



Part 5 – Glimpses of Grace in Terrible Times

1 Samuel 2:11-36

These were terrible times in Israel. Idolatry and immorality had left a mark of shame upon the land as the people continually mimicked the nations. As this passage points out, the priests Phinehas and Hophni, sons of Eli, were outrageously corrupt. What hope is there when the spiritual leaders of the people are villains?

But throughout the account there are glimpses of grace. Indeed, the section starts out by giving us a brief glimpse in Samuel's direction, who is at the tabernacle "ministering to the Lord." This little boy will grow to be a man who will perform the duties of a judge (a *proto-king*), a priest, and a prophet; something unheard of. Throughout the sordid tale of Eli's sons, the narrator inserts little reminders that the Lord is at work: "the boy was ministering to the Lord" (vs. 11), "Samuel was ministering before the Lord" (vs. 18), "Now the boy Samuel continued to grow both in stature and in favor with the Lord and also with man" (vs. 26). Samuel is a sign from the Lord that grace will have the last word.

The Good News First

Vs. 11 – "Then Elkanah went home to Ramah. And the boy was ministering to the LORD in the presence of Eli the priest." – With one sentence the writer is establishing that Hannah's prayer (vv. 1-10) is already being granted. Samuel is portrayed as being trained as a priest, one who ministers in the house of the Lord. All of the bad news we are about to read happens as God is at work to raise up Samuel.

Disaster at Shiloh

Vs. 12 – The term translated "worthless men" is applied elsewhere to idolaters (Deuteronomy 13:13), the sexually immoral (Judges 19:22), insurrectionists (1 Samuel 10:27), and liars (1 Kings 2:10). Eli's sons were "worthless" (or, wicked) because "they did not know the Lord." This may also be translated, "had no regard for the Lord." In the context, this is not a morally neutral condition as though they simply lacked information. Rather, "did not know the Lord" conveys a hard-hearted indifference. As priests, they had been instructed in God's law but remained unchanged and unbelieving.

Vv. 13-14 – The priest's servant would plunge a three-pronged fork into the cauldron of meat being prepared by the worshippers, and whatever was drawn out would belong to the priest (this is where we get the term "potluck"). It is not entirely clear as to whether the practice described was itself an abuse or whether Eli's sons were abusing an accepted practice by intentionally taking far more than they were entitled to.

Vv. 15-16 – The further description makes clear that Phinehas and Hophni were not only stealing from the worshippers. They were stealing from the Lord as well. They demanded meat before it had been cooked upon the altar, along with the fat portions (a highly valued portion) which was to remain on the altar to be burned. According to the law laid out in the Pentateuch, taking back the fat portions of the sacrifices carried the penalty of death (Leviticus 7:22-25).

Vs. 17 – What Hophni and Phinehas were doing constituted a "very great" sin in the "sight of the LORD." They were not only robbing the worshippers but were treating "the offering of the LORD with contempt."

- The righteousness of Israel would not rise above the level of her leadership. Though the Lord had preserved a faithful remnant, the nation was in spiritual and political disarray. Even the holy ground of Shiloh was being treated as a playground for sin by the priests.
- This seems so foreign to contemporary people, perhaps even especially Christians who may wonder why a burnt offering of fatty meat from a lamb or goat or bull would be so valuable to God. But we must remember that God had instituted the sacrificial system as a means to cover the people's sins. And though the animal sacrifices only symbolically covered the people's sin (Hebrews 10:4), they pointed forward to the one perfect and eternal act of atonement that Jesus would achieve by laying down his life in our place. The sacrificial system was meant to tutor the people in their need for a Divine Savior who would remove their sin by shedding his blood. To treat the altar of the Lord with contempt, therefore, was to proactively dishonor the blood of Christ.

A Glimpse of Grace

At this point the writer shifts our view once more to Samuel, Hannah, and Elkanah.

