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God's Answer to a Culture in Crisis

1 Samuel

Prayer: *Father, I do thank you for the children, I just thank you for what a blessing it is to see them, I'm just so grateful for them and for those who are looking after them. I just continue to pray, Lord, we are as children before you and we continue to pray for the presence of your Holy Spirit as we open up your word. We pray for the grace that only you can provide and for the Spirit who opens our eyes and we pray that you would give us the ability to make this of permanent value. We pray it in Jesus' name. Amen.*

Well we are starting a brand new series today. Our story starts at the beginning of 1 Samuel which describes the birth of this great prophet.

Israel is just starting to come out of a protracted period that in many ways mirrors the period that we are in right now in 21st century North America. All sense of morality and ethics have broken down and what is put in its place is a mockery of what God intended for his people. And it's best described by this quote in

Judges 21:25. It says: In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.

Well in spite of the grotesque rebellion that Israel had embraced, God still had his hands on her. And one of the forms of rebellion that Israel embraced was a desire for a king, I mean, they were tired of being a theocracy, having God as their titular or head and their actual rulership through judges. And again, these judges were largely military leaders, most of whom had profound moral failings.

1 Samuel describes the birth of the prophet as the beginning of the change of Israel's governance from a theocracy ruled by God through a series of judges like a Samson, Gideon, to a monarchy ruled by God through kings like Saul and David.

Time and again Israel had rejected God's rule and now found itself longing for a king. So in a place and time ruled by corruption and debauchery we now find God actively at work in the lives of two people who are effecting that change, two people who would change the face of Israel forever.

And so we pick up on 1 Samuel chapter 1, verse 1. It says: *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. 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.

I figured this is as good a time as any to address the theological elephant in the room, and that's the fact that Elkanah had two wives. And I think that brings up a much bigger question. The question is: Why is it that God seems to acquiesce on this whole issue of polygamy? I mean, it seems strange when we know the very first man and woman, Adam and Eve, they were the architect and model of what God wanted marriage to be and that is first and foremost between a man and a woman. I mean *Genesis 2:24* says: *Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.*

Well thousands of years later the Lord Jesus was confronted by a number of religious leaders who were demanding to know what his position was on divorce. And you see, at that time there were two very different schools of thought about divorce laws that Moses had spoken of in Deuteronomy. There was a liberal interpretation and there was a conservative interpretation. And the literal interpretation was that Moses said a man could divorce his wife for any infraction whatsoever, including burning a meal or speaking too

loudly. The conservative interpretation was that divorce would only be acceptable if there was marital infidelity.

So once again these Pharisees, they're approaching Jesus and they don't really have a legitimate desire to have a question answered, they really want to trap him between two different opinions. And no matter which opinion he affirmed, he was bound to make enemies with those from the other side. But no matter to Jesus. He made his position crystally clear. In *Matthew 19* it says: *He answered, "Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, 'Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'? So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate."*

Well the religious leaders were once again deeply disappointed because Jesus had once again made them look foolish. And so they protested. *They said to him, "Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?" He said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. And I say to you: Whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery."*

You see, both Moses and Jesus allowed for divorce but not as an escape clause for men but as a protection for women from the wickedness of men who would put them away for the slightest infraction.

You have to understand, the social structure in Israel at the time was completely organized around stable families having as many children as possible. You see, it was a stable family with many children that provided the labor force in a largely agrarian culture as well as a means of protecting mom and dad when they grew too old to provide for themselves. And to be suddenly cut out of that system at the whim of a husband who no longer appreciated your cooking was to turn someone loose with no protection whatsoever, no social security, no government benefits, no home, no future.

You see, it was the hardness of heart indeed that had God allowing for social structures such as multiple marriages. And it's certainly not something God approved of but God allowed, considering the hardness of man's heart. Nowhere in scripture are you ever going to find God approving of polygamy. And in this case that we're looking at this morning, it's no different. What is different though is the reason why Elkanah had two wives. It wasn't about burning dinner, it was actually about producing children.

