

STUDIES IN SAMUEL No. 3

1 Samuel 2:1-11

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This great psalm of thanksgiving is the prototype of the “Magnificat” as anyone can see who compares it with Luke 1:46-55. And like the Magnificat it ranges far beyond the particular blessing of a child as the gift of God to a devout woman. Only in v. 5 is that thought explicitly present.

As we mentioned before, in our introduction to the Book of Samuel, this poem, with David’s great psalm in 2 Samuel 22 form an “inclusio” for the Book of Samuel. A great poem at the beginning and another at the end, both majoring on the same themes: the holiness, power, and faithfulness of God; his bringing down the faithless and raising up those who trust in him; and, surprisingly perhaps on Hannah’s lips, that God’s power and provision will accompany his vice-regent in the world, Israel’s king (v. 10). It is striking that the last verse of chapter 2 and the last verse of 22 (v. 51) are very similar, though the latter mentions David by name.

Obviously, the assertion in this great poem of God’s power to reverse fortunes, to plunge the high and mighty to the depths and to exalt the lowly is a magnificently fitting introduction to the Saul – David story, and the author of the book of Samuel clearly understands that. It is hard to know what to do with Hannah’s last statement about “the king” when there was, of course, no king in Israel at this time. A number of proposals have been made and I won’t bore you with them. But remember, already in Deuteronomy 17 there is the expectation that the Lord would choose a king for Israel and in the period of the Judges there was felt the need for a king for Israel (8:22). If, as many have thought, Hannah is prophesying here, following upon the extraordinary circumstances of the birth of her son and in view of the key role he will play in salvation history – after all her psalm is “inspired” and does find a place in the canon of Scripture, as does David’s at the end – , there is nothing unlikely then in the assumption that she is anticipating the dawning of the era of the kings of Israel, the era her son was to introduce.

Text Comment

v.1 “horn” The horn of an animal represented its strength and pride. We might say today that someone “held his head high.” And, in this particular case, with the following idea being that of “boasting over one’s enemies”, this seems clearly to be the idea. The Lord has lifted me up above my enemies, raised my horn high! Remember, Peninnah was introduced as Hannah’s “enemy” in 1:6-7 (rival). Note that “horn” appears again in the last verse of the hymn. He has raised Hannah’s horn high; let him do the same for the king! Interestingly, in 1 Chronicles 25:5 “exalting the horn” is explicitly related to the granting of offspring!

By the way, if we are troubled by what seems to us a certain spirit of vindictiveness in Hannah (“My mouth boasts over my enemies...”), let us remember that we get the same thing in the NT, even among the saints already in heaven (Revelation 6:10)! A sense of vindication is not the same thing at all as vindictiveness. After all, it is part of the Lord’s

victory and the manifestation of his glory before the world that his enemies will be made a footstool for his feet.

- v.2 God is a “rock” in that those who trust in him find security and protection in him. They find in him as in a great rock, stability, strength, and permanence. The sense of the three line verse is that Israel’s God is without compare.
- v.3 “By him deeds are weighed.” That is, in his omniscience, the Lord looks into the actions of men – their motives and manner as well as their outward conformity to the law of God – and finds their true character. It is folly to be arrogant before a God who knows all and is able to redress the balance of human behavior and restore a righteous outcome. The verses that immediately follow give examples of God doing just this. This is “God the Reverser” [Klein, 17]
- v.5 The Lord gives victory to the powerless and brings the powerful to defeat (v. 4); he makes hungry the people with lots of food and fills the stomachs of those who had nothing. In v. 36, in the judgment pronounced on Eli’s house, we have an instance of this. Hophni and Phinehas made themselves fat on the offerings of God’s house, but their descendants will beg for a crust of bread.

Hannah eventually was to have six children; but seven is the ideal number, the image of perfect fulfillment.

- v.6 The Lord can deliver, even from the grave!
- v.8 The ash heap was the garbage dump of an ANE town where the beggars were to be found. It is a special character of the Lord’s treatment of human beings to lift up the needy, as it is to cast down the proud. It is the hope of those who suffer in this world, that the Lord delights to show them mercy if they trust in him. And, obviously, the creator and ruler of this world is able to do this if he pleases.
- v.9 Those who talked high and mighty – as we will hear Hophni and Phinehas speaking arrogantly in a few verses – are forever silenced.
- v.10 Those who pit their strength against the Lord must be destroyed.

