

Homiletics Analysis: 1 Samuel 1

Content & Intent

This Text — Content

First Samuel 1 opens the narrative of Samuel's birth by placing the reader inside a household fracture: Elkanah has two wives, Hannah and Peninnah, and the LORD has closed Hannah's womb. Peninnah provokes Hannah year after year; Elkanah's well-meaning but obtuse attempts at comfort only deepen her sense of isolation. The narrative pivots at the sanctuary in Shiloh, where Hannah breaks from the family meal and pours out her soul before the LORD in a vow-prayer — asking specifically for a son and pledging to give him back to God as a Nazirite. Eli the priest first misreads her (accusing her of drunkenness), then blesses her when corrected. Hannah's countenance changes before she receives any answer — she eats, and her face is no longer downcast. The LORD remembers her, she conceives, and she bears Samuel. The chapter closes with her fulfilling her vow: she presents the weaned child to Eli at Shiloh, and her brief explanatory speech identifies Samuel as the answer to her prayer, returned to the LORD for as long as he lives.

This Text — Intent

God is seeking to show the reader that genuine, unguarded, vow-laden prayer addressed to the LORD of Hosts — prayer born from real anguish, specific need, and willingness to relinquish the very thing being asked for — is not an embarrassment but the appointed path through which God acts in history. The chapter intends to produce in the reader both a reorientation of how they pray (from managed petition to unguarded, costly trust) and a recognition that God's sovereign purposes are not thwarted by barrenness, provocation, or institutional blindness — they move forward precisely through the broken and overlooked.

Subject Sentence: Hannah's desperate, vow-laden prayer opens the LORD's purposes for all Israel.

Primary Claim: God is demonstrating that He works through the desperate and overlooked — and that prayer which costs something, made in genuine trust, is the means He appoints for bringing His purposes to birth.

Interpretive Evaluation

The nature of Hannah's prayer and vow

The most significant interpretive question in this chapter concerns how to read Hannah's vow. Some traditions, particularly those with strong voluntarist or pietist emphases, treat Hannah's vow as the model of human initiative that "moves God to act" — as though the vow itself is the mechanism that unlocks divine response. This reading tilts toward a transactional theology of prayer: if your request is desperate enough, your commitment weighty enough, God will comply. This should be *qualified*. Hannah's vow is not absent from the Reformed reading, but it is read within a framework where God's sovereign elective purpose has already been set in motion. The vow is the human form that genuine trust takes — not a negotiating lever but an act of relinquishment that demonstrates Hannah's prayer is not about self-fulfillment. She asks for a son precisely to give him away.

The closed womb — divine sovereignty vs. natural misfortune

The text is explicit: "the LORD had closed her womb" (1:5, 6). Arminian and Wesleyan readings often soften this or read it as God permitting a natural condition rather than actively ordaining it. The text does not permit this softening — the narrator states it as a simple causal fact on two occasions. The Reformed reading *affirms* what the text states directly: God's sovereign governance extends to biological particularity, and the suffering this produces is real but purposeful. This is not a peripheral interpretive point — it is the theological engine of the entire narrative. If the womb closes by nature and God responds to prayer by opening it, then God is reactive. If God closes the womb and opens it in response to prayer, then God is orchestrating a specific providential movement in which Hannah's anguish and prayer are the appointed human means of a divinely purposed outcome.

Eli's role — institutional failure and its limits

Eli's misreading of Hannah functions in the narrative as a minor foil — the institutional religious structure is partially blind. Several Baptist and free-church interpreters rightly note this as a signal that access to God is not mediated through priestly competence. This *acknowledgment* is worth retaining: Hannah's prayer is addressed directly to the LORD of Hosts, not to Eli, and Eli's blessing at the end functions as priestly confirmation, not as the mechanism of answer. The Reformed reading agrees with this but does not use it to evacuate the role of the gathered community or the means of grace — Shiloh is still where the household comes to worship, and the vow is fulfilled there.

The Nazirite dedication and Samuel's subsequent ministry

Dispensational interpreters sometimes read Hannah's vow primarily as an anticipation of Samuel's prophetic office and transition from the period of the judges, with less attention to the passage's immediate theological force. While canonical placement matters (and is addressed in Key Canonical Support), the chapter makes its own complete claim: the

section does not require reading forward to Samuel's prophetic career to be complete. Read it first on its own terms.

