

# When You Can't Have What You Want

Dr. Stephen D. McConnell



1 Samuel 1:1-20

When I was seven years old my family and I took a trip to Philadelphia. We were living in Western Pennsylvania at the time and we were going out to Philadelphia to visit my oldest brother who was a student at the Valley Forge Military Academy. We also intended to visit some family friends while we were out there. Now to make the eight-hour trip worthwhile for me my parents held out before me the prospect of visiting the Liberty Bell. I had heard and read about the Liberty Bell and was intrigued by its story --- in fact all the way out on the Pennsylvania turnpike mom and dad would assuage my restlessness by reminding me that we were in fact going to stop and see the Liberty Bell. Once in Philadelphia we made our rounds of visits to see my brother and to see our friends ... dinners here, staying over night there. I found myself bored with most of it ... but occasionally mom or dad would assure me that the Liberty Bell was soon in my future. Well, as these things sometimes go --- time ran a little short and traffic got a little long and the schedule got a little bit away from us --- and I can remember as if it were yesterday riding in the back seat of the car and calling up to the front seat, "Mom, Dad ... are we going to see the Liberty Bell now?" And I can remember my parents looking at each other and then my mother looking back at me saying with a great deal of remorse because she knew this was the one thing I was banking on on this trip, "Steve, we are not going to see the Liberty Bell." And, of course, she went on to explain all the very logical and coherent reasons why were planning to see the Liberty Bell but we didn't expect this or that to happen and we feel so bad and so on and so forth. Of course none of that matters to a seven year old boy. What matters is that he can't have what he wanted.

Now I assure you that this is not an event in my life for which I needed therapy, I have long since forgiven my parents for not taking me to see the Liberty Bell --- fact of the matter is ... those things happen. Circumstances beyond our control. Best laid plans of mice and men. Life has a

lot to do with how to live amidst the reality that you can't always have what you want. (Sounds like a Rolling Stones song.)

Isn't it true? Every since you were a baby --- you had to deal with the reality that sometimes you could not get what you wanted. At age five it was the piece of candy that you wanted. At age ten it was the television show that you wanted to stay up late and watch. At age fifteen it was the boy or girl that you wanted to ask out or be asked out by. At age seventeen it was the driving privilege you wanted or the extended curfew that you wanted.

All of our "growing up life" was and is about learning how to deal with the reality that you can't always have what you want.

An Episcopal colleague of mine told me once the story of taking his 10 year old son on a little father-son fishing trip. The two had been planning the trip for several months and the little boy was very excited about spending time with his dad and doing something they both loved -- fishing. The boy packed and re-packed his suitcase at least five times. They went shopping for the best fishing tackle. They charted out what streams and lakes they wanted to fish up in New England. (That's not them upon the screen, but I'm sure that was the picture that boy had in mind.) By the time the day rolled around the little boy was almost beside himself. Not having slept nearly a wink the night before, the boy was up at 6 am knocking on his dad's door. They loaded up the car and said good-bye to mom and off they went. The trip of a lifetime.

On the second day of the drive up to New Hampshire -- my friend got a call on his cell phone. It was the church secretary. Mr. Phillips had died. Mr. Phillips was one of the pillars of the church. His death was unexpected. The widow was beside herself. After a couple calls -- it became clear to the Reverend that he had to go back. This was one of the pastoral moments he could not pass on to someone else. He got into the car and looked over to his son and told him the news. The trip was off. They would have to do it another time. He turned the car south and began the return home. In a little bit, dad looked over at son ... and could see big crocodile tears dripping down his cheeks. "I'm sorry, son. I really am," said the regretful father. And in response the little boy said, "It's not fair, dad. It's just not fair."

Life isn't fair, is it? Sometimes, often times, we don't get what we want -- even what we feel we need.

“If my life and your life is to have any real meaning – if it is to make any real sense – if it is to have any real purpose – it is to be lived in response to this wonder of why me.”

