

# THE WICKED SONS OF ELI

1 Samuel 2:11-39

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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” (1 Sam. 2:30).

**A**n important feature of First and Second Samuel is the use of contrasts to make a point. We saw this at the beginning of First Samuel and we will continue to see this feature until the end of Second Samuel. First, there was the contrast between humble, believing Hannah and the arrogant hostility of Peninnah, her rival co-wife. At the end of chapter 1, Hannah brings her young son, Samuel, to serve in God’s house, initiating a contrast between young Samuel and the wicked sons of Eli. This chapter thus “artfully alternates between the sinful practices of Eli’s wicked sons and the innocent purity and righteousness of Samuel and his family.”<sup>1</sup>

The reason for these contrasts is the grace of God at work in a dark world. Early in 1740, an American pastor named Samuel Blair complained that “religion lay as it were a-dying and ready to expire its last breath of life in this part of the visible church.” In fact, however, God was on the brink of launching one of the great revivals in history, the Great Awakening, which dates from that very year.<sup>2</sup> God had been quietly working behind the scenes preparing what would soon be launched onto the front pages. The same situation is seen in the early chapters of First Samuel. The contrast between

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<sup>1</sup> Bill T. Arnold, *1 & 2 Samuel*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 70.

<sup>2</sup> Cited from Dale Ralph Davis, *1 Samuel: Looking on the Heart* (Ross-shire, UK: Christian Focus, 2000), 23.

Samuel and Eli's sons does more than warn us against the way of the wicked. It also reminds us that God is at work behind the scenes, so that even amidst wickedness and unbelief there is always a hope for grace.

## THE SINS OF ELI'S SONS

Israel's hope for grace is represented by little Samuel, whom his parents left behind in the tabernacle to serve the Lord: "Then Elkanah went home to Ramah. And the boy ministered to the LORD in the presence of Eli the priest" (1 Sam. 2:11). Meanwhile, Israel's need for grace is displayed in the lives of Eli's sons, whose wicked conduct debauched the priesthood.

The introduction of Eli's sons leaves little to the imagination: "Now the sons of Eli were worthless men. They did not know the LORD" (1 Sam. 2:12). This is about as condemning an introduction as one could receive. To say that they were "worthless men" is to say they were agents of destruction. To then say that they "did not know the Lord," means that for all their access to divine religion and their knowledge of theology and the rituals of worship, these were unconverted men, spiritually ignorant of God's saving grace, and caring nothing for the demands of his holiness. What a crisis it was for Israel that these were their spiritual leaders. No wonder Israel's spiritual life was represented by Hannah's barren womb!

The wickedness of Eli's sons is seen in their contemptuous treatment of the offerings brought to the Lord at the tabernacle:

The custom of the priests with the people was that when any man offered sacrifice, the priest's servant would come, while the meat was boiling, with a three-pronged fork in his hand, and he would thrust it into the pan or kettle or cauldron or pot. All that the fork brought up the priest would take for himself. This is what they did at Shiloh to all the Israelites who came there (1 Sam. 2:13-14).

The law of Moses provided that the priests serving at God's house would receive their food from the sacrifices that were offered. But whereas the law specified specific portions for the priests, depending on the animal (cf. Lev. 7:34; Dt. 18:3), Eli's sons demanded their own form of pot luck, sending their servant to randomly skewer meat from the family pots. Emboldened by their success at this, the young

priests went further and demanded even the fat portions, which were reserved for the Lord. “Moreover, before the fat was burned, the priest's servant would come and say to the man who was sacrificing, ‘Give meat for the priest to roast, for he will not accept boiled meat from you but only raw.’ And if the man said to him, ‘Let them burn the fat first, and then take as much as you wish,’ he would say, ‘No, you must give it now, and if not, I will take it by force’” (1 Sam. 2:15-16). Devout Israelites who came to sacrifice before the Lord not only witnessed the priest’s sacrilegious attitude towards the offerings but also suffered the theft of what the Lord had allotted for themselves and their families. Verse 17 comments: “Thus the sin of the young men was very great in the sight of the LORD, for the men treated the offering of the LORD with contempt.”

