

...to turn a nation around

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[0 : 0 0] The reading is taken from 1 Samuel, chapter 2, beginning at verse 11, on page 272 of the church Bibles.

Then Elkanah went home to Ramah, and the boy ministered to the Lord, in the presence of Eli the priest. Now the sons of Eli were worthless men, they did not know the Lord.

The custom of the priests with the people was that when any man offered sacrifice, the priest's servant would come, while the meat was boiling, with a three-pronged fork in his hand, and he would thrust it into the pan or kettle or cauldron or pot.

All that the fork brought up, the priest would take for himself. This is what they did at Shiloh, to all the Israelites who came there. Moreover, before the fat was burned, the priest's servant would come and say to the man who was sacrificing, Give meat for the priest to roast, for he will not accept boiled meat from you, but only raw.

And if the man said to him, Let them burn the fat first, and then take as much as you wish, he would say, No, you must give it now, and if not, I will take it by force.

[1 : 1 9] Thus the sin of the young men was very great in the sight of the Lord, for the men treated the offering of the Lord with contempt.

Samuel was ministering before the Lord, a boy clothed with a linen ephod, and his mother used to make for him a little robe and take it to him each year when she went up with her husband to offer the yearly sacrifice. Then Eli would bless Elkanah, and his wife would say, May the Lord give you children by this woman, for the petition she has asked of the Lord. So then they would return to their home. Indeed, the Lord visited Hannah, and she conceived and bore three sons and two daughters. And the young man, Samuel, grew in the presence of the Lord. Now Eli was very old, and he kept hearing all that his sons were doing to all Israel, and how they lay with the women who were serving at the entrance to the tent of the meeting. And he said to them, Why do you do such things? For I hear of your evil dealings from all the people. No, my sons, it is not a good report that I hear the people of the

Lord spreading abroad. If someone sins against a man, God will mediate for him. But if someone sins against the Lord, who can intercede for him? But they would not listen to the voice of their father, for it was the will of the Lord to put them to death. Now the young man, Samuel, continued to grow both in stature and in favour with the Lord and also with man.

And there came a man of God to Eli, and said to him, Thus the Lord hath said, Did I indeed reveal myself to the house of your father, when they were in Egypt, subject to the house of Pharaoh? Did I choose him out of all the tribes of Israel to be my priest, to go up to my altar, to burn incense, to wear an ephod before me? I gave to the house of your father all my offerings by fire from the people of Israel. Why then do you scorn my sacrifices and my offerings that I commanded, and honour your sons above me by fattening yourselves on the choicest parts of every offering my people Israel? Therefore the Lord God of Israel declares, I promised that your house and the house of your father should go in and out before me for ever. But now the Lord declares, Far be it from me, for those who honour me I will honour, and those who despise me shall be lightly esteemed. Behold, the days are coming when I will cut off your strength and the strength of your father's house, so that there will not be an old man in your house. Then in distress you will look with envious eye on all the prosperity that shall be bestowed on Israel, and there shall not be an old man in your house for ever.

The only one of you, whom I shall not cut off from my altar, shall be spared to weep his eyes and to grieve his heart, and all the descendants of your house shall die by the sword of men.

[4 : 45] And this that shall come upon your two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, shall be the sign to you, both of them shall die on the same day. And I will raise up for myself a faithful priest, who shall do according to what is in my heart and in my mind. And I will build him a sure house, and he shall go in and out before my anointed for ever. And everyone who is left in your house shall come to implore him for a piece of silver or a loaf of bread, and shall say, Please put me in one of the priest's places, that I may eat a morsel of bread.

Well, good morning everyone. Do keep your Bibles open at that passage so that we can refer to it as we go along.

And before we start, why don't we just pray again. Heavenly Father, please, as we look at your word this morning, soften our hearts and open our ears that we might hear what you are saying to us through your word today. Amen. Now, on the back of the service sheet, there is an outline. And if you have a look at that, that shows you roughly where we're going this morning. We're going to be thinking about this title of God stepping into turn a nation around, and we're going to work through these points, thinking about not despairing, being faithful, and then seeing a glimpse of the future. Well, that's not actually our future, but you'll understand that. This is the second of our talks in 1 Samuel.

