

God's response to rotten leaders

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Date: 08 June 2025

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[0 : 00] The passage is hard this morning and I think the topic is hard this morning. Think about rotten leaders, rotten leaders.! A leader is someone we put our trust in, someone that we look to to guide us, we expect to act with wisdom and integrity.

And yet painfully, we will all know what it's like to have a rotten leader. And I'm sure this will hit home for you in all kinds of different ways.

I think one of the first times in my life that I really got this, to be honest, was during the COVID pandemic. It was a very different time for different people. Some people probably enjoyed time off school and time away from the office.

But to be honest, it was a pretty rubbish time for me. I was in a city and in a job that were all quite new to me. I didn't really know the two guys that I was living with at all, and I was far from family. Life was restricted. The rules were demanding. It was pretty rubbish. But maybe like me, you believed the political leaders who said that this was all necessary for the common good.

[1 : 10] And so I did my best to comply. But then what did we see? The same leaders who imposed these rules on others openly disregarded them themselves, partying hard while banning people from going to funerals and weddings.

I just felt rotten. You're supposed to look up to leaders, but it just seemed rotten. We're going to know the reality of rotten leaders in all kinds of different ways.

And perhaps some of those are going to be very personal and painful for you. As we read through 1 Samuel, as we continue doing that this morning, it is a dramatic story.

We saw last week, and we'll keep seeing, God brings a massive turnaround to a nation in crisis. Last week, we saw God hear the prayer of a desperate but faithful woman, Hannah, provide her with a son, Samuel.

And Hannah amazingly dedicates him back to the Lord for service in his tabernacle. And yet, as we see this morning, the tabernacle is pretty rotten because it's full of rotten leaders.

[2 : 22] The house that Samuel is serving in is full of rot. It's a crisis of rotten leaders for God's people, and we'll see that God is about to confront them head on.

It's dramatic, but it is really good news for us and for anyone who desires justice and desires for good leaders. We get to see God be strong and honest and set things right.

We'll know the reality of rotten leaders in all kinds of ways, as I said. I'm going to put some photos of rotten leaders that you might remember. I'm not going to keep them up for very long, but maybe you recognise some of these people, you know.

The problem is, they're just everywhere. And the problem is, the stakes feel even higher when it comes to religious leaders.

Maybe you'd recognise some of these kind of things. I'll take them off for now. The stakes are even higher when it comes to religious leaders, because you don't just look to them for general guidance, but you look to them for things to do with God.

[3 : 33] Religious leaders carry some kind of authority from God. You expect them to speak for God and represent God to you and embody his character and his kindness.

And yet, I'm sure you'll be aware of so many stories of religious leaders who have been absolutely rotten. As I've been preparing for this week, I've been going through my mind of some of the Christian leaders that I've looked up to or have heard of within my lifetime, who have had a dramatic fall and have been pretty rotten, from Catholic churches to charismatic churches to conservative churches, in the Church of England and other denominations.

Rotten leaders are everywhere. I think of one preacher whom I sat in the room and listened to a bunch of times. I think of the bosses and pastors of some of my friends.

There's just rotten leaders everywhere. And so the big question for us today is, what is God's response? What is God's response to rotten leaders? And in 1 Samuel, we will see good news that God does respond.

But the message that gives us and to rotten leaders today is something to pay close attention to. So first, the obscenity of rotten leaders.

[4 : 58] What's going on in 1 Samuel chapter 2 is not pretty. Firstly, Hophni and Phinehas were greedy. Did you see that? It talks about stealing meat from the sacrificial system.

God had set up a system that was fair and very organised. When meat was offered at the tabernacle or temple, God got a share of it.

The priests got a specific share. And the worshippers who brought the offering got to take a share of it home too. But Eli's sons were very greedy. Verse 13 says, The priest servant would come with a three-pronged fork, plunge it into the pan, and whatever the fork brought up, the priest would take for himself.

They were grabbing extra beyond what was organised for them. They were taking from the worshippers' portion, and they were what the worshippers would have cooked and taken home for themselves.

But more than that, the priests were taking from God's portion too. The fat was always God's special portion, because I guess it was the tastiest bit.

[6 : 06] Verse 15, Even before the fat was burned, the priest servant would come and say, Give the priest some meat to roast. He won't accept boiled meat, only raw.

They demanded the best, the fatty, delicious parts, taking it before God received his share. They were treating God's sacrifices like their own personal buffet.

Second, their greed led to abuse of power. Worshippers rightly objected to what they saw was going on. They wanted to honour God properly.

Verse 16, If the person said to him, Let the fat be burned first. They answered, No, hand it over now, and if you don't, I'll take it by force. They used threat and physical force.

They showed no respect for God, or for God's people. Verse 17 tells us, The sin of the young men was very great in the Lord's sight, for they were treating the Lord's offering with contempt.

