



GREAT MIRACLES

OLD TESTAMENT

1 SAMUEL 1-3

 **LIVING WAY**
BIBLE STUDY

PERSONAL APPLICATION

WHOSE GOD RULES? – 1 KINGS 18

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“Soon Samuel would be the unchallenged leader of God’s people and he would be able to rally God’s people into the conquest of their enemies.”

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SLEEPLESS AT SHILOH

I must confess that the story of the Lord calling young Samuel in the middle of the night was a frightening one to me when I was a child. The difference between fantasy and reality is so negligible when one is very young. The thought of a mysterious voice arising from some hidden corner of a darkened room while nothing but vague monsters lurk in the closets is really too much to contend with at age 3 or 4. Perhaps that’s why I’ve chosen this story as one of the great miracles of the Old Testament. Its profundity is more evident to the little child than to the grown adult. Nevertheless, this is the miraculous means by which the Lord chose and directed an outstanding prophet and judge.

Samuel, actually, would be the last of Israel’s judges. The people of God, wishing to imitate the kingdoms surrounding them, would insist on a king after Samuel’s tenure. This, of course, would be contrary to God’s will, but nevertheless, He would bow to their prayers and pleas, allowing them to learn the dire consequences of their rebellious demands by personal experience.

But we are forging way ahead of our current story. In order to understand the full impact of this great miracle, we must understand its background. A certain man, named Elkanah, enjoyed the warmth of two wives. In the Old Testament, we often read about biblical figures who were polygamists. Perhaps the most egregious example is King Solomon, who entertained 700 wives and 300 concubines! Some will point to these historical precedents and question why the Christian church has always maintained limits on a single husband and wife in union for a lifetime. Our Lord, in His Sermon on the Mount, insists on the faithfulness of husband and wife, adding to the Sixth Commandment and declaring that even if a man looks lustfully at a woman, he is guilty



of sin (Matthew 5:27–28). So, when we read about such figures in the Old Testament, we are not to assume the biblical characters are giving us an example to live by. They are, indeed, sinning by their profligacy, and if there is no explicit condemnation of their behavior in immediate context, we are not to assume the Lord is condoning polygamy. That has historically been a Mormon error, not a Christian one.

One of the reasons our Lord commands a lifetime union between husband and wife is vividly demonstrated in our reading this week. Elkanah's two wives hate each other. One, named Peninnah, has enjoyed the blessings of numerous children. The other, Hannah, is barren. And Peninnah never hesitates to throw the fact in Hannah's face – vindictively and spitefully. Poor Hannah prayed and prayed for a child. She even brought her prayers to the central sanctuary in Shiloh. Once, as she prayed silently to herself, the priest at the sanctuary, Eli, saw her lips moving, and, with an arrogant judgmentalism, he condemned Hannah for being drunk. Of course, Hannah was not drunk. She had offered a prayerful bargain that if the Lord would bless her with a son; she would dedicate that son to a lifetime in the Lord's service. She promised that she would never cut her future son's hair (1:11). In Samuel's day, long hair was a sign of dedication to the service of the Lord under the Nazarite vow. (This would have been good to know when as a teenager, I noticed my own parents view my long hair with suspicious intent!).

When Eli, the priest, realized she had only been praying, he offered her his blessing, and in time, Hannah gave birth to her first son. And she named him Samuel, which

means, "heard of God." True to her word, Hannah took Samuel to the sanctuary in Shiloh after he had been weaned (about 3 years of age) and offered him to the Lord. He would serve in God's house all the days of his life. His service began under the instruction of Eli.

It was a blessing to Eli that Hannah fulfilled her promise, because Eli's sons were to be sorry disappointments in the priesthood. Eli's sons really didn't care about the reverence and dedication needed to be a priest. They were in it for their own personal gain. They abused their office by seducing women who came to the temple and by taking for themselves the best parts of the sacrificial meats. In other words, they were the 12th century BC version of some of our modern wayward televangelists. And the Lord would not put up with it!

An unnamed prophet was led to Eli and pronounced judgment against his sons. It had been the Lord's command that the Lord's priesthood would continue through Aaron's lineage. When a father was part of the Aaronic priesthood, his sons would follow. But, in Eli's case, the Lord promised an end to the succession. Both of Eli's sons would die on the same day, and the Lord would raise up a faithful priest in their stead.

And so, the young Samuel grew under Eli's watchful eyes. When the events of our miracle began, Samuel was no longer an infant. We can't be sure of his age, but the Jewish historian, Josephus, estimates he was nearly 12. It's no coincidence that we read of Jesus debating with the temple priests at the same age. The story of Samuel's call becomes a "type," or model, of the story

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of Jesus' childhood. We see further parallels between Samuel and the young Jesus when we read about Hannah taking Samuel to the temple and presenting him to Eli. We are reminded of Mary taking her young son Jesus to the temple and presenting Him to Simeon. Like Hannah, who accompanied the presentation with an offering of bulls and flour and wine, Mary presents Jesus with the accompanying offering of doves.