Worst of all was the contempt these young ministers showed towards God’s holiness. Their desecration went so far that “they lay with the women who were serving at the entrance to the tent of meeting” (1 Sam. 2:22). This tent – the tabernacle – was the place where Israelites entered God’s holy presence, so how great was the sacrilege of the priest’s sexual sins here! These Israelite women, probably serving to clean and otherwise addressing the needs of the tabernacle, ought to have been treated with the utmost sacredness, but were instead treated like the temple prostitutes of pagan shrines.

This conduct by the high priest’s sons could only have the worst effect on both the spiritual and moral character of the nation. After all, if Israel’s priests thought so little of the Lord, why would anyone revere him? Furthermore, given the tendency of our sinful nature to greed and lust, the sordid example of the priests would inevitably provide an incentive for a widespread tolerance of similar debaucheries. William Blaikie thus comments: “Men of corrupt lives at the head of religion, who are shameless of their profligacy, have a lowering effect on the moral life of the whole community.”<sup>3</sup>

The gross failure of Eli’s sons reminds those who exercise authority in the church that their holy calling carries a holy obligation, for which they should be held to account. How easy it is, and how often

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<sup>3</sup> William G. Blaikie, *Expository Lectures on the Book of First Samuel* (Birmingham, AL: Solid Ground, 1887, reprint 2005), 41.

we see it today, for preachers to use their ministry primarily for personal gain – employing worldly approaches that bring large crowds and sizable offerings – rather than seeking the glory of God and the spiritual health of his people. And how often ministers who begin seeking personal gain end up disgracing themselves in sensual sins.

In contrast, we are told of the growing spirituality of little Samuel. After his parents left him at Shiloh, “the boy ministered to the LORD in the presence of Eli the priest” (1 Sam. 2:11). And while Eli’s sons were busy exploiting their sacred positions, “Samuel was ministering before the LORD, a boy clothed with a linen ephod” (1 Sam. 2:18). This “linen ephod” was probably a white apron, signifying Samuel’s status as a priest-in-training. Dressed in this fashion, Samuel not only sincerely played the part given to him but he also looked the part. His example alone encouraged sincere faith and godliness. He reminds us that individual Christians may serve the Lord faithfully and with holy lives regardless of the general spiritual environment. How important such believers are, and how often God uses them to bring revival to his seemingly lifeless church.

#### ELI’S INEFFECTIVE REBUKE

Samuel is contrasted not merely with Eli’s wicked sons but also with the high priest himself. Verse 21 tells us that “the young man Samuel grew in the presence of the Lord,” and immediately adds, “Now Eli was very old” (1 Sam. 2:22). Eli comes across as a well-meaning and personally godly man, but an ineffective spiritual leader and a failure in the governing of his sons.

Naturally, Eli knew about his sons’ exploits, so “he said to them, ‘Why do you do such things? For I hear of your evil dealings from all the people. No, my sons; it is no good report that I hear the people of the LORD spreading abroad’” (1 Sam. 2:23-24). Eli’s failure is seen in that while he heard about his sons’ sins and he talked to them about the behavior, Eli did nothing to curb these wicked actions.

We can easily imagine that this pattern had characterized Eli’s parenting all through his sons’ upbringing. His first error was in failing to supervise their priestly service. The result was that instead of intervening and correcting his sons on the spot, Eli merely came to

them later to discuss what he had heard. His second, and greater error, was that his rebuke did not lead to immediate punishment. According to the Bible, the failure to discipline our children is the surest way of ruining their souls (cf. Prov. 13:24). It will later be said of David that he never “displeased” his sons by holding them to account (1 Ki. 1:6), and the treachery, murder, rape, and treason committed by his progeny bears testimony to David’s parental failure.

In dealing with his grown sons, Eli had an obligation at least to remove them from their office and install other qualified and godly priests. In the original days of the Israelite priesthood, even Aaron’s sons Nadab and Abihu had been struck dead by God for bringing “unauthorized fire” into the tabernacle (Num. 3:4). How much more atrocious were the sins of Hophni and Phinehas! But though Eli rebuked his sons he took no action. Blaikie writes that Eli “could not bring himself to be harsh to his own sons. He could not bear that they should be disgraced and degraded. He would satisfy himself with a mild remonstrance, notwithstanding that every day new disgrace was heaped on the sanctuary, and new encouragement given to others to practice wickedness.”<sup>4</sup>

For their part, Eli’s sons would have been wise to receive their father’s rebuke. “But they would not listen to the voice of their father” (1 Sam. 2:25). Few things are more vital to children than humility in receiving parental correction. This is true for adults as well: the Bible says, “Whoever loves discipline loves knowledge, but he who hates reproof is stupid” (Prov. 12:1). When the fifth commandment tells children to “honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land” (Ex. 20:12), it teaches that receiving correction from parents and succeeding in life go hand in hand.