And when we compare cultures, we see that even now the 21st century, childlessness is an extraordinarily difficult path that many couples find themselves in. Well in ancient Israel childlessness was an even more profound problem. Women whose wombs were closed, they were considered disgraced. They were considered dishonored. Barrenness was a sign of God's displeasure to many, but more than anything it was a recipe for economic disaster to a family that relied on children as the one source of personal wealth and security in old age. But it wasn't just children who were critical, it was sons.

Carolyn James writes in *The Gospel of Ruth*: "In patriarchal cultures, sons are prized. Daughters are not. A daughter leaves to build another man's house. But a son will carry on his father's name, build his father's house, and inherit his father's wealth. A man must have a son. If his wife lets him down in this, his family will press him to discard her – either by divorce or polygamy – and find another wife who can produce a son. His relatives depend on him to perpetuate the family name and solidify them economically for another generation. He depends on his wife to save his honor and preserve his name. If she fails, he will do whatever it takes to fulfill his duty and protect himself. The same desperate quest for sons dominates the landscape of the Bible. Hannah didn't pray for any child. She wept and pleaded for a son.

Jacob's wives, Leah and Rachel, were in an all-out war to see who could produce the greatest number of sons for their husband. Dinah, the one daughter mentioned, is Leah's disappointing seventh child – the girl who cheated her mother out of the crowning achievement of producing seven sons. When the aging Elizabeth finally conceives, she recalls her decades of barrenness as a time of public 'disgrace' or 'shame' from which God has finally delivered her (Luke 1:25). Her words reveal the inescapable stigma and mental anguish attached to childlessness."

(James, Carolyn Custis. The Gospel of Ruth (pp. 77-78). Zondervan Academic. Kindle Edition.)

Well the reason why Elkanah had a second wife was because he absolutely had to produce children to survive economically. And it's surely not the very first time that men have taken desperate measures to, as it were, force God's hands when it comes to children.

I mean, we saw this with Abraham. Remember, God promises him a child; and after many, many years of not seeing that promise fulfilled, Abraham decides what, he's going to produce that child himself through his maid Hagar. She gave birth to Ishmael who is the father of the Arab nations, while Sarah, Abraham's other wife, gave birth to Isaac who is the father of the Jewish nations. The

result of that disastrous decision is still being played out today. In fact just this week, we saw the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Jewish nation of Israel recapitulating the bitterness and the enmity that existed ever since Isaac and Ishmael went their separate ways.

And as we'll see in the following text this morning God was still at work. Elkanah clearly loved his wife Hannah actually much more so than his second wife Peninnah who was there primarily to produce children.

And so speaking of Elkanah, our text says in verse 3: *Now this man used to go up year by year from his city to worship and to sacrifice to the LORD of hosts at Shiloh, where the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were priests of the LORD.* Now Eli was the high priest at the time and his sons were priests as well, they just happened to be profoundly corrupt. And again, remember, God is speaking about a time when Israel's just starting to make a turn from absolute corruption. Eli the high priest, he allowed his sons to run rampant until God finally put an end to them, but they're emblematic of the state of Israel at the time.

Verse 4 says: *On the day when Elkanah sacrificed, he would give portions to Peninnah his wife and to all her sons and daughters.*

But to Hannah he gave a double portion, because he loved her, though the LORD had closed her womb. And again, if this sounds familiar it's because once again we're seeing a certain pattern recapitulated and it all stems from a failure to be willing to do things God's way. I mean, It's the same pattern of bitter competition that we saw between Rachel and Leah and it was over the very same issue, it was over child bearing.

