

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

These questions are designed to help you talk about God's word and Pastor Brian's message with friends and family. You of course can use your own questions, but we'd like to give you this tool to encourage Biblical fellowship and discipleship in your circle of relationships. *Enjoy discovering more about Him!*

"GOD'S GRACE IN A TOXIC PLACE" | 1 SAMUEL 1:1-11 | PASTOR ANDREW PAULSEN

WARM-UP QUESTION:

What's the grossest mess you've ever seen?

"Toxic Home" - (1 Samuel 1: 1-6)

Elkanah, Hannah and Peninnah have an unhealthy relationship. What are toxic situations found in homes today?

"Toxic Advice" - (1 Samuel 1: 7-9a)

Hannah has different voices to listen to in her life that aren't from God. What are different pieces of advice given today?

"Cleansing Prayer" - (1 Samuel 1: 9b-11)

Hannah pours out her heart to God, crying. What are heartfelt prayers you've heard or even said yourself?

REFLECTION QUESTION:

There are many layers to the toxic mess in this family we're reading about: selfishness, jealousy, depression, shame. Have you asked God lately to reveal how your lifestyle and attitude are impacting those around you? Have you poured out your heart to Him in way that shows you trust Him?

God's Grace in a Toxic Place: Part 1

1 Samuel 1:1-11

Intro

Thanks Cameron. And Shane, thank you too. Youth ministry sometimes is on the front lines because our young people are more raw and real about what's going on. It's almost been a full year since schools shut down and all that's gone on during this pandemic. Isn't that crazy?

I'm Andrew Paulsen and I'm the pastor who oversees Community Groups. I also am a high school social studies teacher here locally and my wife Charlotte and I are blessed with 2 boys, which I often talk about if you've been here when I've shared. But the other family member I'm very proud of is my dog, Misha. Due to distance learning, I've been able to take her on walks almost every day, praying and just seeing stuff around the community. You'd think with all of us around more she'd be better off. And in some ways she is: more treats, more pats, more love and attention. But she developed this scab on her head in the middle of all that fluff that just wouldn't go away. So when we took her to groomers, they said they would check it out. When my wife picked Misha up, they said they opened up the wound and cleaned it out... and found fly larvae in there! I know, gross! They said it happens more than you realize, and those bugs actually can help with cleaning the sore, but we took her to the vet to be check over anyways.

But this story in some ways goes with what I would like to share today. Many times things that look fine on the outside are actually diseased and toxic on the inside. I heard a pastor recently share that for many during this past year, their relationships and homelife are like a lake that's been drained and they can see what it's really like under the water: a healthy ecosystem, or a toxic dump. Isn't that the truth, that change and especially crisis can force us to take a hard look at life.

And maybe you struggling with this right now, that you find yourself in a pretty toxic living situation or work environment or relationship. And if not, praise God, but we can often suddenly find ourselves in that kind of mess. So over the next two weeks, I wanted to look at a part of scripture where we see God's Grace in a Toxic Place, the story of Hannah.

Let's Pray

1 Samuel 1: 1-6

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

Toxic Home

The toxic situation we see starts with Elkanah: he has two wives!

And this is especially problematic in some ways because he is Levite, his from the priestly tribe, he was part of the religious leaders of his day. So just like we have famous pastors and priests who abuse and misuse their position to have affairs, so did Israel in its history. Elkanah has created a controversial example for his village.

We also can safely assume Elkanah is wealthy because usually only wealthy men had the resources to support more than one wife, and later in 1 Samuel we see that the sacrifices he brings to the temple in Shiloh are impressive.

The other day I read a short article about a throuple that had been on the popular show House Hunters. Now for those of you who don't know, a throuple is basically polygamy, or today called polyamorous relationship. And the wives in this throuple said so many guys think their husband is lucky, but they are quick to correct: they can be a pain in the butt (to paraphrase). Now today's polygamists pursue it out of pleasure, but was that the same for Elkanah?

Why did Elkanah have 2 wives if he was a priest? Some rabbis around 200 ad wrote in the Midrash and other sources that they believed Elkanah was being like Abraham. To remind many of you, Abraham was the father of Judaism, called out by God to start a new people to worship Him and he was promised an heir. But his wife Sarai could not have children, and they grew tired of waiting for a baby so they set up Abraham to have a child by another woman, Hagar. So for Jews part of protecting your heritage and wealth meant having an heir was super important, and maybe Elkanah had tried with Hannah and gave up, and found Peninnah to get him the heir he wanted, not much different than King Henry VIII if you remember your British history. So like many successful and driven people, he had taken matters into his own hands to get what he thought he had to have. Or maybe he was just showing off his wealth? Or maybe giving into lust? Maybe he couldn't stand having the image of a childless family? Or a combination of all the above, which is usually how sin grows in our lives, we find multiple ways to justify what we want to do. But I think it's safe to assume that he is insensitive and selfish. For whatever the reason, he wasn't satisfied with one wife, he had to have another, no matter what it did to his homelife. And no matter how faithful he has been in going to the temple, giving to the Lord, he has a toxic mess under his roof.

