

GIVE THEM BACK TO GOD
1 Samuel 1:8-11, 27-28

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The most frightening endeavor that many of us will ever undertake is the attempt to be a good parent – a good father or a good mother. Despite all the pondering of heart and soul in the nine months preceding (or, in the case of adoption, sometimes years or as little as a week), you are never ready. You try to be prepared, but how do you really prepare for a job this big?

Preparing your heart and your mind is not as easy as making the nursery ready. Oh, it's easy enough to paint the wall pink or blue – or yellow, if you're unsure, to put plastic safety plugs in all the electrical outlets, and assemble the crib. Those preparations are mechanical, but they do not get the heart ready for the great adventure of being a mother or a father.

Those first few days after the exhilaration over the birth had waned, maybe your thoughts went something like this. I know mine did. I've written this as if I'm a young father with a new son. Of course, in reality, God did better for me – he gave me three girls. Boy or girls, doesn't matter, our feelings are the same.

God, we spent so much time picking his name. We wanted him to have a good name. We thought maybe a good name would make him a good man. Names seem awfully important.

Lord, I'm not sure why you have chosen me for so great a task – to take care of one of your little ones until he is big enough to be on his own. I know I'm not chosen because I'm good, smart or especially equipped for this task, because I know some of your greatest servants are never assigned the responsibility of being a parent. You use them in other ways, but you have chosen to use me in this way.

I thought I understood what love was until I first held him. And now I know, for the first time, how much my own parents loved me. How ungrateful I was at times for their sacrifices. How much I owe them for their devotion and love to me.

And God, now that I hold my baby (or your baby), though I know I cannot fully understand how you love me as your child, I realize for the first time, if only a bit, how you care for me.

But God, this is so much responsibility for the next twenty years. And Lord, do you really ever stop grieving or caring for your children? I mean, if I'm 92 and he dies at age 70, I think I would grieve as if I had lost an infant, because then, I will only love him more. By then, he'll not only be my son but my best friend as well.

There is a way in which asking me to be a father, O God, you have asked me to walk around with my heart exposed. There is no more protection, no more shelter. No more playing it safe. It's all raw now – my nerves, my heart, my feelings. You have made me vulnerable.

Every time he has a fever, I'm going to worry. Pace until his fever breaks with the dawn. Or, what if it seems like he is developing more slowly than his peers? I'll ponder something must be terribly wrong. And God, I've seen you give special children to special families who have changed those families in such powerful ways that it's your mystery as to the assignments you place at each of our feet. But Lord, I ask you, as I start out on this task of trying to be a dad, that if you have a chance to choose, I want you to make me sick instead of him. I want you to make me hurt instead of him.

From this day forward, my life will hold a lot of grieving. You've given me this job of being his dad, but basically you want me to work my way out of a job. When he takes those first steps, we'll all clap. Yet at night in the bed, in the darkness, we'll cry because we'll realize he doesn't need us as much anymore. And God, I know how it is. Just about the time we get his schedule worked out, it will be time for school to start. Will the teacher love him like I love him? Will she understand that sometimes he just can't sit in his seat? Will she understand he's not a bad kid, but he just doesn't like green beans? Will they really remember that his asthma keeps him from running as quickly as other kids on the playground? Or that he sometimes needs to rest and can't be pushed? And those buses are awfully big, Lord – awfully, awfully big for a little boy to walk around.

God, just to keep him safe I'd like to put him in a capsule. But I can't. He has to go out into this cruel, harsh world and drift further and further away from me on every single outing. And when he gets his driver's license, Lord, do you know how fast they drive on I-40? Do you have any idea what it's like trying to get on I-40 from the Georgia on-ramp? You blink and crash. Why they built it that way, Lord, I'll never know, but that's the way it is. Even Dale Earnhardt Jr. would have had a hard time with the Georgia on-ramp.

Now that I'm a daddy, I see dating in a whole new way. He's going to try to pick a girl to be the mother of my grandchildren, to spend the rest of his life with, based on the way things go with a few months of movies and dinners out? I will have to worry if he's treating her right – or is she trying to take advantage of my boy?

The older he gets, Lord, the more he is going to want to make his own decisions. The dumber he is going to think I am. Oh, I know, Lord, that's the way I treat you sometimes. And you're my all-knowing, heavenly Father.