If you remember, Jacob loved Rachel but he was tricked by his uncle Laban into marrying Leah instead. And he wound up marrying both and it created enormous problems. See, it so happened that Leah was able to have children and Rachel wasn't. *Genesis 30 says: When Rachel saw that she bore Jacob no children, she envied her sister. She said to Jacob, "Give me children, or I shall die!" Jacob's anger was kindled against Rachel, and he said, "Am I in the place of God, who has withheld from you the fruit of the womb?"*

And so we see the exact same pattern of bitterness and jealousy that existed between Rachel and Leah who were sisters, well that's repeating itself now between Hannah and Peninnah.

Verse 6 says: *And her rival used to provoke her grievously to irritate her, because the LORD had closed her womb. 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.

You see, Peninnah clearly met with what the culture considered to be the most important requirement for a wife: she bore children for Elkanah. It certainly could not have escaped her though that Elkanah's love was for Hannah. And so this was a deep-seated conflict that has no simple solution.

Verse 8 says: *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?"* Now, this comment may be thousands and thousands of years old but its 21st century equivalent is a complaint I hear constantly from wives about husbands, perhaps even my wife about her husband. You see, Elkanah has this typically male reaction, which is a male reaction to a crushing female dilemma, and that is minimize it intellectually and just sweep it a way emotionally. I mean, I can just imagine a distraught Hannah thinking, thank you, Elkanah, for pointing out to me that my grief is actually silly because after all, I've got the equivalent of ten sons. I've got you. Somehow or other I can't help but think Elkanah's remarks missed the mark.

Verse 9 says: *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. She was deeply distressed and prayed to the LORD and wept bitterly. 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."

Well the one thing we know about Hannah's situation is that this took a long time to develop, and as always the case when couples have infertility issues, I mean, it takes time to realize that pregnancy isn't happening. Clearly Hannah has been petitioning God with no positive answer for quite some time now. Hindsight gives us the ability to realize that God intended to use Samuel to turn the whole nation of Israel around, reshape its politics, its future and its destiny.

So we ask the question then why is God hesitating to answer Hannah's prayer? I mean this isn't biological misfortune. This is literally the hand of God. Time and again scripture refers to infertility as God closing the womb. We've certainly seen in scripture God's inscrutable ways of closing the wombs of women and we see that he's done it often with women in particular that he loved greatly. We look at Sarah, Rebecca, Elizabeth, Rachel, Hannah, all of them were chosen by God and every one of them

experienced God closing their wombs. And again, this is not just a personal tragedy. In this culture this is economic destruction.

You know, in reading about Hannah's struggle I couldn't help but think about another woman who had a similar struggle that we looked at many, many years back. Remember we did the study on Ruth. And if you remember, it started out with Naomi and her husband Elimelech and they're leaving Israel because they have to go to another place, they just simply have to economically. They go to a cursed place named Moab. And as I pointed out back then, this is not like a couple retiring to Florida because of the sunshine. Literally Israel's in the middle of a severe and profound drought and moving to Moab is Naomi and Elimelech's bid to survive. But we also know that Moab was a bitter enemy of Israel.

I've never been in a place that would be openly hostile to me based solely on where I was from, but that was clearly the case in Moab. But there's good news for Naomi, and the good news is she's not going to this foreign place alone, at least she has a family. She has achieved what for a woman in her time and her place was the mark of significance. It was proof positive that she had value, that she had worth, that her personhood was genuine and secure. She had been able to produce not just one but two sons for her husband Elimelech.

So leaving Israel, Naomi, has -- she has two sons, and again they were her social security, they were her future, they were mentally, physically, spiritually and financially everything that she needed; and within one sentence we learn that they are gone and so is her husband. *Ruth 1:5* says: *And both Mahlon and Chilion -- that's the boys -- both Mahlon and Chilion died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband.*

Well the scripture doesn't give a timeline or even mention how it happened but the bottom line is that the worst nightmare Naomi could have ever imagined at any time during her marriage to Elimelech has now come to pass. The unthinkable has actually happened.