If you were here last week, you may remember that we heard about God turning around the situation of a woman called Hannah. She was an Israelite woman, and that her situation was in part reflecting the situation of the nation of Israel. What we saw was that Hannah had a reversal of fortune, and that this pointed towards this coming reversal of fortune for the nation of Israel as well. But then in this next part, when we get into the end of chapter 2, we don't see really any sign of that at all. Actually, we just see more signs of God's sin, of Israel's sin to start with. And what happens in this passage this morning reminds me a little bit about a mission that we had at university. Now, what happened was that we had copies of Luke's gospel printed. They were printed for us by the universities and colleges Christian fellowship. The idea was they were handed out to anybody who wanted them. And we were hoping that as we handed out these gospels, people would read them, but also people would be challenged by maybe what their preconceptions of the Bible. And so on the front page of this gospel, there was a picture. And the picture was a young man sort of lunging out to grab hold of a young woman.

And the young woman was sort of frightenedly turning around, looking back as he leapt out to grab her. And across the top of it, it said, don't judge. If you then opened up the flap, there was another half to the picture. And written across the top of the other half was a book by its cover. And the other half of the picture was a busy road of a lorry rushing along that was just about to run the woman over. And when you first look at it, you think he's attacking her. But actually, he's not at all. What it first looks like is not what's going on. And what's happening here is very, very similar. What it first looks like is not necessarily at all what's actually going on.

[8 : 22] If you look at this passage today, you might think, well, where is God? You know, is God not paying any attention to what's happening in Israel? Remember that at the end of the book of Judges, we're told everyone was doing what was right in their own eyes. And then we see Eli's sons, we see the priests who were behaving in no better way at all. Just like Hannah's situation was reflecting the situation of Israel. So Eli's son's behaviour is also reflecting the situation in Israel. In fact, we could turn that round and we could say that the situation in Israel is reflecting their behaviour because actually, the priests were the leaders of the people. These are the guys who are meant to be behaving well, setting a big example, helping people to serve the Lord. But instead, they're sinning terribly. Let's just have a look at some of these things they were doing. So they're at Shiloh. Shiloh is where the Ark of the Covenant is. No temple building has been built. The Ark of the Covenant is in a tent and people are coming to offer sacrifices where the Ark of the Covenant is. And the Eli's sons are the priests who are ministering there under Eli's authority. And how are they behaving? Let's just read some of this again.

Look at verse 13 with me. The custom of the priests with the people was that when any man offered sacrifice, the priest's servant would come while the meat was boiling with a three-pronged fork in his hand. And he would thrust it into the pan or kettle or cauldron or pot. All that the fort brought up, the priest would take for himself. This is what they did at Shiloh to all the Israelites who came there. Moreover, before the fat was burned, the priest's servant would come and say to the man who was sacrificing, give meat for the priest to roast, for he will not accept boiled meat from you, but only raw. Now, in case you don't know, in God's law there was provision for the priests to eat from the sacrifices. But that was meant to happen after the sacrifice to God. You came and offered your offering, what was left over, the priests could have some of that for their food. But what's happening here is the priests are taking it beforehand. They're not even waiting for the offering to be given. They're just coming straight in and taking it. Then lower down in the chapter, verse 22, we see that Eli is hearing all his sons are doing. And what are they doing? They're sleeping with the women who are serving in the tent of meeting as well. So they're not doing the sacrifices right. They're engaged in sexual immorality. And verse 17 really sums it up. The sin of the young men was very great in the sight of the Lord. So Eli's sons are sinning, their sin is very great. Israel as a nation has been sinning, and its sin is very great. So where is God? It's a reasonable question to ask, isn't it? Has he abandoned his people? Can he not see what's happening? Does he not care?

And when you look around at the world today, you may think similar things. We were hearing a little bit earlier already about famines and war and financial turmoil and injustice all over the place.

