

Samuel's Rise, Eli's Demise

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[0:00] Almighty God, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, You have said that Your Word is living and active, sharper than any sword, penetrating to the division of soul and spirit, joints and marrow.

You have made it able to judge the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. So please enable me to speak Your Word faithfully today from Your Word. Please cause it to do what You have promised it will.

And we pray this in the name of Jesus Christ and for His glory. Amen. Friends, I want to start off in an unusual place. I want to let you into my mind and my feelings just a little.

I'm going to do that because I presume that you are like me. Maybe a big presumption, but nevertheless, that's what I'm going to do. In other words, I assume that some of the things that go on inside of me go on inside of you as well.

Now, the point is that I often find myself thinking about the future. This happens at all sorts of levels. When I was younger, I had many hopes for the future. I hope to be successful in my chosen field of endeavor.

[1:01] I hope to find a good woman that I could spend my life with. And I did. And as time went on, though, my hopes changed a little. With the coming of marriage and children, I hope for children that were healthy, that love Jesus, that would grow up to be good human beings and would grow up to be Christians.

I hope that the world that they grew up in would be in better shape than it looked so it might be. And now I continue to hope for them that they will grow in the faith, that they'd continue to love Jesus, that they too will.

Well, in fact, they have done this as well, that they too will find good women and that they will be good husbands and fathers. And I hope that as Heather and I get older, we might enjoy good health, good friendships, good opportunities to continue in ministry.

And I hope that the members of this church, as we leave it later on this year, might grow in faith and knowledge and they might effectively reach people for Christ. That's what we'll be praying for.

We have lots of hopes. I hope that we might both do a good job in the new places of ministry that we're going to in Singapore. The hopes that I have are very tangible hopes.

[2:16] They are generally affected by the stages of life that I've been through. However, there have been other hopes that have remained very constant through all the changes of life. And these hopes have to do with my own spiritual state.

You see, I think that at every stage in my life as God's person, I have found myself looking at the promises of God and then back to the reality of life.

And I found myself desperately hoping and for something better than what is where I am. Let me explain just a little bit about what I mean. You see, when I read the Bible, I find within its pages a picture of what a godly person is like.

I find that such a person is someone who always has the best interests of others in mind, who loves others as they love themselves, who has nothing to do with sexual immorality, impurity, debauchery, witchcraft, hatred, discourse, discord, jealousy, fits of anger, selfish ambition, dissensions, envy, greed, drunkenness and the like.

These are all quotations from scripture. That's what we are expected to be like, according to Galatians 5. Instead, we are to find that we are to be someone who is characterized by love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, goodness, faithfulness and self-control.

[3:30] We're not to let any unwholesome word come out of our mouths. But a godly person is to be someone that from their mouth only issues things that are helpful for building up others according to their needs.

The godly person that I read about in scripture is someone who's got rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Instead of these things, the godly person is meant to be kind and compassionate, forgiving others, even as they have been forgiven in Christ.

They are to treat each other with respect and as equals in Christ. Their minds will dwell on the things that are true and noble and right and pure and lovely and admirable and excellent and praiseworthy.

They are keen to learn from God and practice what they learn. They live in prayerful dependence upon God. They're faithful and obedient. That is the sort of person that I want and hope to be. And let me tell you a little bit about reality. See, in the real world in which I live, I am not like this ideal godly person or at least not consistently. I don't always have the best interests of others in mind.

[4 : 44] Although I don't have difficulty with all the lusts of the flesh that I listed above, I do have problems with some. The fruit of the spirit are not always the things that characterize my relationship with God and with others.

The words that issue from my mouth are certainly not always gracious, seasoned as it were, with salt. I have spoken words that have destroyed rather than built up.

I do find myself getting angry every now and then with my wife and children, sometimes with colleagues, although I don't often express that, and with members of the church. Forgiveness and compassion are not always as high on my agenda as they should be.

Oh, I do have moments for friends, in case you think I'm a real rogue, when I do do the sorts of things that I would like to do as a Christian. But in my own mind, they are not nearly as abundant as they should be.