Father, I want to believe in him. I want to trust that he is going to do the right things. I want to trust that he's going to make good choices. And yet I realize you've trusted me, and I've not always made good choices. Father, give me the wisdom to teach him both about the law and about grace. That the law warns him that certain things will destroy his life, and yet grace is abundant, even the freedom to live life without restraint. Father, I want him to be a boy who understands law, but I want him to be a boy who also drinks from the goblet of grace.

And God, there are going to be those times when I need the courage to say “no” to him. He’s going to ask, beg, and plead. He’s going to think he knows what is best for him, and I’m going to know better. And God, just like when you tell me no because you don’t want me to destroy myself or you have better for me than what I want for myself, God, give me the courage to say no to him.

The world we live in is so cruel. Look what we did to Your Son. You didn’t make it this way; we did. We broke your creation. I will lie awake in my bed at night a thousand times and play the “what if” game. What if he doesn’t come home at the appointed time? How many nights will I toss and turn in my bed wondering, pondering, “Is he okay?” I stare, waiting for the door to open and for him to arrive home safe.

In the next two decades I’m going to make a thousand decisions. I’m going to make a dozen decisions even today that are going to influence the outcome of his life. I’m going to need your wisdom. I’m going to need your grace. God, I’m just too scared to do this by myself. You’ve given me the task, but I’m going to have to ask you to be with me.

Lord, right now, I want to give you back this, your son. He is dedicated to you. O God, I thank you for the gift of a son. But I know, truly, that he doesn’t belong to me. He belongs to you. I can’t do this alone. Help me. He’s your son.

This morning I want us to look again at the story of Hannah – to see how it is that she cared for her child, how she perceived her duties as a mother.

This morning I want us to look at a passage of Scripture in which a child is given by God to a devout mother who, in turn, realizes the need to return the child to God. And I want you to see that your child is Samuel, too.

v. 1-2

Already in verse 2 we see the tension emerging between Peninnah and Hannah. Simply stated, Peninnah had children by Elkanah, but Hannah had no children.

v. 3-5

It was clear that Elkanah favored Hannah over Peninnah (who we will call Penny from here on). The family went up to worship at Shiloh; a trip that included both worship and sacrifice, on a yearly basis – a special act of worship to God. As part of the worship act, a portion of the sacrificial meat was given to the family for them to eat. It became apparent in the little things that Elkanah did that he, in reality, loved Hannah more than he loved Penny. He would always give her a bigger and better portion of the meat.

We don’t mean to, but we do show favoritism in small ways. I had a very good looking college roommate, a body builder, and we could go through the same cafeteria serving line at college and inevitably I would end up with a midget portion while he would look at me and grin when a family of 5 could have eaten off of the portion which he was given. I would get a chicken wing while he would get a full breast portion.

Like the cafeteria lady loved my roommate James, so it was with Hannah – Elkanah gave her an extra portion of each sacrifice because she had no children and he loved her the most.

V. 6-7

Penny detested Elkanah's favoritism so much that she badgered Hannah to the point of tears, so that Hannah would have to excuse herself from the table, unable to enjoy the family lunch.

I can just hear her now:

"After all Hannah, I am the mother of Elkanah's children."

"Well, not having any children of your own, Hannah, I'm sure that you would not understand what I am talking about."

"Oh Hannah, do help extra with the chores. Being pregnant so often, I stay exhausted."

"Hannah, I wonder if my next child will be a man child or a woman child? What do you think?"

"Oh Hannah, the Lord has seen fit to bless me again, my husband will be delighted with the news."

After the taunts and innuendos, Hannah was surely reduced to tears and she left without even eating her meal.

V. 10-11

Hannah took her problem to the Lord. Like many of us when we are distraught, Hannah attempted to bargain with the Lord. "Lord, if you will only..." (Be careful when you make such a vow to the Lord, He takes them seriously. He expects you to keep your side of the bargain.)

"Lord, if you only give me a child, then I will give him back for your service."

Samuel – the child that belongs to God.

Is this not the way that it should always be? Isn't your child Samuel, too? Children are on loan from God. Don't think for a moment that a child born into your family is a thing to be clutched and kept. No, no, your babes are gifts from God that are to be returned to Him.

From the moment that your child is in your arms, all of your time, energy and effort is focused on training the child to be able to flourish on his own. We teach the babe to feed himself, we coax the toddler to walk. We try to give values to our children in order that they might choose right over wrong on their own volition. All of our energies are focused on the devastating day when our child will no longer lay his or her head upon a pillow in our home.

Our children are not property to possess, but on loan from God.

