

37/48 – December 20, 2020

Dear Friends,

One of the Old Testament's best witnesses to godly faith is Samuel. He was born into a dark world, especially so for the nation into which he entered, God's nation, Israel. Eli, the high priest, was viewed as the leader, and his sons took advantage of their position for personal indulgence and sin, not for God. We get the sense that Eli knew, but perhaps he was too old to be as strong as he should have been against them and their sinful ways. The Lord mercifully sent Samuel to take the leadership of Israel when Eli died.

The lessons related to Samuel's birth are full of rich instructive truth for us in our time. When human nature and unbelief would hang black crepe everywhere and complain about how hopeless it was to believe or think anything good, Samuel looked up to His God and lived the godly life that shouts out to God's people, "There is hope! There is a bright future for God's people." What has been the impact of the last nine months on your faith? On your spiritual outlook for the future? For your future? For the future of your church? For the future of godliness in this country? If you have joined the "Black crepe gang," Samuel reminds you. It is time to look up, to trust God, and to shout out to believers around you, "There is hope. Our God has not forsaken us! He will give us renewed blessing and victory.

Many years ago I read a brief poem that fits the need of our day so well. Since I do not have access to it, I'll tell the story and give you the faith-conclusion of the poem. A passenger ship was at sea, loaded with passengers, when the news reached the ship that a fierce hurricane was approaching. The ship could not outrun the storm. Hope was bleak. The captain and his crew told the passengers the news and told them to prepare for the worst. As the passengers were scurrying around on the deck in their final preparations, one passenger noticed a young girl, nestled in a quiet corner of the deck, playing with her dolls, and singing a happy little song to them. He observed her for a few seconds and then spoke to her, "Didn't you hear the announcement? Don't you know that the ship is almost certain to sink in this storm? How can you be so happy?" The young girl looked up to the troubled man, smiled that captivating little girl smile, and said, "Sir, my father is the captain of this ship. I trust my father. He will steer the ship through the storm to safety." Folks, today we need to listen to that little girl, to remember what some of us may have forgotten. Our Father is the Captain of our life, and our Father will go with us through this storm, and lead us to safety on the other side!

Blessings,
Joe Holder

Samuel, Son of Answered Prayer

And she was in bitterness of soul, and prayed unto the Lord, and wept sore. And she vowed a vow, and said, O Lord of hosts, if thou wilt indeed look on the affliction of thine handmaid, and remember me, and not forget thine handmaid, but wilt give unto thine handmaid a man child, then I will give him unto the Lord all the days of his life, and there shall no razor come upon his head. (1 Samuel 1:10-11 KJV

1900)

Wherefore it came to pass, when the time was come about after Hannah had conceived, that she bare a son, and called his name Samuel, saying, Because I have asked him of the Lord. (1 Samuel 1:20 KJV 1900)

Samuel stands apart as one of the Old Testament's unique men who served God faithfully and filled a role that few men could fill. Our study passage takes us to the context of Samuel's beginning. In the Old Testament, God frowned on polygamy. The God who commanded—and wrote in stone—"Thou shalt not commit adultery" would not wink at polygamy. The fact that the Old Testament records instances of polygamy by otherwise godly followers of God in no way approves the practice. It rather testifies to the honest integrity of God in reporting the historical facts of Old Testament history, even when that information shows His own followers in a less-than-ideal-light.

In Our study passage, we read that the man who would become Samuel's father had two wives. One bore children to the family. Hannah, the woman who would become Samuel's mother, was barren. Imagine two women under one roof with one husband. The woman who bore children to the family would gleefully rub salt into the wounded heart of the woman who was barren, and so the report goes. Hannah endured this ordeal for an extended time. Eventually she took her plight to the Lord. In her prayer, she vowed, if God would give her a son, she would devote that son to God as one of the few Nazarites for life mentioned in the Old Testament. The normal Nazarite vow was associated with a specific task. The person taking the vow would not cut his hair until he had completed his vow. Then he would return to his normal hair style and care. Samson and Samuel were dedicated as Nazarites for life. When Samson compromised that vow, he met with disastrous trials. Samuel remained faithful to his vow to his death.

The first two chapters of First Samuel record the story of Samuel's birth and early childhood. The closing lesson in First Samuel 1 tells of Hannah's fulfilling that vow, of taking her "young" son (1 Samuel 1:24) to Eli, the high priest at the time of these events, and leaving him with Eli in the House of God. Samuel proved to be the godly man who honored God more than Eli's ungodly sons. I love the narrative in 1 Samuel 3 of the Lord appearing to—and calling—Samuel in the middle of the night. Twice Samuel heard the Lord's voice and thought Eli was calling him. After Samuel's second visit to Eli's bedside, Eli got the message and told Samuel how to react if he heard that voice the third time. The world into which Samuel was born was more devoted to sin than to God, even snaring Eli's own sons. When Eli's sons should have been preparing themselves for the priesthood, they instead gave themselves to self-indulgent sin, shaming both Eli and God among the people. We think of very young children as a blank chalkboard waiting for the example of older people around them to "Write" on their minds by example and thereby influence the young to follow their good example. In times such as Samuel's, there were few good examples to lead. Sadly, this is often the case, but thank the Lord, we find Biblical record for a number of young, very young believers who, despite their tender age, and despite living in a dark season all but void of any godly examples to mold them, heard the words of God and obeyed.

