

Context and Background

Context: The books of 1-2 Samuel have been called some of the most honest historical writing in existence. The books chronicle the transition of the Israelite people from a loose confederation of tribes to a group of people led by a single monarch. Further, the author traces the ever fluctuating faithfulness of the Hebrew people, pulling no punches along the way. Rather, the author chooses to throw the light of reality upon both individuals and the nation as a whole, highlighting brilliant successes and abysmal failures. One might mistake, however, that Israel is the main focus of the book, or that any of the various characters—Samuel, Saul, David—undergird its purpose. The true subject of the book is God. The author uses the raw and real events of history to lead his readers to understand God's movement across history. Specifically, God is portrayed as moving redemptively, moving to redeem and restore His people as He continually holds out hope, even in the face of failure and loss.

Background (Pain): Pain is and always has been part of the human experience. Pain can be experienced in at least two general forms: physical (Job 3.20, 7.11; 10.1) and emotional pain (Ruth 1.13, 20; 2 Kgs 4.27; Zech. 12.10; 1 Sam. 1.10). The authors of Scripture make no attempt to deny the presence and experience of pain as a normal part of life (One might consider reading the Psalms for some of the most vivid portrayals of pain in Scripture. See Psalm 42. One might also read Lamentations, an entire book lamenting the pain of an entire people.) Rather, across Scripture, one finds pain portrayed vividly and accurately. Indeed, one finds not only the presence of pain but the discussion of the problem of pain. Why does pain exist? Where does it come from? Perhaps most importantly, what is God doing about our pain? What is important to note is that Scripture does not offer an easy answer to the problem of pain. Rather, pain seems to be a normal part of life. For reasons beyond our understanding and the understanding of the authors of Scripture, God chooses to allow pain to remain part of our lives. Some texts go so far as to state that pain—physical and emotional—is actually a normal part of following God, something that somehow builds our faith (Heb 11.32-40; James 1.2-4; 1 Pet 1.6-8). Scripture does portray a solution to pain. This solution, however, is not found in the removal of pain, at least not in our present experience. The solution to pain is found in God joining us in our pain, taking on and joining us in our suffering (Heb. 2.14-18; Is. 53.4-12). In our present experience, God's movement provides us with one who both understands our experience of pain and one who has taken our pain upon or absorbs our pain into himself, much like a sponge absorbs water. The future result will be life free from pain as God's movement both to identify and absorb our present pain leads to a new creation free from the presence and experience of pain (Rev. 21.1-5).

The Text

Silent Pain (1 Samuel 1.1-8): The book of 1 Samuel begins with the background behind the birth of one of the main characters of the book, the prophet Samuel. Samuel's birth narrative is one that reflects the very real experience of pain. A certain man from the hill country of Ephraim named Elkanah had two wives, Hannah and Peninnah. We see that Elkanah was a religious man, going up to Shiloh each year to worship. At this point in Israel's history, the Temple had not yet been built. People worshiped at the Tabernacle built by Moses. The Tabernacle was mobile but was semi-stationary at Shiloh. While the issue of two wives is at first startling to our modern sensibilities, the reason for Elkanah's polygamy is clearly stated. Hannah had no children. The language of the text reflects that Hannah was the original wife, a point underscored by Elkanah's love for Hannah. However, Hannah was childless. In a day in which a male child was not only desired but necessary for hereditary rites, Elkanah has "replaced" his first wife with one that could bear him children. The failure to bear children, specifically male children brought great shame upon women in ancient cultures. One can imagine the additional shame brought on by being "replaced." More than likely, questions of worth, security, and even God's blessing were normal for Hannah. Elkanah, however, seems oblivious to Hannah's inner questioning and shame, something her fellow wife is all too aware of and makes to her advantage by provoking Hannah. This provoking, something that takes place over a number of years, leads to constant pain and sorrow coupled with weeping. However, when Hannah's pain breaks through to the surface it is minimized by Elkanah who does not seem to understand.

