

## **A Humble Approach to the Sovereignty of God**

### **Sermon 1: Understanding God's Sovereignty**

Passages: 1 Samuel 2:1–11

Luke 1:46–55

Today we start a new series of sermons taken from the Books of Samuel. Let me say from the start that I have never preached from these two books. In fact, it wasn't my idea that we look at 1 and 2 Samuel. It was Aisen's!

But, I believe that this is a good choice for us. Why? Because the 2 books of 1 & 2 Samuel, originally written as one book, are centred on the sovereignty of God. What they teach us is that, despite the fumbblings and failures of humankind in the affairs of this world, there is a God who has a purpose and a plan. And although we cannot often see it or understand that plan (sometimes under the false illusion that God is distant or uninterested in us), yet God continues to work out His purposes over the long and convoluted course of history. In fact, it is usually only in hindsight that we can even catch a glimpse of God's purposes and plans. As they say, "Hindsight is always 20/20!" And that's one of the chief reasons why the Bible was written— to show us that, over the long haul, God really does have a plan. God really is working His purposes out as year flows into year!

Hence, we've given this new series of sermons the title, "A Humble approach to the Sovereignty of God!" In humility, we seek to to learn the lessons of history that help us to appreciate the mysteries of God's sovereignty.

#### **Let's pray.**

The USA is a fascinating country...particularly now that I'm an adult. You see, you cannot really know or understand any nation or country until you begin to understand its history. Kim and I, along with Kim's parents, were able to do just that during our recent trip to my homeland—the great State of Pennsylvania!

- European settlement of Pennsylvania began in 1677 when William Penn was given a land grant from the English King, King Charles II. (Pennsylvania means "Penn's woods".) Penn

was a Quaker and, because this religious movement was outlawed in England, Penn easily persuaded many of his fellow believers to flee persecution in Pennsylvania.

- Other religious groups also fled to Pennsylvania—most notably, the Amish, fleeing persecution in Germany.
- One hundred years later, we find much of the American Revolution taking place in Pennsylvania. George Washington fought many battles near my hometown. The Declaration of independence was eventually signed in Philadelphia.
- Another hundred years later and the Civil War was being fought. One of the critical battles was fought at Gettysburg, site of Abraham Lincoln’s famous “Gettysburg Address”. (“Four score and seven years ago...”)
- Pennsylvania became an industrial empire during this time as the combination of coal, iron ore and a massive river meant that steel could be manufactured in Pittsburgh. Robber barons such as Carnegie, Frick, Mellon, Schwab and Heinz flourished in this environment, making their money off the backs of cheap labour and exploitative work practices.
- I could go on, but the point I’m making is that, without an understanding of history, you will go through life superficially without any understanding of a nation and its people.

With that in mind, let me kick off this first sermon in the Book of Samuel by encouraging you to think of the Bible as a history book. It is the history of the nation of Israel...the history of God’s people and the foundation of the church.

- **Genesis** (the book of beginnings) describes the creation of the world and the founding of the Hebrew nation under Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.
- **Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy** follow this new nation as God liberates it from slavery in Egypt, takes it

into the Sinai desert and, after 40 years of wandering, brings it to the border of the Promised Land.

- The Book of **Joshua** tells the history of entry into that Land.
- **Judges and Ruth**, then, tell the story of the settlement of the twelve tribes in that land under its first national leaders...men and women filled with the Holy Spirit who repeatedly led Israel to victory over her enemies.
- Here is where the Books of **1 and 2 Samuel** come in.

But before we get to them, there are three things that are really important for us to remember as we read Israel's history:

First, **the chief character was always God**. He was the cause of Israel's history. He was the Sovereign One who not only brought Israel to birth but made her into a great nation and brought her into a new land. Indeed, even when the people of Israel felt as if God was absent, history repeatedly proved the opposite—that the God of Israel was always incredibly near to his people...personally bringing His purposes to fruition in and through His people, over the course of thousands of years!

The second thing to remember is that the history of Israel was never meant to be understood apart from world history. Rather, Israel's history was always essentially tied to world history because God's plans and purposes for Israel always had a universal intention. Israel was created as a nation to be a light to the world...to lead all the nations back to their Creator God.

There is a third thing to remember: Throughout this drawn out history of Israel, the people of God repeatedly forgot who they were! Israel regularly lost the plot and went off course! Indeed, every major leader that we find in the Bible (from Abraham to Isaac, to Jacob, to Moses and Aaron, up to the Judges) exhibited major character flaws! What this repeatedly proves is that Israel could only succeed in her mission to the world by the consistent influence of the grace of God. Israel would never be able to fulfill God's plans and purposes for the world without His sovereign intervention in her affairs.