And again Carolyn James points out that if you compare her situation to what everybody considers to be the absolute worst and that's Job, well she compares Job and she sees both Naomi and Job losing their families, their fortunes and their futures, but she points out that at least Job had friends. At least he had his reputation and a chance to rebuild his future, but none of that existed for Naomi. See, her family, her fortune and her future had all gone into the grave with her husband and her two sons. And all that was left for her now were two Moabite women who also now had the social status of widows. These were her daughters-in-law. And

somehow the text doesn't point it out but it's obvious that her two daughters-in-law, Ruth and Orpah, they've been married for years but they didn't produce a grandson or a granddaughter. So in short Naomi's daughters-in-law are not only bereft of husbands but they're barren as well. And in that time and in that culture it's hard to imagine a more dreadful set of circumstances.

I mean is it any wonder that Naomi in bewailing her circumstances to her daughters-in-law describes her misfortune as her inability to produce sons. *Ruth 1:11*, she's saying to her daughters-in-law who were trying to accompany her, she says: *"Turn back, my daughters; why will you go with me? Have I yet sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? Turn back, my daughters; go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. If I should say I have hope, even if I should have a husband this night and should bear sons, would you therefore wait till they were grown? Would you therefore refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, for it is exceedingly bitter to me for your sake that the hand of the LORD has gone out against me."*

What's the source of Naomi's agony? It's no different than Hannah's. It goes back to sons. I mean, we've certainly seen in scripture God's inscrutable ways in closing the wombs of women that he viewed mightily. We have Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, Elizabeth,

Ruth and now Hannah. And the one thing that links every one of these women together is that God in each case is doing a major work in their lives. These were pivotal women with a pivotal role in producing the very leaders who would rule Israel. And God took every one of them to the place where they knew their only hope was in God. I mean God had always planned on Samuel to lead the nation of Israel in a different direction from the mess that it found itself in, but what he waited for was for Hannah to reach a place where she was so willing to trust God for the outcome that she promised Samuel's life would be wholly dedicated to him.

I mean, could God have simply raised up Samuel as an adult, miraculously assign him that task? Well, of course he could. But that's not how God works. God was absolutely doing a work in Hannah's life bringing her to a place where her trust in God and her desire to have a son reached the exact point where she was willing to dedicate his entire life to God.

Verse 12 says: *As she continued praying before the LORD, Eli observed her mouth. 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. And Eli said to her, "How long will you go on being drunk? Put your wine away from you." But Hannah answered, "No, my lord, I am a woman troubled in spirit. I have drunk*

neither wine nor strong drink, but I have been pouring out my soul before the LORD. Do not regard your servant as a worthless woman, for all along I have been speaking out of my great anxiety and vexation." Then Eli answered, "Go in peace, and the God of Israel grant your petition that you have made to him."

In a sense you could see Eli, this is Israel's high priest, he's representing just how far off this nation had become. I mean, he's watching Hannah pour out her heart directly to God and his conclusion is she's drunk. Hannah corrects Eli and he leaves her with a perfunctory blessing but something has actually changed in Hannah. We look at verse 18 and it says: *And she said, "Let your servant find favor in your eyes." Then the woman went her way and ate, and her face was no longer sad.*

Big changes have taken place in Hannah. Hannah has done exactly what Paul tells us to do that we need to do when we are heavily burdened by unanswered prayer.

This is what Paul tells us in *Philippians 4:6*. He says: *Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.* Not because you

made your prayer request just like the prosperity preachers want you to make it and not because you checked all the right religious boxes, that's not this at all. It's because you know that God is in control and you know that God loves you and that regardless of the outcome of your request you can know that God wants your best and his glory to come out of this. And we know that Hannah found that peace because the text says that her face was no longer sad and that she finally started eating. Remember Elkanah was distressed by the fact that she was so anxious, she was so distraught she wouldn't eat. Well now he's taken that burden off herself and placed it where it belongs, she's placed it on God.

