

THE SECRET OF A HAPPY LIFE

1 Samuel 1:1-20

Dr. George O. Wood

1 Samuel 1:1–20 (NIV)

“There was a certain man from Ramathaim...whose name was Elkanah. He had two wives; one was called Hannah and the other Peninnah. Peninnah had children, but Hannah had none.

Year after year this man went up from his town to worship and sacrifice to the LORD Almighty at Shiloh, where Hophni and Phinehas, the two sons of Eli, were priests of the LORD. Whenever the day came for Elkanah to sacrifice, he gave portions of the meat to his wife Peninnah and to all her sons and daughters. But to Hannah he gave a double portion because he loved her, and the LORD had closed her womb. And because the LORD had closed her womb, her rival kept provoking her in order to irritate her. This went on year after year. Whenever Hannah went up to the house of the LORD, her rival provoked her till she wept and would not eat. Elkanah her husband would say to her, ‘Hannah, why are you weeping? Why don’t you eat? Why are you downhearted? Don’t I mean more to you than ten sons?’

Once when they finished eating and drinking in Shiloh, Hannah stood up. Now Eli the priest was sitting on a chair by the door post of the LORD’s temple. In bitterness of soul Hannah wept much and prayed to the LORD. And she made a vow, saying, ‘O LORD Almighty, if you will only look upon your servant’s misery and remember me, and not forget your servant but give her a son, then I will give him to the LORD for all the days of his life, and no razor will ever be used on his head.’

THE SECRET OF A HAPPY LIFE

1 Samuel 1:1-20

As she kept on praying to the LORD, Eli observed her mouth. Hannah was praying in her heart, and her lips were moving but her voice was not heard. Eli thought she was drunk and said to her, ‘How long will you keep on getting drunk? Get rid of your wine.’

‘Not so, my lord,’ Hannah replied, ‘I am a woman who is deeply troubled. I have not been drinking wine or beer; I was pouring out my soul to the LORD. Do not take your servant for a wicked woman; I have been praying here out of my great anguish and grief.’

Eli answered, ‘Go in peace, and may the God of Israel grant you what you have asked of him.’

She said, ‘May your servant find favor in your eyes.’ Then she went her way and ate something, and her face was no longer downcast.

Early the next morning they arose and worshipped before the LORD and then went back to their home at Ramah. Elkanah lay with Hannah his wife, and the LORD remembered her. So in the course of time Hannah conceived and gave birth to a son. She named him Samuel, saying, ‘Because I asked the LORD for him.’”

Today I begin a new series from this great Old Testament book, 1 Samuel. I thought it might be helpful if I shared a moment with you on how I select a series. We realize the Bible is inspired of God, profitable for teaching and for training in righteousness as Paul says in 2 Timothy. In reality, we could go anywhere in the Word and find help for life. But I look for an inward sense of timing and direction from the Holy Spirit. As I personally thought of a direction for this fall, I didn’t have direction come to me—until I was driving home from leaving George at college. I reflected on leaving him there. I remembered Hannah had left a boy at college. He was slightly younger than mine when she left him at Eli’s Bible school. I recognized that I was not the first person—the first parent—to leave a child in the care of someone else for training. So, I got excited about that. I began thinking of the implications of this book. It’s been a while since I was

THE SECRET OF A HAPPY LIFE

1 Samuel 1:1-20

in the Old Testament. I came to 1 Samuel. I recognized that God does have a unique way of bringing His Word to bear in our lives. I trust that's going to happen as we study 1 Samuel in the coming months.

We were talking in our staff meeting about God's timing and the appropriateness of His Word to our lives. I was reflecting on the fact that about seven years ago, I was preaching through the Book of Leviticus on Sunday morning. A man and his wife walked into the church service for the first time. They had served thirty years in church without ever having a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. They came out of that church very frustrated and disappointed in their experience of church life. That particular Sunday in Leviticus, I was in Leviticus 13 and 14, which dealt with the esoteric and exotic subject of leprosy and skin diseases—a real interest to a contemporary audience. I struggled all week to make some spiritual sense of that passage. I finally wound up preaching a sermon, “What Your Skin Is Telling You About God.” Little did I know that couple was sitting there, and the man had suffered fourteen years from an incurable condition. It had become so severe that he had absolutely no relief from it. Now, there's a pastor up there, whom he doesn't know, talking about skin diseases. The message touched him, and he thought maybe God had a word for him in this church. The next Sunday the couple came back. When the invitation was given, they came forward. He asked to be anointed with oil, and we prayed God would heal him. God healed him completely of that disease. He's been totally free of it every day since. He now serves as our minister of visitation. God brought unique timing. I would not think of preaching a series on skin diseases. But because you go through Scripture and confront it, you have to deal with it. That's what we're trying to do. I believe there will be many testimonies of a similar nature when we've finished 1 Samuel. People will say, “That was the Sunday God met me.”

