

But one thing Biblical scholars have never done is to say the stories don't matter: they do. They matter because they are the voices of people who believed; they are their stories. They were written down to show us that despite the fact that human beings do some really awful things, God continues to love them through it all. Whether they're our ancestors like Abraham who did some really loathsome things; or kings like David who really stuffed up, God stuck with them. God may not have liked their conniving and their adultery and even their murdering, but God never abandoned them.

That's why we read the stories. That's why they continue to have meaning. We just need to remember that we can't read them as though they are pure history. So while things have changed dramatically in how quickly stories are written, surely one thing hasn't changed: we have a God who loves us.

That's the one detail on which we can rely with absolute certainty, and that is our good news for today. Let's celebrate our clearer vision and look at things differently as we grow older – and hope and pray with our two young boys at the start of this sermon, that we might see when people are sorry or sad and always see what another person **meant** to do, even if they got it wrong. And know that being happy comes from seeing what is really important in life.

Amen!! Thanks be to God!!

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A Message from Mark!
**The Wisdom of
Hindsight**

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Scripture: 1 Samuel 2:1-10 Mark 13: 1-8

Two young boys were deep in conversation. *“Wouldn't you hate to wear glasses!” “No! Not if I had my grandma's kind. She can see when people are sorry or sad and she always sees what I meant to do, even if I got it wrong. One day I heard her say she can see right through people and that being happy comes from seeing what is really important in life. She says she learned to look at things differently as she grew older – but I know it's in her glasses.”*

Aren't we all a little wiser in hindsight? Reflecting back on things we've done, don't we often know we could have done better? The only problem with hindsight is that it doesn't help us in the here-and-now. Sure, **IF** and **WHEN** we **DO** reflect on what we've done, we might gain some insight into how we could have done better – and can do better in the future. But the truth is, hindsight can only help us **IF** we reflect on the past – and **IF** we're willing to learn from it.

Using hindsight was the way in which most of the Bible was written. People wrote down stories long after they occurred. This gave them the opportunity to evaluate what had happened in the past and use that evaluation to shape their story.

It also gave them a chance to counteract theologies that were found to be lacking. Stories were shaped and crafted to make a point to the people for whom they were written. It's doubtful that any of these writers ever imagined that someone would be trying to understand their writings 3000 years later!

We, in today's world, often have a difficult time understanding how the Biblical stories were written. We've become accustomed to reading stories **NOW**, as they're happening, and if not **when** they're happening, shortly after. Many people stay up late on election nights waiting for the results. Why? The outcome is certain to be all over the papers and on the radio the next day. Why wait up? What difference would it make in your life if you heard the news at 8am instead of 1am? Probably none, yet we seem addicted to immediacy. **The facts and nothing but the facts** – that's what we want, and we want them **NOW**.

The writers of ancient times, on the other hand, wrote down stories from the perspective of time. Rarely were stories written down within a generation of happening; often, it was generations later. Then, when they were finally written down, it was from the perspective of how these stories related to the present – the present as understood from the author's perspective. We ought to have some understanding of why historical perspective is critical. We gasp today that it took our legislators until 1967 to give indigenous people the right to vote. And our embracing and celebrating multiculturalism is very different to what we now perceive as the ill-informed 'White Australia Policies' of the 50's and 60's.

We need to understand how evaluating events as they're happening may vary considerably from how they're evaluated from an historical perspective. And neither may be totally accurate. For **HOW** stories are told is influenced not only by current analysis, but also by the perspective of the writer.

The writing of stories generations after they occurred meant that authors could shape and mold their characters to produce the results they wanted from their perspective. No doubt the author of the book of Samuel believed that his God, Yahweh, was a god who helped those who were oppressed. After all, it was Yahweh who rescued the Israelites from their oppression in Egypt. And Yahweh wanted the people to be faithful in return. So, why not add a few details to the birth of Samuel and to Hannah's song that would reinforce these beliefs? Why not make Hannah an oppressed woman, rescued from her oppression by her faithfulness? Why not make her song one about how God inverts power – defeating the powerful and raising up the weak?

What a way to reinforce God's graciousness to **EVERYONE**, not just those who appear blessed because of their power or wealth! Makes all the sense in the world from that perspective. However, to read into that story that God picks and chooses whose prayers will be answered by the degree of their faithfulness is to read into that story something that I don't believe was intended by the author.

How can I say that? I say that because I believe in a God of love. I believe in a God who loves us so much that God gave us dominion over the earth and partners us in the very act of creation – as we welcome the gift of these precious children, Alyssa and Lachlan whom we baptise today. I believe that whether we're good or bad, rich or poor, sinner or saint, God loves us. I believe all those things because as I've read between the lines of the stories – both those in the Hebrew Scriptures and those in the Newer Testament – and that's the God who emerges. That's certainly the God I serve and discover afresh in Jesus, the Christ.

Sure, stories have been shaped and molded and filled out with details to produce an effect that the author wanted at that time. To deny this would be to deny a wealth of Biblical scholarship.

They simply, at that time, couldn't imagine anything else. So when Hannah bargains with God and is blessed with a child, we want to cheer for her – and for God. *Yeah, God! Good going!* Hannah in faithfulness asked; you rewarded her for her faithfulness. That's what people back then believed: blessings were from God; being cursed was also from God. In the case of this story, both Hannah and God come out looking good.

