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# Title: The Christmas Son: Samuel

**Text: 1 Samuel 1:1-2:11**

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## Introduction

Always winter and never Christmas. That line uttered by Mr. Tumnus to a bewildered Lucy is one of the most famous lines in literature. Mr. Tumnus, of course, is referring to a spell that has been cast on Narnia by the White Witch. That spell and that line captures the essence of Narnia's state of perpetual misery under the rule of a wicked queen. Unpacked further in *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe*, we find that the perpetual misery of "Always winter and never Christmas" means Father Christmas does not visit Narnia. This line penned by Lewis is a line that is quite self-explanatory in American (and presumably, British) culture. Sitting as it does at the beginning of winter and at the end of the calendar year, the Christmas season, highlighted by the return of Santa Claus, functions as a season of hope for all of society. Lewis surely meant more than that, but even a child can begin to understand what life would be like if it were "Always winter, and never Christmas", especially if Father Christmas never visits.

Even our profane and perverted culture understands this. How many of our children's stories involve a plot line in which there is the possibility of Santa not showing up for Christmas? At one point in one of our popular stories, due to some kind of insurmountable conflict, Santa says, "we'll have to cancel Christmas". Nothing could be worse in the worldview giving rise to the story. Human misery is exacerbated by the thought of "no Christmas", even if the values and interpretation of Christmas are all wrong.

This is certainly true of Mr. Tumnus. The quickest way for the newcomer Lucy to understand how bad things are in Narnia without a lot of explanation is simply: "always winter and never Christmas." Lucy's response is to be expected: "How awful."

## 1 Samuel 1 background

Hannah is living in a place where it is always winter and never Christmas. How bad was it? This is the time of the judges. These are the days in which there is no king in Israel, and everyone does what is right in their own eyes. Things are so bad that Israel's champion not long ago imploded a Philistine temple, taking everyone with him to his death. There is no king in Israel. The one who was supposed to be leading Israel in the name of the Great I AM ends up under a pile of rubble in a spectacular crash and burn, more interested in chasing the fame of the world and illicit love than God's glory.

Things are so bad that the horrific memory of R-rated sordid and notorious violence is still fresh. Everyone is doing what is right in their own eyes, and it is so bad it is as if Israel is only doing evil continually. There are 21 chapters in the book of judges and this is judges chapter 22. If you are a faithful Israelite, jealous for God's glory and passionate for his name and fame, at this time in Israel's history it is always winter and never Christmas.

It's as if Father Christmas never comes. Reading just a few chapters in, we find out that the Shekinah glory of the tabernacle, which is set up at Shiloh, is not visibly present. Things are so bad, God isn't simply absent, the religious mafia has taken control of the establishment. The seedy part of town is now life as normal, all of the time, everywhere. Israel and her worship are a wasteland. The entire nation, including the tabernacle in Shiloh, is bereft of anything resembling true faith. It is always winter and never Christmas.

## Hannah's barrenness

This misery isn't simply set in a series of events. This is everyday life. This is personal. How bad is it? Let us read 1 Samuel 1. There is glory in this chapter, but it is set against the backdrop of abject misery.

This is what God's word proclaims to us:

There was a certain man of Ramathaim-zophim of the hill country of Ephraim whose name was Elkanah the son of Jeroham, son of Elihu, son of Tohu, son of Zuph, an Ephrathite. 2 He had two wives. The name of the one was Hannah, and the name of the other, Peninnah. And Peninnah had children, but Hannah had no children.

Two things to briefly note. First, Elkanah was an Ephrathite... think Boaz, who lived to the south in Bethlehem. Same family, different towns. Boaz may even still be alive. Ruth and Boaz are most likely in the last years of their life. Obed is probably a few years older than Elkanah, and Jesse is probably just a little younger than Elkanah. This is part of the silent but significant backdrop to these opening chapters. Saul may be a tyke and David isn't on the scene... yet. So think of this opening chapter as occurring shortly after the events in Ruth and in the latest stages of the Judges.