THE SECRET OF A HAPPY LIFE

1 Samuel 1:1-20

Today's verses teach us the secret of a happy life. Did you see that as I read through these verses? Did you find the key to a happy life? It's there—underneath those words. It's there. To explore what it is, we're going to ask and try to answer four questions today: "What is happiness anyway?" "What are some of the results of unhappiness in our lives, and what does unhappiness produce?" Thirdly, "What are some strategies we should avoid when we are unhappy?" And lastly, "How do we arrive at a condition of happiness if we are unhappy?"

I. What is happiness?

At the root of happiness is the three-letter English word "hap." It's the root word. We use it as the basis for the words "happy," "happiness," and "happen." Therefore, happiness occurs as the result of what is happening to us. Therefore, happiness is circumstantial in nature. It depends very much on a positive circumstance and environment in our life. When things are going well—our health is good, our family is intact, our friendships are thriving, food is on the table, and money is in the bank—then we are happy. When things aren't going so well, we are unhappy because we've been diminished by our lack of positive external circumstances. You recognize immediately that happiness falls short of the New Testament virtue of joy. Happiness depends upon a favorable outward state. But joy is an inward state of elation, wrought through an intact relationship with Jesus Christ, which is independent of external circumstances—whether those circumstances are favorable, neutral, or negative. Joy is there. So joy reaches much deeper than the level of happiness. Let's take happiness today and not try to deal with joy.

As we have defined happiness, let me ask you, "Are you happy?" You may answer no and the person next to you thought you were. I don't want to get any of you in trouble. There are really only two answers to that—yes or no. If you say, "Yes, I'm happy," that doesn't mean you're spiritually right. You could be happy for totally wrong reasons. If you answered "No, I'm not

THE SECRET OF A HAPPY LIFE

1 Samuel 1:1-20

happy,” then we go to the next question: “If you are unhappy, do you know why?” Some people, I’ve found, don’t really know why they are unhappy. They have been unhappy for so long they’ve forgotten why. They’re in a perpetual state of unhappiness. Do you know anyone like that? I’m reminded of counsel a pastor friend once gave me: “In the pastorate, I’ve found it’s important that you do not spend your time with people who are perpetually unhappy. You can try and try to make them happy, but you will never succeed in making them happy. For a period of time, you will simply make them less unhappy, but ultimately they will go back to their original state.” There’s some truth in that. If you are unhappy, do you know why? And if you do know why, could I ask one other question? “If you’re unhappy and you know why, is your unhappiness resulting from a lack of something tangible or intangible?” Unhappiness really comes from something we lack in our life. It is a lack. Something we want, but we don’t have. It may be tangible. Like a boyfriend or a girlfriend, a wife or husband. Happiness for some people may be a new car or a particular kind of car. Or a home. Or an apartment. Or a promotion. We all know that a free trip to Hawaii would make anybody happy. Tangible.

For Hannah, her lack of happiness was due to a tangible reason. She lacked a child. Our society today is quick to jump on poor Hannah and say that she lived in the days when women’s value was determined by whether or not they had children, whether or not those children were male, and how many children they had. We live in a more liberated age today. That would seem to be the case, but that may be a little too easy. What do we do with couples who desperately want children and cannot have them? We also recognize that every society places certain values on what’s happy. I don’t think our standards are any higher or any lower than the prevailing social and economic standards of Hannah’s day. We’ve simply substituted other values. Instead of, “Do you have children? How many? Are they male?” We ask, “Do you have a career? Do you have a

THE SECRET OF A HAPPY LIFE

1 Samuel 1:1-20

college education? Do you drive a BMW? Do you look good in a swimsuit?” And we have a host of other values.