Do you look at that and think, well, where is God? What's he doing? This week I was reading about some churches in Holland that are now teaching that God is just an experience, that Jesus was not God's son, and that heaven does not exist. And where is God? What's he doing? Has he abandoned his people?

Well, just like that picture on the front of the gospel that we handed out, what you first see doesn't always explain everything. So don't despair, because actually God has a plan. In the passage today, we see that he sends a man of God. We're not told who this man of God is, but he sends a man of God to Eli, and therefore to Israel too, with a message, and a message that answers some of these questions for us. It tells us that God does see what's going on.

[12 : 19] Look at verse 29 with me. He says, Why then do you scorn my sacrifices? This is God speaking through the man of God to Eli, saying, Why then do you scorn my sacrifices and my offerings that I commanded, and honour your sons above me by fattening yourselves on the choicest parts of every offering of my people Israel?

God sees it. He knows what's going on. And actually, God then judges it. If you look further down, on to verse 31, this is God's judgment on that. Behold, the days are coming when I will cut off your strength and the strength of your father's house, so there will not be an old man in your house.

So God hasn't abandoned his people. He sees he's going to judge the sin. And more than that, he tells us that actually he's got a plan as well. There's something he's specifically doing.

Look down a bit further at verse 35. He says, And I will raise up for myself a faithful priest, who will do according to what is in my heart and in my mind. And I will build him a sure house, and he shall go in and out before my anointed forever.

So God's message to Eli and Israel is a message of judgment on their sin, yes. But it's also a message of great encouragement that God is working out his purposes in the world, whatever it may look like at first glance. So if you're tempted to look at the world and lose heart, to see the sin around you, to question God, this is a great passage of reassurance. God does have a plan, so trust him.

[13 : 55] He does know what he's doing. But I was preparing this talk. It occurred to me there may well be people here this morning for whom this doesn't seem like good news. Perhaps you would rather there was not a God with a plan, a God who sees what is happening in the world and a God who judges sins. So instead of this news helping you not to despair, it might then actually cause you to despair.

If you look at the world and think there is no God, then this passage is telling you that your judgment of the situation is wrong. There is a God and he does care and he has got a plan. Well, if that's you, please keep listening because in a little bit we're going to get on to a bit more of God's plan and it's really very, very good news. So stay with me. Firstly, don't despair. God has a plan.

The next thing then to notice in this passage is that the author is making a very deliberate contrast between Samuel on the one hand and Eli's sons on the other. You may have spotted this contrast as the passage was read. As a statement about Samuel is then followed by a statement about Eli's sons. It goes back to Samuel.

It goes to Eli's sons again. It goes back to Samuel. So throughout there's this contrast being pointed out to us. And to help us understand this, I want you to imagine that tomorrow morning, through your letterbox, an envelope arrives. This is a beautiful golden envelope. And inside this envelope is this lovely invitation. It's an invitation to a garden party at Buckingham Palace. Fantastic. It's ornate. It's beautiful. It tells you just a little bit about what you've been invited to do and when you're going to come. And you think, fantastic. You send it off. And then in the post a few days later, you get another envelope. This one's a long list. This one says, right, this is where you have to turn up. This is what you have to wear. This is how you're going to behave. This is how you speak to the people when you get there. You think, great, I really want to go to Buckingham Palace. I'm going to go and do all this.

Okay. So you turn up. You get let in. You're listening to the music, eating the food, having a really good time. And then you spot one of the other guests. And this guest has turned up. And this guest is wearing a pair of sort of torn old shorts, really quite dirty, not washed. Doesn't really quite look like he shaved this morning before he came. He's had a little bit too much of the wine to drink and it's got a bit loud and a bit raucous. And when he gets invited to come and meet the Queen, he actually just wanders off in the other direction. And this guest ends up being thrown out of the party rather than getting to stay.

[16 : 29] And when we look at this passage, we see this contrast between the way that Eli's sons and the way Samuel's behaving, very similar to the way the guests at this party are behaving.