And you know, Jesus raises an obvious question to us about that burden in *Luke 12:25*. He says: *"And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life? If then you are not able to do as small a thing as that, why are you anxious about the rest?"*

So the question raises itself: What do you do when you're heavily burdened about something? Do you fret? Do you worry? Do you play scenes over and over again in your head, each time hoping for a better or different outcome? I think every one of us knows what it's like to have your stomach tied in knots over something that you have little or no power over. Well what Hannah is

demonstrating to us is that giving something over completely to God can and will give you genuine peace.

So we pick up at verse 19. It says: *They rose early in the morning and worshiped before the LORD; then they went back to their house at Ramah. And Elkanah knew Hannah his wife, and the LORD remembered her. 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."* The man Elkanah and all his house went up to offer to the LORD the yearly sacrifice and to pay his vow. But Hannah did not go up, for she said to her husband, "As soon as the child is weaned, I will bring him, so that he may appear in the presence of the LORD and dwell there forever." Elkanah her husband said to her, "Do what seems best to you; wait until you have weaned him; only, may the LORD establish his word." So the woman remained and nursed her son until she weaned him. And when she had weaned him, she took him up with her, along with a three-year-old bull, an ephah of flour, and a skin of wine, and she brought him to the house of the LORD at Shiloh. And the child was young.

Well it's estimated that young Samuel was probably about three years of age when Hannah took him up to dedicate his entire life to serving the Lord in the temple. Now she would be putting him in the care of the very same men who so grossly misinterpreted her

pleas to God that he thought she was drunk. There's no way Hannah could possibly do that without fully and completely trusting in the sovereignty of God.

Verse 25 says: *Then they slaughtered the bull, and they brought the child to Eli. And she said, "Oh, my lord! As you live, my lord, I am the woman who was standing here in your presence, praying to the LORD. For this child I prayed, and the LORD has granted me my petition that I made to him. Therefore I have lent him to the LORD. As long as he lives, he is lent to the LORD." And he worshiped the LORD there.*

You see, Hannah had received the answer to her prayers. She received an additional answer, God indeed opened her womb and she would go on to have many other children. And you know, it's easy to see these kind of stories and say, well, you know, this is thousands of years ago, this is ancient stories designed to show us how God dealt with saints of old. But I'd like to fast forward a couple thousand of years to a story of a different couple taking a totally different kind of stress before the very same living God with the same attitude and how they got the very same response.

I have to tell you, I'm not a very big fan of golf but lots of the folks in my family are. And we wound up last Sunday watching the

most prestigious golf tournament of the year, the Masters tournament. And the winner of that golf outing and incidentally its \$4 million prize was a man named Scottie Scheffler. One of the things about this particular golfer is how straight-faced, how unemotional he is as he goes about his game. I mean, you watch him on the TV and he doesn't budge, he doesn't crack a smile, he's just kind of straight forward, and he looks like he's as cool and calm as can be, and apparently that appearance couldn't be further from the truth.

Spectrum magazine noted what happened to him that very day. It said: "A picture of calm and collected all week, Scheffler said he was a mess Sunday morning. 'I cried like a baby this morning,' he said in the press conference. 'I was so stressed out. I didn't know what to do. I was sitting there telling Meredith'" -- his wife -- "'I don't think I'm ready for this. I'm not ready, I don't feel like I'm ready for this kind of stuff,' and I just felt overwhelmed."

So here we have Scottie completely overwhelmed just like Hannah was, and understandably so, I mean, the eyes of the entire world were on him. And you know golf is a game in which stress is a major player. And here he's saying the stress is clearly overwhelming. Well, his wife Meredith directs his focus in the

most wonderful way. "She told me, 'Who are you to say that you are not ready? Who am I to say that I know what's best for my life?' And so what we talked about is that God is in control and that the Lord is leading me; and if today is my time, it's my time. And if I shot 82" -- by the way, 82 is a horrible score -- "if I shot 82 today, you know, somehow I was going to use it for His glory."