The other: Hannah has no children. This becomes THE storyline of chapter 1. Hannah is barren. Like Naomi and Ruth and Manoah's wife (Samson's mother), Hannah's barrenness is Israel's wasteland. And as we've noted in the past, this was not an insignificant issue for these women. To be barren was to fail to provide the husband with offspring that would continue the family's participation in the material blessings of the covenant. With so much at stake it is easy to empathize with these women in the Old Testament who were barren.

## Hannah's suffering

But Hannah has to deal with more than barrenness.

3 Now this man used to go up year by year from his city to worship and to sacrifice to the the LORD of hosts at Shiloh, where the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were priests of the LORD.

Stop right there. If you are an Israelite in David or Solomon's palace hearing this read, you get a sick feeling in the pit of your stomach right about now. If you're hearing this, you begin to hear the undertones of the sinister music. You are thinking to yourself this isn't good. The author, hasn't told us anything about these two brothers, yet... but to the original hearers the notorious side of the judges is in

high gear in the story. Hophni and Phineas represented everything that was wrong with Israel in the time of Elkanah and Hannah. These guys are important to our story here, as we see it unfold.

Before we get too caught up with the two blasphemers in this story... note the contrast. Elkanah goes up to sacrifice and worship the Great I AM Warrior-Champion. This is the first time God as Warrior, the LORD of hosts, is mentioned in the Old Testament. And it's not an accident. At Shiloh, the place of God's dwelling, but also the place where much sordid activity had taken place in just the past few years (see the end of Judges).

4 On the day when Elkanah sacrificed, he would give portions to Peninnah his wife and to all her sons and daughters. 5 But to Hannah he gave a double portion, because he loved her, though the LORD had closed her womb.

Who had closed the womb? If the womb opens, it is God who caused it. If Hannah has a child now, there will be no mistake as to who has done it. But Hannah's plight isn't simply barrenness. Remember, this is the time of the judges. Everyone does what is right in their own eyes.

6 And her rival used to provoke her grievously to irritate her, because the LORD had closed her womb. 7 So it went on year by year. As often as she went up to the house of the LORD, she used to provoke her. Therefore Hannah wept and would not eat. 8 And Elkanah, her husband, said to her, "Hannah, why do you weep? And why do you not eat? And why is your heart sad? Am I not more to you than ten sons?"

This is where the plot becomes dark. Hophni and Phineas were an omen. As the story unfolds we find it is open season on Hannah. Hannah is barren. Hannah is persecuted. Once again, in two women in the storyline we find two ways to live. It's not enough that Hannah is feeling the weight and the shame of barrenness as a faithful Israelite woman. Hannah is being kicked while she is down.

Year after year, day after day during the temple visit, Hannah is beat on emotionally. If you read carefully here, it's not an accident that the author of Samuel places the persecution and the distress within the context of the tabernacle visit. It's as if Peninnah intentionally waits for the annual visit to the tabernacle, so that she, like Israel in the time of the judges, wants to hit Hannah where it hurts most. The attack on Hannah is an attack on the tabernacle... on the Great I Am himself. What kind of a God would allow the woman who can't get enough of being in and around the tabernacle, the woman who is most passionate about his glory, to go barren?

This is devastating to Hannah. Look at all of these words... provoked grievously, irritated, closed, provoked, wept, would not eat, weep, heart sad. There is a physical toll on spiritual war. And yet Hannah returns to the tabernacle year after year. Elkanah obviously is not much help. He is walking by sight. Making all the right sacrifices but missing the point of it all.

Year after year, day after day at the tabernacle. On and on and on. Israel's apostate. Blaspheming sons are running a brothel as outlaw sheriffs, Penninah is a cruel tyrant, Eli's incompetent, Israel is faithless, Samson a failure... If ever there was a proverbial gutter, Hannah is in it and it's raining. Is there no relief for those who are truly God's redeemed? Where is God and his glory? Always winter and never Christmas.

## Hannah's Nazirite hope

And in the next few verses we begin to see why Hannah is remarkable. We see how it is she endures such misery. In her despondency, she does not curse God and die. She turns to her only, her ONLY source for relief. These are some of the most amazing grace-filled, faith-laden statements in all of Scripture.