It is here that the term “anointed one” or “Messiah” is first used of a king. Remember, Samuel as a book is about the rise of the royal house of David in Israel, and here, early on, is the first intimation of what is to come.

- v.11 The LXX which sometimes preserves a better Hebrew original, more often in Samuel than elsewhere in the OT, reads “They left him there, before the face of the Lord and returned to Ramah...” [The standard Hebrew text of the OT is taken from a copy of the MT (the Masoretes were Jewish scribes who preserved the Hebrew text with minute care from A.D. 500 to 1000. The text that forms the basis of the Hebrew text that all scholars use today is the Codex Leningrad, the oldest extant copy of the entire Hebrew Bible. It is

dated c. A.D. 1000. So, naturally, there was always a question as to how accurately the text had been handed down through the 1000 years since the beginning of the Christian era and then the centuries before it back to the writing of the books of the OT themselves. The discovery of OT books and parts of books among the Dead Sea Scrolls was, therefore, a huge excitement for scholars of the biblical text, because now they had manuscripts more than a 1000 years older than what they had had before. The general conclusion once the DSS mss had been compared with the Masoretic texts of the middle ages was that the Masoretic text was very reliable, indeed, in a number of cases where small differences were found between the MT and the DSS texts, it was clear that the MT was still to be preferred as the more accurate text. But, in a few cases, it appeared that the MT had, early on, been copied from texts that were not as pure as those that the LXX translators had been using 200 years before Christ. And, in a number of cases, that seemed so in the text of Samuel. I hope that little summary is clear. What we want, of course, is the original Hebrew text of the books of the OT – the book of Samuel as it was first written down by whomever it was that wrote it – but no one has that original. The nearest we come to it in time is the translation of it into Greek 200 years before Christ. And scholars work to retranslate the LXX back into Hebrew to see what the Hebrew text was that the Greek translators had before them. That is, of course, an inexact science. What is more, there were by that time already differences that had crept into the copies of the text. But, the Hebrew text itself, as preserved by Jewish scribes through the ages, in almost all cases of divergence is still to be preferred, even though our copies of that Hebrew text is further removed in time from the original writing of the OT books than the LXX translation. So, what does all of that mean? Well, it means that it seems likely that v. 11 should be read “*They* left the boy and went home...” That is the reading of the LXX, 200 years before Christ and it makes better sense. But, we cannot be absolutely sure of that, because the MT, the oldest copy of which dates from the middle ages but the fidelity with which it was copied out is nothing short of amazing, reads “Elkanah went home to Ramah...”

As with the Magnificat, the real theme of this great poem is God himself – his power, his knowledge, his faithfulness, and his mercy and his willingness to intervene in the world, by means of his knowledge and power, to redress the imbalances that are found here and, in particular, to lift up those who look to him in faith and to cast down those who rebel against him. It is, of course, in the first place, as the final verse of the hymn shows, an introduction to the account of the Lord casting down and raising up in the case of the house of Eli, the house of Saul, and the house of David. And, of course, the psalm puts the birth and life of Samuel in the larger context of the saving acts of God on behalf of his people [Hertzberg, 31].

The situation of God’s faithful children may be as seemingly bleak as Hannah’s was, in her barrenness and subject to the haughty ill-will of her rival Peninnah, but the Lord is perfectly able to vindicate his children and will in due time.

And, the Bible is, of course, a record of that – of the Lord reversing fortunes according to his wise and gracious will – from the beginning to end. He casts down mighty Egypt and exalts Israel, bringing her out of captivity on eagles’ wings. He brings her into the Promised Land and conquers her enemies on her behalf and grants her cities she did not build and fields she did not

plow while destroying the wicked people who inhabited Canaan before her. But, when Israel rebelled against God, she was brought low and made subject to the Philistines. Soon we will see the Philistines conquer Israel as agents of God's judgment and then be brought low themselves for capturing the ark of God.

And so it will continue throughout the Bible. The vaunted army of the Assyrians is destroyed in a single night by the angel of the Lord and God's people are lifted up from the disaster that threatened them. Or, in the NT, Saul of Tarsus persecutes the church, executing at least Stephen, perhaps others, arresting many others and seeking to arrest many more. But the Lord "will guard the feet of his saints but the wicked will be silenced" and so Saul was on the road to Damascus. The church was delivered, vindicated, and given a new champion all in one fell swoop.

