

THY SERVANT HEARETH

The playoffs for the National Football League began yesterday, and will culminate with the Super Bowl, the league championship. It is estimated that two-hundred million people watched the championship. For some people, watching sports is merely entertainment. For others, it is far more. Noah Webster defined *fanatic* as *A person affected by excessive enthusiasm, particularly on religious subjects; one who indulges wild and extravagant notions of religion, and sometimes exhibits strange motions and postures, and vehement vociferation in religious worship.* The devotion some fans have toward their teams can only be regarded as fanaticism. They have idols, prophets, icons, rituals, superstitions, pilgrimages, relics. According to a survey taken gambling review site Time2Play, “fans engage with their favorite teams and players on an emotional and personal level.” The survey showed:

A remarkable 17.6% interact with their teams or communities on social media daily, while 38% maintain weekly interactions, reinforcing the strong bond that develops between fans and their sporting idols. Moreover, a staggering 84% of fans collect memorabilia, with 17.3% boasting extensive collections. This tangible connection allows fans to surround themselves with symbols of their devotion and further underlines their deep emotional attachment to their favorite sports teams or players. The act of collecting memorabilia becomes a tangible representation of their fandom, allowing them to immerse themselves in the world of their beloved sports icons. It serves as a constant reminder of the memorable moments, victories, and personal connections they have with the team or players.

Peter Carbone and Rich Caturano are fans of the New England Patriots. They drive sixty miles for every home game, rain or shine, or even snow. Ellen Centore says that her devotion to the Philadelphia Eagles is a “deep, abiding, unconditional love.” Brazilian soccer fan Maurício dos Anjos had his team's jersey tattooed on his torso. Mark Miller, a fan of the Buffalo Bills, was so certain that his team would win Super Bowl XXVII that, before the game, he got a tattoo declaring the Bills the champions. New York Yankees fan Spencer Lewis confesses that his team are his religion, his everything. Sadly, when the favorite team of soccer fan Alphonso Omondi lost, he was overcome with grief, and committed suicide. Some people will give their lives to a sports team, but not to the living God. God calls His people into service, and they must, with a willing heart, answer His call.

After God delivered the Israelites from their bondage in Egypt, He made a covenant with them at Mount Sinai, and in that covenant God agreed to be their God so long as they obeyed His law. The people agreed to the terms of the covenant, but they immediately, and continually, broke them.

When Israel dwelt in the promised land of Canaan, the people of God were governed by judges. In this period of Israel's history, the people would rebel against God; then God would allow them to be subjugated by a heathen nation; the Israelites would repent, and ask God for deliverance; God would raise up judges who would liberate them and guide them; and then the tragic cycle would repeat. The days of Eli the priest and Elhanah the Levite were a time of declension. Elkenah had two wives, Hannah and Penninah. Penninah has children, but Hannah had none, and Penninah scorned Hannah for her barrenness. Hannah was desperate to have a child, and she wept and prayed to God for one. Finally, she made a vow to God. She said:

O LORD of hosts, if thou wilt indeed look on the affliction of thine handmaid, and remember me, and not forget thine handmaid, but wilt give unto thine handmaid a man child, then I will give him unto the LORD all the days of his life, and there shall no razor come upon his head. (1 Samuel 1:11)

Hannah struck a bargain with God: if God would give her a son, then she would dedicate him to God as a Nazarite. A Nazarite is sanctified, separated to the service of the Lord. He was forbidden from partaking of intoxicating liquors, anything that might dull his senses, or cloud his judgment. He was forbidden even to eat of fruit of the vine. He was forbidden to cut his hair. The Nazarite was to be special, different from all others, and wholly dedicated to the Lord. When Eli saw Hannah's grief, he said to her, "Go in peace: and the God of Israel grant thee thy petition that thou hast asked of him." (1 Samuel 1:17) The prophet, too, would ask God to bless the woman according to her desires. Hannah did conceive, and she bore a son, whom she called Samuel, which means, *Heard of God*, because God heard her prayer. Hannah made good on her vow, and she dedicated the child to God. She sang a prayer in which she humbly acknowledged the wisdom and power of God. God is the God who reverses fortunes. He exalts those who humble themselves, and humbles those who exalt themselves. He will defeat His enemies, and He will do it by the king He will appoint to this purpose. Hannah humbly submitted to the Lord, and the Lord rewarded her humble submission to Him.