I'm not at all as consistent as I would like to be. I know the ideal, and I hope to be like the ideal, and I set my goals on being like the ideal.

[5 : 48] But it doesn't always work out that way. More often than I'd care to admit, sin dominates me and seems to overtake me. And friends, let me be very frank with you.

When that happens, I cry out to God and I say, what can I do? What hope have I got? I want to be something else. Can reality in me ever meet the ideal?

Can life ever be as it should be? Can I be rescued from the bind that I find myself in? Will sin, failure, and human frailty always be my master?

Will the good purpose of God for me ever win over the reality that is sinful me? And alongside this, will the good and greater purposes of God for his world ever win out over the reality we see ever so prevalent in our world?

Let me say that if you have my hopes for yourself and for the world, then I think the books of 1 and 2 Samuel come to our rescue.

[6 : 50] They help us immensely. You see, they deal with people who are just like you and me. And they ask these sorts of questions. And they particularly do so in the very first few chapters and also in the last few chapters of the books of 1 and 2 Samuel.

So let's see what we can find in them today. I want you to open your Bibles with me to 1 Samuel chapter 2, verse 11 to 36. And again, big picture stuff tonight. Let's get an overview of the story first. You might remember the background. Remember where we've been the last few weeks. We started the book of 1 Samuel by hearing the story of Hannah. I remember she was barren and persecuted. And one day she decided that she would stand up and go to God and call out to God to help her and to give her a child.

She told God that if he did this, she would give the child back to him for a lifetime of service. And then we heard how God did hear her prayer and granted her the son who is Samuel.

And last week we looked at the song that she sang when she brought Samuel up to the temple to give him over to God's service under Eli the priest. And we listened to her giving these great theological reflections on God and what God had done for her.

[8 : 06] Well, tonight we are going to hear two parallel stories. On the one hand, we hear interspersed references to Samuel's growth all the way through this passage we're looking at.

And that's what we're going to look at now. So have a look. Verses 18 to 21. Sorry, in verse 11, we're told that Samuel is left behind at Shiloh and he ministers before the Lord under Eli the priest.

Then in verses 18 to 21, if you have a look at them, we find Samuel ministering before the Lord. Then we are told of the ongoing family life between Hannah, Elkanah and Samuel and of their ongoing relationship with God and his representative Eli the priest.

And then verse 21 concludes by telling us that Samuel grew up in the presence of the Lord. Then finally, in 1 Samuel chapter 3 verse 1, if you just flip into the next chapter, we're again told that Samuel ministered before the Lord under Eli.

Now, throughout the story, therefore, we have these scattered references to Samuel. And did you notice something that the references about Samuel are always positive?

[9:16] He's always linked with God. And it's clear that he's looked upon with favor by God. But it is also clear that he's looked upon with favor by the people as well.

That's one side of the story. Samuel's side. The other side is not so happy. For the other side tells us a story of other young men in another family.

And the introduction to them sums up their story. Look at verse 12 in chapter 2. Now, I should tell you that a literal translation would read something like this. The sons of Eli were sons of Belial because they did not know the Lord.

So let me repeat it to you. And I deliberately used the original so you get a feel for the poetry that is there. The rhyming of words.

The sons of Eli were sons of Belial for they did not know the Lord. Do you see what the writer is trying to tell us right at the beginning of his introduction?

[10:16] The sons of Belial is another way of saying worthless or wicked or good for nothing. However, probably it's best to translate it just literally as I said.

You see, what is being said here is that these boys are physically the sons of Eli the priest.

However, psychologically and morally, who are they the sons of?

Belial. Their affections, their disposition lies more with wickedness and worthlessness than it does with their father Eli. And the second half of the verse tells us that they did not know the Lord.

In other words, they were priests by inheritance. They exercised priesthood in Israel. But they didn't even know the Lord that they were meant to be representing. They had no regard for God or his ways.

They were sons of Belial, not sons of God. And just as they had no regard for Eli's paternal authority, so they had no regard for the Lord's authority.

[11:17] So there's the introduction to them. It's not a good start, is it? And that things don't get any better as the story progresses, as you might have picked up, as we had it read to us.