[7 : 08] And third, they committed sexual sin. Verse 22 is shocking. Eli heard about everything his sons were doing to all Israel, and how they slept with the women he served at the entrance of the tent of meeting.

These men, in a position of power, had sex with women who worked there, in God's holy place. It's completely against God's way, and a complete misuse of power.

It's like a pastor, stealing from the donations pot, threatening anyone who objects to them, and having sex with the women who work under their power.

It's obscene. You could imagine this for Hannah and Elkanah, or a family in Israel. They've travelled for days, bringing their best lamb, a significant financial sacrifice, as an act of worship.

It's the most special day of the whole year for them. And into this sacred moment, Swaggah, Hophni, and Phinehas. Not with reverence, but like fat gangsters, high on life.

[8 : 17] They don't see a holy offering, they see a free meal. But it's obscene. Eli's sons, the priests, leading Israel, at the very centre of the religion of the country, are rotten.

They sin with greed, and power, and sex. They hurt people, they offend God, they have no respect for him. It's obscene. A very important, and very difficult question for us to ask, though, is, why do they sin like this?

Because it's right, I think, and it's quite easy, to condemn it out there. But if we only do that, we miss something crucial.

And that is, their sin is very shocking. But the attitudes behind it are all too familiar. And I don't say that to downplay what they did.

But I think it's a good question for us to ask, is where can our attitudes actually be a bit like theirs? And with greed, or power, or sex, these priests put their own pleasure before honouring God.

[9 : 28] They put their own pleasure before honouring God. And at some level, we do this too.

Now, as I said, that does not excuse obscene sin, but it warns us, because if the same problem out there is in some ways the same problem in here.

Imagine, this is pretty easy to imagine probably, because it happens all the time. I'm scrolling on my phone, laying on the sofa, I'm pretty tired, and Emma, my wife, needs help with something.

And it would honour her, and honour God, to go and help her. But I snap back, because I don't want anyone to interrupt my selfish time, when I'm just chilling out, scrolling on my phone, being mindless.

I'm putting my pleasure before what would odd honour God. You can imagine it in other ways. Taking lustful looks at something online, because it feels satisfying.

Or flirting with someone you know you shouldn't, because you enjoy the attention. Or finding escapism and ultimate pleasure in food, or alcohol, or video games, or online shopping.

[10:35] It's seeking comfort and pleasure in things and ways that dishonour actually what God has given to us, good things, and putting our own pleasure before honouring God.

See, it is one thing, and it's not a bad thing, to condemn sin when we see it. But if we're being honest, that means we have to also look inwards too. And so when we ask, why would they sin like this?

The honest answer is, we can understand. We know what it is to choose our pleasure before honouring God. And that's why what comes next matters so much, because God's response to rotten leaders has relevance to us too.

The second thing is, the hope of better leaders. And peppered throughout this passage, there is the contrast of hope. On a sunny day, if you light a candle, you can barely even see it, you can barely see it in this quite bright room.

It doesn't do anything, a candle on a bright day. But if you light a candle in a very dark place, it might provide your only way out. The darkness provides a dramatic contrast to the light.

[11:47] And that's what we see all the way through this passage. Because in the tabernacle, there's another character, the little boy Samuel, who we were introduced to last week.

You might wonder, what could a three-year-old boy possibly do in a tabernacle? Well, maybe he was fetching things and carrying them around. Maybe he was cleaning bowls, like in this picture here.

And perhaps his job each day was to open the doors and welcome everyone in. He would have watched and learned how he saw the sacrifices going on. But all the way through the passage, the way it's written gives us a clear contrast.

Do you see that? Verse 11 is about Samuel, 12 to 17 are about Eli and his sons. Then 18 to 21 about Samuel. Then the next bit, 22 to 25 about Eli and his sons before Samuel again in 26.

It alternates all the way through. The alternating contrast shows us how different Samuel is to Eli and his sons. And what are some of the things we learn about Samuel in these verses?

[12:50] He genuinely ministers before the Lord in the tabernacle. He grows up, he gets bigger where it talks about Hannah needing to make a new robe for him each year. He grew in stature and favour.

He came from a righteous and blessed family. And Samuel grew up in the presence of the Lord. And what does Samuel do in this passage for us? It gives us a glimmer of God's purposes.

He's planning something different. The bright light of Samuel shines out amidst the horrible darkness. God's turnaround in the religious system of Israel is coming.

For the reader, it gives us hope as it points to a better leader that God provides. For Israel, for God's people, at any point now in the future as they look back on this, they can look back to a story with hope that God does and can bring a better path or a remnant or a religious turnaround to a country that's an absolute mess.

After hearing about Eli and his sons, don't you breathe a bit of a sigh of relief when we hear about Samuel? Because we long for leaders like him, leaders that are faithful and humble and pure and upright.