Key Canonical Support

- **Genesis 18:9–14; 21:1–7** — Sarah's barrenness and Isaac's birth is the primal template: the LORD closes and opens wombs for covenantal purpose; Hannah's situation reads as a deliberate echo, placing Samuel's birth within the redemptive-historical pattern of God's people emerging from impossibility.
 - **Genesis 30:1–2, 22–24** — Rachel's closed womb and the birth of Joseph: "God remembered Rachel" (30:22) prefigures "the LORD remembered Hannah" (1 Sam. 1:19) — the verb *zakar* (remember) signals covenantal attention and saving action, not mere recollection.
 - **Luke 1:5–25, 46–55** — Elizabeth's barrenness and the birth of John the Baptist, together with Mary's Magnificat, echoes Hannah's situation and foreshadows her prayer in chapter 2; the pattern of God choosing the overlooked, closing and opening the womb, and raising up voices to prepare His people runs from Samuel through John to Christ.
 - **Psalms 113:7–9** — "He gives the barren woman a home, making her the joyful mother of children" — the psalm canonizes the Hannah-pattern as a statement of God's character: He lifts the poor from the ash heap and the barren from her shame; this is what the LORD of Hosts does.
 - **Romans 4:17–21** — Abraham's faith toward the God "who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist" — the theological structure underlying Hannah's story: genuine faith addresses what is humanly impossible and trusts the God for whom barrenness is not an obstacle.
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Aim: To show that the appointed path through which God moves His purposes forward is not institutional competence or managed religion but costly, unguarded, vow-laden prayer from those whose need has stripped away every pretense.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1–2	Elkanah introduced — family, tribe, two wives; Peninnah has children,	Narrative sets the structural tension immediately: two wives, one fruitful, one

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
3	Hannah has none Annual pilgrimage to Shiloh; Elkanah worships and sacrifices to the LORD of Hosts	barren “LORD of Hosts” (<i>YHWH Tsabaoth</i>) — the title Hannah will use in her vow; a God of sovereign armies
4–5	Elkanah distributes portions; Hannah receives a double portion because he loves her, but the LORD had closed her womb	The double portion is love expressed economically; it does not resolve the real need; v.5 places responsibility for the closed womb explicitly with God
6	Peninnah provokes Hannah severely “because the LORD had closed her womb”	The narrator repeats the divine causation; Peninnah’s cruelty exploits a God-ordained condition
7	Year after year this pattern repeats; Hannah weeps and will not eat	The chronic, compounding nature of the suffering — not a single crisis but a sustained condition
8	Elkanah’s question: “Why do you weep? Am I not more to you than ten sons?”	Well-intentioned but obtuse; Elkanah offers himself as a substitute for what Hannah grieves; love cannot replace the specific need God has placed on her heart
9–10	After eating and drinking at Shiloh, Hannah rises and goes to the temple; she is “deeply distressed” and “wept bitterly” and prayed to the LORD	The pivot of the chapter: she moves from the table to the sanctuary; the language is of maximum emotional extremity
11	Hannah’s vow: if You give me a son, I will give him to the LORD all his days; no razor shall touch his head	The vow combines the Nazirite dedication (Numbers 6) with absolute relinquishment — she asks for what she will immediately return
12–14	Eli observes Hannah’s lips moving; concludes she is drunk; rebukes her	Institutional blindness: the priest cannot read genuine prayer; he mistakes intensity

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
15–16	Hannah corrects Eli: she has not been drinking but “pouring out her soul before the LORD” — she is a woman “deeply troubled” and “of great anxiety and vexation”	for intoxication Hannah’s self-description is theologically precise: her prayer is soul-poured, not performance
17	Eli’s blessing: “Go in peace, and the God of Israel grant your petition that you have made to him”	Eli’s role shifts from accuser to blesser; he functions now as priestly confirmation, not cause
18	Hannah’s countenance changes; she eats; her face is no longer downcast	The transformation precedes the answer — she acts in faith before any biological change; this is the narrative’s quiet theological peak
19–20	The family returns home; Elkanah knows his wife; the LORD remembers Hannah; she conceives and bears a son; she names him Samuel — “I have asked for him from the LORD”	<i>Zakar</i> — covenantal remembrance; Samuel’s name (<i>Shemu’el</i>) is interpreted as related to asking/hearing
21–23	Elkanah returns for the annual sacrifice; Hannah stays back with the nursing child; tells Elkanah she will bring Samuel when weaned and then he will remain before the LORD forever; Elkanah defers and blesses her; the LORD establishes His word	Elkanah’s deference is notable — he submits to Hannah’s judgment on the timing; God is described as actively confirming the plan
24–28	After weaning, Hannah brings Samuel to Shiloh with substantial offerings; she presents him to Eli and identifies herself as the woman who prayed; she	The fulfillment is exact and intentional: she gives back exactly what she asked for; the word <i>sha’al</i> (ask/lend) creates wordplay with Samuel’s name and appears

