

1 Samuel 2:12-36

Introduction

If you're just becoming familiar with the Bible, you may be wondering what on earth this is all about. All this talk of priests and sacrifices and a place called Shiloh and a boy who wears a linen ephod... it all sounds a million miles away from everyday life here in Hastings.

There *is* a lot here that sounds unfamiliar to our 21st century Western ears. But I don't want you to be put off by that. As we look at this passage together, we'll see that it points us to Jesus. We'll have to grapple with the details of the story, but, as we do so, we'll see that its message is very relevant indeed to our lives today. So please don't be put off by the things you find unfamiliar and strange.

As we've noted before, these books of 1 and 2 Samuel are set against the backdrop of a national crisis in Israel many centuries ago. Everyone was doing as they saw fit. The nation was in moral chaos. It was thoroughly diseased with sin.

And that's what the sacrificial system was for. God had given priests and sacrifices to Israel as part of the solution for sin. When you sinned, you could go to the tabernacle at Shiloh. The tabernacle was a big tent, which was the place of God's presence. It was the house of God. And, when you sinned, you could go there, and a priest could make a sacrifice on your behalf to make up for what you had done.

But here's the problem. The national crisis penetrated even to the house of God. The priests were as corrupt as everyone else. If Shiloh was the religious heart of the nation, then the nation was rotten to the core. And that's what we've just been hearing about in our Bible reading.

So, I've put as our first heading - Shiloh: the rotten heart of the nation.

Shiloh: the rotten heart of the nation

And the passage begins with the two sons of Eli the priest: Hophni and Phinehas.

1. The corrupt sons

See how they're described in verse 12.

Eli's sons were scoundrels; they had no regard for the LORD.

It's not a great start! And throughout the text that follows we see them acting without any restraint.

As priests, they were entitled to keep a portion of the sacrifices for food. The Old Testament Law states that they were entitled to keep the breast and the right thigh of the

animal sacrifices for themselves (Leviticus 7:31-32). But they're not content with that. They tell their servant to spear whatever he could get with a three-pronged fork, and to keep it. It's greed. And it's exploitation.

And it gets worse... because, we're told, they take the meat with the fat still on it. That may not sound like a big deal to our ears. But the fat of the animal was the Lord's portion (Leviticus 3:3-16). It belonged to *him*. They're robbing God of what is rightly his. Even doing so by force if necessary. It's a terrible abuse of power.

Verse 17 sums it up: **The sin of the young men was very great in the LORD's sight, for they were treating the LORD's offering with contempt.**

And their father doesn't come off much better. If anything, he seems complicit.

2. The complicit father

When we get to verse 22, we're told that Eli **was very old**. That may imply that some time has gone by since verse 17. If so, then in that time, the behaviour of his sons has deteriorated further.

In addition to their contempt for the sacrifices, something more is added. We're told that they're also sleeping with the women who served at the tabernacle. In today's terms, we'd call them sexual predators. This is all out of hand.

And Eli seems to be doing nothing about it. He has heard about all his sons are doing. In fact, bad reports seem to be spreading throughout Israel. And Eli is in charge. He is responsible for everything that happens at the tabernacle. At the very least, we would expect him to remove them from office. We would expect him to stop them ministering. But all he can manage is a rather half-hearted rebuke, which they ignore. He warns his sons that it's a very risky business to sin against God. But they just dismiss his words and carry on doing what they're doing. And notice what we're told in verse 25: They didn't listen to their father's rebuke, **for it was the Lord's will to put them to death**. We'll come back to that later.

We may feel some sympathy for Eli. After all, most parents can identify with having children who don't listen to them. But nonetheless, he's in charge at the tabernacle. Verse 29 implies that he too is benefitting from his sons' behaviour. And God holds him responsible. From verse 27 onwards, the Lord speaks through a man of God, who speaks from the Lord, and warns Eli of coming judgement.

3. The coming judgement

God reminds Eli that he had dealt very generously with his family. Going all the way back to Aaron, the brother of Moses, God had chosen Eli's ancestors to serve as priests. And he had provided for their needs. He had given them portions of the food offerings to eat. But Eli

and his sons had shown scorn for God's grace. They had exploited the people and fattened themselves on the fat of the sacrifices, the portion that belonged to the Lord.