Let's look again at what Eli's sons are doing. We're going to pick out a few specific verses. Firstly, in verse two, when they're described as worthless men because they do not know the Lord. So Eli's sons don't know the Lord. Verses 13 to 17, we've just been looking at. We see how they were treating the offering, so they're scorning the offering. And then in verses 22 to 25, we see how they're sinning before God, but also before Israel as a whole. And you could sum up Eli's sons as basically being unfaithful priests. They've got a job to do, they're called to be priests, they're not being faithful in it. Samuel is then in contrast. So in verse 21, he's growing in the presence of the Lord. Eli's sons don't know the Lord. Samuel's growing in the presence of the Lord. In verses 11 and 18, Samuel is ministering before the Lord. So where Eli's sons are treating the offering with contempt, Samuel is ministering before the Lord. And in verse 26, Samuel is growing in favour with the

Lord and men, in contrast to Eli's sons who were sinning before the Lord and men. So there's this contrast going through it. Eli's sons are unfaithful, Samuel is faithful. And this contrast helps us to see what trusting in God's plan looks like. Because both these people had a choice, they could either be faithful or they could not be faithful. They'd both been chosen as priests. God actually in the passage confirms that he had chosen Eli's household as a priest. If you look with me at what the man of God first says in verse 27, it says there came a man of God to Eli and said to him, thus the Lord has said, did I indeed reveal myself for the house of your father when they were in Egypt, subject to the house of Pharaoh? Did I choose him out of all the tribes of Israel to be my priest, to go up to my altar, to burn incense, to wear an ephod before me? Those are rhetorical questions. The answer to the question is yes, God did choose them to do that. They'd been chosen, they had a job to do, but they weren't faithful in doing it.

And we too have a very similar choice. We have been chosen for a job. The New Testament tells us a bit about that job. 1 Peter chapter 2 verse 9 is one place where we're described as a royal priesthood and our job is described as proclaiming the greatness of God. Or in the book of 1 Corinthians in chapter 3, we're described as God's fellow workers and our job is building the church. So if you're a Christian, you have a job to do. You've got to proclaim the greatness of God and to build the church. So will you be faithful or will you be unfaithful? Just looking again at that contrast, we can sort of narrow it down slightly into just sort of two things really. Firstly is that Samuel knows the Lord where Eli's sons don't. And secondly, we can say Samuel's serving the Lord where Eli's sons are not. Knowing God and serving him seems to be the sort of the core of this contrast. And so this is how we should be faithful to our calling, by knowing God and by serving him. In fact, how else could we proclaim his greatness if we didn't know him? It makes sense, doesn't it? And what is proclaiming his greatness and building the church if it's not serving him? So these ideas really go hand in hand. We start with knowing God and so actually being faithful starts with knowing God as well.

So my question for you this morning then would be, well, how can you get to know God better? What can you do? Bible reading, prayer, listening to sermons, talking to other Christians. These are all ways we can get to know God better. But as God has revealed himself in the Bible and as God's revealed himself through the life and death of Jesus which is recorded in the Bible and God speaks to us through the Holy Spirit when we read the Bible, the Bible is probably the best place to start.

[20 : 35] It's a great place to get to know God and I'm sure we could all spend some more time in it. But why is that? Why don't we spend enough time reading the Bible? Have you ever stopped to think about what it is that actually hinders you from reading the Bible more? Is it that reading the Bible is not a high enough priority in your life or is it that you find it hard to make time to read the Bible?

It's funny though, isn't it, how we make time to do what we really want to do or we feel that we really need to do. Well, I think reading the Bible actually comes into the category of things we really need to do and therefore we need to make time to do it. I was very challenged by a book a couple of years ago in which an author was describing a situation where he felt God was asking him to give up his favourite sport. And the reason he felt this was the case was because he was basically spending too much time doing it. Spent a lot of time thinking about it, a lot of time practising it, a lot of time playing it and he felt it was just taking up too much of his time. And he felt God saying, well actually I want you to stop doing that so you've got more time to spend with me.