And so what I learned about Scheffler is that, first of all, he's a committed Christian and second of all his wife Meredith was upholding him constantly in prayer. Again, this is not the kind of prayer that the prosperity preachers preach where you line all your ducks up and you force God to do whatever you want. It's the kind of prayer that Hannah prayed. That's, "Lord, I'm giving my future directly into your hands. I'm trusting you for the outcome."

CBS News said this about Scheffler, said: "Scheffler is guided by his Christian faith, about which he has become increasingly vocal. He spoke about it before the tournament started. About how he is not defined by his golf score or his success but rather his faith. Inverse to the control he exerts over his game and emotions during tournaments, he has seemingly ceded control of everything else, both on and off the course. 'I believe that today's plans were already laid out many years ago, and I could do nothing to mess up those plans,' Scheffler said Sunday after becoming the 10th golfer

in history to win two green jackets in a three-year span. 'I have been given a gift of this talent, and I use it for God's glory. That's pretty much it.' While Scheffler is not devoted to his faith for the purpose of winning golf tournaments -- quite the opposite, in fact - in listening to him speak about it, one would find it difficult for a golfer to have a better mindspace. He holds the line between 'cares a lot' and 'identity not tethered to outcome' perfectly. This is not a state of mind he works hard on adopting like other golfers; it's simply his belief system. It's who he is."

You see, "cares a lot" means you put maximum effort into everything that you do but "identity not tethered to outcome" means that you've already given that outcome completely over to the hand of God, trusting that he's going to work all things out for your good and His glory. And that works from Hannah to Scottie, from childbirth to golf games. You know, there was nobody who cared more than Hannah about her childlessness and we've seen the havoc that it reeked economically, psychologically and spiritually, yet we saw Hannah give it to God completely. Once again verse 18: *And she said, "Let your servant find favor in your eyes." Then the Woman went her way and ate, and her face was no longer sad.*

Well, in a press conference after the Masters Scheffler himself

said this: "The reason why I play golf is I'm trying to glorify God and all that He's done in my life," he said. "So for me, my identity isn't a golf score. Like Meredith told me this morning, 'If you win this golf tournament today, if you lose this golf tournament by 10 shots, if you never win another golf tournament again,' she goes, 'I'm still going to love you, you're still going to be the same person, Jesus loves you and nothing changes.' All I'm trying to do is glorify God and that's why I'm here and that's why I'm in this position."

See, whether it's Hannah and Elkanah or Scottie Scheffler and his wife Meredith, it doesn't matter win or lose, the issues remain the same and our responses to those issues remain the same.

And so you might be saying, okay, well, what does ancient Israel and a test of faith have to do with the Masters tournament? Well, first of all, you know, I hear people complain about athletes giving their testimony to Christ. I've heard people say oh, that's just a performance, you see that all the time. I wonder how many times those folks go to their place of work and stand up in front of their peers and explain that Jesus Christ is their Lord and Savior. Until you've done that yourself, I don't think you're in any position to complain about somebody else doing it regardless of whether or not they're a professional athlete.

You see, we live in a culture today that has unprecedented wealth and unprecedented prosperity and unprecedented comfort and it's still legal and okay to do that. But we also live in a culture that's absolutely collapsing. And it's a culture that's becoming more and more hostile to those who claim Christ as Lord and Savior. So make no mistake about it, there are plenty of people who deeply resent Scottie Scheffler and his wife Meredith for their outspoken faith. These are folks who would like nothing better than to see them fall flat on their face because of it.

You know just last week I was talking about Christi Napier and how God used her response to a medical crisis to help us grow, and one of those responses was the encouragement that she gave us that we can get through any kind of trial with God's grace. And I pointed out that encouragement is actually the act of giving somebody else courage that they might need.

