

Big Turnarounds

1 Samuel 1-3

IN 2001 we saw the largest corporate collapse in Australia's history. I'm talking about HIH insurance.

Hih fell over with estimated losses of 5.3 billion dollars.

Amongst other things the liquidators blamed the collapse on false reports, reckless management, incompetence, fraud, greed, and self-dealing. Which might sound shocking. But we're kind of used to it. It's the usual stuff.

And as usual. While the battlers lose the lot. The guys at the top never seem to. They get away with their offshore accounts and their cleverly hidden assets.

Company loss. But personal profit. And even when they do get caught. Like in the case of Rodney Adler. Things still don't seem right.

Rodney Adler was tried and found guilty of corruption and dishonest conduct. But after about half of a four year jail sentence. He's back in his Vaucluse mansion living it up.

Now with that in mind. Let's go back to ancient Israel. And things are pretty dark. It's the time called the period of the judges in Israel. Before there were any kings. And if you're reading through your Old Testament chronologically you'll have the very last words of the book of Judges ringing in your ears.

In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit.

It's every man for himself. And as usual. The rich and the powerful feed off the powerless. With seemingly no accountability.

It's a low point. And there are a few of those in Israel's history. But as we follow along with the story of Hannah. We're watching a significant turnaround.

So we'll pick it up at the start of chapter 2. With Hannah's prayer. Sometimes called Hannah's song. And Hannah's words are setting the scene for the whole book. For the great turnaround God's got planned. And it's a turnaround that all starts with this little family from the backblocks of Israel.

And you'll see in her words there's a note of celebration. And the glimmer of a future hope. Because as we're going to see, Hannah has just been through an incredible **turnaround herself**. Which in her eyes gives **hope for the rotten mess of the whole nation of Israel**.

So chapter 2 here's Hannah's prayer.

She says

My heart rejoices in the Lord

In the Lord my horn is lifted high.

They're the words of someone who's been craned out of a deep pit.

She says my mouth boasts over my enemies. For I delight in your deliverance.

Now you've got to be asking the question at this point, who 's she got in mind here? Who are her **enemies**? I mean, you're actually told a few verses before she's got a little toddler. But as you look back at what she's been through in chapter 1, you can see she's been **copping heaps**. When it comes to enemies, she's definitely got someone specific in mind.

But even though our story starts out with Hannah's particular problems. In a way they're just a snapshot of a kind of mean spirited arrogance all over the place. And at this point she wants her arrogant enemies to know something. And that is... that their **arrogant days are numbered**. She wants them to know that there's no one Holy like the Lord, there's **no rock** like her God. And there's a warning for them in verse 3. Don't keep **talking so proudly**. Don't let your **mouth speak such arrogance**. For the Lord is a God who knows. The Lord is a God who **weighs deeds**. The Lord is the God who sees the unseen, who knows exactly what we're thinking, who sees exactly what we're doing, who isn't fooled for a minute by our false piety or our veneer of respectability.

Because you can't fool **Lord God of Israel**. And in verses 4 and 5 Hannah spells out a series of **great reversals**.

So lets go back to chapter one. See in a bit more detail where she's coming from.

Here's Hannah's story.

Hannah's married to a bloke who seems pretty decent. Even if he's not that important in the scheme of things. His name's Elkanah. And he loves his wife. But the trouble is. He's got TWO.

Elkanah's married to Hannah. But he's also married to Penninah. Remember this is the days where everyone did as he or she saw fit. And a lot of people saw fit to do what their pagan neighbours were doing. So you take a few wives. Never seems to work that well.

But everyone else is doing it. So why not?

And I'm guessing it's only the blokes who'd ask that question.

The wives know exactly why not. And here's one example. Two's company three's a crowd.

For whatever reason. Penninah's got it in for Hannah.

And Hannah's got to put up with this ongoing cruelty. As Penninah zeroes in with the cruelest jabs of all.

The fact that Hannah's infertile.

If you've been around someone for a while you tend to know what pushes their buttons. And Penninah's an expert.

While the Lord's closed Hannah's womb. Penninah seems to be filling up a childcare centre all on her own. Look Hannah. Here's number six. How many you up to again. Oh that's right. Zero. Deeply cutting words.

So here they are, they go up as a family to Shiloh year after year to make sacrifice to the Lord God, and there's this tender little picture of how Elkanah loves Hannah and takes special care of her. But verse 6 in chapter 1 says "because the Lord had closed Hannah's womb, her rival kept **provoking her** in order to **irritate her.**" She just keeps at her and at her and at her.

Verse 7, this went on year after year. "Whenever Hannah went up to the house of the Lord her rival provoked her till she **wept** and wouldn't eat."

And Elkanah would say to her **what's wrong?** Why are you **downhearted?**

Which might indicate that Elkanah's both blind and deaf or maybe just the typical male.

