**Promise kept with prayer of praise**  23/1/22 dkm

Read: 1Samuel 1:19-2:11, Luke 1:39-66

Text: 1Samuel 1:21-2:11

Psalms: 146, 94:9-14, 113, 117

On my recent holiday I read a book by Timothy Keller entitled ‘Hope in Times of Fear’. In this he writes about the ‘great reversal’. The story of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16 is a case in point. Lazarus was a poor beggar in this world but was exalted to the bosom of Abraham after his death. In this world everyone would have known the name of the rich man, but as Jesus told this story, only the beggar is named. Jesus helped and healed lepers, blind people and cripples, beggars and children and widows, as well as despised people like tax-collectors (cf. Mat 11:5). Jesus preached ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand’ (Mat 4:17). The kingdom of heaven looks very different to the kingdoms of this world.

Reversals are also seen across the OT; they are seen here in the 1Samuel. Such reversals often involved women, who had little social power in ancient societies, and still in some societies today; actually, the reversal we see in today’s text involves two women. The previous book in our Bibles is about Ruth, about her faithfulness to her mother-in-law, and then her faith in God. 1Samuel begins with the focus on a childless woman called Hannah, living in the hills of Ephraim.

What we read in the Bible was not headline news in ancient Israel but it was very important in the purposes of God. If you are caught up in the 24hr news cycle of sport, politics and celebrities, remember that God sees beyond this superficial world, and he is very good at lifting up the lowly and putting down the proud, or making the rich poor and the poor rich (2:7, Luke 1:51-53, Mat 5:1-10).

When Hannah prayed with tears and no audible voice, the Lord heard her prayer. We know this because he gave her the male child she asked for. She called her son Samuel. But Hannah knew he was more than her son- he belonged to the Lord. Hannah had promised to, ‘give her son to the Lord all the days of his life’ (1:11). We see her keeping her promises in our first subheading today. The second part of our sermon will focus on the prayer of Hannah.

**1. Promise kept**

We have seen Hannah’s faith in bringing the concerns of her heart and life to the Lord in prayer. She knew the Lord is gracious and powerful to grant our requests. We now see that she was faithful in keeping the promise or vow she made to the Lord in her prayer. We are not to start ‘bargaining’ with the Lord in our prayers. We must be careful in making any vows, but it is not wrong to do so. What is very wrong is to go back on any vow or promise we make.

Hannah’s decision not to go up to the house of God until Samuel was weaned is quite understandable. Actually, it would be even more difficult to hand over her little boy at a later time. Some know the reality of separation from a young child, but all of us, I hope, feel something of the pain of separation experienced by Hannah. Her pain was self-inflicted, but her vow was not a rash vow and she had no intention of dishonouring it. The Lord takes promises or vows very seriously, and so must we- another feature of the great reversal! The Lord declares, ‘Those who honour me I will honour’ (2:30).

Elkanah and his family continued their pattern of worship, each year going up to the house of the Lord with a sacrifice (1:21). What does the reference to ‘his vow’ in verse 21 mean? Had Elkanah made his own vow regarding Hannah, or something else? Or had he taken on Hannah’s vow, and taken to reminding the Lord she, and he, had not forgotten this vow? His reply to Hannah when she told him she would not go up until Samuel was weaned point to Elkanah not only knowing, but also approving, and indeed being bound by Hannah’s vow: ‘Let the Lord establish his word’ (1:23). Keeping this vow would be the fulfilment of Hannah’s prayer, to the Lord’s word being established. If Hannah had selfishly gone back on her vow the Lord would not have been pleased. He had great plans for this special child.

‘After he was weaned she took the boy with her, young as he was, along with a three year old bull, an ephah of flour and a skin of wine and brought him to the house of the Lord in Shiloh’ (1:24 NIV). Samuel was probably around 3yrs old. Why a 3yr bull old as a sacrifice (some versions have three bulls)? A bull was a huge sacrifice, but nothing compared to the sacrifice Hannah was making. In passing, note that those few early years are very important in the development of a child. Samuel grew up in a godly home, watching his mother pray and his father going off to worship the Lord. When he was given back to the Lord to serve in the house of God he was obedient to Eli and attentive to the voice of the Lord.

Upon arrival at the house of the Lord, the family sacrificed the bull and brought Samuel to Eli the priest (1:25). Hannah reminded Eli that she was the woman he rebuked for being drunk when she was praying for a child. She acknowledged that the Lord had answered her earnest prayer and given her a son, and that now she was giving this child back to the Lord- or in the beautiful words of our Bible, ‘I also have lent him to the Lord’ (1:28). She had brought this answer-to-prayer child for dedication at the house of the Lord. Her dedication meant literally leaving her child in the Lord’s house to serve the Lord all the days of his life. Hannah worshipped the Lord and returned home with her family, minus her beloved son Samuel- but not before she uttered the prayer or song of praise that we now come to.

**2. Prayer of Hannah**

After leaving her precious son with the Lord at Shiloh, Hannah was overcome with joy rather than sadness: ‘My heart rejoices in the Lord’ (2:1). The Lord is powerful to bless those who obey him, to bless not just with material things but with peace and joy in the heart. Has this been your experience when you obey the Lord, even when it is hard to do so? He blessed Hannah with more children (2:21), but her rejoicing was in the Lord himself not just in what he gave her. Her Spirit-inspired prayer begins with personal rejoicing but ends with a prophecy affecting ‘the ends of the earth’ (2:10). We have previously noted the similarity of Hannah’s prayer or song or psalm with the song of Mary in Luke 1. Both focus on the theme of the great reversal. We see this particularly in the middle section of this prayer. The first section is in praise of God who is sovereign.