Now, we can better appreciate the book of **1 Samuel**. As I said earlier, 1 Samuel comes at the end of the period of the **Judges**... around 1050 B.C. It was a period of great social upheaval when the people of Israel had, once again, lost sight of their corporate identity. They had forgotten who they were and the fact that they were meant to be a holy nation and a royal priesthood, called to bring the other nations back to God. Instead, they were operating in chaos and anarchy. The very last verse of the Book of Judges perfectly describes the situation: **“In those days, Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit.”** (or, “everyone did what was right in their own eyes.”)

In other words, it was another period of self-destruction for Israel...one which only the sovereign hand of God could rectify! Only God could bring Israel back on course to be His instrument of universal salvation. And that’s exactly what He is going to do in the Book of Samuel!

Keep this in mind as we read the opening verses of 1 Samuel 1. **(Read vv 1–2)**

The opening lines convey two very simple ideas...ideas that will repeat throughout the entire Book to help reinforce the **gracious nature of the sovereignty of God**:

1. **Obscurity!** Despite the fact that “everyone was doing what was right in their own eyes”, God chose “a certain man” with a certain background, from a certain village, embroiled in a certain domestic situation, to be His instrument. Indeed, it is the very obscurity of Elkanah from Ramathaim, a Zuphite, that should strike us! Elkanah was a nobody, from nowhere! He had no status or heritage that would excite the reader’s imagination. He was just an ordinary guy. (I hear echoes of 1 Corinthians 1 here, where Paul tells us how God has chosen the foolish things of this world to shame the wise and the weak things of this world to shame the strong!) It will be from Elkanah’s lineage that Samuel the prophet will be born!

Indeed, 1 Samuel is all about **obscure people** from **obscure places** with **obscure backgrounds** doing incredible things through God's power... obscure people that God will use to bring about His universal purposes and plans. And the lesson of history will repeatedly be there for our learning, that, in His sovereignty, God often by-passes the powerful people of this world to bring His purposes to fulfillment.

2. **Barrenness!** Sadly, Elkanah's first and favourite wife, Hannah, is barren—she is unable to bring forth the fruit of the womb. Look at **verses 6–8**. (Read)

Of course, this flies in the face of God's promise back in Deuteronomy 7:14 that, once inside the Promised Land, He would bless the Israelites with fertility! **"None of your men or women will be childless..."** God had said. So why was Hannah, Elkanah's beloved bride, condemned to such a humiliating state? Why did God allow such scorn to fall on Hannah, particularly when her name means 'grace'?

Through the lesson of history, we will understand that, despite Hannah's humiliation, God will not fail to bless! Her prayers will be answered. In the end, God will show His goodness...not for Hannah's sake alone, but for the sake of His plans and purposes for the world! God's sovereign hand gives her what, by nature, she could not have, and by doing so, Hannah follows a long line of very famous barren women—Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, the mother of Samson -- who all rejoiced in their miracle babies...**babies who all become leaders of Israel!**

Taking it to another level, Hannah's barrenness is symbolic of Israel's barrenness (her inability to bring forth any fruit for God) and Hannah's humiliation represents Israel's humiliation before the nations of the world. Indeed, 1 Samuel is ultimately about the way the sovereign God of Israel must personally and repeatedly intervene in Israel's affairs in order to bring life to Israel's womb, for the benefit

of humankind. In the sovereignty of God, Israel will be a great nation after all.

The sovereignty of God! It's the only hope for Elkannah. It's the only hope for Hannah. And it's the only hope for Israel!

And that's why the song of Hannah, found in chapter 2, is so important for us to read as a statement of Israel's history. Although it was Hannah's private little hymn of praise to her sovereign Lord, it would become Israel's public hymn of praise to God.

**Let me read it again (1 Samuel 2:1–10).**

Do you get it? Do you see the flow of history? Do you better understand the place of Israel as a nation in the affairs of the world?

Here is a God who mysteriously uses the weak and compromised nation of Israel to influence the affairs of the world so that He might use her to bring His life and salvation to the nations! Yes, it's true: **“everyone was doing what was right in their own eyes”**. Nevertheless, God in His sovereignty was still at work in Israel...quietly raising up the prophet Samuel for the sake of the world.

Of course, we cannot finish our discussion of this text without connecting Hannah with another woman who was also barren... the last in a long line of barren women found in the Bible. Her name was Elizabeth, and by God's grace she bore a child...a son named John... who would call Israel back to her divine obligation to be a holy nation and a royal priesthood for the sake of the world.

Better still, at about the same time there was another woman in Israel who, although she wasn't barren, was certainly outside the realm of expecting a baby. She was a virgin who also became pregnant in a miraculous fashion, proving beyond a doubt that God, in His sovereignty, will not stop until His good plans and a life-giving purposes for the entire world are fulfilled. In Jesus, the Son of the virgin Mary, the barrenness of this life will finally, once and for all, be miraculously healed in the new birth of His Spirit.

You cannot understand a nation unless you understand its history. It is my prayer that our studies in the Book of Samuel will provide the necessary historical insights to help us see our historical faith in the light of god's overarching and gracious sovereignty. **Let's pray.**