Verses 13 to 17 tell us they were gluttons and bullies. And by their actions, they defrauded the people of God. That is, for their own sake of gaining things for themselves, they defrauded God's people and they treated the Lord's offering with contempt.

Our next introduction comes to them in verses 22 to 25. Flip down and have a look at them. Again, the first verse holds the clue to understanding what is going on. We're told that Eli was old.

The implication is that the sons are now in a position where they are increasingly dominating the temple life and where they will inherit Eli's mantle. And we're told that Eli hears what they are doing. And what he hears is an additional item or has an additional item. Not only the boy's guilty of gluttony and bullying and treating the Lord's offering with contempt, they now have another sin that they have added.

[12:21] They are sleeping with the women who have given themselves to service of God at the entrance of the tent of meeting. And so in verse 23, Eli, having heard this, confronts them.

And the narrator of the story has told us how Eli has heard. But there's no reference to the sons hearing. And there's no reference to them responding in any way. In fact, verse 25 is clear that they do not listen to their father's rebuke.

There is nothing even like a mumbled apology from them that is recorded for us. They don't attempt to concoct an excuse. They don't even often to amend their ways. They really are sons of Belial, worthless thugs.

And Eli's warning is clear. Such high handed sin against God will leave his sons high and dry and without hope. The third incident involving Eli's family comes in verses 27 to 36.

We're told that a man of God comes to Eli. And the speech here is very similar in thrust and length to the speech in 2 Samuel 13, where Nathan the prophet comes to David the king after his adultery with Bathsheba.

[13 : 31] Very similar in its thrust. It is potent and full of judgment. And the charges are clear. In verses 27 and 28, God makes clear that there's been a long history of grace and kindness toward Eli and his family.

Then in verse 29, he delivers his accusation. And I'll give you a little more literal translation of the verse. It comes from the New American Standard. It goes like this.

Did you hear all the my's?

My, my, my. This is my. This is what I own, not what you own. It is not for you to do with what you think.

And then, did you notice right at the beginning, why do you kick at my sacrifice and my offering?

That first my, that first you is in the plural in the original language.

[14 : 40] In other words, God is making it clear that Eli himself is responsible for what his sons are doing. For what has happened. He has participated in the gluttony of his sons.

He's done worse, but he's done even worse things than that. He's kicked against God's sacrifices. In other words, he's acted out of contempt or defiance. And in doing such things, Eli has honored his sons more than he's honored his God.

And then in verse 30 and following, God announces the judgment. In effect, he promises the decimation of his family and the end of their effective ministry. That's if you summarize what's going on there.

That's what's going on. And he also gives a sign to Eli that so that he can see that this, how serious and resolute God is about his judgment. And within a chapter or two, it'll have all happened.

Finally, there's a deep irony in this. As Eli and his sons had scorned the priesthood that they had been given, it will be taken away from them and given to someone more fitting.

[15 : 43] You see, their gluttony, their brutality over food will end up with them. Did you notice it here? Begging for food and sustenance themselves. As it turned out, these prophecies took place within the history of Israel.

Within a few chapters, Hophni and Phinehas are dead. And in 1 Kings chapter 2 verse 6, the last and following, the last of Eli's line is replaced by Zadok and his line.

God fulfilled his word. Finally, the true high priest, of course, Jesus Christ, replaced all other human priests. That's God's faithful priest who does what is in accord with God's heart and mind.

So can you see what's going on in this chapter? There's an overview of the story. Let's turn and observe some of the larger themes that are here and see what we can make of them. First thing that I want to do is reflect on the human activity that we see in the whole of these two chapters.

First, we have Elkanah's family. Here's Elkanah himself. He's obviously, we find out this from the first chapter, he's obviously a deeply religious man who wants to do the best for his family.

[16 : 49] Then there's Peninnah. Remember her from chapter 1, the other wife? She's a persecutor of the disadvantaged Hannah. And Hannah herself is the heroine of the story.

I think this is why I think it's such a good child's name. I think she's the hero of the whole book in many ways. I think she sets the standards for the whole book. Great name for a daughter.