People, we can do all the right things in church, but if we continue to pursue sinful lifestyles, it will begin to show up in our relationships. And for people who say the bible promotes polygamy and polyamorism, they aren't reading the stories completely. Every

polygamist in scripture had a toxic homelife in one way or another. So again, living in sin will show up. If we struggle with greed, it will show up. If we struggle with porn or other forms of sexual immorality, it will show up. If we are more concerned with appearances than true fruit of the spirit, it will show up.

And as I really looked at Elkanah, I couldn't help feel convicted myself. I can be pretty busy, fairly driven, and don't like to wait or miss out. And sometimes I don't slow down to spend time with my wife, or my kids. This may sound weird, but my wife enjoys the days I stay in my pjs and just hang out on the couch with her much more than the days I get up and workout and accomplish my to do list. Why? Because instead of focusing on my goals and my agenda, I'm putting her first, I'm being WITH her, like the title of the book our church gave out. Elkanah isn't able to be WITH Hannah in her barrenness, he wasn't willing to suffer along side her, his 2nd wife and kids prevents him from truly sympathizing and empathizing with her.

So what do we see in this 2nd wife, Peninnah. Well, both the text and Jewish historians suggest she is the unloved mother of his children. She's been blessed with kids, but Elkanah favors Hannah as we see in the double portion at mealtime. Peninnah has her retirement set, for children are the retirement plan in this society and she has many. In a culture where having many children is the ultimate status and security for a woman, Peninnah has it made, but it's not enough. She bullies Hannah, either out of jealousy that Elkanah still adores her, or she's the type to pounce on someone else's weakness, or maybe both.

Everyone, when you struggle to be satisfied, you usually struggle with jealousy. And jealousy is so poisonous to our relationships with friends, family and co-workers. It can show up in anger and abuse like we see in Peninnah, or as bitterness and being sullen.

And Hannah? She's depressed and bullied. Constant reminders of her barrenness has created a strong sense of shame. Today we would say she's suffering from anxiety and depression based on her lack of eating and emotional breakdowns that we'll see in a minute. She's bullied in her own home, constantly, for years. The whole town knows its her problem: Elkanah proved that by taking another wife and having children. So in their culture, she's a failure, cursed. Even the kind gestures of her husband are reminders that she has no children to hug, no future security, a reputation of a loser because why else would he give her a double portion? His pity is no comfort. Her womb is barren, she's been betrayed by her husband, bullied by her rival, and abandoned by her community, and nowhere to go.

See the toxic mess?! So many of you can relate to feeling trapped by your body, your workplace, your school, your relationships. You have no escape. What can be done? Well, we'll see the first step.

1 Samuel 1: 7-9a

. 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?" After they had eaten and drunk in Shiloh, Hannah rose.

Toxic Advice

So a long while ago, my wife came home from work all frustrated with stuff that had happened there. So I tried to help by offering to make dinner, no, I just want to make it. So then I did the dishes, tried to play with our boys. She layed down. I offered to give her a back rub, foot rub. No, I'm fine. No, it's ok. I then made my mistake: What's wrong? What did I do?

Andrew, sometimes it's not all about you. You know what's wrong, I had a terrible day at work, I'm frustrated. You can't do anything to fix it right now!

I may have made it all about me, but Elkanah is showing the same self-centeredness. He basically is saying, Boo, I love you, don't cry, she's doesn't mean anything to me, she's just my baby momma. Which of course is no help! But he represents the advice of the world: forget your problems, find satisfaction in pleasure: in food and wine and the arms of someone. That's what the world says to do with toxic relationships, move on and get yours. Quick side note ladies, no man will be able to truly fix the hole in your soul. Hannah may have tried for years to find comfort in her man, but it wasn't enough. Guys, satisfying your selfish desires won't bring you peace. For all Elkanah has achieved and experienced, he can't create the peace he and his family needs. And if you continue to believe that your lover is your everything, you end up doing one of two things: you let yourself be used by them because they've become your master and idol, or you get bitter, angry and maybe even abusive towards them, because they are constantly disappointing you.

Peninnah for a second time is called rival, it also could be translated as adversary. She is constantly poking and jabbing at Hannah's source of shame, reminding her of her failure. It is as if to say, you're worthless, you should just leave, run away, don't come back. And notice how it happens on the way to the temple, near where the family is to worship. The very place that should be a source of comfort has become a place of pain because of the twisted use of these special mealtimes.