As we grow older the stakes appear to get higher and the issues appear to grow deeper. When our daughter was born she was delivered by a fine, fine doctor. Just a great man. He was a man who showed great delight in being able to deliver to people the pride and joys of their life. But he and his wife themselves were not able to have children. Day in and day out observing the miracle of new life --- but not being able to have their own child. Imagine the ache inside.

Many of you know what that ache is about.

Maybe you ache over a job you really want that you can't have. Maybe you ache over the perfect marriage that you want that you can't have. Maybe you ache over a particular skill or talent that you want that you can't have. Maybe it is a certain dream that you dream that it appears you can't have. Maybe you look back upon a bad childhood and you ache because you so wished you had a better childhood. Maybe you ache over parents that aren't together anymore and there is nothing you can do to put them back together even though you so want to. Maybe you think about a big mistake that you made and you ache because you want so badly the chance to take it back ... but you can't take it back.

A big part of life is dealing with the reality that you can't always have what you want.

You know, so many of the great stories of scripture begin with people who ache over things that they want, but they can't have. You can't go two pages into the Bible before you come across Adam and Eve who are given the entire Garden of Eden but are prohibited from eating of one tree. And it turns out that it is that one tree that they want. But God says they can't have it.

Joseph, son of Jacob, just wants an open and honest

relationship with his brothers, but what happens? His brothers beat him and throw him into a pit and then sell him for a slave.

Job, a faithful follower of God, just wants a comfortable life and a healthy family --- but almost within a moment's notice it is all taken away and he can never bring it back.

Moses' mother just wants to hold onto her baby boy --- but she can't. She has to float him down the river into the hands of Pharaoh.

Joseph and Mary just want a simple, ordinary marriage --- but then the angel comes and simple and ordinary would soon fall from their personal lexicon.

The apostle Paul -- servant of God -- begs God to take away his thorn in the flesh, but it never leaves him.

Life is filled with the reality that you can't always have what you want.

But you know it seems that the good news that scripture is trying to tell us is that often the great stories of joy and miracles and faithfulness and fulfillment begin precisely at the point when you come face to face with what you cannot have. Scripture seems to be telling us that in those moments when we have to deal with the great limitations of life --- it is in these moments that God has something brewing. Something different. Something sometimes wonderful. Sometimes powerful. Sometimes unimaginable.

Take for example our lesson this morning. People who study the book of I Samuel will tell you that from the beginning it is a story about a man named David. David, who will become the greatest king in the history of Israel.

The plot of I Samuel is the raising up of one of the greatest spiritual and political leaders of history, King David. But where does the story begin? The story begins with a woman who is deeply depressed and weeping hysterically and praying fervently because she cannot have what she wants. The story of David begins a generation before in a family outside of his own with a woman who desperately wants a child. She can't have what she wants. God, so she understands it, has closed her womb.

Her name is Hannah. Hannah means "charming" or "attractive". But you know no matter how charming or attractive you might be --- it doesn't really matter when you can't have what you really want. So Hannah goes to the temple and she prays. And she prays that God would give her a son. Now here's the amazing part: she tells God that if God gives her a son ... she will give him back. She will raise him to be a Nazirite --- which is a young man disciplined to become a priest of God. She says to God, "I will give him back to you." And as the story goes she conceives and gives birth to a son and she names him Samuel because Samuel means, "I have asked him of the Lord." And as the rest of the story goes she raises Samuel as a Nazirite and when he comes of age she gives him to the high priest of Israel and he becomes for the rest of his life a servant of God. And it is Samuel who alone has the discerning eye to see that that a young shepherd boy who has escaped the notice of all of Israel – the young boy David, would be God's chosen one to be the king of Israel.

From the ache of one woman who could not have what she wanted ... came the beginning of the story of the greatest king of Israel. And it all began when Hannah surrendered herself to this great sweeping story of God. That whatever God should give it is intended for a grand and glorious purpose. In both abundance and scarcity God is seeking to write a story with our lives.