I wish I'd had a daughter. I could have named Hannah in one sense. Hannah herself is the heroine of this story. This story tells us she stands and she chooses to depend upon God.

And then she fulfills her vows and she acts as a godly mother toward her dedicated son. And then lastly in this story, there's Samuel himself. We're not told much about Samuel's actions.

He's pretty little at the moment. All that we are told is that God is at work in him and that he ministers with God's favor and with the people's favor.

[17 : 48] Now these very words will be used to speak about the Lord Jesus Christ in Luke's gospel. He finds favor with God and man. So, you know, this is happening way back there with Samuel.

Now, second family, Eli's family. They are a bunch of rogues, thugs, sons of Belial, worthless fellows. They sin with a high hand.

They give no place to God or any other authority figure. Eli appears to be a somewhat directionless man himself. He's mostly led by others. He's led by Hannah back in chapter one.

He's now led by his sons here. He comes across as a bad father, an unworthy priest. And so here we have it. A bunch of humans, much like any bunch of humans anywhere in the world today or any other period of history.

There are the good among them and there are the bad. But all in all, they are very human and act with all the normal human motives that we see. Now, let's turn to God's activity.

[18 : 53] It's clear that God is very active in this story. We see it in 1 Samuel 1 5, where we're told that it was God who had closed the womb of Hannah. We see it in chapter 2 verse 25.

We're told that the sons of Eli did not listen to their father's rebuke. And did you hear the words? For it was the Lord's will to put them to death. We're told of Samuel's growth with no human responsible.

But he's constantly linked with the Lord. And so we assume that it's God that's at work. And lastly, we see God taking decisive action in sending a man of God to Eli and his household.

Now, as you take a look at these incidents, what do you see in common? What is it that God is doing here? Well, it's clear from these passages that he has a program and a purpose in his world. It's clear, isn't it? He's marching on toward it. He clearly wants Samuel in place. And the barrenness of Hannah and the hard-heartedness of Eli's sons have that object in mind.

[19 : 56] Hannah's poem says that he is clearly heading toward a place where a godly king will be in situ. But it's also clear from the prophecy of the man of God that God also wants a godly priest in place.

And this same godly priest will be a godly prophet as well. And so here's the balance of these chapters. Here is God, active in history, pushing towards his larger purposes for his people and his world.

And he works toward those purposes through ordinary people in ordinary families. They are people who make choices and are clearly responsible for their actions.

Some good, some bad. It might be Hannah who decides that she'll stand up and she'll go and pray. Or it might be Eli who fails to be a good parent. Or it might be Eli's good-for-nothing sons who culpably shake their fist at God and his authority over them.

No matter which it is, somehow God is at work in all of them. He's accomplishing his purposes. So slowly, subtly, through human frailty and sin, he will push on toward his goal.

[21 : 08] And in the end, he will have arrived at where he's heading. Despite humans and through humans. Now, I wonder if you can see all of the implications of this.

First, there are implications within the books of Samuel. You see, my own view is that these stories are deliberately placed here to make a fundamental theological point.

You see, the book of Judges, the previous book to this one, is a book where... Well, in the Hebrew Bible, it's the previous one. But anyway, it's got a little gap between it because you put Ruth in and so on.

But the book of Judges, which historically is the one before this, is a book where on the outside, things looked out of control. We're working through it in our morning services at the moment. And it looks really out of control at the moment.

The books of 1 and 2 Samuel... But in reality, in the book of Judges, it's not out of control because God is at work ruling his people. Now, the books of 1 and 2 Samuel will describe how the people of God attempt to force some control on their political situation.

[22 : 14] You see, within 8 chapters, 7-8 chapters, they will assert their will by requesting God give them a king. It will be a very high-handed act.

It will amount to being a rejection of the kingship of God. But God will somehow overrule that blasphemous desire. Despite the machinations of his people, he'll establish his king.

In other words, he'll do exactly what he's doing even in this chapter. He will work in and through and over human action to accomplish his great purpose in his world. And because of that, friends, we humans can have hope.

