

“A Faithful Priest”

1 Samuel 2:27-36

27 And there came a man of God to Eli and said to him, “Thus the LORD has said, ‘Did I indeed reveal myself to the house of your father when they were in Egypt subject to the house of Pharaoh? 28 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. 29 Why then do you scorn my sacrifices and my offerings that I commanded, and honor your sons above me by fattening yourselves on the choicest parts of every offering of my people Israel?’

30 Therefore the LORD the God of Israel declares: ‘I promised that your house and the house of your father should go in and out before me forever,’ 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. 31 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. 32 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 forever. 33 The only one of you whom I shall not cut off from my altar shall be spared to weep his eyes out to grieve his heart, and all the descendants of your house shall die by the sword of men. 34 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.

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. 36 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 priests’ places, that I may eat a morsel of bread.”

As I’ve preached through this book of Samuel, I’ve reminded you of several things each week because they are so important to understanding not only this book, but even the thing we Christians call the Gospel.

The first thing is that ancient Israel would have divided the Old Testament into only three parts: the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings. The Law included the first five books of the Bible (Genesis-Deuteronomy). The Writings included the Psalms and “wisdom literature,”¹ as well as the books of Ruth and Esther. Everything else, including that which we tend to call “historical” was considered as part of the Prophets.

This is important to remember because the job of a prophet, whether he used poetry or history, was to persuade. In the case of the book of Samuel, the purpose of the prophet is to persuade Israel (and us) of the fact that Israel needs a king like David (in spite of his flaws).

One of the sub-plots to this purpose is the removal of Eli and his family from the spiritual leadership of Israel and replaces them with a “faithful priest.” The person whom God would use to transition Israel from leadership by judges and unfaithful priests to leadership by a king and a faithful priest would be Samuel.

The first seven chapters of this book record this transition and God’s rationale for it.

Remember the context and back-story. Historically, this is the time of the Judges. Spiritually and morally it is mayhem. Into this context we see the miraculous birth of Samuel to one of Israel’s few faithful families—that of Elkanah and Hannah.

Hannah gives Samuel over to full-time service at the tabernacle, and immediately we are shown the contrast between Samuel and the house of Eli.

Eli’s sons, among other things, were guilty of treating the Lord’s offering with contempt. They took the “fatty portions” of meat before it was even sacrificed. In short, the text tells us, “They were wicked men.”²

¹ Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon.

² 1 Samuel 2:12.

On the other hand, Samuel is painted, even as a child, as being an ideal servant “ministering before the Lord;” he even looked the part. Where Eli’s sons were like henchmen from the Sopranos, Samuel was like Charlie Bucket from Willie Wonka— “two *bad, evil* children; one *good, obedient* child.”

At some point, Eli rebukes his sons, not because he is convicted by their sin and behavior, but because he is embarrassed that they have been caught. To call his admonition a rebuke is being very generous because, if you remember, his words are extremely weak. He says, “Why do you do such things?” and “...it is no good report I hear about you...”³

Needless to say, his sons refused to listen “for the Lord was pleased to put them to death.”

Now, to this week’s text. More than one of you have commented on my portrayal of Eli as being a bit harsh. In fact, some of you have asked, “Don’t you think you’re being a bit hard on Eli?” Or, “Aren’t you giving him a bad rap?” My guess (and hope) is that after today, you understand why.

When I was in the army, some of my best memories come from the times when, after a long deployment, we’d be sitting around cleaning our weapons and, inevitably, someone would begin trash-talking. The process would be to start comparing stories about who was the most miserable during our latest mission. That would lead to trash-talking about how badly you could hurt someone. Some examples: “I’ll hit you so hard, you’ll starve to death before you quit rolling.” Or, “I’ll hit you so hard, your driver’s license will get a black eye.” Or, one of my favorites, “I’ll hit you so hard, your whole family will fall down.”

In today’s text, we see this actually happen. God hits Eli so hard, his whole family fell down. We’ll look at three things:

- I. God’s Assessment of Eli (27-29)
- II. God’s Judgment upon Eli (30-34)
- III. God’s Replacement for Eli (35-36)

God’s Assessment of Eli (vv. 27-29)

Immediately after we’re given a snapshot of the wickedness of Eli’s sons and his subsequent “rebuke” of them, the action ramps up. Notice the text says, “And a man of God came to Eli.” While we don’t know, exactly, who this is we do know from the rest of the Old Testament that this person is a prophet. In fact, the phrase “man of God” is used more than 70 times as a synonym for the word prophet. Why is he there?

To couch things in a corporate metaphor: In his tenure as manager of God’s regional office in Shiloh, Eli has run the business into the ground. This prophet has come as a representative of the ownership (God) both to deliver Eli’s pink-slip and to inform the rest of us that there will be a permanent change in management.

How does he deliver this message? He begins reviewing his job performance by using a series of rhetorical questions:

1. Did I indeed reveal Myself to the house of your father when they were in Egypt, subject to the house of Pharaoh?
2. 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?