And again, Christi's ability to focus on Christ to get through a medical crisis gave us that courage. If she could do it, perhaps I could do it as well. And that applies to couples who lived thousands of years ago as well, I mean, Hannah's willingness to give her son fully to God at the risk of putting him in the hands of Eli the high priest who couldn't even get her prayer right, well it underscores the 21st century issue that's staring us today right

in the face, and it's something that people are justifiably frightened of. It's something they need to be encouraged in particularly in a collapsing culture, and that's what's the future going to be for my children? For my grandchildren?

What if I told you that a culture that becomes unabashedly anti-Christian, that is a culture that actively persecutes those who name the name of Christ is usually a culture in which the believers of necessity grow stronger and deeper in their relationship in Christ and that includes your children. I mean if you had to choose between the comfort of a culture that we're in right now along with its open perversion and outright rebellion against God that's clearly infecting every single aspect of this culture including its children, or if you were to live in a culture that actively persecuted you and your children for your Christian faith and your comforts were minimized but your faith was strengthened, which one would you opt for?

Do you want you, your family, and your children to experience genuine rejection, hostility and perhaps even persecution if it means their faith and their relationship with Christ will grow ever that much stronger? See, this is a choice that is becoming more and more apparent every day. I mean, you have to be extraordinarily naive not to see the increasing hostility that this

culture has towards Christianity. Grandmas who picketed abortion clinics are now facing years and years in jail while anti-Semitic crowds shut down bridges and universities with absolute impunity.

Just this past week the Department of Education bragged about fining the largest Christian university in the United States \$37 million for a very bizarre rule infraction and has vowed "we're going to shut this school down" while other campuses are erupting with anti-Semitism. No big deal.

I mean, if you're sensing an increasing hostile attitude towards Christianity, you're not mistaken. *Washington Times* reported: "Incidents of arson, vandalism and other hostile acts against U.S. churches rose to at least 436 last year, more than double the number recorded in 2022, the Family Research Council says. In releasing its sixth 'Hostility Against Churches' report during the 2024 National Religious Broadcasters International Christian Media Convention here, the family values advocacy group said the figure is more than eight times the number of incidents recorded in 2018, when it began tracking such incidents. Besides vandalism and arson, acts against congregations included gun-related incidents and bomb threats, among others. The Family Research Council has identified a total of 915 such acts since 2018."

Folks, I could list dozens and dozens of incidents where faith in Christ is coming under blistering attack and I can tell you with absolute certainty it's going to get worse. Chances are your personal situation's going to be somewhere between Hannah and Elkanah and Scottie and Meredith's. And their solutions although separated by thousands and thousands of years and vast differences in cultures was still the same: They put their trust in a sovereign God whose goal it is to seek out their good and his glory.

And so the question you need to ask yourself today is: Am I willing to do the same? Am I willing to welcome the increasing hostility if it draws me and my family closer to Christ?

But then again that brings up a second question. The second question is: How do I know I'm going to be able to stand up for Christ if and when my big challenge comes? Well, actually the answer to that is very simple. Ask yourself how do I stand up to the little challenges today? You see, it was Jesus who said one who is faithful in very little is also faithful in much. And so my challenge to all of us today is to start paying close attention to the little things that are challenging your faith. Practice finding ways to be bolder in the way we live out our ordinary faith in little things, because that's how we grow our capacity for big

things. Ask God for the grace to be bold like Scottie and trusting like Hannah. Let's pray.

Father, I thank you for the example that you've given to us from thousands of years ago and from a week ago. And Lord, I just think of that word encouragement, is to grab, hold on to courage from something else or from someone else. I thank you for Hannah and the encouragement that she is. I thank you for Scottie and Meredith for the encouragement that they are. And I pray that each and every one of us would start realizing that God is actually training us for the big stuff with the little stuff. And so I pray that we would be sensitive to and tuned in to those things that we might dismiss as, oh, that's not a big deal because it is a big deal. Give us the grace, the strength, and the wisdom to treat each and every challenge to our faith as if it is a big deal. And I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.