Too often we locate our happiness with stations in life. I’ll be happy...when I graduate from high school, when I get a job, when I get married, when I make my fortune, when my kids are grown, when I retire. We must enjoy the ride between the stations of life. That’s the key to good mental and spiritual health. Are you lacking a tangible today and that makes you unhappy? Or maybe your unhappiness could be related to something intangible. Something like...I want more meaning in life, I want to be loved, I want influence, I want a happy marriage, I want a better quality of life. Intangibles.

II. If you’re unhappy, why are you unhappy?

If you are unhappy, you can usually summarize it in twenty-five words or less. You might say something like—I’m unhappy because my health is bad, or my spouse never takes any time with me, or I hate to go back to school, or I’m forty pounds overweight, or my children don’t seem to love me, or I’m broke, or I’m lonely, or I’m going through a divorce. A lot of things make us unhappy. What are the results of unhappiness? We can see some of them as we approach Hannah’s story. There are seven very clear things that happened as a result of her unhappiness.

A. First, Hannah was upset. Verse 6 says that her rival provoked her. It says that her rival provoked her in order to irritate her. And it was year after year, not just a one-time thing. The word “provoke” carries the idea of being brow-beaten, bullied, humiliated, and crushed. Is someone getting to you? Really pounding away at you and you’re upset by it?

B. Another mark of unhappiness for Hannah was her tears. In Hannah’s case, they were a physical, visible mark. Other people feel sadness on the inside but don’t find it as easy to spontaneously let the tears flow. She wept, verse 7. Verse 10, she wept much. I wish I had the

THE SECRET OF A HAPPY LIFE

1 Samuel 1:1-20

capacity to shed tears more often than I do—to be able to cry. I know tears are a powerful healing agent. For Hannah, her sorrow was manifested in her tears.

C. A third way her unhappiness was manifested was a change in her eating habits. She wept and would not eat, verse 7. Her husband asked her, “Why don’t you eat?” For some people, when they’re depressed or sad, they quit eating. For others, they start eating. I always know when something’s getting to me—I start heading for the food. Especially chocolate. Did you know there’s a special chemical property in chocolate that lifts you from depression? It’s true.

D. Then a fourth characteristic of Hannah’s unhappiness was a diminished personality. Verse 8, she was downhearted. Not up—downhearted. In verse 18, when she came to a resolution, she was no longer downcast. Unhappiness shrinks and shrivels. It collapses the frame, the façade, and the face. It brings a diminution of the human personality. It makes us less than we are. Our potential is severely restricted. We cannot be all that we are capable of being when we are downhearted. We need to be lifted up and able to expand, rather than have our balloon deflated by life.

E. A fifth quality of unhappiness is bitterness. Verse 10, she had bitterness of soul. Most often our bitterness, like Hannah’s, comes from things that happen to us that are simply beyond our control. Hannah couldn’t help that her womb was closed. That was beyond her control. And it just didn’t seem fair. Ever heard that phrase? As you get older, you realize there are a lot of things that happen in life that are just not fair. How you deal with the situation is going to determine how successfully you make it through life. Life is unjust. You might as well accept that fact. There are going to be unjust things happen to you. What happened to Hannah was unjust.

THE SECRET OF A HAPPY LIFE

1 Samuel 1:1-20

F. Another mark of unhappiness is refusing to be consoled. Inconsolable. Nobody can cheer you up. “Don’t try to cheer me up! I have a right to be depressed!” Have you ever felt that way? Or known somebody that, no matter what you did, was past cheering up? There are some times in life when the tragedy is so deep, nothing artificial will cheer us up. We just simply have to work our way through it. Inconsolable.