That was a big challenge for me and for me when I was reading the book, I actually felt God saying to me, well actually there were things that I needed to change as well. For me the problem wasn't sport, it was reading books. I like reading books but I get a bit obsessed when I pick up a book.

Once I've started reading it, I read it till it's finished and I don't do all that much else other than read. I read the book while I'm cleaning my teeth, I read the book while I'm eating, I read the book on the way to work if I can, if I get a quiet moment at work I might read the book and I start reading and I'm reading and reading and reading and it's gone. I don't read the Bible, I read the book.

And actually I felt God saying to me, well you know this won't do really. And that's what I decided to do and what I still do now is that I don't read any book for pleasure any day unless I've read my Bible first. It now takes me a very long time to read books that I used to read very quickly but I read my Bible an awful lot more than I used to do. It might not be books for you, it might not be sport but whatever it is, you know, think about it. What is it that needs the change of your priorities to help you to read the Bible more? So knowing God is the first thing. Serving God, how can you serve God better? Well again perhaps that's something to go away and think about more. These ideas about proclaiming his greatness and about building the church. Think about well how are you already serving? How does what you do proclaim his greatness and build the church? And then you could think about well how could that change to help you do that more?

[23 : 20] Okay so firstly this morning we've been encouraged to trust God more, to trust that he has a plan whatever the circumstances around us look like. And then secondly we've been encouraged to be faithful to our calling, to do this proclaiming his greatness and building the church.

And these two things are linked in more than one way. I said earlier that if you trust God to work out his plan that will be being faithful to your calling but your calling is actually also part of God's plan. We see we have an advantage over Samuel and the Israelites, they just get a little glimpse of the future, a glimpse of what God's plan is and we being quite a long time in time ahead of them have had much more explained to us. So last week Hannah was praying, chapter 2 verse 10, and as she prays she mentions a king. Let's just read that again, chapter 2 verse 10, the second half of that verse it says, the Lord will judge the ends of the earth, he will give strength to his king and anoint the power of his anointed. This is surprising because there is no king in Israel. So who is this king that Hannah's talking about? As Hannah has been praying, God has opened up her eyes and her mind and given her a little glimpse of what he's going to do, the fact that he's going to be bringing a king.

This week we've heard from God that we also know that a faithful priest is coming. God's going to raise up a faithful priest and we're going to have a coming king. And so this is the Israelites' little glimpse of what's about to happen. And there are later events in the book of 1 Samuel which partly fulfil that because we have Zadok the priest coming and serving David the king, David who's, you know, Israel's greatest king. So we have a part of a fulfilment of these things coming before we get to the end of 1 Samuel. But we have a much greater fulfilment in Jesus, Jesus who is the king of kings, Jesus who is our great high priest. They were asked to trust God that he was going to turn their nation around as he'd turned Hannah's situation around. And they knew that a king and a priest was involved in that. We know that this was part of God's great plan of salvation and that actually he was preparing to send Jesus to die for us. This is the greatness that we have to proclaim, that actually he has a great plan of salvation. This is why we work with him to build up the church. And this is why that if you thought that there being a God who judges sins and has a plan was a bad thing, I hope you can see why I think it's a great thing. Because God's plan is a plan of salvation. Yes, he sees sin and yes, he's the judge of the whole earth. But his plan was then and is now to bring salvation. So you too cannot despair at this news. Jesus was the priest king, he's died, he's been raised to life and God's gift of salvation is available. It's good news that God sees, it's good news that he cares and it's good news that God has a plan. So in summary then the message is really the same to us all. Do not despair at what you see in the world around you. God has a plan. Instead, get to know him and live lives that serve him.

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you this morning for your wonderful plan of salvation, that you sent Jesus to die and raised him back to life for us, Lord. We thank you that you have told us all about this in your word. And we pray that you would make reading the Bible a higher priority for us. That you would help us to set aside time regularly to read your word and to view it as such an important thing that it comes before other things that we do, Lord. That it is not something that is optional, but something that we actually need to do. And by your grace, Lord, would you enable us then to do that. Amen.

Good■. Again, let's pray. et■es.