9 After they had eaten and drunk in Shiloh, Hannah rose. Now Eli the priest was sitting on the seat beside the doorpost of the temple of the LORD.  
10 She was deeply distressed and prayed to the LORD and wept bitterly.  
11 And she vowed a vow and said, "O LORD of hosts, if you will indeed look on the affliction of your servant and remember me and not forget your servant, but will give to your servant a son, then I will give him to the LORD all the days of his life, and no razor shall touch his head."

Embedded in misery, deeply distressed, weeping bitterly, her soul in vexation, Hannah casts her gaze to the Great I AM whose presence was supposed to be in the tabernacle and offers her womb to his glory, his honor, and as we will see in a few verses, his name. This is remarkable. Remedy for her barrenness is not her end goal. The Great I AM and His presence in the tabernacle is her aim and end. She wants a son not for her, but for God to bring an end to the "always winter and never Christmas".

She wants God to give her a Nazirite son, a son who will be solely dedicated to God's glory and the worship of Israel, marked by dietary and hygiene restrictions. The forever language here... all the days... moves both directions... he will serve the LORD... a razor will NEVER touch his head. Who does this sound like? This ultimately is not about her barrenness. She wants God to give her Samson's replacement. If Samson hasn't already blazed out his candle, she sees it coming. "I will give my son to the LORD." He will serve in the tabernacle. He will be all the things for God's glory and fame that Samson wasn't. This prayer is: "LORD, please vindicate your glory, please stop the faithless apostasy and rebellion through the gift of a son!"

Not only does Hannah ask for a son who will be a better Samson, she is dedicating him to tabernacle service. This son will be everything Eli's sons are not. And this is a theme that carries into the storyline of the book of Samuel. Her desire is to see, through the birth of a son, the tabernacle returned to its proper status as God's visible presence among his people and filled with the Shekinah glory. As it is, her prayer is an indictment against an institution that epitomizes "everyone doing right in their own eyes." The tabernacle is leadership is corrupt and vile. Hannah prays that God will clean house through the birth of a son.

Verse 12:

12 As she continued praying before the LORD, Eli observed her mouth.  
13 Hannah was speaking in her heart; only her lips moved, and her voice was not heard. Therefore Eli took her to be a drunken woman. 14 And Eli said to her, "How long will you go on being drunk? Put your wine away from you."

How bad is it in Israel? It's so bad that the one who has been given the responsibility to shepherd Israel in the gospel has allowed the tabernacle to become so pagan that when a true Israelite pours out her heart in emotional prayer, his first thought isn't, "she's praying". He doesn't recognize prayer when he sees it. The author goes out of his way to make sure we see she's praying. Eli is so much a part of faithless Israel, he has a woman praying in his tabernacle, the supposed visible presence of the LORD, and he thinks she's drunk.

## Hannah remembered

For the sake of time, skip down to verses 19 and 20. This is the heart of this passage. Penninah's oppression, Hophni and Phineas's horrendous blasphemy, Eli's complicity and spiritual complacency, Elkanah's insensitivity, and Israel's continued apostasy and rebellion... all land here on these verses. Total darkness. Utter humiliation. Always winter and never Christmas.

And, then... verse 19:

Verse 19... Elkanah knew Hannah his wife, and the LORD remembered her. 20 And in due time Hannah conceived and bore a son, and she called his name Samuel, for she said, "I have asked for him from the LORD."

Oh... again... in utter darkness there is grace unspeakable. In the midst of her misery, there is direct divine intervention. Elkanah is the good husband, but this is an act of God. This entire passage orbits around these two verses. It's as if these two verses bring the 450 year era and Israel's descent into a sinful abyss to a screeching halt. This divine intervention when God has seemed absent is the stuff of Israel-in-Egypt-I've-heard-the-cry-of-my-people.

The birth of a son is the crack of light in the darkness. In the midst of despair, God remembered Hannah and gave her a son. In a time of rebellion and darkness, God remembered Israel and sent them a Nazirite son. Samson has been replaced. Hophni and Phineas will be condemned. God's glory is about to return to Israel.