When Mary has been told of her selection in giving birth to the Son of God, she sings her praises in the song we know as the Magnificat (from the Latin which means "glorifies"). Similarly, Hannah, after presenting Samuel in the Temple, sings her praises to God for choosing the least fortunate from among His people and blessing them in the most surprising fashion. This is very much Hannah's "Magnificat." The Lord has this remarkable tendency to use similar themes in the story of His people's experiences to reveal His will and purposes. It isn't that the Lord has a limited sense of creativity; rather He wishes to underscore His work and will by showing us again and again His clear and intentional intervention in our world's history.

We should also remember that when a young boy in Israel reached the age of 12, he was

considered personally responsible for his obedience to the law of God. This was a significant time in a young boy's life, a time when his rite of passage brought him from childhood to adulthood. Today, Jews recognize this rite of passage in the "bar mitzvah" (which means "son of commandment"), and the tradition continues in our Lutheran church under the rite we call "confirmation." When I was confirmed, this process was considered rather terrifying, involving a public examination of our Christian faith before the entire congregation. When one survived such an ordeal, one did indeed finally feel like an adult!

We are told that during Samuel's childhood, the Lord rarely communicated personally with His people. There were few visions or prophecies revealed to man by God. The history of man shows there are periods when people experience a heightened spiritual awareness of the Lord, followed by periods when disbelief and skepticism are on the ascendancy. Before the American Civil War many people noted the decline of Christianity accompanied by a groundswell of interest in spiritism. In our own day and age, many have pointed out the numerical decline of mainline Christian denominations accompanied by a growing fascination among Americans with Eastern mysticism and New Age philosophy. Perhaps we

will have to endure something “apocalyptic” to return us to the way and will of the Lord!

Judging from the behavior of Eli’s sons, Samuel lived during a time when few people were concerned about God’s will. Worship had become corrupted, and God’s spiritual leaders were interested only in personal gain. Israel was once again drifting from the Lord, and the call of young Samuel would eventually provide for leadership against the nation’s next nemesis, the Philistines.

Samuel could not have known his important role in the deliverance of God’s people as he lay in bed, allowing the day’s studies to lull him into a pleasant sleep. When the sounds of the outside world had dimmed, and he felt himself drifting into slumber, a voice awoke him. The voice called his name. Whether it came as a shout or a whisper, its intent was crystal clear. “Samuel,” it said. Samuel, awaking from his sleep, called out, “Here I am!” But no one answered.

Samuel jumped from his bed and searched for Eli. The Bible tells us that Eli’s eyes were aging and growing dim, so Samuel may have often responded to Eli’s calls for help. Anyway, who else could be calling Samuel but his mentor and guardian? “Here I am” Samuel said to Eli, who was rather befuddled because he hadn’t called Samuel at all. Thinking that Samuel may have had a particularly realistic dream, Eli told Samuel to go back to bed. And Samuel complied.

Once again Samuel’s rest was disturbed. The voice crept from the shadows of the temple room calling Samuel’s name so clearly and unmistakably that Samuel was forced once again to rise from his bed and seek out Eli.

Once again Eli denied calling him. And yet a third time Samuel was called by The Voice.

After the third time, Eli began to suspect something divine was at work. So, he told Samuel that should the voice again resound, Samuel should reply, “Speak, Lord, for your servant hears!” And the voice which Samuel heard returned, flowering into a vision of judgment against Eli and his sons. This was a turning point in Samuel’s life. For the first of what would become many times, the Lord spoke directly to him.

Because Eli’s sons were so wicked, and because Eli had never had the courage or fortitude to correct his sons, the Lord promised judgment. In the morning, when Eli demanded to know about Samuel’s vision, Samuel explained it all. And Eli, hardly sounding surprised, responded with resignation, “He is the Lord; let him do what is good in his eyes.” Eli must endure the consequences of his sins, of course, but we cannot discount his understanding God’s righteousness and power, and the inevitability of the Lord’s will. Despite his son’s wickedness, Eli demonstrated an unusual faith in the God he had been serving his entire life.

Men and women have heard the call of God in many and various ways. The prophet Isaiah, for example, experienced a vision of God’s heavenly throne room where six-winged angels flew through the air giving praises to God (Isaiah 6:1–8). The Lord came to Jeremiah and compelled Jeremiah into service by explaining that Jeremiah’s destiny had been determined before his conception. The disciples were called when Jesus simply walked up to them and said, “Follow me.” All of us who trust the Lord have been called by God sometime in our

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lives, whether through baptism or through the hearing of His Word. But few of us have been called in such a dramatic fashion as Samuel.