You know in 1 Peter 5:8 it says your adversary, the devil, prowls like a lion. I know the original words are from different languages, but the concept is similar. Adversary. Accuser. Satan. He's your true enemy, and he wants you to run away from God, to give up and never come back. And he attacks with twisted versions of the truth, using your own failures and insecurities against you. Isn't that true? Our insecurities and fears are used against us in so many ways. Elkanah's insecurity over his legacy and image had led him into polygamy, Peninnah's insecurities with her husband had led to jealousy and

bullying, and Hannah's insecurities and fears had open the door to attacks that left her too upset to do anything.

This part is my fear as a parent and a husband. That I would somehow make going to church, worshipping God, a source of pain and frustration instead of comfort and joy. Yet, for so many of us, it is our toxic relationships that can be the biggest obstacles to our ability to be with God in spirit and in truth.

So Hannah has the temptation of the world, the voice saying to ignore her pain and problems and satisfy her senses, or the temptation of the devil, the voice saying to give up and go away. But she doesn't follow either. Notice how in the middle of verse 9 it says "Hannah rose... Period" Other versions say she stood up. This isn't just saying she got to her feet, this is an idiom. Just like in English we say stand up for yourself doesn't literally mean to rise from a chair but to defend yourself, this has a similar meaning. It means to take action, to not be passive. Something in Hannah says enough to the lies and to the bullying. So many people share their turning point came when they decided it was enough, like the prodigal son realizing he was living a toxic mess. But's not enough to take charge, to rise. Your course of action matters. So what action does she take?

1 Samuel 1: 9b-11

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."

Cleansing Prayer

Now if this was Hollywood, Hannah would have some great one-liner as she left Elkanah in the room, or she would slap the food out of Peninnah's hand, or maybe Peninnah herself. But no, Hannah goes to the temple and prays. Do you see the courage here? The very place where she has been bullied, constantly reminded of her shame by her adversary, she goes back to and pours out her heart to God. Despite all her shame and constant ridicule and feeling God has caused this failure, she prays.

And I love her honesty in her prayer. She is desperate with tears and weeping and she asks God to show her favor. You know, that's what Hannah means, favored one. God, I was taught that I was loved, that I had your favor as your daughter, but I don't feel like it. My body won't work, I'm trapped with my bully, my community sees me as a loser. Please, remember me. Please see my problem!

She's gone from wanting a son to wanting salvation, from wanting a baby to take home to wanting God to take away her shame. This time, God isn't a genie in a bottle who gives her what she wants but He's become her source for life. To show that, she's willing to give back the son she wants. She's not looking for a son to fulfill her, to hug

her, to take care of her in old age, but for God to make her clean and whole by giving her a son. See the difference?

The reason I say that is because at the end of her vow, she says no razor will touch his head. In other words, he will be a Nazirite, a man dedicated to God. Which means he will stay at the temple, not in her house, He will serve God without many possessions and not be able to take care of her in her old age. Hannah is looking for God to meet her in her pain and to take away her shame as only He can.

And like Hannah, our source of shame and pain can only be taken care of by God. Hannah was willing to give up all her hopes and dreams with her firstborn son to be able to have her shame taken away by God, to be right with Him. And that foreshadows what God would do for all of us, he would send his one and only son to take away all the sins of the world by dying the death we deserved that we might live the life he lived. And because Jesus came and died and rose again, despite all the toxic mess we've made of our lives, that others have put in our homes, we can still approach God, broken and crying and know that God loves us and hears us. So like Hannah, will you rise, stand up? Maybe literally, maybe figuratively, but will you take action, not to fix yourself, but to meet with God. Maybe you need to confess your selfishness, your insensitivity, that you've been a bully, that've given into jealousy and anger. That you made it hard for others to worship, that you've been listening to the world, to the lies of the enemy. Before we have communion, let's have a time of honest prayer. And if you struggle to have the words, let Romulo and the music team lead you with this song. And if you can't sing along, ask someone next to you to pray for you. And if you can't even ask, allow God's Holy Spirit to intercede for you. God desires a broken heart, a humble heart as the Psalmist writes. But let's rise, and pour out our heart to Him.

Let's pray

We will continue our study of Hannah next week, but if you peak ahead, after she poured out her heart to God, before she ever heard an answer to her prayer, she felt peace and was able to eat. And after so many of you have poured out your heart, we are going to eat the Lord's supper. But don't feel like you have to. Maybe you still need to work things out with someone, to talk things over. Scripture warns of taking communion in an unworthy manner, and there's no shame in not taking communion, it's being honest about where your heart is at. But at the same time, remember, this meal is for sinners, not superheroes. By taking eating the bread and drinking the juice, we admit our need for Jesus.

on the night when Jesus was betrayed he took bread, ²⁴ and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, "This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me."

²⁵ In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me."

Instagram Survey: What stories of grace in toxic places can you share?

What questions about prayer in tough times do you have?

Info Booth.