But he does notice. And so he tries to be helpful.

He'd say "Don't I mean more to you than **ten sons?**"

Which I'm presuming is maybe not that helpful. And maybe something of an UNDERESTIMATION of poor Hannah's despair.

And so **Hannah prays.** Weeping. Bitter in soul. Mouthing the words of her silent prayer while she's there at the temple, vowing to the Lord God that if he **gives her a son...** that she'll **give him back.** In God's service. "**O Lord almighty,**" verse 11, "if

you'll only look on your servant's **misery** and **remember me**, and not forget your servant but **give her a son**, then I'll give him to the Lord for all the days of his life, and no razor will ever be used on his head." Which was the custom they used to mark out the **Nazirites** who were vowed to God's service.

Give me a son. And I'll give him straight back.

And Eli the priest is sitting in the corner, **watching**. And he sees her lips moving. But he's hearing no words. And he thinks that she's drunk. Which with all the eating and drinking and partying that went on at the temple was apparently not that unusual. But she says, "I'm **not drunk at all**," verse 16. "I've been praying here out of my **great anguish and grief**."

But here's the good news. Out of all the barren women in Israel, out of all the heartfelt prayers for a child, **God's going to answer her's**. Verse 19, they go home to Ramah, **the Lord remembers her**, and she **conceives**. And gives birth to a son, who they call **heard of God**. Samuel. Because **God heard her prayer**.

And so two or three years later when Samuel is weaned, it's time to take him back to the temple. To **give him to the Lord**. And that's where she is as she **prays this prayer** in chapter 2.

And you can see how her words are loaded. And that while she's talking about the pride of **warriors** whose bows are broken in chapter 2 verse 4, the **biggest enemy**

she's gloating over is the spiteful Peninnah. Here's how it's panned out, against all the odds. The second half of verse 5, she spells it out.

She who was barren has borne seven children,
but **she who has had many sons** pines away.

She says **look who's laughing now**. The great reversal. The **barren one** is rejoicing. And the **boastful one** pines away. And so on a personal level, the injustice Hannah was suffering was overturned.

Now I'll just get you to come back with me and take a look at verse 5. Because Israel's a place where the rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer. Israel's a place where the **full** are gorging themselves; and the hungry go empty. But Hannah says, **that's going to turn around as well**.

The bows of the warriors are broken,
but those who stumbled are armed with strength.
Those who were full hire themselves out for food,
but **those who were hungry** hunger no more.

the **strong and arrogant** will get what they deserve... and the **weak and hungry** will rise up. Because God's going to bring a reversal. Just like her own.

Verse 9. Ultimately, when it comes down to a playoff between the faithful and the wicked, it might look like the wicked are winning. But it's going to be **turned around**. Read the words.

He will guard the feet of his saints,
but the wicked will be silenced in darkness.

It is not by strength that one prevails;
those who **oppose the Lord** will be shattered.

"**But the wicked**". And it's no surprise that you get to the end of Hannah's prayer and you get a description of exactly who she's talking about. Because the **priests of Israel**, the guys entrusted with the spiritual welfare of the nation, the **holy men** who make sacrifices to the Lord God to atone for the sins of the nation... are as **wicked as they come**.

Go down to verse 12. Eli's sons are absolutely rotten. "Eli's sons," verse 12, "were **wicked men**." We know from chapter 1 their names are Hophni and Phineas. And Hophni and Phineas according to verse 12 have **no regard for the Lord**.

And then we get the details. From verse 13. About how as the people offer a sacrifice and burn the fat in a pleasing aroma to God and then roast the meat for their family celebration, these **wicked priests** would send round their servants to **collect the meat tax**. A big three pronged fork that they'd **plunge into the pot**; and **the priest would take for himself**, verse 14, whatever the fork brought up. And it says there, "This is how they treated **all the Israelites** who came to Shiloh.

Bad enough to treat the **Israelites** like that. But look at the next bit. Because Even before the **fat is burned...** in a pleasing aroma to God... now the servants are coming and saying "Give the priest some **meat to roast...** he won't accept **boiled meat from you**, but only **raw**". He's planning a **barbecue** with his mates. And if the

man says to him in verse 16, "Let the fat be burned up first," which was actually **part of the ritual**, " the servant would say, "**No**, hand it over now. If you don't, I'll **take it by force.**"

Verse 17 sums it up. This sin of the young men Hophni and Phineas was **very great** in the Lord's sight, for they were **treating the Lord's offering with contempt.**

And Hannah in her prayer says **those who were full** will be hiring themselves out for food... but those who are hungry **hunger no more.**

Eli's sons are **wicked men.** But Hannah in her prayer knows that God **guards the feet of his saints.** But the **wicked...** will be silenced in darkness. Eli's sons are bullying people into submission with threats of force. But Hannah says in her prayer it's not by **strength** that one prevails, verse 9, those who go around making threats by **force**; the fact is, those who **oppose the Lord** will be shattered.