That drive to drop them off at a college eight hours away is a wrenching gut punch. You've build the boat; will it float? Will she follow the path and principles you've taught her?

It seems that it is nearly impossible to stop mothering and fathering all at once. You have so protected them, so influenced them, so desperately wanted the best for them. The pattern is so ingrained that it seems impossible to change.

One mother gives good advice that has worked for her.

Ann Landers, 10/7/89 (How to Have a Good Relationship With Your Adult Children)

Don't press for more phone calls or visits. When you don't hear from your children in a while, it is a healthy sign that they are functioning more independently and more successfully. Many parents would dearly love to be free of tearful phone calls, requests for money and cries for help.

Don't try to find out every detail of your children's lives and don't ask questions about finances, in-laws, family planning, promotions at work, etc. If something happens that they're happy and excited about, they will share it. If it's something they're not happy about, they won't appreciate your bringing it up.

If your children need help, they will ask for it, unless, of course, you are the kind of parent who says, "I told you so."

Let your children go. You have nurtured them and educated them. The best gift you can give them now is freedom. Give them wings. They owe you their gratitude and their respect. That is all.

Your parents raised you, and you repaid the debt by raising your children. They will repay you in kind by raising theirs. This is the natural rhythm of life, and it has been the same since time immemorial. It is part of a Grand Design.

Your children are not yours. They belong to the Lord. Your child is Samuel, too.

Not only must we realize that as they reach maturity we need to give our children back to God, but as Hannah concluded, we must come to the realization that God is the owner of even our little ones.

V. 20-22, 24-28, 2:18-21

Hannah, after Samuel was weaned, kept her vow to God. As she promised, she took him back to the house of worship in Shiloh and left him there to serve in the priestly functions. Each year, as the family made the yearly trip to Shiloh, Hannah would make her son a robe and bring it to him. She never forgot the child that God had loaned to her.

How about you, mother? Have you come to the full realization that your little ones are on loan from God? That He has entrusted them to you. And that even as Hannah took her child to the

temple to develop a relationship of service to God, you, too, are to bring your child to the church, to devote him to the place of worship.

There is not a parent in this room who would think about leaving their child at home instead of taking them to elementary school, deciding not to go to school on Monday because it is too rainy, because we had a busy day the day before, because the family is tired, to think of staying out of school for these reasons sounds ludicrous. The state would judge any parent who acted thusly as unfit, and they would be charged with doing detrimental damage to their child.

But many mothers and fathers use those same reasons for allowing their children to miss Bible Study, to miss their religious training on Sunday.

I find it incredible that when we would never for one minute want our children to fall behind their peers in their reading, writing and arithmetic – the skills and arts of the temporal realm.

We often neglect their religious training by permitting poor attendance to the events at the church that promote their learning the truths of the faith – the eternal realm.

Allowing them to fall behind their peers in learning the stories of the faith, and developing the skills that will contribute to their allegiance to God.

Nothing, and I mean nothing, is more important than your sharing your religious tradition with your child.

Your child does not only need to learn to feed himself physically, he also needs to develop hunger and thirst after the righteousness of God.

Not only does your child need to develop agile motor skills, he needs to learn to run the race of faith.

Not only does your child need to learn about the birth of western civilization, he needs to learn that God acted in history through the birth of Jesus, His Son.

Parents, your children are gifts from God, entrusted to your care. Surely, as Hannah returned Samuel to God, directed him to the House of Worship – so you, too, must turn your children to God, directing them to the House of God!

Parenting is an awesome responsibility. To parent properly is to realize that you are only a steward, someone to whom God has entrusted a child. But in the final say, your child, like Samuel, belongs to God.

My mother sent me the following letter several years ago on Father's Day.

Dear Howie,

Sorry the card is late, but the thoughts are not. I am very proud of you in your role as a father as well as all your other roles.

I can remember holding you and feeding you your bottle while I prayed that you would be used by God in a special way. I gave you to Him and He has blessed me richly.

It was so humbling to attend your church in Amarillo the first time and see you do the children's sermon. It is hard for me to believe that my son, the son of a simple, mill-village girl, is the pastor of that great church. God has been so good to me.

Always know that I love you more than life itself. I know that you can understand that kind of love since you are a father now.

Your Lisa and your girls are just something precious and rare. Always treasure them and put them first after God.

Love,

Mama

"Happy Father's Day"

I'm a Samuel. I hope your child is a Samuel, too.