In the verses that come before these ones, Hannah had warned her hearers not to act arrogantly before the Lord. He is the God who knows... who weighs our deeds. And now the deeds of Eli and his sons were about to be weighed. The inevitable judgement was coming.

In verse 31, the Lord says: **'Those who honour me I will honour, but those who despise me will be disdained.'**

And in verse 33, he speaks of their downfall: **'Every one of you that I do not cut off from serving at my altar I will spare only to destroy your sight and sap your strength, and all your descendants will die in the prime of life.'**

Eli's whole family would be removed from office. Their ministry would end. None would reach old age. Eli's two sons would both die on the same day. And the rest of his family would be reduced to begging for food to eat. It's a chilling fulfilment of Hannah's words in verse 5: **Those who were full hire themselves out for food...**

And over the years that followed, everything happened just as the man of God had said.

It's a terrible story of the inevitable consequences of sin. Judgement will follow, if not in this life, then certainly on the final day of judgement at the end of history. Eli and his sons had shown contempt for God and the inevitable consequences would follow.

But there's another story in these verses. It runs in parallel to the story of Eli and his sons. And it's a complete contrast. It's the story of Samuel. While the sons of Eli are growing in wickedness and depravity, he is growing in stature and in favour with the Lord.

So, I've put as our next heading – Samuel: growing up fast!

Samuel: growing up fast!

Samuel is quietly ministering in the background as a faithful priest.

1. A faithful priest

The contrast between him and the sons of Eli is made clear in the way the passage is structured. Look at the verses that come either side of it.

First, look at the verse that comes immediately before our passage. Verse 11: **Then Elkanah went home to Ramah, but the boy ministered before the LORD under Eli the priest.**

Then look at the verses that come immediately after our passage. Chapter 3, verse 1: **The boy Samuel ministered before the LORD under Eli.**

And then look at the section at the middle of our passage. It begins with verse 18: **But Samuel was ministering before the LORD...**

While the sons of Eli are exploiting their ministry and behaving wickedly, Samuel is quietly ministering in the background.

We're told that he wears a linen ephod. An ephod was something that priests wore. Samuel wasn't qualified to serve as a priest because he wasn't descended from Moses' brother, Aaron. Only the descendants of Aaron were qualified to serve as priests. Yet, nonetheless, he wears the mark of a priest, as he goes about his ministry under Eli's supervision.

Each year, when they bring their sacrifice to the Lord, Hannah and Elkanah come and visit Samuel. And each year, Hannah makes him a little robe, which she gives him. And God's pleasure in Hannah and Elkanah is evident, because, over time, God blesses them with five more children: three sons and two daughters. Notice the contrast with Eli, whose sons will be taken from him.

And we're told, at the end of verse 21: **...the boy Samuel grew up in the presence of the LORD.**

It's repeated in verse 26: **And the boy Samuel continued to grow in stature and in favour with the LORD and with people.**

Eli's sons are growing in wickedness and bringing themselves under God's judgement. They have no regard for the Lord and clearly don't know him at all, even though they serve as priests. Bad reports about them are spreading around Israel.

But Samuel, on the other hand, is growing up in the Lord's presence. And he's growing in stature and in favour not only with the Lord but also with the people.

The contrast couldn't be greater.

Eli and his sons are priests in the line of Aaron, but don't act like priests.

Samuel, on the other hand, is not a priest in the line of Aaron – he's not qualified to serve as a priest – but increasingly he acts like a true priest should.

His rise is a sign that God can raise up for himself a priest from *outside* the line of Aaron if he so chooses. And that's exactly what God says he will do. Look at verse 35. God is speaking. And he says this: **'I will raise up for myself a faithful priest, who will do according to what is in my heart and mind. I will firmly establish his priestly house, and they will minister before my anointed one always.'**

Initially, we might think of Samuel as the priest whom God raises up. Or we might think of Zadok, who replaces Eli's descendant Abiathar, under King Solomon.

But ultimately, these verses are pointing us to Jesus.

Samuel is a type of Christ.

2. A type of Christ

We can see that in the way he's described. Look again at verse 26: **And the boy Samuel continued to grow in stature and in favour with the LORD and with people.**

And now consider these words, written by Luke in the New Testament: **And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and man.** (Luke 2:52)

Luke is deliberately echoing the words of 1 Samuel... because Jesus *is* the priest whom God promised to raise up. Like Samuel, he was not a priest in the line of Aaron. But he *is* *the* faithful priest, who replaces all human priests, and does what is in perfect accord with the heart and mind of God.