Silly flannel graphs. This isn't about not having a baby when your rival has 10. This isn't about feeling bad because the rival is picking on you. This isn't about drunken prayer. This really isn't about rewarding Hannah's faith, though that's a key part of the story. This is about a woman who is passionate for God's glory, turning to her only source of help, and God's provision of a son who will bring him glory (and, if we follow the storyline farther, will usher in the king of God's design, David).

The LORD kept her barren, allowed her to go through unmitigated misery at the hands of an oppressor, and then in response to her desperate cry aimed at His glory, he opens her womb. The birth of this son has as its focused aim His glory and His name which will be made known to the nations around.

There is an irony here that could miss us English speakers. She says "I have asked for him from the LORD". She speaks of her activity. But Samuel's name literally means "name of God." In the name itself we find her motivation. LORD, for the sake of your name and your glory, give your servant a Nazirite Son. LORD I'm barren, I'm persecuted... do you not see what people are saying about you? Do you not see Samson's failure? LORD, vindicate your name and make your visible presence again a reality in the life of your people through the birth of a Son. God, in his grace, opens the womb, and a son is born. A son is dedicated to serve in His presence, night and day until the end of his life. And this is precisely what happens. Samuel is born, and when he is old enough, Hannah offers him to a lifetime of service in God's presence.

Silly flannel graphs. The book of Samuel opens with the birth of a son. All of the major themes find their nexus in the birth of this son. In fact, in this chapter, there are three running themes that hold this text together, and they all land on the birth of Samuel in the middle of the passage: affliction, the temple/presence of the LORD, and prayer-petition. All three of these subjects are mentioned multiple times...over and over in these verses. The context or immediate setting for this passage is the tabernacle and the activity occurs where the LORD is supposed to be visibly dwelling among his people.

The affliction is real. It is intense. Mary weeps. She won't eat. Her prayer petition, her appeal, is made in the tabernacle, the only place her appeal can go. Her appeal is as passionate as the vexation and distress she feels. She sees herself as a participant in the grand drama of redemption and appeals to the ONLY ONE, the Covenanting I AM of Israel, who can help her. The prayer and petition of God's redeemed are used by God to accomplish his purposes in the salvation of his people.

And the covenanting God of Israel hears the petitions, and he answers her appeal with the gift of a son. The grand tapestry of these themes, the tabernacle, the prayer-petition, and Hannah's affliction, indeed the entire story itself, finds its landing point in the birth of this son.

Why does the author write of the birth this way? Because he wants Israel to see that both the catalyst and resolution of Hannah and indeed Israel's spiritual dilemma is found in the birth of this son. Hannah names him "Name of God... because I petitioned him of the LORD." Israel is under duress. Israel is apostasizing. Israel's has not appealed to God. Israel has defamed God's name.

And yet, there is a woman of Bethlehem who does what Israel does not. Hannah appealed to her savior, the tabernacling God of Israel, for a nazirite "savior" who carries the name of God with him wherever he goes. In the name of God there is hope for Israel. In God's grace he looks on Hannah and her appeal with favor, and in Bethlehem there is born a son who will be instrumental in bringing about Israel's salvation from her enemies, and the establishing of a kingdom.

## Hannah's song

How do we know that Hannah understands more is at stake than simply her barrenness and her oppression at the hands of a rival? Chapter 2. Hannah's song is an interpretive grid to lay over chapter 1. It is the key to understanding Hannah's worldview and her faith. Chapter two is a prayer, but it occurs in the form of a song. And this isn't an accident. God's divine intervention on Hannah's behalf elicits a response of praise from Hannah. But Hannah understands her situation and her plight to be bigger than just her barrenness.

Chapter 2 verse 2: 2

And Hannah prayed and said, "My heart exults in the LORD; my horn is exalted in the LORD. My mouth derides my enemies, because I rejoice in your salvation. "There is none holy like the LORD: for there is none besides you; there is no rock like our God.

Before we read any farther, if we are Israel hearing this in the reading of the assembly, we know precisely how Hannah understands herself. This song bears all the marks of the song of Moses, as well as a prominent prayer of David's in the book of Psalms. We half-expect the next line to be, "The rider and his horse, God has thrown into the sea."