God is a God of great **turnarounds.** And as we're going to see, God's going to turn things around. From a very small beginning.

It's the small beginning you see in the person of a very small boy. The **son** Hannah prayed for.

The end of chapter 1. Just as she promised, Hannah **gives him to the Lord.**

Presents him at the temple, to serve along with Eli. There must have been **tears in her eyes** as she left him there and prayed her prayer. And yet she's rejoicing.

Because **Samuel**, small as he is, is going to be **faithful.** And he's going to bring joy to a lot of people.

And there he is in chapter 2 verse 11, his parents go home. But **the boy** ministered before the Lord under Eli the priest.

Just a small insignificant boy.

Verse 18. After the description of the **wicked sons of Eli**. There he is again. **But Samuel**, chapter 2 verse 18, was ministering before the Lord

As verse 26, **the boy Samuel** continues to grow in stature and in favour with the Lord and with men. And we'll see that through **samuel** God's going to **reshape a nation**. And overturn the proud. And lift up the humble faithful ones who serve him.

Now it's interesting isn't it, that **almost those exact words** are picked up and used of another small boy in the New Testament. Where after Mary's song in Luke chapter 2 picks up the same theme as **Hannah's prayer**, that God has **filled the hungry** with good things but sends the rich away empty, that God **scatters those who are proud in their inmost thoughts** but **lifts up the humble**, you read these words about her own small son. Insignificant. Born in a stable. Luke 2 verse 52.

"And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature and in favour with God and men."

And so somehow Luke wants us to see in Jesus a reminder of the things that were foreseen by Hannah that she celebrates in her song.

That in an even bigger way than what we'll see over these next few weeks, that as Samuel speaks God's words to Israel and as we'll see the **corruption** and **pride** of

priests like Hophni and Phineas overturned, there's even **more to come**. In the person of **Jesus Christ**.

If I can take you back to Hannah's song for just a final minute, you'll see these words in verse 6 and 7. That the Lord brings death **and makes alive**. He brings down to the grave **and he raises up**. That he sends poverty and he sends wealth, that he humbles and he exalts, that he **raises the poor** from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap. He seats them with princes and has them inherit a **throne of honour**.

Which again are promises that the **New Testament picks up**. And so the apostle Paul says in Ephesians chapter 2 that even though we were **dead in our sins**, we'll be alive with Christ. Who died and rose again. God raised us up with Christ he says. And seated us with him in the heavenly realms. That he'll pour out his incomparably great riches on us in the age to come. Those who are humble and faithful. That a small boy who grew up to die on a cross is going to bring about the sort of great reversal that we long for that puts everything right again. In an upside down world. So if you're feeling low, if you're feeling hopeless, if you're feeling unimpressive, that's exactly where God wants us to start.

Hannah says at the end of her prayer in verse 10. "**He will give strength to his king** and exalt the horn of his anointed." Words that spoke first of all about King David. But much more fully, about the humble and glorified **king Jesus**. Who died and who rose. So we can too.

Want to make it big?

I don't know if you want to **make it big** in the world. But if you do, you need to be warned. And you need to take heed. That the way God does stuff over and over again is he takes the small and the humble and the weak and the lowly and the insignificant. And he lifts them up. And he ultimately overturns the boasters and the bullies. We're going to see that playing out with Eli's evil sons next time. But for now here's something to take away.

I wonder if as you read about Peninnah and her thoughtless cruel words, her mean spirit...the way she used **Hannah's tragedy** against her... I wonder if words like that ever come from you? Calculating words. Arrows meant to hurt.. God has gone to great lengths to say to you, you might **think you've got the upper hand** with your cutting little remarks. But that's what he's going to **overturn**.

Or those pious sounding sons of Eli. And yet their piety was all for their own advantage, **self serving**. If that's even a **little bit like you**, be warned. That Jesus shows us once and for all that God **lifts up the humble**. And hates that sort of malice in his people who in the end like Hophni and Phineas just **treat the Lord's offering with contempt**. Because in the end there's no offering left for people like that.

If you really want to make it big, think small. Think **service**. Think how you can speak **healing words** instead of words of hurt. Think how you can **fill others needs** at **your expense** rather than meeting your own needs at theirs. Keep watch on your words. So that instead of speaking **proudly**, you'll weigh every word in the knowledge that the **Lord is a God who knows**, and by him our **deeds** are weighed.

And that's what we're going to see unfolding in 1 Samuel over the coming weeks. As the tallest guy in Israel becomes king and comes crashing down. As the **smallest son** of Jesse who's watching the sheep becomes the **king after God's own heart**.