Vs 18 – “Samuel was ministering before the LORD, a boy clothed with a linen ephod.” – The linen ephod was a simple white garment, symbolic of Samuel's apprenticeship into priestly service. The reference to Samuel (“a boy”) at this point “is to paint the misdeeds of Eli’s ‘boys’ in even darker tones by virtue of their contrast with the faithful service of the ‘boy’ Samuel.”¹

Vv. 19-21 – The detail of Hannah visiting Samuel each year with a new robe is certainly a tender one. But it may well portend something of greater significance. In the ancient world, robes often communicated a degree of religious and social value. We will see this symbolic function of robes elsewhere in the books of Samuel. When Saul tears Samuel's robe, it is a sign of the kingdom being torn away from Saul (15:27-28). Later, David's conscience will be burdened for having cut away a portion of Saul's robe even though he did so as evidence that he had no intention of harming him (24:11).

During those yearly visits, Eli would bless Elkanah and Hannah. Specifically, the priest prayed that the Lord would grant them more children, and in due time Hannah conceived and bore three sons and two daughters. This portion of the account ends with a description of Samuel which sounds remarkably similar to how Jesus is described in his youth (Luke 2:52).

Eli's Sons Go from Bad to Worse

Vs. 22 – This is not the first time Eli, now an old man, has heard about the troubling behavior of his sons. Not only were they stealing from the offerings and sacrifices, they were also engaging in sex with women at the tabernacle (“the tent of meeting”). Such behavior boggles the mind. How could any son of Israel, much less priests, treat the holy dwelling of the Lord with such contempt? In this way they treated the house of the Lord like a pagan temple.

Vv. 23-24 – Their sinful behavior was no secret among the people. Eli heard the reports from “all these people.” He hears “no good report” concerning his sons.

Vs. 25 – Eli's question to his sons likely carries even more weight than he could have known, but his logic is correct. Where there is strife among people, the Lord may mediate between the two through his appointed means. Indeed, the Torah records in great detail how various disputes are to be adjudicated and resolved. But what will become of the one who has offended the Lord? Who will mediate between the LORD and a sinner?

Eli's sons “did not listen to the voice of their father, for it was the will of the Lord to put them to death.” Notice how the hardened hearts of Hophni and Phinehas were, by this point, the judgment of the Lord. “Persistence in sin over time results in the inability to do otherwise (Romans 1:24-28).”² The Lord had rendered a verdict on Eli's sons.

A Glimpse of Grace

Vs. 26 – In the face of such a devastating development, we are given another reference to Samuel and the Lord's grace (“favor”) toward him. And once again we are reminded of the words written of Jesus during his youth. There is no mention of Eli. Only Samuel is described as having found favor with the Lord. As the next section reveals, Eli no longer enjoyed the Lord's favor.

The Judgment upon Eli's Household

Vv. 27-28 – Whoever the man is who spoke to Eli, it is clear that he speaks as a prophet of the Lord. The Lord's relationship with the house of Eli is described in three acts: “I [did] reveal...” (vs. 27c), “I [did] choose...” (vs. 28a), “I gave...” (vs. 28b).³ The Lord also outlines the primary functions of the priest: “to go up to my altar,” “to burn incense,” and “to wear an ephod before me.” Each act is one of mediation. The priest goes before the presence of the Lord on behalf of the people to make intercession (represented by burning incense). The ephod (robe) the priest wore was accented by the stone-encrusted breastplate representing God's people. The house of Eli had failed in these sacred duties. In the words that follow, the Lord will announce that he will bring Eli's priestly line to an end.

Vs. 29 – By failing to properly discipline his sons, Eli was privileging them above the Lord. The moral weight of Eli's incompetence as a father was heightened greatly by the fact that his sons were priests, so his inaction was tantamount to treating the sacrifices of the Lord with “scorn.”