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	declares Samuel to be the answer to her prayer, lent/returned to the LORD for as long as he lives	three times in vv. 27–28

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	1–8	The Barren Household — suffering, provocation, and the limits of human comfort
2	9–18	The Vow-Prayer — Hannah pours out her soul before the LORD of Hosts
3	19–20	The Divine Response — the LORD remembers Hannah
4	21–28	The Returned Gift — Hannah fulfills her vow and presents Samuel to the LORD

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: Hannah’s desperate, vow-laden prayer opens the LORD’s purposes for all Israel.

Primary Claim: God is demonstrating that He works through the desperate and overlooked — and that prayer which costs something, made in genuine trust, is the means He appoints for bringing His purposes to birth.

Applications (Five)

1. Reframe what God is doing in your unanswered need. (*Mind/Belief*) The narrator tells us twice that “the LORD had closed her womb.” If God has closed a door in your life — in your marriage, your ministry, your career, your longing for a child — the text refuses to let you call it merely a circumstance, bad luck, or someone else’s failure. It is the LORD’s doing, which means it is not arbitrary, not blind, and not the end of the story. The suffering is real; the closure is intentional; and God knows exactly which door He has locked and when He intends to open it. Stop treating your unanswered longing as evidence of divine indifference. It may be evidence of divine purpose you cannot yet see.

2. Let God's apparent silence drive you to unguarded, costly prayer, not away from prayer. (*Will/Behavior*) Peninnah's provocation, Elkanah's inadequate comfort, and Eli's misreading of her all function in the narrative as successive failures of human help — each one strips away another place Hannah might lean other than God. When every human support has revealed its limits, what remains is the LORD of Hosts and a woman who is weeping. Follow her to the sanctuary. Not with managed, respectable petition, but with the kind of prayer that looks a little unhinged from the outside — lips moving, no sound, tears, soul poured out. Hannah teaches us what genuine prayer looks like: it is not composed; it is desperate.

3. Examine whether your prayers ask for things you're willing to give back.

(*Affections/Worship*) Hannah's vow is the interpretive key to her prayer. She does not ask for a son as a possession, a consolation, or a proof that God loves her. She asks for a son specifically to return him to God. This exposes a frequent deformity in our own asking: we want God to give us things for our comfort, our security, our sense of completeness — and we plan to keep them. Hannah's prayer was shaped by worship, not consumption. She wanted a son the way a steward wants a resource to deploy for the master's purposes. Examine what you are asking for and whether your asking would survive the condition "I will give him back."

4. Trust the transformation that precedes the answer. (*Affections/Worship*) Verse 18 is the chapter's most quietly radical moment: Hannah's face changes and she eats before a single biological thing has happened. She has only Eli's blessing and her own prayer. The answer is not yet; the womb is still closed; the situation is externally identical. But she is different. This is what faith looks like in the narrative — it doesn't wait for circumstances to change before its countenance changes. Ask yourself whether your joy, your peace, and your settled spirit are hostage to your circumstances being resolved, or whether you have learned to eat before the answer comes.

5. Bring what God gives you back to Him in concrete, specific act. (*Will/Behavior*)

Hannah does not merely intend to honor her vow — she travels back to Shiloh, brings three-year-old offerings, finds Eli, and puts the child in his hand. The fulfillment of the vow is as specific and costly as the vow itself. There is a lesson here for every person who has cried out in a crisis, made commitments before God, and then quietly let them dissolve when the crisis passed. The resolution of your need is not the end of the story — it is the beginning of the vow's fulfillment. What specific, concrete act of return does God's answer to your prayer require of you?