Before leaving our discussion of this miracle, we must learn the fate of Eli and his sons. The people of Israel went out to battle the Philistines because the Philistines were intent on conquering central Canaan. The people of Israel were routed on the battlefield and, nearly despairing, they decided to bring out the Ark of the Covenant, believing its power would ensure the defeat of their enemies. The Ark of the Covenant was housed in the temple at Shiloh, so it was natural that Eli's sons should accompany it into battle.

When the people of Israel first saw the arrival of the Ark, they shouted with joy, convinced that victory was within their grasp. And the Philistines, hearing the tremendous outpouring of emotion in their enemies' camp, shivered with fear, believing a god had come to defeat them. And they remembered how the Israelite God had delivered His people from Egypt through a variety of plagues. Even now, the memory of that long ago Exodus was enough to bring terror and fear into the hearts of Israel's enemies!

Nevertheless, the Philistines engaged the Israelites in battle. But the Lord was not with His people because of their wickedness. Once again Israel was defeated. And in the battle, the Ark of the Covenant was captured while Eli's sons were slaughtered. When Eli received the news that his sons had been killed and the ark captured, he fell out of his chair, broke his neck, and died. Finally, it wasn't the loss of his sons that provoked Eli's fatal reaction; it was, instead, the news that the Ark of the Covenant had been taken (1 Samuel 4:18). Samuel's vision had been fulfilled. And his reputation spread throughout the land. Soon Samuel would be the unchallenged leader of God's people and he would be able to rally God's people into the conquest of their enemies.

PERSONAL APPLICATION*WHOSE GOD RULES? – 1 KINGS 18*

Savior and Lord, we thank You for calling us as Your children. Help us to hear and learn Your sacred Word, and use it in our daily lives for guidance and strength. Give us the power to discern Your will in the challenges we face. Through Your grace and forgiveness may we reflect Your love. In Your most precious name we pray. Amen.

1. How does the author of Kings describe King Ahab and his wife Jezebel? (1 Kings 21:25)

What were some of the abominable sins they committed? (1 Kings 16:29–33)

And what was the consequence of their sins? (1 Kings 17:1)

2. What office did Obadiah hold? (1 Kings 18:3)

Who was the first king to appoint this office and what was the name of the first office holder? (1 Kings 4:1, 6)

3. Even though three years of drought was destroying Israel and her people, did Ahab repent? What did he do instead? (1 Kings 18:5–6)

State the purpose of the trial and tribulations God allows us to endure. (Deuteronomy 8:5; Proverbs 13:24; Hebrews 12:7–11)

But how do many people tend to respond to such trials? (Exodus 8:19; Revelation 16:1–11)

4. What was Obadiah's reaction to Elijah's command that he tell King Ahab of Elijah's presence? (1 King 18:7–9)

Why was Obadiah so afraid? (1 Kings 18:12)

How do the following actions of God's Spirit suggest Obadiah's fears were well founded? Ezekiel 3:12–15

Acts 8:36–40

2 Corinthians 12:2

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5. Explain why you think Ahab's description of Elijah as a "troubler of Israel" (1 Kings 18:17) was such a threatening accusation? (Joshua 7:24–26)
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6. What was Elijah's challenge to the people of Israel before his demonstration of God's power and kingship? (1 Kings 18:21)

Describe ways in which you think the Christian faith has been compromised by false religions or philosophies today.

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7. Describe the process by which Elijah and the prophets of Baal would prove which god was the true God. (1 Kings 18:23–24)

Use your creative imagination. In what ways would you appreciate the Lord demonstrating His power and superiority in our world? What do you wish He would do in order to convince the world of His authenticity?

Why might the most majestic demonstration of God's power still be inadequate to convince the world of the Lord's supremacy? (Matthew 16:13–17)

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8. How does Elijah demonstrate that the miracle he will perform is no sleight of hand or magical trick? (1 Kings 18:33–35)

How does the Lord demonstrate that His resurrection is no sleight of hand or magical trick? (1 Corinthians 15:5–8; John 20:24–29; Luke 24:36–39)

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9. What was the result of Israel repenting and returning to the Lord? (1 Kings 18:41–45)

Once again, use your imagination. Describe some of the changes which might occur if American society as a whole repented and returned to the Lord?

10. What was Jezebel's reaction to God's miracle? (1 Kings 19:1–3)

Why do you think people tend to react to the miracles of God with hostility and anger rather than thanksgiving and awe? (John 8:48, 11:45–50, 1:1–5; Psalm 10:4, 14:1)