Eli's sons exploited the sacrificial system and used the sacrifices for their own benefit.

Jesus offered one perfect sacrifice. And he did so at great expense to himself. His sacrifice was his own body, offered up on a cross to win forgiveness for the sins of his people.

He doesn't take, like the sons of Eli did. He gives. Even his own life.

And through his resurrection from the grave, he has been declared to be a priest forever, who saves completely those who come to God through him.

So... how can all of this encourage us today?

That's our final heading.

How can this encourage us today?

Well, firstly, these verses encourage us, once again, that God is in control.

1. God is in control

In the dark days of the Judges, amid the moral chaos, God was at work. Despite the depravity and corruption that reached to the very heart of the nation at Shiloh, he was in control. He was bringing about his sovereign purpose. And he was doing so through ordinary people in an ordinary family.

We've seen already, in chapter 1, that he stood behind the heartbreak of Hannah's childlessness. He closed Hannah's womb. And then he opened it in response to her prayer. All along, he had been working through Hannah to put Samuel in place in Shiloh.

We've seen how Hannah's song gives further shape to his purpose. He was working to put a godly king in place, which he would do through Samuel.

And this week, when Eli's wicked sons refused to listen to their father's rebuke, we noted that God was involved, because it was his will to put them to death. He was working, even then, to remove them from office and to put a faithful priest in place.

And we've seen how God's sovereign purpose, to put in place a godly king and a faithful priest, will ultimately find its fulfilment in Christ.

The picture that's building is of God's active involvement in history, pushing it towards the end he has willed for it.

And this should really encourage us.

God is in control. He is at work ruling his world.

This world will always contain a mixture of people. Some will be indifferent to God. Some will actively oppose God. Still others will love him and live for his glory. And over them all, God is at work ruling his world and bringing about his sovereign purpose in Christ. He is doing so despite sinful people. He is even doing so *through* sinful people. And he is certainly doing so through ordinary people in ordinary families, like you and me.

All of this means that we can live with hope.

It should encourage us to be like Hannah. To live each day in humble dependence on God. No matter how ordinary our lives may seem, or how difficult our circumstances may be, it should encourage us to align ourselves with God's sovereign purpose in Christ, by seeking to live each day by faith in his promises and in obedience to his commands.

That's the first way in which these verses should encourage us.

And, secondly, they should encourage us to go to Jesus.

2. Go to Jesus

In the days of the Judges, everyone did as they saw fit. It's not a bad description of the days we're living in now; days of growing individualism: everyone doing as they please. These verses warn us that judgement is coming for all of us. No one will escape.

But as in the days of the Judges, God has provided a solution – a way of salvation. It's Jesus. He is the faithful high priest whom God has raised up. His one, perfect sacrifice on the cross has won forgiveness for every sin of all his people.

If we say that we have no sin, we're kidding ourselves. We all sin. We might try to hide our sin, for fear of it being exposed. But on that day of judgement all that is hidden will be laid bare. Everything will be exposed. Trying to hide our sin will get us nowhere.

We might carry around a huge burden of guilt and shame, because we don't know what to do with it. Perhaps we fear bringing it to God because we don't know how he will treat us.

But these verses encourage us to come to the Father through his Son, Jesus Christ. He is the solution that God has provided. There is no other. He is our faithful priest. And if we come to him, openly confessing our sin, and turning from it, he will treat us with grace and mercy.

He won't exploit us like the sons of Eli. He won't take advantage of us. He won't take anything *from* us, except our guilt and shame. He will lift it from our shoulders, having dealt with it already at the cross.

And he will give *to* us in return forgiveness and life and salvation.

Go to Jesus.

And let him deal with your sin once and for all time at the cross.

Let's pray.

Loving Father, thank you for Jesus. Thank you for your sovereign purpose to bring forgiveness and life through him. Thank you for the encouragement of knowing that you are at work in the world today, accomplishing your sovereign purpose in Christ. Please help each of us to come to him, our faithful high priest, to find forgiveness for our sin, and to receive life in his name. We ask it for his glory. Amen.