Poured out petition (1 Samuel 1.9-18): In a moment of great grief brought on by the constant provoking of Peninnah and Elkanah's obtuseness, Hannah turns to God. The language of the text is quite vivid. Hannah is desperate, desperate for God's presence and movement in her shame and sorrow. She weeps bitterly in deep anguish, and in desperation makes a vow to the Lord begging for His attention and movement. What is interesting to note is that Hannah expresses great faith in her prayer. She is the first person in the Old Testament to speak to God as the "Lord Almighty." Her petition, however, is not understood. Eli, the aged priest, mistakes her fervent prayer for drunkenness and rebukes Hannah. Hannah responds that rather than being drunk, she is deeply troubled and has been pouring out her innermost thoughts and feelings to God. Recognizing the truth of her claims, Eli accepts her explanation and offers a blessing. Interestingly, his wish of peace offers no real consolation beyond that which God "might" bring. Hannah is left with only God as a potential source of comfort. However, Hannah's countenance reflects that she finds this hope sufficient. She leaves the Tabernacle relieved, her face no longer downcast.

God's remembrance (1 Samuel 1.19-20): Hannah leaves the Tabernacle and returns home with her family. Life continues, as do the circumstances which bring her pain. Yet, God remembers Hannah, indicating that He has heard her prayer and been present in her pain. This remembrance leads to Hannah becoming pregnant and the subsequent birth of a son. Hannah recognizes God's movement, stating that her son's birth is due to God's movement.

Application: Pain. It is a normal part of the human experience. The real question about pain is not "Will we experience pain," but "What is God doing about it?" Or perhaps, "Where is God in my pain?" In Hannah's story, we find that God is present in our pain. He understands our sorrow and suffering, even when others do not. He does not minimize our sufferings but moves to meet us in them. He remembers us. Seeing God in this pain is possible, insofar as we are willing to pour out our pain upon and to Him. It is in our pouring out that we find God pouring in, filling us with hope, joy, and the experience of His transforming presence.

Finding God in the Ordinary

Discussion Guide 1

1 Samuel 1.1-20

Getting Started: 10 minutes

- Describe a time when you were hurt growing up.

Diving Into the Text: 60 minutes *(The following questions are intended to provide your group with a simple road map through the text. Feel free to use these questions in ways that best fit your group and the dynamics of your own meeting.)*

Setting the Stage: *Where is God? No really, where is God? Where is God in the good stuff? Where is He in the bad stuff? Where is He? Life seems to march on, day after day. Life seems so ordinary, so mundane, so much like, well, life. Where is God in all of it? We all ask this question at points in our lives. Time marches on and many times we feel as if we march with it, alone. Perhaps at no point do we question more than in our pain. When life hurts, we want to know where God is. We want to know where God is because He certainly couldn't be present. If He was present we wouldn't be hurting. Right? I mean, if God really loves us, if He really is powerful, if He really is present then we wouldn't hurt. So, if we hurt, then something must be awry. Maybe God isn't who we thought He was. Maybe, He isn't where we thought He was. Or could it be that He is something other altogether? Could it be that God is present, present in the ordinary things of life, even the hurts and we just don't see Him? How can that be? How can it be that someone as big as God can be hidden? Maybe He isn't hidden. Maybe, just maybe, we haven't learned yet how to look.*

- Read 1 Samuel 1.1-20
- In what ways and for what reasons did Hannah hurt?
- What responses did people make to Hannah's pain? What effect might these have had?
- In what ways are people around you hurting?
- In what ways, if any, might you be hurting? Can you elaborate?
- In her pain, Hannah poured out her innermost feelings and desires to God. She poured out her pain, asking for God's presence. What difference might God's presence make in the experience of pain? Can you elaborate?
- What might "pouring out pain" to God look like today?
- When was the last time you poured out your pain to God? What happened?
- Group Exercise: Break into pairs or groups of three. Spend some time "pouring out your pain" to God with one another. After this time, come back together for a time of praise and sharing.

Wrapping Up: 20 minutes

- Prayer requests
- Group Prayer time
- House-keeping matters (assignments for the next meeting)