Verse 25 tells us that the reason Hophni and Phinehas would not accept their father’s reproof was that “it was the will of the Lord to put them to death.” This statement does not remove responsibility from Eli’s sons. The point is to show that God was so outraged by the young men’s sins that he resolved to punish them with death, and to this end he hardened their hearts to their father’s reproof.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 43.

Their apostasy goes hand in hand with the Lord giving them over for destruction. Eli gets to the heart of the matter in his warning: “If someone sins against a man, God will mediate for him, but if someone sins against the LORD, who can intercede for him?” (1 Sam. 2:25). His point was that sins against other people can be forgiven through the atoning blood of the Lord’s sacrifices. But what can be done for sins that show contempt for the sacrifices themselves? Their sins against God’s way of salvation – much like those who despise the gospel today – left Eli’s sons with no means of forgiveness. So great were their sins against God’s means of grace that the Lord gave them over to the lethal condition of hardened hearts. Ralph Davis applies this as a warning to us all: “someone can remain so firm in his rebellion that God will confirm him in it, so much so that he will remain utterly deaf to and unmoved by any warnings of judgment or pleas for repentance.”<sup>5</sup>

Behind the scenes, and in contrast to Eli’s corrupt family, is the family of Samuel. If God works powerfully in faithful individuals, how much more powerful is the behind-the-scenes presence of whole godly families. In Elkanah and Hannah we see the value of loving, godly involvement with one’s children. We read that “his mother used to make for him a little robe and take it to him each year when she went up with her husband to offer the yearly sacrifice” (1 Sam. 2:19). Gordon Keddie writes: “The family is to be an arena in which personal godliness is promoted and the glory of God is manifested in personal relationships that are rooted in commitment to the Lord.”<sup>6</sup>

Hannah and her husband were imperfect sinners like us all, but their sincere commitment to God made an impact on their son. We can imagine the prayers that Hannah wove into every strand of her growing son’s annual robe, along with the exhortations and encouragements that came with its delivery. F. B. Meyer writes: “Mothers still make garments for their children – not on the loom or with their busy needles merely, but by their holy and ennobling characters displayed from day to day before young and quickly-

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<sup>5</sup> Davis, *First Samuel*, 27.

<sup>6</sup> Gordon J. Keddie, *Dawn of a Kingdom: The Message of 1 Samuel* (Hertfordshire, UK: Evangelical Press, 1988), 42.

observant eyes, by their words and conversation, and by the habits of their daily devotion.”<sup>7</sup>

Hannah’s spiritual fruitfulness is mirrored in the increase of her family’s size. Every year, Eli would bless her and before long “she conceived and bore three sons and two daughters” (1 Sam. 2:21). Hannah gave to the Lord and received an abundance from him in return. Verse 26 describes Samuel’s increasing spiritual maturity in words that indicate the highest commendation, especially since the Gospel of Luke will echo them to describe the growing maturity of the boy Jesus: “Now the young man Samuel continued to grow both in stature and in favor with the LORD and also with man” (cf. Lk. 2:52).

Eli must have spent many sleepless nights wondering how things went so wrong with his children. I imagine that his thoughts of what he would do differently, given the chance to raise his sons again, would make interesting reading. When our children are grown, what will we wish we did differently? Will we wish we had been more diligent in teaching and discussing God’s Word? Will we regret that we were not more determined and consistent in correcting sin? Will we wonder why we did not make the effort to set a better example of faith and godliness? Will we question the priorities we demonstrated by our lifestyle choices, or would we make the time to be more involved in our children’s lives? The problem is that once our children are grown, it is too late to act on any such resolutions. For Eli, all that remained was the downfall of his house, while God worked behind the scenes to make new provision for the leadership of his people.

## GOD’S REJECTION OF ELI’S HOUSE

**N**ews of God’s judgment, along with a stinging rebuke, was not long delayed:

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? Did I choose him out of all the tribes of Israel to be my priest, to go up to my altar, to

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<sup>7</sup> F. B. Meyer, *Great Men of the Bible*, 2 vols (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), I:275.