Hannah is adopting the song from Israel's greatest moment and God's greatest triumph to her own situation in the birth of her son. This hasn't been simply about Hannah. She understands her place in the grand drama of redemption and places her plight and her son in that context. These aren't Egyptians. These are not simply the Philistines who oppress Israel. These are Penninah, Hophni, Phineas, Eli. Anyone who sets themselves over against God and taunts His people because of who He is and who they are. This was never simply about Hannah's barrenness. This isn't simply some mother who, on a whim, pontificates in exaggeration about a stressful situation in her life that has been resolved. This is a mother, who, against all odds, has the eyes of faith to cry out to God under duress on behalf of His glory and his name and his fame. There really are national interests at stake in the birth of her Nazirite Son.

Notice the divine reversal of fortunes in verse 5:

Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread, but those who were hungry have ceased to hunger. The barren has borne seven, but she who has many children is forlorn. The LORD kills and brings to life; he brings down to Sheol and raises up. The LORD makes poor and makes rich; he brings low and he exalts.

The first thing we notice here is the stark language. This is black and white stuff. This is why we can say that Penninah has not simply been acting the part of an oppressive rival in the marriage. That's there, but it's much more ultimate or sinister. This is the unrighteous enemy persecuting the righteous. Hannah is severely oppressed. She languishes at the hands of someone who does not have God's glory as motivation and in fact, like Hophni and Phineas and the rest of faithless Israel, is using God's institution in self-serving ways. God is being

mocked by his own people. And yet, in the birth of a Nazirite son, God is beginning to turn the tables.

The second thing we should note is the resurrection language. **The LORD kills and brings to life; he brings down to Sheol and raises up.** Through the birth of a Nazirite son dedicated to service in God's presence for God's glory, cold, dead, faithless, "always winterized" Israel is brought back to life. Samuel represents the resurrection of Israel. God, through Samuel, is in the beginning stages of ending the monotonous cycle of his people doing what is right in their own eyes. More than 400 years of disobedience and oppression at the hands of the Philistines are drawing to a close.

There's something bigger on the horizon. Samuel represents the hope of Hannah, and indeed the hope of Israel.

Verse 10:

**The adversaries of the LORD shall be broken to pieces; against them he will thunder in heaven. The LORD will judge the ends of the earth; he will give strength to his king and exalt the horn of his anointed."**

Say what? What king? Hannah has the kind of faith that embraces heavenly realities that don't exist in real time and space yet. Hannah is waiting for a king in faith. It's here we find the heart of the storyline of the book of Samuel. Even in Hannah's misery, she longed for and anticipated the day when there would be a king in Israel who represents God's glory and presence and rule on earth. Hannah, like Israel, is anticipating the arrival of a king, but unlike faithless Israel, does not have self-serving motivations in the desire for a king. Hannah longs to see God's name and fame vindicated in a throne from which his justice is brought to bear against those who blaspheme his name.

This is not, as the popular viewpoint is, that Hannah wants some sort of vindication for herself. In the birth of a son, Hannah anticipates the God's salvation of his people and justice meted out against those who are faithless. This weeping, misery, despair, desperation is more than personal barrenness, but anguish for salvation from rebellion and wickedness. She grieves, she weeps, she is under duress not simply because she is barren, but because in her barrenness it is always winter and never Christmas. Day in and day out she lives in the shadow of utter spiritual bankruptcy. She longs for God to raise the dead. She has hope and prays toward God's ends. Samson, Eli, Hophni, Phineas. She knows this can't be it. There must be something more for God's people. She longs for a more permanent display of God's justice and glory.

And God, in His power and might and justice, is working to make that happen in time and space. This song belong to those great songs of Israel about God riding to the rescue of his people and vindication of his name. God's work isn't simply an idea. God intervenes in real time and real space to accomplish his purposes. And he is on the move. It's not an accident that three of these Old Testament miracle sons are born around the same time in similar circumstances. Samson, Obed, and Samuel... all born to divinely ordained (abnormally) barren women, all meant to

convey God's exclusive power and authority to accomplish these things. All 3 births are meant to provoke Israel toward the anticipation of the birth of a special son who acts on behalf of God for the people. Two were Nazirites, Samson and Samuel, meant to embody God's temple presence among the people, and one embodied God's redemption of his people through a royal line (and pulling in Gentile interests along the way). God is at work, not simply moving his people from anarchy to monarchy, but bringing them to life, redeeming for himself a people with whom he will dwell in justice and glory.

