

Divine Reversal

1st Samuel 1:27-2:8; Psalm 102:2-12; John 2:7-16



God often seems to be in the business of upsetting the apple cart. The vast majority of our treasured Bible stories are precisely about this aspect of God's interaction with humanity. We might even get the idea that God is unpredictable, partly because God does not always upset the cart by miraculous intervention. Is there any rhyme or reason to God's actions that seem to reverse the normal affairs of life? Is God unpredictable, or is there consistence behind divine intervention?

Love and mercy can be predictable, as can grace. What makes them unpredictable is when they strike us as being out of character for the one bestowing grace and mercy. We find ourselves taken by surprise when our expectations do not match the character of God's blessings.

A surface reading of Hannah's story finds a would-be mother seeking desperately for the gift of children along with the acceptance and blessing that they might convey. Essentially, Hannah's is a selfish desire for God to intervene in her life and grant her personal wish. Hannah feels life to be empty without children. She takes her case before *Yahweh* at the tabernacle, hoping to gain the ear of the Almighty in order that she might be relieved of the ignominy of childlessness.

Eli takes her for a drunk. Indeed, she had been drunken in her selfish desire for a child, but a change has come over her that we find reflected in her prayer in the previous chapter. She no longer makes this a selfish request, but dedicates her as yet unconceived child to serve *Yahweh*. Divine response takes us on a somewhat unexpected turn. Whereas Hannah shifts her focus from self to submission, we find Eli's life a contrast. Eli would be expected to present his sons as servants of God and dedicate them specifically to serve *Yahweh*. Where Eli is lacking, Hannah and *Yahweh* come through. The story of divine reversal becomes a story to God's making things right—grace comes as a corrective, setting things as they should be. It is not so much a story of the individual, but of the desperate condition of the nation—their need for a leadership wholly dedicated to serving *Yahweh*.

According to Hannah's prayer, *Yahweh* is the God of the impossible. The barren have children, the slaves are freed, those who are oppressed and suffering find relief. This is the God who sets things aright—who restores. God intervenes to restore, reminding us how things are meant to be.

Wine was a symbol of joy at festal occasions. For the Passover celebration, it marked the blessing of entering the land of God's promise. At the wedding ceremony it symbolized the joy of the household forming between the bride and groom. While we would not expect a superstitious outlook proclaiming doom for the couple if the wine ran out, there was a sense that something was indeed amiss. Socially, the shortfall of wine was a disaster for the family and the celebration. It distracted the celebrants from the purpose of their gathering.

Jesus came to the rescue. It would appear that there was some reluctance, but nevertheless, Jesus intervened and transformed the even from disaster to success. The mitigation of this disaster, however, served a greater purpose than relieving the wedding party from the discomfort occasioned by a lack of preparation. This act of reversal became a proclamation of something more. John uses the story to call attention to the superiority of God's provision and blessing.

The host's words are interesting. He cries out the groom his surprise. Standard practice would be to serve the best wine while the guests had fresh palates, then introducing a younger or inferior wine. The reason is obviously to trick the guests into believing what they are being served is better than it really is. The host is surprised for the best wine is being introduced last. Now they can tell that what they have been drinking was not up to par.

For the gospel writer, these words are much more than a reflection of the quality of wine that Jesus produced. Jesus' intervention at the feast is about more than a rescue from social disgrace. The abundant provision of the highest quality wine is filled with a greater meaning in the fact that Jesus' presence, gospel, and ministry is a greater manifestation of the reality of God's participation in the life of Israel. The reversal of standard practice becomes a sign of God's setting things aright—making them as they should be. If we consider John's first chapter, we find Jesus presented here as the wine of God's feast. As the pre-existent word that revealed at the appointed time, the older and better wine is set out last. In this appearing we recognize its superior quality. It is when this wine is set out that the real feast can begin.

John follows this passage with a description of Jesus cleansing the Temple. Perhaps here the message has greater clarity. Standard ritual practice in the Temple had drifted away from honoring God. The people had reduced worship to a system of commerce, trade, and profiteering. There were rules to be followed to the letter and a profit to be made on the side. Rather than worshipping, they were about the task of religiously observing a prescribed set of regulations. They had lost their focus upon the God they claimed to serve. As the sons of Eli, they were more interested in seeing what they could get out of the system than serving God in sincerity.

Prescribed religiosity was doing little for the people. They were following the routines, rites, and rituals of religious observance. They were going through the motions of obeying God's commandments. Traditional practice had overtaken the meaning it was intended to convey. Form, place, and procedure had overtaken the purpose of gathering at the Temple and celebrating the upcoming Passover. Bugged down in the details of religious prescription, they were leaving God and the essence of Passover out of the picture.

They were missing the essential. When we miss the essential, we lose everything. Jesus came on the scene to set things aright. He entered the courts of the Temple to restore things as they should have been. The commandments to present one's best in sacrifice to God had been substituted for the cheap wine legalism. Jesus offered and even demanded reversal. This was no call for divine retribution, but a challenge for the people to set their lives in order. There was no longer room for the cheap religion of following prescribed customs and procedures. The better wine was being served—its quality rendered the standard fare worthless.

Hannah's decisions as a mother proved superior to Eli's service as priest and judge. Whereas Eli placed his own interests in first place, Hannah dedicated her best to God. Eli perhaps had the standing, form, and authority, but Hannah fulfilled the purpose in worshipping God. Hers was the greater blessing. What would divine reversal look like in our lives? Will we seek after selfish interests that do not matter, or will we allow God to set things aright in our own lives, setting aside the cheap wine of our personal interests? Is there worth in allowing God to upset our apple carts?

—*Christopher B. Harbin*