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: This chapter establishes that God's sovereign governance extends to the most intimate biological particularity of human life — the opening and closing of the womb — and that this governance is purposeful rather than capricious. The LORD of Hosts, the God of sovereign armies, is equally sovereign over a woman's

reproductive capacity and over the timing of His redemptive purposes for Israel. The chapter also teaches that genuine prayer is not a technique for managing God but the ordained means through which God brings His purposes to expression in history. God did not need Hannah's prayer to accomplish His will — He is the one who closed the womb in the first place — but He has appointed her prayer, her vow, and her faithful relinquishment as the human form through which His purposes move forward. This is the mystery and the dignity of prayer in a sovereign God's economy: He moves His purposes forward *through* the desperate ones, not despite them.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: The narrative of Hannah's barrenness and Samuel's birth is a microcosm of the gospel logic that runs through all of Scripture: God chooses the weak, the overlooked, and the humanly impossible as the instruments of His redemptive purposes, so that no flesh may boast in His presence (1 Cor. 1:26–29). The closed womb is not a narrative device — it is theological statement: God's purposes do not depend on human fertility, human power, or institutional competence. They depend on His own sovereign purpose and grace, expressed through broken people whose need has stripped away self-sufficiency. The chapter also anticipates the Reformed doctrine of the means of grace: prayer is not a mechanism that coerces God but a Spirit-appointed channel through which the God who has already purposed an outcome draws His people into participatory trust. Hannah's willingness to give Samuel back reflects the gospel logic of death and resurrection — she releases what she has been given, and God returns it transformed. The entire episode points forward to the God who gave His own Son and received Him back in resurrection glory.

Main Takeaway

The God who closed Hannah's womb opened it through desperate, costly, vow-laden prayer — not because she earned it, but because He had already purposed it and appointed her anguish as the path. If you are in a season where every human comfort has failed and you feel forgotten, you are in exactly the condition God uses. Stop managing your prayers. Pour out your soul to the LORD of Hosts. And be willing to give back what you are asking for.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Reducing Hannah to a model of spiritual persistence without attending to divine sovereignty.** The most common homiletical move in this chapter is to preach Hannah as an example of persistent prayer that eventually wears God down.

This is not what the text teaches. The narrator has told us twice that God closed her womb. The answer is not the fruit of her persistence overcoming divine reluctance — it is the fruit of God’s sovereign purpose moving through her prayer. Preach the sovereignty without evacuating the reality of Hannah’s anguish and prayer; preach the prayer without implying God was waiting for her to try harder.

- **Making the barren womb purely a symbol and evacuating its biological reality.** There is a temptation to move too quickly to spiritual application (“your barrenness represents your unfulfilled dreams”). This is not wrong, but it must not come at the cost of the text’s literal claim. Hannah’s suffering is real, embodied, and socially devastating in her cultural context. Start with the real before moving to the resonant.
- **Treating the vow as the mechanism of answered prayer.** Some preaching implies that the reason Hannah’s prayer was answered was the Nazirite vow — as if she found the right combination to unlock divine response. The vow is not a mechanism; it is an act of relinquishment that demonstrates genuine faith. The answer comes because “the LORD remembered Hannah” (v.19) — a covenantal act of divine initiative, not a triggered response to a correctly formatted petition.
- **Preaching Elkanah as a villain.** Elkanah’s love for Hannah is genuine and his provision is intentionally doubled. He is not the problem — he is a sympathetic figure who cannot provide what God alone can give. His question in verse 8 (“Am I not more to you than ten sons?”) is obtuse but not cruel; it is the honest statement of a loving husband who cannot understand a grief that transcends what he can offer. Preach him as the limit of human comfort, not as opposition.
- **Stopping the sermon at Samuel’s birth and missing the vow’s fulfillment.** The narrative arc of the chapter runs from vow (v.11) to fulfillment (vv.24–28), and the fulfillment is as theologically significant as the prayer. Many expositors treat verses 24–28 as a brief coda to the real story. But the wordplay on *sha’al* (ask/lend) in verses 27–28 is the narrator’s interpretive payoff: Samuel is the embodied answer, returned to God, his name itself a testimony to what prayer accomplishes. Do not rush past the fulfillment.
- **Missing the canonical significance of the LORD of Hosts title.** Hannah specifically addresses God as “LORD of Hosts” (*YHWH Tsabaoth*) in her vow — the first use of this title in 1 Samuel and one of the key covenantal names in the Old Testament. This is not incidental. She is addressing the God of sovereign armies and cosmic rule over her most intimate personal need. Preach this: the God who commands the armies of heaven is the God who pays attention to a woman weeping in a sanctuary who won’t eat. The majestic and the intimate are not in tension in this God.