When the time came, Samuel began his training in temple service under the supervision of Eli. The Scriptures say, "And the word of the LORD was precious in those days; there was no open vision." (1 Samuel 3:1) This is to say, in those days, God rarely gave revelation, whether word or vision. There were in Israel priests, but no prophets. Such was the sad state of Israel when Samuel began his service.

Elkinah and Hannah dedicated their only child to the Lord, as righteous Abraham had dedicated his. Although Eli was devout, his sons, Hophni and Phineas, were not. They were base and self-serving. According to the law of Moses, when the people offered sacrifices, the priests were granted a portion. (Exodus 29:27, 28; Leviticus 7:28–38) The sons of Eli extorted the people, taking more than they were allowed, and they demanded it be given them before the Lord was given His portion. The priests were meant to serve the people, but they compelled the people to serve them. The result was not only that the Lord and the people were robbed, but also that the people came to resent the sacrifices which God prescribed for their spiritual benefit. Isaiah would later say of the spiritual leaders of Israel, "Yea, they are greedy dogs which can never have enough, and they are shepherds that cannot understand: they all look to their own way, every one for his gain, from his quarter." (Isaiah 56:11) It appears that Eli said nothing to his sons about this wicked practice. Indeed he profited from their sins.

The sons of Eli were wicked, yet Samuel was faithful. Although young, he served in the temple, and he wore the garment of his office. Eli blessed Elkinah and Hannah, and prayed for them that God would give them other children to recompense them for lending Him their son. The Lord heard the prayer of Eli, and He gave to Elkinah and Hannah three sons and two daughters. Samuel, for his part, continued to develop spiritually.

Samuel grew more spiritual and righteous, but Hophni and Phineas grew more carnal and degenerate. Certain women served at the entrance to the tabernacle, and these two depraved priests regularly had relations with them. (cf. Exodus 38:8) The people complained to Eli, and when he finally did respond it was not in proportion to the sin: he rebuked them, but he did not remove them from office, or otherwise punish them for their wicked acts. Yet, rebuke them he did. They, who were to consecrate the people, corrupted them; who were to lead the people to God led them away from God. Eli warned his sons: if one man sin against another, a third will judge between them. If a man sin against God, there is no third party to judge between them, but God Himself judges the man, and His judgment is severe. The Scriptures say, "Notwithstanding they hearkened not

unto the voice of their father, because the LORD would slay them.” They had so long defied God that He would destroy them, and so He struck them with judicial blindness so that they did not receive their father’s correction. Samuel, however, remained dedicated to the Lord. He continued to grow in stature, and in favor with both God and man.

A man of God came to Eli with a word from the Lord. He reminded Eli that God made Aaron priest in Israel, and that Eli was Aaron’s descendent and so in the priestly line. Yet, Eli scorned God’s sacrifices, and favored his own sons over God, and was even complicit in their sins by benefiting from them. So, the Lord said, “Be it far from me; for them that honour me I will honour, and they that despise me shall be lightly esteemed.” (1 Samuel 2:30) Eli exalted his own house, so God would humble it. He would cut it off from the priesthood and leave it in ruins. God would give to Eli a sign of this future ruin: Hophni and Phineas would die, and on the same day. Eli’s sons were unfaithful, but God would raise up a faithful priest, one who would do everything in God’s heart and mind. God would bless that one and give him a large family. Then the remaining descendants Eli would bow before the faithful priest, and beg him a morsel of bread, and the lowest service in the priesthood. So the exalted would be humbled, and the humble exalted. This had its fulfillment, first, in Samuel, but, of course, as all Scripture, ultimately in Christ.