Now one could imply from the story of Hannah that if you don't have what you want ... all you need to do is to pray hard and promise God that if he gives you what you want you will give it right back to him ... and if you do that God will grant your prayer. That would be untrue. It does not often happen that way. Just ask Job. Just ask the apostle Paul. Just ask Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. You can pray real hard and not get what you want. God is not a quid pro quo God. Paul says, "I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have

learned the secret of being well fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."

Victor Frankl – survivor of a Nazi concentration camp – wrote one of the greatest books of the 20th century (in my estimation) – *Man's Search for Meaning* – in which he writes about losing everything that matters to him – including his family and then says this – "I have come to learn that what matters is not what I expect from life, but what life expects from me."

So Hannah's story is a story of discovery. Discovering not as much about what she expects from life, but what life expects from her. That in the midst of living life where we can't always have what we want, God would have us know that whatever life should give and whatever life should withhold and whatever life should take away – there is still a grand story God wants to tell through you. God is always trying to push your story to good.

You see, that was the great lesson that Hannah learned. Hannah was a depressed, anxious and hysterical person because she had focused her life on what she did not have. But life changed for Hannah when she began to realize that all gifts ... even the gift she most wanted ... were gifts that God gives to us but only for a purpose. Only for a reason. God has a great design for every gift he gives us.

Think of it .... Joseph son of Jacob gets sold into slavery by his brothers ... but with the gifts God has given him he rises to power in Egypt and saves an entire nation as well as his own family from famine and starvation.

Job loses his everything he has, but through the experience is brought into a mysterious and life changing encounter with God and later receives a new family.

Moses' mother gives her boy away, but with his gifts he becomes the great liberator of Israel.

The apostle Paul never loses his thorn in the flesh --- but what God gives him is the message, "My grace is sufficient for you and my power is made perfect in your weakness."

What life gives you, God uses for a purpose. Every material thing ... every spiritual thing ... every familial thing ... every physical thing ... can be surrendered to a grand and glorious and heavenly scheme. That from the moment of your conception everything you were given in your mother's

womb is material for the great story of God. That when your mind developed through education and experience ... your mind was given to you for a grand and glorious purpose. That when you acquired skills and talents ... those skills and talents were given to you for a divine and heavenly purpose. That when you began to make money ... every last dollar and cent was given to you for the purposes of the kingdom of heaven. No matter what you have been given ... no matter how abundant ... no matter how limiting ... God sees it as material for the grand scheme of grace.

So I know a man named Chuck Matheny. Chuck was born with cerebral palsy. Chuck used to make his way around on crutches but now it's a wheelchair or a bike when he is doing a benefit walk. All his life he's suffered all the hindering symptoms of cerebral palsy. There is a lot that Chuck could want that he never got. His parents in response to their son's condition and plight built the Matheny School in central New Jersey for disabled children.

Today Chuck travels across the world telling people that there is no person born for whom God does not have a grand and glorious story. He spoke a while ago at a high school graduation and said in summary --- I cannot correct the way I was born. All I know is that God allowed me to overcome my handicap and appreciate the life he has given me. I have become his tool to help others understand why they are here.

You see, what God gives you no matter how limiting it may be he gives with a story in mind.

So when you and I begin to look at what we don't have --- and we will do that from time to time ... when we begin to ache over what is not ours ... and we will do that from time to time ... it is the human condition. It is people like Hannah and Joseph and Moses and Mary and Paul and scores of others who will be the first to tell you ... that right at the moment when you mourn over what you don't have ... right when you are faced with the great limitations of your life --- it is right in that moment that God might be starting to compose another one of his most amazing and miraculous stories.

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*Dr. Stephen D. McConnell*  
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Church of the Palms

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3224 Bee Ridge Rd, Sarasota FL 34239 • (941) 924-1323