G. Finally, as a mark of Hannah’s unhappiness, she was depressed. Verse 11, misery; verse 15, deeply troubled; verse 16, great anguish and grief. Hannah’s unhappiness was during high religious moments. Every year the family would pack up and travel fifteen miles north. The center of worship then was not in Jerusalem but in Shiloh, where the ark of the tabernacle of Moses’ day was—where sacrifices were administered. There was a kind of temple. It was a full day’s journey. They would pack the kids up, get there, and camp for a week. It was a high family time. A high festival time. A high spiritual time. And it was the time when Hannah felt the worst. Hannah’s depression became keenest when she was in a context in which she should have received some consolation and uplift. Don’t be surprised if you’re at a church service and you walk away depressed. The reason is not that the sermon is bad. The sermon may have been great. The music may have been great. But you came with a need, and you felt vexed when you left because you didn’t get resolution in that service. Hannah knew what that was about. She was depressed.

III. What are some strategies we should avoid when we are unhappy?

Three strategies Hannah avoided—

A. She did not respond with ugliness to others. Her name itself means “grace” or “favor.” It gives the idea of being charming. She evidently never threw stuff back at Peninnah. She internalized her anger rather than throwing it back at her rival. I’m not suggesting that it’s always

THE SECRET OF A HAPPY LIFE

1 Samuel 1:1-20

healthy to internalize anger. Sometimes we need to express it. But in Hannah's case, she didn't simply dump back a truckload of venom on her rival. The fact that Hannah stayed a lovely and charming person is shown in verse 5, "But to Hannah he gave a double portion because he loved her." In some situations, a person can get so bent out of shape that they cease to be a person who is easy to love. But Hannah evidently, in the midst of her sorrow in life which went on year after year, still kept that gentle side which her husband found easy to love. He continued to give to her out of his heart.

B. Another thing, she did not throw away her relationship with God. I would suspect that Peninnah associated her wealth of children with the idea that God was looking favorably on her. Hannah, like Job, had the same innocence of character and integrity; the reason for their adverse circumstances had nothing to do with them internally. Hannah kept her relationship with God—even when God was disappointing to her.

C. The third strategy, she did not give up—even when she was misunderstood by Eli the priest while she was praying her heart out. She's pouring out her soul to God. Her heart is praying, but her lips are mumbling. She's not making articulate sounds. The priest misreads her. At the very time Hannah most needed help, a member of the clergy misunderstood her. Has that happened to you? The pastor has not understood your problem correctly when you came for spiritual counsel? Or has made some stupid remark? Or has misjudged the situation totally and has been careless, frivolous, inattentive, or indifferent? Just the time when you needed help, the person in society who knew God or knew the psychology that was supposed to help—they let you down. It's not fair! That's when you want to give up. Pastors and counselors are just people. They can sometimes be dead wrong. Hannah didn't want religious ceremony to detract her from pressing

THE SECRET OF A HAPPY LIFE

1 Samuel 1:1-20

through to God. “I was pouring out my soul to the LORD.” She determined not to give up. It’s important in life. Never give up. As Christians, we must never give up.

IV. How do we arrive at a condition of happiness?

On the basis of an initial reading of the story, we’re tempted to say that gaining happiness is simply done when the deficiency or the lack is made up. Hannah wanted a son, and Hannah got a son. Happiness complete. But is life that simple? Is the interpretation of this story that simple? Not at all! In fact, to interpret the story that simply would be to totally misread it. It is true that Hannah’s circumstances changed. And it is also true that in certain situations, your circumstance and my circumstance won’t change at all this side of heaven. But the universal truth in this story is that God used the lack. He used the deficiency in Hannah’s life to change her and to change human history. He used the lack to bring something into existence that was not contemplated at the beginning of the lack. Hannah, years earlier, began her prayer, “God give me a son!” I’d imagine that in those days she was a rather young woman, and she simply wanted a son to be able to prove she was a woman, had the blessing of God on her life, and was in no way inferior to her rival. In some ways, her prayer was extremely selfish. Hannah’s request gets modified as it goes on year after year. Finally her request no longer becomes person-centered or self-centered. She becomes God-centered. She is now praying, not just for a son for her sake, but a son for God’s sake. Verse 11 says she prayed that if God would give her a son, she would give him back to God, and he would be a Nazirite based on Numbers 6—a person dedicated to the Lord who never drinks strong drink and never cuts his hair. That was a mark of dedication.