Eli grew old, and his eyesight weak. On one occasion he lay down in the tabernacle to rest. Before the lamp in the temple went out, where the ark of the covenant was, while Samuel was sleeping, the Lord called Samuel, and Samuel replied, “Here am I.” He thought that Eli had called him, and as the man was old, and blind, Samuel went quickly to him. Eli told Samuel that he had not called him, and that he should return to sleep. After Samuel left Eli, God again called him, and again Samuel went to Eli, and said, “Here am I; for thou didst call me.” Eli again denied calling him, and told him to return to sleep. Samuel was a devout man, but he had no experience as a prophet, and so he did not recognize God speaking to him. A third time the Lord called Samuel, and a third time Samuel went to Eli and said, “Here am I; for thou didst call me.” Eli finally understood what was happening to Samuel, and he told him, “Go, lie down: and it shall be, if he call thee, that thou shalt say, Speak, LORD; for thy servant heareth.” (1 Samuel 3:9) So, Samuel did as Eli told him. Then the Lord a fourth time called Samuel, and Samuel answered, “Speak; for thy servant heareth.” (1 Samuel 3:10) Samuel was dutiful, not only to Eli the priest, but to the Lord. When the Lord called Samuel, Samuel promptly answered His call. He was ready to hear the Lord. So, the Lord spoke to him. He said:

Behold, I will do a thing in Israel, at which both the ears of every one that heareth it shall tingle. In that day I will perform against Eli all things which I have spoken concerning his house: when I begin, I will also make an end. For I have told him that I will judge his house for ever for the iniquity which he knoweth; because his sons made themselves vile, and he restrained them not. And therefore I have sworn unto the house of Eli, that the iniquity of Eli's house shall not be purged with sacrifice nor offering for ever. (1 Samuel 3:11–14)

God gave Samuel a message concerning Eli. As God had before told Eli by the man of God, so told him by Samuel. Because of the sins of Eli’s sons, and Eli’s sin of tolerating them, God would judge his house, and no sacrifice or offering would dissuade Him. The fall of the house of Eli would be great, and all Israel would see it.

When morning came, Samuel feared to give Eli the message, but, naturally, Eli wished to know what the Lord had said to him. So, Samuel told him. Eli’s response lacked enthusiasm. He simply said, “It is the LORD: let him do what seemeth him good.” (1 Samuel 3:18) Eli’s response to this prospect was resignation without repentance. Such was Eli’s devotion to God. The Scriptures say, “Samuel grew, and the LORD was with him, and did let none of his words fall to the ground. And all Israel from Dan even to Beersheba knew that Samuel

was established to be a prophet of the LORD.” (1 Samuel 3:19, 20) Eli’s lamp was going out, but Samuel’s was growing brighter. The Lord was with Samuel, and all the words that he spoke to Samuel were proven true.

The word of the Lord came to Samuel to order the Israelites to do battle with the the Philistines. So, the engaged them, and, to their consternation, were routed. Four thousand Israelite soldiers were killed. When the Israelite army returned to camp, they sent for ark of the covenant to be brought to them, believing that it would save them from their enemies. So, Hophni and Phineas brought the ark to them. Israel again fought the Philistines, and were again routed. The Philistines killed thirty-thousand foot soldiers, and captured the ark of the covenant. Hophni and Phineas, too, were killed. When a messenger told Eli what had happened, the elderly priest fell backward in his chair, and broke his neck, and died. Such was the ignominious death of one who was not devoted to the Lord.

Samuel told the Isralites, “If ye do return unto the LORD with all your hearts, then put away the strange gods and Ashtaroth from among you, and prepare your hearts unto the LORD, and serve him only: and he will deliver you out of the hand of the Philistines.” (1 Samuel 7:3) The Israelits did as Samuel said: they repented of their sins, and put away their idols, and served the Lord only. Then the Israelites a third time engaged the Philistines, but this time the outcome was different. The Isralites defeated the Philistines, and subdued them. The Scriptures say, “And Samuel judged Israel all the days of his life.” (1 Samuel 7:15) Eli was not completely devoted to God. His devotion was half-hearted, and he died in shame. Samuel was throughout his life devoted to God, and God blessed him for his devotion.