As we read forward from this beginning miracle of Samuel's birth through his life story in Scripture, we can see how he faithfully honored his mother's prayer and vow, honoring God, as well as her and her vow.

Let's turn back for a few reflections on the verses cited above, before Samuel was born. A barren, God-fearing woman endured the taunts of her husband's other wife (Reported in Scripture, but not approved by God or by Scripture), lived with bitterness for a season, but she wisely came to realize that *bitterness would not solve her problem*. She needed to take her complaint to the Lord in prayer,

and to trust Him for a solution, not try to force one herself. Through devoted, sincere prayer to the Lord, Hannah turned from “*bitterness of spirit*” (1 Samuel 1:10) to a vow for a son who blessed her and all of Israel in his lifetime.

Have you ever faced unfair and bitter situations that left you, like Hannah, bitter of spirit? I have. And I honestly confess that I didn’t always deal with them with her wise grace. They would have turned out far better if I had followed Hannah’s example. I can’t think of a better passage in the Bible to encourage and wisely instruct God’s confused, struggling people during our present disruption from COVID-19 than this lesson. In reading comments from people from all corners of our country, I see both a faithful Hannah here and there, and I also see words that seem far more like a Hannah who could have been, had she not taken her complaint to the Lord in faith and left it in His hands. Bitterness of spirit, if not resolved with the Lord through prayer, has a way of growing stronger in our lives, of taking over more than a quiet corner till it consumes us and robs us of the ability to think in faith or to see how much we are truly blessed. Think about the last nine months and the disruption we have endured. Every day the sun arose right on schedule. How many of those days did you or I make any contribution whatever to the sun’s rising? None? Then God remained faithful in discharging His loving providence in your life, didn’t He? How many days did you go without a meal because you couldn’t go to the grocery store? Not one? Ah, God, in His loving providence, continued to feed you and supply your needs, didn’t He?

Looking diligently lest any man fail of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble you, and thereby many be defiled. (Hebrews 12:15)

In this warning message, Paul cautions us. When we surrender to bitterness, we also “*fail of the grace of God.*” We laud the grace of God for our eternal salvation and security, but I fear we often ignore the role the grace of God can fill in our daily lives. So long as we keep the grace of God—and the God of grace—fixed in our minds, we are immune from bitterness. We constantly sense that our God is loving and abundant, truly “Gracious” in His care of us. Neglect that faith-focus, and it becomes so easy to fall into the resentful bitter spirit that consciously ignores every blessing and complains about what is not. When we observe another person with this mindset, we sometimes describe them by “What have you done for me today?” You give and give and give some more, but when they want something, they ignore everything you ever did and load you with guilt, as if you never lifted a hand for them. It is truly tragic when children of God lose sight of their God and His goodness so fully that they adopt this attitude toward Him.

Blessed be the Lord, who daily loadeth us with benefits, even the God of our salvation. Selah. (Psalm 68:19)

This verse reveals God’s true care and provision for us. Bible language scholars suggest that “Selah” was the equivalent of a “Musical rest.” In musical score of our time, a “Rest” is a small symbol located in the musical score. Skillfully placed “Rests” in a hymn can be as touching as the most precise notes of harmony. Translated to the written Psalms, they suggest that the thought immediately preceding “Selah” is a key or highly significant thought. Respect the “Pause,” and spend time reflecting on its meaning. Sadly, in our busy world, too many believers, even devoted Bible readers, form the habit of speed reading what they do read in the Bible. They read over “*Selah*” and give little thought to a strange word they’ve seen only in the Psalms. They give little thought to the lesson in the

verse, much less take the time to pause and reflect on it.

Think back over this season. If you had awakened each morning, greeted the sun and thanked the Lord for sending it faithfully, thanked Him for your food, and for all of His gracious supply of your needs, how might your life be different today from what it is? You would have still seen every day's sun, eaten every meal, but your heart would be so different today, don't you think? Instead of choking back that bitter spirit that often erupts with bitter words that dishonor your God and your faith, you'd be blessed to write or to speak words of encouragement to those around you. Would you be better off by that experience? Yes, you would. Do you think, perhaps, that those dear people close to you who observed your bitterness---and sometimes may have been the recipients of some of your bitter outbursts---would be better off? Without question. Instead of fending off the wounds of your angry, bitter words, they would be basking in the warm rays of your encouraging and faithful reminders, "God is good. He will stand by us and see us through this ordeal, and worse, if necessary."

Without question, the last nine months have been the most unusual of my life. Frustrating? Yes! However, when I read or reflect on what Christians of the past faced, it has been minor. During the 1918 Spanish Flu pandemic, believers could not meet in church for over a year, and they didn't have Facebook, or Zoom, or other electronic media to communicate with each other, and even to listen to preaching and edifying hymns. My mother, a young woman at the time, actually moved into the homes of several neighbors where a family member had the flu to minister to them and to help them through the ordeal. She sadly helped many of them bury their loved ones, but she also helped many of them back to good health. And she never caught that flu. Despite all the disruption we have experienced, we have been so richly blessed during this season.

Recently I've thought more than a few times that now is the ideal season for a "*Selah*" moment with believers in God. Take the time to pause, reflect on the many blessings you've enjoyed during this season, and thank the Lord for them. You could do few things that would better prevent bitterness. Let's all have a faith-filled "Selah" moment soon!

Elder Joe Holder