That's what the author wanted; that's why he told his story this way. But this story was written many generations after Hannah gave birth to Samuel, and it was written for one primary purpose: to make people understand that Samuel was special, even in terms of how he was born.

But one way this story has been misused is when it's interpreted to say that God blesses those who are faithful and persevering. Hannah was faithful; Hannah persevered in her prayers. Therefore, God answered her prayers. **But what about other people; and what about people today?** What about women who want desperately to have children and their prayers go unanswered? Are they less faithful than Hannah? Perhaps so, but perhaps not. How do people feel when they know that they're praying with great faithfulness and perseverance and their prayers go unanswered? Does that mean that they're somehow lacking? Does it mean that God doesn't care? **NO, none of the above.**

If that's the message we take away from Hannah's story, that does a disservice to God and to many faithful people. Chances are, the author of Hannah's story knew very little about this woman, other than that she was Samuel's mother. But since Samuel grew to be a faithful servant of God, the author may well have assumed that his mother had helped to shape her son's character. So he made her faithfulness a part of the story.

Our texts for today serve as excellent examples. As we examine them, it might be helpful to consider how their authors were influenced not only by hindsight, but also by their unique perspectives. What was their intent in writing down these stories?

The gospel of Mark was written sometime after the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD. The author knew the temple had been destroyed. He also knew that Christians had been enduring horrible persecutions by Nero. When Rome burned in 64 AD, Nero needed a scapegoat, something to deflect people's anger from him; he found one in Christians. They were considered upstarts, people who followed a leader that some said was the Messiah, the anointed one of God who would rescue them from oppression. Stories are told of how Nero used Christians as human torches at his outdoor parties. Whatever he did to them, it certainly wasn't pretty.

In short, the writer of the gospel of Mark was confronted with a situation that was bleak indeed! The temple, the very place where God had been said to reside, had been destroyed and followers of Jesus were undergoing fierce persecutions. There had to be an explanation; there had to be some way to give people hope when it seemed impossible to have any. By predicting these events – by making them necessary precursors to the end times – the author no doubt anticipated that these stories would bring hope – hope that suffering was not the final word, that there was light beyond the darkness. And placing them on the lips of Jesus made these events appear as though they were a part of God's plan: *“Not one stone will be left...all will be thrown down....And beware, they will hand you over to councils.”*

This section of Mark is known as the *“little apocalypse.”* Apocalyptic literature has always served a primary purpose: it foretells the end of the world – usually in sudden, violent, and

destructive terms. It also forecasts the ultimate destruction of evil and the triumph of good. Prior to the start of the year 2000, you may recall some loopy predictions forecasting the end of the world. In response, a television documentary was produced about apocalypticism. This documentary detailed how Biblical apocalyptic literature was created to explain times of incredible oppression – oppression so horrible that no one could explain it – oppression that culminated in almost total despair. In such situations, people grope for answers; there has to be an explanation! The book of Daniel, the book of Revelation and even this little apocalypse were written during such times.

Understanding the context can help us to evaluate these “**prophecies**.” What we learn, of course, is that they aren’t “**prophecies**” so much as messages intended to bring hope to those suffering oppression. Such hope is often stated in these terms: God will eventually destroy those who produce chaos and oppression and bring to glory those who persevere. That **good will prevail** is something we all want to believe. And doesn’t perseverance in the face of evil or apathy or whatever forces may try to keep us from God, somehow place those who persevere on the side of good?

Such predictions serve another purpose: they fight fear with purposeful activity. The followers of Jesus no doubt dreaded the possibility of persecution; they knew that their own leader had been crucified. But when reminded through apocalyptic literature that Jesus had forecast devastation and persecution before his second coming, they also remembered his directive: the good news must first be proclaimed. So proclaim it they did, even though it threatened their very lives!

Of course, 2000 years later, that message has become something all together different. Now, many parts of the church use the fear of an apocalypse to create fear: if you’re not on the right side, you’d better

beware! Abandon God and you’ll find yourself left behind at the end time, faced with the certainty of fire and brimstone, suffering and pain. And needless to say, being on the side of God means being in the Church – the right Church! A message that was originally intended to offer hope and to help spread the gospel has been misused.

No doubt the author never imagined that his story would be used to create fear in people – not for the sake of their souls, but for the sake of the Church coffers! Another byproduct of this misuse is that God becomes really awful – but it seems those who distort the message don’t care much about that. Distorting the story has become useful for the growth of the church. Who cares what it does to God?

Friends, we ought to care!! We also ought to care how some of these stories – meant to portray a kind and caring God who reaches out to those who are oppressed – might be used in selfish ways. Or heard very differently than was ever intended by the author.

This is certainly true regarding the story of Hannah. Most of us, when we hear this story, probably read the characters fairly accurately. Hannah is loved by her husband, Elkanah, but he needs desperately to have an heir and it appears that Hannah can’t give him one. This doesn’t change his love for her; in fact, he treats her very tenderly. But an heir is critical – especially in his society – and so he marries another woman, a woman who not only bears him children, but who treats Hannah with disdain and cruelty.

Hannah is certainly oppressed. Not only is she treated badly by her rival, but she’s scorned by society. If you couldn’t bear children back then, you were considered useless. And barrenness was considered a punishment of God. Once again, that didn’t make God look too good, but remember, the Israelites were a people who believed that God was responsible for everything – good and bad.