to say, “If it’s not mine, I’m not going to take it, or borrow it, or use it, unless I

have the permission of the rightful owner.” But everyone seems to do as they see fit.

That’s the way it was in Samuel’s day too. At the Tabernacle Samuel was under the authority of two rascals, the sons of Eli, who basically ran the show for their aged father, the high priest. These two showed no regard for the Lord, whose worship they were conducting. Instead of giving the Lord the best part of each sacrifice and being content with the leftovers, they demanded the best part for themselves and offered the Lord the leftovers. They didn’t care that God wanted them to be faithful to their wives. They regularly had affairs with the women who served at the Tabernacle. As the leaders, so the people. Self-willed, the people did whatever they pleased.

<sup>18</sup>*But Samuel was ministering before the LORD—a boy wearing a linen ephod, the garment of a priest. Can you imagine having a pastoral apprentice who was only eight, ten, twelve years old? People who came to the Tabernacle were pleased to see this boy serving the Lord. They appreciated Samuel: he was honest. Apparently Eli was teaching Samuel well. More importantly, the Holy Spirit was at work in Samuel, making his faith strong and guiding him in holy living.*

Samuel didn't take bribes, like Eli's sons did. He waited until he got married before engaging in intercourse. He treated the Lord with respect and the people with honor. If picturing Samuel in the Tabernacle at twelve years old reminds you of Jesus in the Temple at twelve years old, asking questions of the teachers and giving his answers, then you can see that Samuel was A LITTLE BOY LIKE JESUS.

Little boys and little girls grow up. Clothing that fit them last year doesn't fit today. Hannah knew this. So <sup>19</sup>*each year [Samuel's] mother made him a little robe and took it to him when she went up with her husband to offer the annual sacrifice.* Can you imagine Hannah's joy every year when she got to see her son? Her first sight of him would be 'Samuel getting ready for a flood,' walking around in his high waters robe. After the likely hugs and kisses, you can almost hear her saying, "Come now, Samuel, off with that old robe. Put on this new one I made for you. That old robe of yours still has some wear in it. Let's hand it down to one of your younger brothers."

That's right. Hannah, who had been as barren as a tree stump, was blessed with two girls and three more boys (v. 21)... which just goes to show, you can't out-give the Lord. He gives to

us first; we give him back the first part of what he gave us; and his attitude is, "Well! if that's the way you're going to treat me, we'll just see how much room you have in your life for more blessings." Those of you who have given the Lord the firstfruits of your income, a big slice of your time, the best of your abilities, or one of your children for church work—you know exactly what I mean. You can't out-give the Lord.

<sup>26</sup>*And the boy Samuel continued to grow in stature and in favor with the LORD and with men.* That's almost the exact same wording used to describe Jesus in today's Gospel (Luke 2:52). Samuel was A LITTLE BOY LIKE JESUS. The main difference, of course, is that Samuel sinned like you and I do. Jesus never sinned, not even once. That's why the Bible calls him "*the LORD our Righteousness*" (Jeremiah 23:6). When God looks at us, he sees Jesus' perfect life draped over us like a robe that hides the lack of holiness in our lives. And the Lord says, "You know, you look just as holy as my own Son. I am pleased with you. Just for that I'm going to let you live with me forever in my awesome heavenly home."

Since the Lord treats us like his own Son Jesus, whose birth we so recently

celebrated, let's be like Samuel. Let's live devout and pious lives. Many of us are not little anymore, but through faith in Jesus we are still God's little children. Let's be a little girl or little boy like Samuel, who was A LITTLE BOY LIKE JESUS.