We humans can have hope. You see, the clear, purposive, concrete action of God is a place where we can, as it were, hang our hats and say, I can rest there.

It's where the people of God can find their security. You see, it doesn't matter whether it is as they wait for a king of God's choice in 1 or 2 Samuel, or whether they wait for the ultimate faithful high priest and prophet, the king who is Jesus Christ, or whether they wait for God to fulfill his great purpose in his world to bring in the new heaven and the new earth, or whether we wait for God to be active in the life of Andrew Reid so he might gradually be formed into the likeness of Christ.

[23 : 37] He is sovereign. Ask God over all of history, and he will accomplish his purposes. So let's go back to where we started.

What does this passage have to say to me on a personal level? As I long for God's hope in me, my sanctification. What can I learn from this? Well, I've given you some hints already.

This passage instructs me that if I rely on myself, then there are a number of things we can expect. If we rely on humans, there are a number of things we can expect. We can expect the occasional good and godly act.

The Bible is clear that generally human nature is sinful. And the general expectation that we should have, if we are humans left on our own, is that we'll find expertise in sin.

That's what humans have been doing for all of human history. If I'm left on my own, I will follow suit. I will do what is right in my own eyes. If I'm left on my own, if I rely on humans, if I rely on me, then we'll be faced with overwhelming hopelessness.

[24 : 47] And we'll be in desperate straits. And the world will be a worse place, not a better place. And I will certainly not grow in godliness. Because I'll be interested in self.

But what about the alternative? What can I expect? What can we expect if we rely on God? Well, again, we'll see the sorts of things that happen in this very passage. We'll sometimes see God acting decisively and in a palpably evident way.

But we'll sometimes not even see him act. He'll be at work, moving toward his great purposes. And his activity will often result in things that we don't quite understand.

But we'll know that he's working toward his good purposes. And we'll know that they are good because we've seen his work in Jesus Christ. And we know it's good. And we know that it is good. Because we know that he loves us. And he always has our good in mind. And he wants to shape us into the likeness of his son. And so we will be filled with hope. Not with desperation.

[25 : 55] Not thinking, how can anything be different for me? But, God, you are at work in me. Though we don't understand everything that occurs, we will know that God has everything under control.

And the world will be as he has ordained it to be. For example, there will be a new heaven and earth where righteousness dwells. And, believe it or not, there will be a sanctified Andrew. And, along with all others who have hoped in his appearance. And hope will eventually overtake the reality that I sometimes feel living now. Hope will become reality.

And that is the God of 1 and 2 Samuel, friends. And that's the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. This is our God and Father. The hope of the world and the hope of us. So, what can we do then as we live in this fallen world?

Well, the first tangible thing we can do is to be people of faith. That is, people who look toward Jesus in whom all the promises of God, that is, that I will be, that my life will catch up with my identity, that they have their yes and their amen in Christ.

[27 : 15] In other words, we can live like the great saints of old, believing and trusting that God is at work and that he'll fulfill his purposes through his Son, Christ.

But we can also act out our faith. That is, we can take the small sorts of actions that Hannah does. We can choose to stand and act in prayerful dependence upon our God, who always has our best interests in mind.

And we can choose to say no to acts and ways of life that have no place among God's people. The New Testament instructs us to do this.

It says, put off that and put on that. So, we can make those small choices. We can choose to do what Eli and his sons did not do. We can choose to repent of wrong and be aggressively opposed to sin.

And we can go about encouraging each other to be people of hope and people of action. Being godly. And gradually, chip by chip, God will fashion us into the likeness of his Son.

[28 : 21] We are that, as it were, already by status. But gradually, he'll make us that as well. So, friends, let's pray.

Our Father, we choose to be like Hannah. That is, we choose to stand and act in prayerful dependence upon you, knowing that you are at work in us as we believe and trust in your Son, and rely on your Holy Spirit to work in us.

Help us to say no to acts and ways of life that have no place among your people. Help us to choose to do what is right.

Help us to choose to repent of wrong and to be aggressively opposed to sin. Father, please encourage us each day by your work in us, by our reading of Scripture to be people of hope and people of action.

Father, we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.