

1 Samuel Chapter 1 - Part One

by Charles E. Wigg

Samuel was the last of the judges, and was born at what was perhaps the darkest time of Israel's history up until that time. The last verse of the book of Judges is very significant, and reveals a state of corruption and anarchy. "In those days there was no king in Israel: every man did that which was right in his own eyes". Ideally God never wished Israel to have a king. He was to be their king, and He would rule them by His word, (The Law). But the Law had been disregarded and there was no longer any clear demarcation of what was right or wrong. When every man does what is right in his own eyes, this is a recipe for total anarchy. Neither were the people of tender conscience, such as Joseph was centuries earlier, because though he had no Bible or law, yet he did have a conscience that told him that to grant the request of Potiphar's wife, would be to sin against God.

Thus Israel had sunk into a moral abyss and the people from the priests down, lived for self, if not for sin. It is at such a time the book opens, and we read about a man that had a lofty name, Elkanah, ('Whom God possesses'), yet it seems that he lived for himself, and his own pleasure.

Elkanah was a Levite, a descendant of Kohath, one of the three sons of Levi. It was the sacred duty and privilege of the Kohathites to carry the Holy Ark on their shoulders during Israel's forty year journey through the wilderness. It was the feet of the Kohathites that dipped in the brim of the Jordan, which was to open the way for Israel to enter the promised Land. But 280 years had passed since that triumphant day. Israel had been through many ups and downs and they were now in a sadly backslidden state. They were at the bottom of the deepest trough of departure from God and from His word. The Ark did not have to be carried any more, (for the moment), but still it was the duty of the Levites to dwell amongst the people in the cities provided for them, and to teach those people the Law, the word of God. It was God's intention that by their holy life and example that they should turn many from iniquity. But there is no reference to any Levite doing this, at this time. It is possible that like the Levites of Malachi's day they caused many to stumble at the Law (Mal. 2:5-9)

The name Elkanah, means 'Whom Jehovah possesses', however it would seem that like the Church at Sardis much later, he had a name to live, but was dead. Though his name would suggest that Jehovah possessed him, yet it seems that he was controlled by self, by sin and its lusts. Elkanah had two wives, and this was a source of misery and unhappiness. There may have been a reason for this. Perhaps Hannah was his first wife, and as Jehovah had shut up her womb, she had borne her husband no children, this may have caused him to take another wife, but the word does not tell us anything about this. It seems that he used Hannah to gratify his lust, and though he cherished a selfish kind of love to her, yet he failed to understand the grief of her heart. The name Hannah means 'grace', and it seems that this dear woman was true to her name. I picture her as a soft and gentle person, and probably beautiful also, but not the kind of person that would pride herself in her beauty, or show it off to others. We will deal more with her character later.

Peninnah was also beautiful as the meaning of her name would suggest. I have seen it suggested that her name means coral. Coral grows in the sea, and is very beautiful, but is also very hard and cruel. There is a world famous coral reef off the coast of Queensland, (Australia). This reef though very beautiful has been the graveyard of many ships, and has literally torn the bottom from many vessels. When swimming amidst coral, if one treads on it with their bare feet, it will pierce the feet, and inflict a painful injury. It seems that Peninnah was such a person, very beautiful, but hard and cruel. Another meaning of her name is Gemstone, or Diamond. The meaning is similar, because gemstones are very beautiful, but also very hard. This comes out later in the chapter. The tragedy of this whole situation was that Peninnah had children, (there could have been ten of them), but Hannah had none.

Elkanah only made a yearly pilgrimage to Shiloh to worship Jehovah, when God had said the all the males amongst His people, (not just the Levites), were to appear before Him three times in the year, and none were to appear before Him empty. That is each one was to come laden with the tokens of His goodness, to present an offering to Jehovah. However it seems that Elkanah went only once a year, this was enough for him. We find a similar situation today, where so many of God's people would not think of missing the remembrance meeting, but it seems that most come empty, (judging by the long silences that there are in many meetings for remembrance and worship). But with most this is the only meeting that they attend, though there may be other meetings, such as the meeting for prayer, for Bible study, for fellowship and ministry etc. I recall a missionary from Jamaica who

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used to speak about S.M.O's. (Sunday morning only) people. Thus it seems that Elkanah was a careless half-hearted kind of person, and his attitude was characteristic of the time in which he lived. (Very much like our own day).

THE ANNUAL PILGRIMAGE

These annual pilgrimages to Shiloh where the Tabernacle was, were a very torturous time for Hannah. She felt that she was a failure. She had never fulfilled the purpose for which she was created she was a wife, but not a mother. She was just like her Nation, though they professed that Jehovah was their husband, yet they bore Him no fruit. This grieved her more and more as the years dragged by. Her rival also made this a terrible time for her, and provoked her relentlessly, reminding her of her failure, and this brought bitterness to her soul. Added to this it seemed that their religion was a farce. They professedly went to offer to Jehovah, yet their main interest was in the feasting and drinking that filled those days. When her husband offered the peace offering, he divided the meat amongst the family, but to try to compensate for her lack, Elkanah gave Hannah a double portion. This probably pained her all the more, and she felt that their 'worship' was just an empty ritual, an excuse to minister to the flesh and to gratify its lusts, there seemed to be little or nothing for God's pleasure in it at all. (May we comment that so much that is called worship today is just the same.)

The time came when she could bear it no longer. Her faith reckoned that if God was to act sovereignly, and to give her a male child, and she was to give that child back to God; then it may be that God would use her child to bring the Nation back to Himself. Her rival's provocation and her own broken heart led Hannah to take desperate measures. She refused to take part any longer in the farcical religious exercises that Elkanah and the rest participated in and she offered to God the sacrifice of her broken spirit. Psalm 51:17. She wept and God saw her tears, in fact He put them in His bottle, (Psalm 56:8). She would do what others had no thought of doing, she would pray to the Almighty Jehovah.