And, this, of course, is the promise the Lord makes to his church regarding the end of the age. She shall be vindicated before the world.

"God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you and give relief to you who are troubled, and to us as well. This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels. He will punish those who do not know God...on the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marveled at among all those who have believed." [2 Thessalonians 1:6-10]

So what is of key importance to the unfolding drama of Samuel is, at the same time, a key part of Christian faith and hope in any age. One cannot judge the true outcome of things, the true prosperity of people, the true success of any human life, by appearances in this world. "The Lord is a God who knows, and by him deeds are weighed." And he will cast down and raise up according to his justice and according to his mercy.

There are many wicked people who live long lives and die happy. But, as Bunyan reminds us, one hour in hell will burn up all the enjoyment that people who have spurned God will ever have found in the pleasures of life in this world.

But, what is more, the Lord does not leave himself without a witness. He often reverses fortune in this world, just so that we can know still more surely that he will do it in the world to come. Hannah is a case in point. But let me give you another one this evening. I mentioned this briefly to the Prayer Meeting a few weeks back, but it is a story that deserves to be heard more widely.

I read this account recently of the conversion and now Christian life of a woman by the name of Amy Tracy [I will quote sections, summarize others]. Amy was raised in an unhappy home and had a particularly troubled relationship with her father. Hers was a "house of chaos and violence" and she often ran to hide at her friend's house next door, though that family was troubled as well. These two girls were thrown together by adversity and it was in friendship with this young girl friend that Amy found the deepest emotional bond of her young life.

Things changed for awhile during her high school years when she began to excel as a runner and became a track star at her school. Her father began to take an interest in her track career. "One of my most vivid memories is of falling into my father's arms at the end of a race," Amy says. "I

was muddy and exhausted, and I felt his long, tweed-wool coat against my cheek and smelled the crisp November air. His big sleeves blocked out the noise of the crowd, and I felt peace and safety.” But that security lasted only as long as she continued to win. Later, when she began losing, her father, who had been a runner himself, began to be obsessively concerned about her performance, yelling at her and her coaches, unwilling to accept failure at the end of a race. She would go numb before her races, knowing what was awaiting her afterward. “...we’d drive home in silence, and it was only a matter of time before I would pay for my loss.” At the end of one race, she remembers, “as I finished behind the pack, I looked up to see my dad’s back as he headed toward the parking lot.” Her popularity faded, her coaches lost interest in her, and the home went on as before.

She went to a woman’s college, chose a major that was dominated by lesbian professors, and encouraged in that direction herself and found acceptance in a community of women and found a purpose for life in the ideology and political activism of feminism. Eventually she was hired by the National Organization for Women. She traveled the country, organizing grass roots involvement on behalf of abortion, gays in the military, and so on.

She met Christians in the course of her work, of course, usually on the picket lines at abortion clinics, at marches and rallies. They made a poor impression on her. “They showed up at clinics with their condemning signs, eerie songs about God, and robot-like determination to close clinics. I didn’t believe they really cared about babies – they only wanted to oppress women. When they rushed the doors at one clinic, scrambling on their hands and knees, forcing their way through our legs, I stepped on them and kicked them as if they were rats. I never felt guilty. I hated them.” The feeling was mutual. Amy was threatened on several occasions, roughed up on others.

But, at the same time all of this was going on in her life, she was becoming more and more conscious of an emptiness inside, of the lack of purity, joy, and peace in her heart. Eventually she became aware of a profound hunger for God. This was disturbing and unwanted. “I didn’t ask for the hunger. ... I had a successful career, friends, respect, and a committed relationship with another woman. My world was hostile to Christianity, and I despised Christians.”

Protests kept her in contact with Christians and, in her view, they lived down to her low expectations. “One event outside an abortion clinic stands out in Amy’s memory. She was looking into the faces of three pro-life women. One glared at her with fury; another looked through her as if she didn’t exist; and the third regarded her with resentment and fear. Yet, instead of being moved to a mirror reaction of anger and self-righteousness, Amy felt like she was coming apart. ‘That day, pain was leaking through my armor. I needed them to reach out and touch me. I needed someone to see me as a real person in pain, not just an abomination.’