The day after John baptized Jesus, he again saw Him, and said to two of his disciples, “Behold the lamb of God!” So, the two believed, and followed Jesus. One of them was Andrew. Andrew went to his brother, Simon, and he told him, “We have found the Christ,” and he brought him to Jesus. When Jesus saw Simon, He told Him that his name would be Cepahs, which means a stone, because he is sturdy and immovable. Except for the predicted threefold denial, Simon boldly lived for Jesus. The next day, Jesus found Philip and told Philip to follow him. Philip found Nathaniel, and said to him, “We have found him, of whom Moses in the law, and the prophets, did write, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.” (John 1:45) Nathaniel said, “Can there any good thing come out of Nazareth? Philip said to him, “Come and see.” (John 1:46) Jesus was born in the town of Bethlehem, but He lived in Nazareth. In His time, Nazareth had a poor reputation. Nathaniel did not expect anything of much good to come from Nazareth, least of all the Christ. Philip told Natahniel to see for himself. When Jesus saw Nathaniel approach, He said, “Behold an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile!” (John 1:47) Nathaniel asked Jesus how He knew him, and Jesus said, “Before that Philip called thee, when thou wast under the fig tree, I saw thee.” (John 1:48) Jesus had before this never met Nathaniel. Yet, He had supernaturally seen Nathaniel in his home, and He knew supernaturally knew the integrity of Nathaniel’s heart. Nathaniel, with simple faith, piously replied, “Rabbi, thou art the Son of God; thou art the King of Israel.” (John 1:49) Jesus taught that God’s greatest commandment is, “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind.” (Matthew 22:37; cf. Deuteronomy 6:5) Jesus seeks followers, but only those who will follow Him wholeheartedly. When He began His earthly ministry, He called men to follow HIM, and those men devoutly answered His call.

Saint Paul wrote to the Corinthians:

All things are lawful unto me, but all things are not expedient: all things are lawful for me, but I will not be brought under the power of any. Meats for the belly, and the belly for meats: but God shall destroy both it and them. Now the body is not for fornication, but for the Lord; and the Lord for the body. And God hath both raised up the Lord, and will also raise up us by his own power. Know ye not that your bodies are the members of Christ? shall I then take the members of

Christ, and make them the members of an harlot? God forbid. What? know ye not that he which is joined to an harlot is one body? for two, saith he, shall be one flesh. But he that is joined unto the Lord is one spirit. Flee fornication. Every sin that a man doeth is without the body; but he that committeth fornication sinneth against his own body. What? know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost which is in you, which ye have of God, and ye are not your own? For ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God's. (1 Corinthians 6:12–20)

In Saint Paul's time, the pagans offered food to their idols, and then sold that food in the marketplace. Some Christians believed that they were free to eat it, but others disagreed. Saint Paul told the Corinthians not to lead Christians into temptation. They should rather surrender their liberty. Christians, whether Jew or Gentile, may eat and drink what they please; it is not sin. In this sense, all things are lawful for the Christian. Yet, not all things are beneficial. Some things, even eating and drinking, can be harmful. Although the Christian is free to make use of some things, he must never be a slave to those things. The sacrifice of food was part of pagan worship, and so was so-called sacred prostitution. Some Corinthian Christians believe that they were free to partake of food sacrificed to idols, and of temple prostitutes. They believed that they were free to indulge the appetite for food, and the appetite for sex; They said that as food was made for the body, and the body for food, so sex was made for the body, and the body for sex. Saint Paul explained that the body and food are temporal things, and that in the resurrection there will be no need for food and drink. The Christian's body may not be dedicated to sexual immorality, but must be dedicated to the Lord, and the Lord looks after a man's body. God raised Christ from the dead, and He will raise believers from the dead. When one receives Christian baptism, He is mystically joined to Christ; he becomes one with Christ. If this is so, it is unthinkable that a man would take a member of Christ and join it to a prostitute. If a man joins himself to a prostitute, then he becomes one with her. The Christian is spiritually joined to Christ. Sexual relations is not merely a physical act, but a spiritual one. It is not so simple as eating food. The Christian must never indulge in sexual immorality, but rather flee it. Sexual immorality is not like gluttony, or drunkenness, which are misuses of the body; sexual immorality corrupts and defiles the whole person, body and soul. When one receives Christian baptism, he is united to Christ, and his body becomes a temple in which the Holy Spirit dwells. God by the death of His beloved Son redeemed the Christian so that the Christian belongs to God. God owns all rights to the Christian. So the Christian ought to glorify God, not only spiritually, but physically; not only with his spirit, but with his body. Christ calls the Christian to follow Him, and the Christian, like Samuel, must answer, "Speak, Lord; for thy servant heareth."

Let us be wholly devoted to the Lord. Let us wholeheartedly follow Jesus. Let us do all things to the glory of God.

Now unto the God of all grace, who hath called us unto His eternal glory by Christ Jesus, be glory and dominion, for ever and ever. Amen.