Translation: If anyone should be able to understand who I am and what I’ve done for Israel, it should be you. In fact, your family has managed “the business” since I delivered Israel from bondage in Israel. Apparently, you don’t understand either who you are or what I’ve done for you. If you did, the next questions wouldn’t even be an issue.

³ 1 Samuel 2:23-24

These first two questions make the case, I think, for what I told you last week, that Eli understood the Law (at least the letter of the law), but he didn't understand the Gospel. You see, his mindset, as communicated to his sons, is that if you break the law and sin against God, there is no hope of deliverance.

If he understood his own history, he would have known that he had things backward. In other words, your only hope of obeying the Law is to understand that you've already been delivered. We know this from the first line of the Ten Commandments, "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me."⁴

In other words, God says, "I've delivered you. Now, here's what it looks like to live in relationship with me." Eli doesn't get this. Neither do many of us.

We know that Eli doesn't "get it" because of the next question, which finds its basis in the first two lines of the Ten Commandments that I just read to you. The man of God asks, "Why then do you scorn My sacrifices and My offerings that I commanded, and *honor your sons above Me* by fattening yourselves on the choicest parts of every offering of My people Israel?"

By honoring his sons above the Lord, Eli has broken (as a lifestyle choice) the first commandment.⁵ Added to this, he's not only honored his sons above the Lord, but it is clear that he also partook of the "fruits" of their sins. His rebuke earlier in this text, apparently, was not only "too little, too late," but also was disingenuous. We know that his sons didn't heed him because it "pleased the Lord to put them to death." However, you can imagine from a human perspective that they didn't heed him because they knew either a) he was a hypocrite or b) he didn't really mean it when he rebuked them.

Either way, the assessment of Eli's "career" is clear. You (Eli) are supposed to be the spiritual leader of Israel, and you have willingly refused to live out your calling. The reason for this also is clear—the Gospel has been right under your nose for generations and still you don't "get it."

Unlike a good employee who might get laid off because of downsizing, etc., Eli is more like an Enron executive who's been busted for bilking the shareholders and mismanaging the company's resources to his own benefit. Because of this, instead of a generous severance package, he faces judgment. That's where the man of God goes next.

God's Judgment of Eli (vv. 30-34)

There is a present component and a future component, but first, a word about "forever." It could be disturbing to hear God say, "I promised...*forever*, BUT..."⁶ The word used here, in Hebrew (*olam*), sometimes means "forever," but most often it probably means something like "for a long duration" or "until completion" or "until it's over." I would rather go with that meaning given the fact that the duration of Eli's priesthood is obviously coming to its end—it's over.

In the present: (1) I will cut off the strength of your house; (2) in distress you will look on the prosperity of Israel; (3) you shall see both your sons die on the same day. This, by the way, is a prophetic sign.

⁴ Exodus 20:2-3

⁵ 47. What is forbidden in the First Commandment?

The First Commandment forbids the denying, or not worshipping and glorifying the true God, as God, and our God; and the giving of that worship and glory to any other, which is due to Him alone.

⁶ I promised that your house and the house of your father should go in and out before me forever,' 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. (1 Samuel 2:30)

In the future: (1) there shall not be an old man in your house forever.⁷ It is important to note that this word, forever, in Hebrew is different than the one used in verse 30. There it was *olam*, here it is a combination of words, *kol yom*. Meaning something more like “in perpetuity” or “all days.” In other words, this phrase actually means something like “forever.” (2) All your descendants shall die by the sword; and (3) your descendants will be left, begging for a morsel of bread (v. 36).

At this point, the original readers would have been extremely distraught. If Eli leaves, who will be our priest? God, through the prophet, answers.

Eli's Replacement (v. 35)

Regarding his replacement, as with Eli's judgment, there is also a present and a future aspect.

Present: *Zadok*

We've got to remember that these stories weren't happening in “real time.” They were recorded after the fact and, in some sense, making the case for the current situation in Israel. Remember the theme of this book: Israel needs a king like David. They also need a priest like Zadok.

Here's what I mean. As you move forward in Israel's history and into David's kingship, at one point he is exiled by his son, Absalom. During this exile the one “house” of Levitical priests that stood with David was the house of Zadok—a faithful priest.

Later, while on his deathbed, David declared Solomon to be the rightful heir to his throne. Before this was made official, however, another of his sons, Ahijah, circumvents David's wishes and takes the throne for himself. During this time, the house of Abiathar, the head priest and *Eli's last known heir*, supported Ahijah in his coup. Another house of priests supported Solomon. Can you guess who? That's right—the house of Zadok.

When Solomon finally takes the throne, it is no surprise that he “fires” Abiathar and installs Zadok as Israel's primary priestly family. There is a twist, however. The “faithful priest” promised in 1 Samuel is to be God's priest *kol yom*—forever; that is, for time without end.

This leads us to the future manifestation of this prophecy. It can only find its fulfillment in one person because only one person was and is a priest before God forever. That, of course, is Jesus.

⁷ There is a qualifier here regarding there never being an “old man.” The prophet says one will be spared “to weep his eyes out and grieve.”