[14:13] I hope that desire takes us forward to Jesus, Jesus, the perfect priest and perfect leader. Jesus is God's ultimate provision for his people.

He is fit to serve in God's temple. Jesus intercedes for us even now. Jesus ensures that we can enter God's presence. When Samuel is good, we should think, wow, wouldn't it be good to have a leader like that?

Or wouldn't it be good to have a leader like that who lives forever? Well, we have one in Jesus. Look at these verses from Hebrews. Hebrews 7 says, because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood.

And later on, such a high priest truly meets our needs. One who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens.

When we know the reality of rotten leaders in all kinds of areas of life and when we know the reality of it, especially in the church, it is good news that God has provided a better, a perfect leader for us. [15:22] When all others let you down, Jesus will not. When all hope seems lost, Jesus is still good. He is, as the verse says, holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens.

He is everything we want in a good leader and priest. Christ. And so, as Samuel provides a glimmer of hope for God to bring a better leader, I let Samuel point you all the way forward to Jesus.

And here's the third and last thing we see. The tragedy of rotten leaders. A tragedy is when something that was so high up ends up falling so far down.

And because as well as providing hope for a better leader, in chapter 2, God shows very clearly that his response to rotten leaders is that he will not take their sin lightly, which is good news for us who long for justice.

I don't know, I suspect you're like this because it's pretty common. But when we see a prominent leader fall, it can be kind of fascinating or you kind of get obsessed with it almost.

[16:37] I don't know, if you've seen in the news this week, a big breakup, you might call it, between Elon Musk and Donald Trump as they hurl insults at each other across social media.

It becomes like a public spectacle. Whether you like those people or not, it's almost like a slow motion car crash that you can't look away from. We're gripped by it.

And I suspect for many, there's a sense of kind of schadenfreude or a pleasure in someone else's falling in watching a powerful leader fall down. In this slow motion car crash, the leader doesn't turn away from the edge of the cliff.

Eli just keeps playing on ahead. He knows his family are steering towards disaster, yet he refuses to grab the wheel and get them back on the road. He's been given the warning signs.

That's what we saw earlier on. He's heard all about the sin of what they do to all Israel. And yet, he doesn't do more than give them a quick little telling off, but nothing really that serious.

[17:41] And so we watch as if in slow motion the car crash of Eli and his family about to face God's judgment. And God sends this anonymous prophet.

We don't know who it is at all. And in verse 28, God reminds Eli of the privilege his family had.

Verse 28, I chose your ancestor out of all the tribes of Israel to be my priest, to go up to my altar, to burn incense, to wear an ephod in my presence.

I also gave your ancestor's family all the food offerings presented by the Israelites. Why do you scorn my sacrifice and offering that I prescribe for my dwelling? Why do you honor your sons more than me by fattening yourselves on the choice parts of every offering made by my people Israel?

Notice God highlights there that the priests get a part of the food offerings that come to him, but it's not enough for the greedy Eli and his sons. And Eli is condemned too for participating in what's going on by not stopping his son, by not taking more of a handle of things.

He is joining in with their sin and actually he too is fastening himself on the choice parts of the offerings. God's house is being desecrated by the men who are supposed to lead it.

[18:59] their obscene sin is happening where he dwells. Do you know, I find so shocking, this passage is not describing something that is happening in a dingy back alley of a rebel city.

It's happening in God's house, the tabernacle, and God takes this very personally. God responds, verse 32, these might be hard lines to read, no one in your family will ever reach old age.

All your descendants will die in the prime of life. Verse 34, Hophni and Phinehas will both die on the same day. Eli's family, and we'll see this actually in two weeks, Eli's family will face a dramatic, uncompromising, holy judgment.

As I said, a tragedy is when something is high in the middle and by the end falls down very low. And we saw that last week a lot in Hannah's song, something that was high is brought down very low.

We'll sing later on, those who oppose the Lord will be broken. Those who were full on food will have to beg for food. It's a hard word, I imagine a very hard word for Eli, a hard word for us to even read as kind of a third person.

[20:17] But it cannot be a surprise for Eli. He knew what his sons were doing. He had the authority to stop them but did nothing. And so now things come crumbling down. He faces God's judgment.

As I said though, within the passage we have seen peppered throughout this hope of a better leader and we get that once more in verse 35. God says, I will raise up for myself a faithful priest who will do according to what is in my heart and mind.

we've seen Samuel is a little glimmer of this hope. Within 1 and 2 Samuel it points us towards Zadok the priest and ultimately it points us towards Christ, the good priest who eternally has the heart and mind of God.

As we read of this tragedy of rotten leaders, how should we respond today? Firstly, and I think this is the big thing that we should respond with, is remember that it is really good news genuinely that God brings judgment.