¹ V. Philips Long, *1 and 2 Samuel*, TOTC (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2020) p. 54

² Ibid, p. 57

³ John Woodhouse, *1 Samuel* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008) p. 65

“Not content with the very great importance of their duties and the ample provision God had made for their needs, the priests had ‘fattened themselves’ with the very parts of the people’s offerings intended to be given to God. Gluttony had triumphed over honoring the gracious God who had dealt with this people, and in particular the priests, so mercifully.”⁴

Vs. 30 – “Therefore,” is particularly ominous here. The Lord announces the judgment that he will pour out upon the house of Eli. The Lord had promised Aaron that his priestly line would continue on in perpetuity (Exodus 29:9). The Lord later restated this promise to Aaron’s grandson (Numbers 25:12, 13). Eli was a recipient of this promise because he was in the line of Aaron.

“But now the Lord declares: ‘Far be it from me, for those who honor me I will honor, and those who despise me shall be lightly esteemed.’” – The Lord is not breaking the promise he made to Aaron, for that promise will continue on but not through Eli’s line. The Lord’s promise to Aaron’s descendants was conditioned on the prior principle that the Lord will not honor those who dishonor him. This statement is the ethical center of the passage. God’s people must never presume upon the Lord. God’s previous blessings upon his people are no guarantee that such blessings will continue if they choose to rebel against him. God is not mocked (Galatians 6:7).

That said, do not miss the other side of this principle that God will honor those who honor him. Though we are not told what that will look like at any given time, we can be sure that God will act on behalf of those who honor (glorify) him.

Vs. 31 – God promises to cut off Eli’s line. A day is coming when there will be no more old men in Eli’s house. For the people of this time, particularly among Israelites, this was as devastating a judgment as one could receive.

Vs. 32 – God promises here that days of prosperity will return to Israel. This almost certainly refers to the Davidic kingdom which will be brought about through the ministry of Samuel. But Eli’s house will be cut off from those blessings.

Vv. 33-34 – The Lord will spare the life of Abiathar, one of Eli’s descendants. He will look on in despair as Solomon, in one of his early acts as judge, removes Abiathar from the priesthood and expels him. Abiathar’s fate is later confirmed as fulfilling “the word of the Lord...concerning the house of Eli in Shiloh” (1 Kings 2:27). Later we will read of the terrible slaughter of priests from which the only survivor will be Abiathar, Eli’s great-great-grandson (1 Samuel 22:6-23).

God will give Eli a sign of this coming judgment upon his household by allowing him to live to see the death of his sons Hophni and Phinehas. Contempt for the Lord, his people, and his house is no small matter, especially when it comes from members of God’s covenant community. Such wickedness brings upon itself the severest of God’s judgment. We are warned about those who “go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth.” Such are the actions of one who has “trampled underfoot the Son of God, and has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has outraged the Spirit of grace” (Hebrews 10:26, 29).

The Light Shines in the Darkness

Without the knowledge of God’s holiness, the wickedness of sin, and the sinner’s need for atonement, the gospel is undermined. The cross ceases to make sense in a world where God is less than holy and sin is made an inconsequential matter. But God is infinitely holy and just. Sin is a grievous evil and every member of the human family has sinned and fallen short of God’s glory (Romans 3:23). And so, to ask Eli’s question, “If someone sins against the Lord, who can intercede for him?”

Vs. 35 – “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 forever.” – As we see so often in biblical prophecy, there is a near-term fulfillment (perhaps more than one) and an ultimate fulfillment. We see this principle in these words spoken of a coming priest who will be faithful. The nearer-term fulfillment of this prophecy was Samuel who would serve as a faithful prophet/priest before the Lord during the transition between the eras of the judges and the kings. Later, Zadok’s household was granted the priestly line (1 Kings 2:35; 4:1) and would occupy that role until the exile into Babylon.

But these words ring most permanently true in reference to Christ, the anointed King who is also our great High Priest (Hebrews 6:20; 7:1). He is the one Mediator between God and man who interposed his blood to cover our sin now and forever (1 Timothy 2:5-6).

⁴ Ibid, p. 68