What grace to Hannah. What faith she displays. This song begins speaking of God's salvation at work in the birth of her son and ends with the glorious anticipation of his rule and reign through a king on a throne that doesn't exist yet. Through the birth of her son, her desire is that God will finally make all things right.

Oh Hannah if you could only see what is happening 25 miles south of you... In the house of Obed, Jesse and his wife someday will have a son. His name will be David. Winter is being broken. God is at work. Christmas is coming. There in Bethlehem a king will be born. Your son, the Nazirite dedicated to service in shekinah glory, will be his forerunner. Samuel is necessary because David is on his way.

## Mary's song

Fast forward 1000 years.... Luke 1. Another birth announcement, another mother, against the backdrop of faithless, spiritually bankrupt, and morally corrupt Israel, takes up the salvation song of Hannah.

Luke 1:

My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant...He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts; he has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty.

Mary quotes Hannah because she understands that what is in her womb is everything Hannah every wanted. Truly. Under duress, Hannah speaks and prays and weeps in the imperfect shadows, anticipating a day that is beyond Samuel and David. David wasn't quite the king he needed to be. Hannah's hopes and dreams and expectations of God's vindication of his name and glory are being realized in a virgin of Bethlehem.

In Israel it is always winter and never Christmas. Things are so bad, the anticipated Messiah for whom they have been waiting thousands of years... shows up and they kill him in utter and ruthless unbelief. This mother knows scandal. This mother knows stigma. And yet in the wake of a promise of a glorious, history-altering birth of a son, on her lips is Hannah's song. All Hannah ever wanted soon lies in a manger, celebrated by angels, worshiped by shepherds. God himself descends into the human cesspool, and fully and finally brings a definitive end to always winter and never Christmas.

## Reflect and Respond

When we were in utter darkness and rebellion, completely incapable of helping ourselves, in need of transformation, God sent his Son. Christ is THE Divine Intervention who brings to an end our life of doing what is right in our own eyes because we believe and act as if we are king. We have no king but me. And yet, God sends his son. Christ, the Promised Son, is the only hope for that kind of darkness. Christ brings darkness to an end, and brings his people to life.

Second, this advent season, let us remember, even as we understand and believe that Jesus is the reason for the season, that as much benefit as there is to reflecting on Christ and his birth, that this is the New Covenant. It is always Christmas, and never winter. Christmas is everywhere. Christmas is 24-7-365. Oh, Christmas has not been consummated. And we're not talking about the material shopping season and the way the anti-Christ portrays for us a very self-absorbed Christmas. We still await and long for the full expression of Christmas glory to be revealed in the Son who rules and reigns in the heavens. But it can be very easy to begin to believe and then act as if the misery we experience is permanent. We can begin to wonder, was the Son really born, and if he was born, why am I still feeling personal devastation? We must remind ourselves, over and over and over that the Son has established his temple. He dwells with His people. The Emmanuel of the Incarnation is THE Son, anticipated in the birth of Samuel. In his life, his death, his resurrection, and his exaltation he brought an end to winter.

Third, many of us are under duress. We are no longer in spiritual darkness, but the residual effects of living in a dark world affect us. For many different reasons. Do we understand that the Son whose birth we celebrate is the ONLY, the ONLY, person who can really help us? Some of us are in situations that are oppressive. Some of us are in situations that seemingly have no answers. We live under duress. We must understand, and believe, and orient our prayers to the Son who has been born. The Christ of Christmas must be our sole object of confidence and hope.

Christ is The Christmas Son. The New Isaac. The New Obed. The New Samuel. God has accomplished the impossible. The Son has redeemed for himself a people and won for himself a kingdom. The Son continues to vindicate God's name and spread His own glory to the ends of the earth. May we be marked by a faith that is satisfied only in the Christmas Son who has made it always Christmas and never winter in the salvation of His people.