But she found none to encourage her to begin with. Her tears and the sight of her weeping troubled her husband. The fact too that she would not join them in the festivities, the excitement, the feasting troubled him too. It was no occasion of joy for her, she could no longer be part of those formalities that pretended to be for the pleasure of God, but in reality were only just ministering to the flesh. She was a bit like the prophet who said "I sat alone", (Jer. 15:17; Psa. 26:4-7). Poor Elkanah tried in vain to get her to join in the religious festivities, professing great love to her, but nothing would move her now from her intention.

When she spoke to God she addressed Him as "The Lord of Hosts", the almighty, the One that possessed almighty power. Yet she did not just ask, or demand of Him, but she vowed a vow that was to cost her very much. She pleaded with the Almighty to look on her affliction, she asked that she might be given a place in His mind, and heart, that He might remember her, poor and needy as she was. She there vowed that if that Almighty God would give her a male child, then she would give that child back to God, so that He might use him as He saw fit. She would dedicate that child wholly to God, not just for a part, but for the whole of his life. Her wonderful prayer was never heard by men, and we are indebted to God for giving us the substance of it, for letting us into the secret of this communication. Could I ask, have you ever prayed a prayer like hers? If there were more of such prayers today, I fear that things would be much different than what they are in the testimony of God.

Eli was sitting on his special seat by a post of the temple, (probably by the gate of the Tabernacle). We are told three things about Eli,

- a) That he was very old,
- b) That he was almost blind and,
- c) That he was very heavy.

All of these things go together to make a picture of decline and decay in the High Priest, and Judge of God's people. The fact that his eyes had grown dim, though a physical condition, yet it means that he had almost lost his

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ability to discern, right and wrong. He saw Hannah as she poured out her heart to God. He saw her lips moving, but he could hear no words and he presumed that she was drunk. Perhaps he had seen other women drunk also, and he assumed that she was like them, and he rebuked Hannah with harsh words. But she did not retaliate in the same way, but addressed him with respect and grace. Her soft answer came as a rebuke to the old priest. She gently urged him to change his attitude towards her, revealing the fact that she was not like other women that he had seen, she was a woman of sorrowful spirit and she had poured out her soul to God. Suitably rebuked Eli did change his attitude, (though he did not apologise), but he joined his spirit with hers desiring that God would grant the request that she had asked of him. If she had responded in the same spirit that he had shown to her, then the result may have been different. (Prov. 26:4).

HOPE FOR THE HOPELESS

From that moment on Hannah's attitude changed, and though her circumstances had not changed, yet she had the answer, and her faith laid hold upon the Almighty whose help she had sought. She dried those tears of sorrow and repentance, her joy returned, she ate and drank, (she broke her fast), her countenance was no more sad. She hoped now in God, and was sure that He would intervene in her circumstances, for His own glory. They arose early in the morning and worshipped. To the others it may have just been a form or ceremony, but it was not so for Hannah now. They returned to their home, and God caused that she was now able to conceive, she yielded the inner shrine of her being to God. This conception was not by any supernatural means but just in the course of normal married relations. The glad day came when Hannah was able to inform her husband that God had answered her prayer, and that she was going to have a child.

Thus began for Hannah nine months of physical strain and tension. To be a mother involved many things that she had never known in the years of her barrenness. But she did not complain, but bore it all patiently, knowing that at length she would have a son, and that God would use her son for His glory. To produce new life is a very costly exercise, but whatever it cost she knew that at the end, there would be glory for God. If her son was to be a Nazarite, then there were some things that she must deny to herself also. She could not expect her son to live a life separated to God, if she was not prepared also to separate herself to God in the same manner. (Judg. 13:4). No believing mother has the right to expect her child to be godly, unless she is first godly and sets an example for the child to follow. It is important to note the part that a mother plays in the life of her child. There never could have been a Timothy unless there had first been a Lois and a Eunice. (2 Tim. 1:5.)

THE GREAT DAY ARRIVES

Thus those nine months, though months of strain that she had never experienced before, yet they were months of expectancy, months of preparation for the coming birth of the long awaited son. During these months Hannah was careful not to do anything that would put a hindrance in the way of her Nazarite son who was soon to make his entrance into this world. Every movement of the child in her womb made her to rejoice. Though it was costly, yet it was more than worthwhile because there was a new life within, a life full of promise. She was barren no longer!

At last the great day arrived, and with it the labour pains, agony untold, for both mother and baby. When all the labour and agony was passed, she quickly forgot it all, as she held in her arms the baby boy that she had prayed for, and longed for all her married life. A man was born into the world, John 16:21, and what a man he proved to be, as the decades unfolded. But many years were to elapse before he would reach manhood, and the years that this baby would spend with her were very important years indeed. She held in her arms a living testimony to the fact that God does answer prayer, especially when we are willing to meet His conditions. She had no difficulty in choosing a name for the baby, she called his name Samuel, saying "Because I have asked him of the Lord". The name means "Asked for of God", or in other words, "Answer to prayer". Thereafter wherever he went, or whenever his name was mentioned; people were confronted with the fact that God is real, and that He does answer prayer, he was a living testimony to this fact.

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God blessed Hannah with an abundant supply of mother's milk, and as she put her little son to her breast, she doubtless gave thanks to God for His goodness. It has been said that when a mother breast-feeds her child, she not only give the child her milk, but she also gives it herself. So Samuel was brought up by a praying mother, in a daily atmosphere of prayer, it was little wonder that he became a man of prayer in his later life. (1 Samuel 12:23.)