We all see injustice done by those in power and yet we often see powerful people get away with it. The corrupt politician, the abusive celebrity, the gang leader who dies rich and happy.

[21 : 37] Without God, we may hope for justice, we may even fight for it. But often, the bad guys win. They have more money for better lawyers.

But God sees the faithful Israelite, he sees the victim of church abuse today, he sees the sex traffic victim anywhere in the world and he says, I see this and I will respond and I will not let the bad guys get away with it ultimately.

For anyone who has ever felt powerless or longed for justice, the news that God will judge is good news. God, the judge of all, will ensure that no one, however powerful or mighty or impressive or popular, will get away with it.

No one is too powerful or can bribe him. God does not show favoritism. On the final day, everyone will be called to account before him and as we will sing with Hannah later on, the Lord God knows all secrets, by him deeds are weighed.

I will say firstly, this is good news for those who face rotten leaders because we can trust that God will do what is fair and right.

[22 : 54] For God's people always, whether the Israelites or the church, whether we face bullies from inside or outside the church, we can hold on to the fact that God is a God of justice.

That doesn't mean though, that we shouldn't care about justice today or stand up against it now.

Actually, because God is a God of justice who hates sin and oppression, we should too.

Because God is a God of justice who stands up for the vulnerable, it's right that his church does too.

That is why safeguarding matters so much. As a church, it is really good and right that we actively combat the rottenness we see in this kind of passage.

And so, at St. John's, we want to be committed to making sure our church is a place where every person is safe and respected and free from harm. Our God of justice must ignite our heart for justice.

And so, I hope we say this often, but I'll say it clearly this morning. If anything ever concerns you at St. John's, if you ever experience or witness this kind of rottenness, please talk to someone about it.

[24 : 08] It's vital that things are well reported so that they can be stopped from happening again and so that the hurt can be cared for. And when we read a passage like this, we don't want to be so self-righteous or naive individually or as a kind of denomination or tradition to say that this kind of stuff will never come close to home.

The reality is that rottenness can be in here, in here. If you want to discuss or report something at St. John's, our safeguarding officer is Judith Roberts. Judith can give us a wave.

You can contact her anytime at safeguarding at stjohs!org. That is true whoever you are, adult or child of any background or ability.

And if you can't speak to Judith for some reason, then you can also speak with the diocese safeguarding team. They are a good team who work hard to care for people in our area and their contact details are always on that little table over there.

This is really important and I hope you see this, that all of us work together to be a church that reflects the love of Jesus rather than reflecting these kind of rotten priests.

[25 : 18] So that's the main thing. I think we should give thanks that God is a God of justice who doesn't let the powerful or those who can bribe get away with it. But from the prophecy in this passage, there is a second application for us and that is the warning to us each individually.

Because I said all of us can know that kind of attitude to put our pleasure before honouring God. And the reality is God will judge all sin, even the quiet or subtle bits.

Every sin will be punished. The question for us though is where will that sin be punished? And God will not let anyone get away with it. And yet he has offered one hope, one amazing hope through Jesus.

Because Jesus is our perfect high priest and Jesus the high priest is also the sacrifice. That means our sins can be paid for through him.

Jesus on the cross with the nails took our punishment. He faced God's righteous justice for our sin in our place. He dies for our salvation.

[26 : 29] He was pierced for our transgressions. And that means we who know that we are sinners can flee from the sin that earns God's judgment and trust in the Saviour who bore God's judgment.

That doesn't mean that we will never have things like a prison system or things like that. But it does mean that there is genuine forgiveness before God for sin because of Jesus.

Our hope must not be in our own goodness or our own self-righteousness because God sees and knows all and will punish all sin. But trust in Christ and ask him to bear your sin in his, bear your sin in your place and it will be fully paid for on the cross.

Which means on that final day when everyone is brought before God Jesus can say on your behalf, I have paid for their sin. This passage is really hard.

It shows God's holy justice against the rottenness of sin and particularly against rotten leaders. But I hope that our response, perhaps now or perhaps in time, can be to thank God that he is holy and he does not let anyone get away with it.

[27 : 54] We can be grateful that he will be fair, that he is the one who's the judge. He is a God of good justice and it's good that he is the one who rules over all.

We're going to take a minute to be quiet, perhaps to reflect on your own heart on some of these things and then we'll sing in a moment and I'll lead us in a prayer just before we do that. Our Lord God, there is no one highly like you, there is no one besides you, there is no rock like you, our God. Thank you that you see all, thank you that you are fair and right and that you will bring ultimate justice in the end.

Please help us to love and praise you for that. Father, we pray to you that we would flee from the sin that so entangles our hearts and trust in Jesus, our one substitute.

Thank you that you are God of holy justice and thank you that you do respond to rotten leaders. We praise you for that. Amen.