“Things came to a head when Amy stood outside an abortion clinic in Pensacola, Florida, wearing a bulletproof vest. Blood still stained the pavement. A man named Paul Hill had shot and killed an abortion doctor and a pro-choice activist there, and a crowd of protesters stood at the foot of the driveway bearing signs announcing that he had done the right thing. Amy was aware of two things at that moment; that, by this logic, these protesters thought she too deserved to die; and that she longed for God with all her heart.”

She realized that unless she could put to rest this seeking for God it would destroy her career in the feminist movement. So when she got back to Washington she saw a therapist. "I am feeling vulnerable to the Christian God" was what she put down as her "presenting complaint." The therapist, however, only wanted to talk about her childhood, so she quit going.

Amy and her girlfriend decided to leave Washington for somewhere more "gay-affirming," so they came to Seattle. Amy soon was employed by the Washington State chapter of NOW, speaking in schools in favor of homosexuality. But the old enthusiasm was gone. "I started to wrestle with what I saw in the gay and lesbian community." She mentioned to her girlfriend that many of their friends and fellow activists seemed as broken as she was and her girlfriend said that it was the result of societal persecution. Amy knew that wasn't true. She says that she began to long for purity and to know right and wrong. Everyone around her based everything on his or her feelings. "I realized that I had grown into a person I didn't respect. I was hard, burned out, and hateful. My loathing of Christians expanded into a dislike of people in general. I began to daydream about having a normal life." She was elected vice-president of the state chapter of NOW. She attended a seminar on spirituality at the state convention but found herself unable to participate in the chanting to a goddess.

For a few days she wandered through the streets of Seattle. "I know it sounds a little weird, but I was looking for someone to tell me how to find God." She went to Pike Place Market because she had once seen someone selling Christian T-shirts, but he was gone. She looked for a street evangelist who sometime preached nearby, but he wasn't there either. Ducking into a library she spent a day reading the Bible and a Christian magazine. Finally she looked up a church, attended an evening service. Arriving was "one of the scariest moments of my adult life." She thought she might be recognized and thrown out. Yet, when the pastor began to speak, all her self-consciousness melted away. "I learned it was possible to have a personal relationship with Christ, and that by placing my life in his hands he would change me from the inside out. That's what I wanted. I wanted change." After attending the church several times, she committed her life to Christ and his salvation on September 19, 1995.

Amy's friends ridiculed her faith and eventually left her. But, at the same time, in the midst of her loneliness she could feel her hard shell melting away and innocence beginning to return. It was six months later before she realized that her positions on the social issues to which she had once devoted her life were being turned upside down. For the last several years she has been working for Focus on the Family. [Frederica Mathewes-Green, "Chasing Amy," *Christianity Today* (Jan 10, 2000) 56-60]

Now that is a wonderful story! And I tell it because it so beautifully illustrates what Hannah said long before about the Lord God. "The Lord brings death and makes alive...he humbles and he exalts...he raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap."

The Lord did that in Amy's case. It wasn't the witness of Christians, it was the intervention of God from heaven that brought light and life into Amy Tracy's heart and that, at the same time, vindicated his truth and power before others. Hannah was a believer before the Lord raised her up; Amy Tracy was elect through the long years of her struggle but God raised her up and

transformed her life and granted peace and hope where there was none before. But whether we are speaking of the very first raising up or the very last in a Christian's life, it is still God who raises up, just as it is God who casts down.

We are hearing these days of the reported conversion and new-found Christian faith of Jane Fonda. Surely we all hope it is true that God has called this woman to himself. It would exactly illustrate that reversal of fortune which is characteristic of God's ways with men and women in the world. But, if so, it would be just one illustration of what God is always doing and will someday do with finality for all of mankind. Those who oppose the Lord will be shattered – nothing can stand before him. Ted Turner, for all his antipathy to Christianity, could no more prevent the Lord's work in his wife's heart than he could prevent it in his own, if the Lord chose to show him mercy. God's power, and knowledge, and purpose simply cannot fail. He does what pleases him in heaven and on earth.

He runs the world. He determines the outcome of everyone's life. He will see to it that all things are judged according to his holiness. His covenant with his people will not, cannot fail. His elect cannot be lost. His enemies cannot succeed, however it may appear they prosper at any moment. As Hannah, so well and wisely put it so long ago: "There is no one besides the Lord our God; no one holy; no Rock like our God."

Let all the earth keep silence before Him!