If you read the Old Testament story carefully, you get what Paul Harvey calls “the rest of the story.” In the Old Testament, there were only two baby boys who were ever consecrated to be a Nazirite from the womb. The Nazirite vow was generally something adults would take

THE SECRET OF A HAPPY LIFE

1 Samuel 1:1-20

themselves. It was voluntary when one got to the age of volition. But there were two babies where the mothers consecrated them to be Nazirites in the womb—one was Samson and the other was Samuel. Samson lived in a period right before Samuel. Hannah knew about Samson. She knew that his consecration was wrecked the day his hair was cut. Hannah was saying, “God, give me a chance to have a baby that will not fail You, that will be dedicated to You, that will do Your mission and Your work, and I’ll give him to You all his days.”

That prayer has a marvelous fulfillment. Samuel becomes the last of the judges, among the first of the prophets. To his singular personality and power, he would take an un-unified, insignificant group of tribes and meld them into a dynasty nation-state. He would anoint the first two kings of Israel, Saul and David. He would lay the groundwork for all future biblical history. Without Samuel, there would have been no David. And without David, there would have been no Son of David—Jesus. And without Jesus, there would have been no us. So we are a direct heir of the prayer of Hannah, “God give me a son, and I’ll give him back to You.”

I’m suggesting to you that we now understand the rest of the story—why God allowed Hannah to be barren. If Hannah had not been barren in the first years of marriage, Samuel’s future would have been very different. He would have become a well-to-do farmer, but he would never have been a great Israeli leader. For some, it would have been God’s will to be a farmer. But for this child, there was a special mission. If Hannah’s disappointment had led her into idolatry or bitter social resignation, Samuel’s future would have been very different, if indeed he would have been born at all. God’s sovereignty worked through Hannah’s cooperation, and her prayer changed over the years.

We may not have the intergenerational impact of Hannah, but each of us count. And as we deal with our own unhappiness in life, we must begin to ask, “Why is this lack not supplied?” Is it

THE SECRET OF A HAPPY LIFE

1 Samuel 1:1-20

possible we should begin to change our prayer? Instead of simply asking selfishly, we should begin to ask, “Through this lack in my life, will Your kingdom advance or will it retreat? With how I handle this lack, will Your kingdom be made better or worse—in my life, in my church, in my community, in the world?” So we begin to pray, not for the selfish fulfillment of our need to be met, but for the cause of God. We pray, “Take this time of lack in my life and shape it for Your good purpose—that out of my lack there might be an advance in the kingdom.” If we are unhappy, we must ultimately get past other people and get past our own self-made remedies and pour out our souls to God. There are some things we cannot resolve in ourselves. There are some things we cannot resolve with the help of friends. There are some things we cannot even resolve with the gracious help of skilled counselors who are Spirit-filled. There are some things we must wrestle out in our relationship with God. We, like Hannah, must pour out our soul to God until we hear Him saying to us, “It is well with you. I’ll advance My kingdom through you.” That’s the Bible solution to the secret of happiness. Resolve the unhappiness in your personal relationship with God.

Closing Prayer

Our Father, only You know what the result would be if I were to ask how many here today are unhappy. You see the heart of every hand that would go up. We take a moment, Lord, to identify what it is that keeps happiness away from us. We realize that probably the underlying reason behind so much of our unhappiness would relate to injustice. It’s not fair. We didn’t deserve this. Hannah didn’t deserve what happened to her. In the midst of our struggle with unhappiness, we pray that You will give us the power of the Spirit to avoid the same wrongful strategies that Hannah had to avoid. And that we will not become an injuring person even though we’ve been injured. That we’ll keep strong in our relationship with You and never give up. We want to take

THE SECRET OF A HAPPY LIFE

1 Samuel 1:1-20

a moment to look beyond our lack to see how You might, through our need, create in us some advance in Your kingdom. We make ourselves available again to You, not knowing how You will create that advance but saying, “Here I am, God—available to You. Use the lack in my life for Your honor, Your glory, and Your purpose. I lay it at Your feet for resolution.” We thank You that You bear our burdens and that You care for us. Thank You because You clearly invite us to cast our cares upon You because You care for us. In that knowledge, Lord, today we are strengthened and comforted. We will no longer refuse to be consoled, for we will be consoled by You. We will be supported and upheld by You. Turn mourning into dancing. Turn lack into plenty. Turn grief into joy. Visit us by Your Spirit. We pray through Christ our Lord who gives us joy. Amen.