In this prayer Hannah refers to various attributes of the Lord of hosts, or almighty God. In the first two verses she refers to God’s salvation and his uniqueness in being holy and being like a rock. By putting her trust in such a God, Hannah could ‘smile at her enemies’ (2:1). She may have regarded Peninnah as an enemy; she certainly gave Hannah a hard time. But there is no sense of revenge or spiteful gloating in Hannah’s prayer. Hannah rejoices in the fact that God remembered her and saved her from her affliction- of being childless. ‘Holy’ carries the idea of separation or ‘otherness’; here it probably refers to purity also. Hannah cried to the Lord, knowing he would hear her prayer and was powerful to grant her request. She came to him as a rock when her life was in turmoil. You can do the same when you feel that the whole world is against you! The words of verse 2 are most suitable for beginning your prayer.

The second section of this prayer, from verse 3 to 8a, is in praise of the God of reversals. Hannah speaks to people who are proud and arrogant, to men who exalt themselves because of their affluence or physical strength. The Lord she worships is powerful to bring down the rich and powerful, and raise up those who are poor or weak. She does not confine her comments to her rival, Peninnah, although she does make another pointed comment in saying, ‘even the barren has born seven, and she who has many children has become feeble’ (2:5b). Hannah went on to have five more children (2:21). The seven here in verse 5 is symbolic of completion or perfection.

To the Lord’s attributes of holiness and power we find Hannah adding God’s knowledge and role as judge; ‘by Him actions are weighed’ (2:3). We learn from Psalm 139 and other passages that God is omnipotent and omniscient. We soon learn that God opposes the proud and arrogant; King Saul become such a man. We will learn that being king in God’s kingdom is not like being king in other kingdoms, just as we must realise that being a leader in the church is not like being a leader in secular organisations. Jesus said, I have not come to be served but to serve’ (Mark 10:45).

In the kingdom of God the arrogant will be made to eat their words, and the weapons of the mighty will be broken (2:3, 4). ‘Those who stumbled are girded with strength’, while those who stand in their own strength will stumble. Moreover, ‘Those who hunger will hunger no more’, but those who are full find themselves searching for bread (2:5). We recall the Magnificat, and the words, ‘He has filled the hungry with good things and the rich he has sent empty away’ (Luke 1:53). Jesus said the same thing in the Sermon on the Mount, so please take these words seriously. We live in a society that laughs at such words, with even churches preaching, ‘God helps those who help themselves’. Dear friend, God helps those who realise they are nothing and have nothing without Jesus, and who humble themselves before Him. So stop looking to the world and start looking to Jesus if you want to know the blessings and the joy that Hannah knew.

In this central section of her prayer Hannah goes on to speak about reversals orchestrated by almighty God. ‘He raises the poor from the dust and lifts the beggar from the ash heap’ (2:8). We are reminded of Job, who was once rich but, in the purposes of God, found himself literally on the ash heap. He refused to curse God and eventually God exalted him to an even higher place, even in this world. The beggar Lazarus was exalted to a higher place after death. His exaltation was permanent, just as the rich man’s condemnation to torment was permanent.

Hannah acknowledges that the Lord ‘brings down to the grave and brings up’ (6:6), a profound comment upon God’s power to raise the dead, unless the reference to ‘bringing up’ is to giving life in the womb. Hannah speaks of the poor being raised up to ‘sit with princes’, words that are prophetic in terms of the role her son will play in anointing a forgotten boy like David to be king of Israel.

The third and final section of Hannah’s prayer is in praise of ‘God the judge’. Reid writes, ‘The Lord who established the world is able to turn it to His purposes at His will. If this is so, He is able to upturn humans in their pride and exalt the humble’. As much as the secular and social media continue exalting the rich and famous, who are usually proud and arrogant, the Lord is working to put them down. The Lord is working to ‘guard the feet of his saints’ who are often used and abused by men and women in their efforts to become rich and famous. Even at this present time the rich and famous are learning that they are not able to control the COVID virus sweeping our globe. ‘For by his strength no man shall prevail’ (2:9). What a great take-home lesson for us today, a lesson for us to remember and to share with people around us.

The creator God is the same God who will judge this world in righteousness. The Lord will thunder from heaven against his enemies (2:10). Israel, under the leadership of Samuel, routed the Philistines when the Lord ‘thundered with loud thunder upon the Philistines’ (7:10). Our ‘experts’ attribute the ‘increasing frequency and intensity of storms’ to man-made climate change, but should we not consider that God in his anger is thundering against a society that has rejected him?

Hannah’s last words are prophetic, prophetic of Messiah. All kings were ‘anointed’, a translation of the Hebrew word ‘messiah’ (2:10). God gave strength to his anointed kings, men like Saul and David, but even David did not ‘judge the ends of the earth’ (2:10). It is the Son of David who is our Lord Jesus Christ who will, in the fullness of time, rule and judge to the ends of the earth.