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. 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?" (1 Sam. 2:27-29).

This rebuke is based on a history lesson. During the time of the exodus, Aaron and his sons were ordained as a perpetual priesthood (Ex. 29:9), consisting of three tasks: "to go up to my altar," that is, to bring the peoples' sacrifices before the Lord for the forgiveness of their sins; "to burn incense," which speaks of the priest's ministry of intercessory prayer; and "to wear an ephod before me," referring to the vestment on which the twelve stones represented Israel before the Lord. These were the very ministries so desecrated by Eli's sons. Yet, here, God's complaint is with Eli: "Why 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" (1 Sam. 2:29). By allowing his sons to violate the priesthood, Eli had regarded their honor above the Lord's. This happens today when men reveal themselves to be morally or spiritually unfit for ministry but are retained in pastoral office for sentimental reasons, with little thought for the good of the Lord and his people. Eli was not responsible for everything his sons did, but he was responsible for them committing their sins in the capacity of priests. Therefore his house is rejected by the Lord, because he treated the privileges of his Aaronic birthright so lightly:

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. 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. 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. 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" (1 Sam. 2:30-33).

God had promised Aaron's house the privilege of serving as priests, but there was a clear obligation involved: "for those who honor me I will honor, and those who despise me shall be lightly esteemed" (1

Sam. 2:30). Because Eli despised the Lord, his house will be cut off from the priesthood. Only one will be left, being “spared to weep his eyes out to grieve his heart,” while all of Eli’s other descendants “shall die by the sword of men” (1 Sam. 2:33).

This promise was fulfilled in the days of David, when Doeg the Edomite slaughtered all of Eli’s descendants at the tabernacle, with the sole exception of Abiathar (1 Sam. 22:6-23). Abiathar served David as priest until he supported the usurpation of Adonijah against David’s heir Solomon. When Solomon expelled Abiathar from the priesthood, the Scripture makes the note, “thus fulfilling the word of the Lord that he had spoken concerning the house of Eli in Shiloh” (1 Ki. 2:27). Abiathar was replaced by Zadok, who was from another more preeminent family of the line of Aaron, thus restoring an earlier promise that this family would hold the priesthood (cf. Num. 25:6-13). In this way, Eli’s descendant was forced to the sidelines during the glories of Solomon’s reign, looking with envy on those permitted to the priesthood in those great days and surviving off the generosity of the man who supplanted him, as verse 36 predicts. Zadok would be the faithful priest mentioned in verse 35: “who shall do according to what is in my heart and in my mind.”

All this would take place in generations to come, but Eli would see its proof, for “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” (1 Sam. 2:34). It would not be long until Eli’s wicked sons were slain on a single day, certifying to Eli the judgment yet to come.

The principle behind God’s rejection of Eli’s house is one we should note: “those who honor me I will honor, and those who despise me shall be lightly esteemed” (1 Sam. 2:30). This is a fixed principle of God’s kingdom. For while the world will generally honor those who serve its cause, the Lord promises to honor those who treasure his glory. History bears this out. Those who despise the Lord may often rise in great power and fame. But the day of God’s retribution comes, and for every despot, corrupt politician, and cheating executive there comes a day of reckoning when his or her name is cast down to the earth. Meanwhile, as William Blaikie comments,

the men that have honoured God, the men that have made their own interests of no account, but have set themselves resolutely to obey God’s

will and do God's work; . . . , and have laboured in private life and in public service to carry out the great rules of His kingdom – justice, mercy, love of God and the love of man – these are the men that God has honoured; these are the men whose work abides; these are the men whose names shine with undying honour, and from whose example and achievements young hearts in every following age draw their inspiration and encouragement.<sup>8</sup>

A famous example is that of Eric Liddell, the Scottish Olympian who won a gold medal at the 1924 Olympics in Paris. Liddell was born and raised in China as the son of Christian missionaries. Returning to Scotland in his adolescence, he emerged as one of the finest runners Britain ever produced, and at a time when British national pride greatly coveted Olympic glory. Liddell was a favorite to win the 100 meter race. But a problem emerged as he learned that the final would be held on a Sunday. Liddell was convinced by Scripture that he should not compete in a race on the Lord's Day, so he refused to participate. Denounced by newspapers as a traitor, and personally pressured by the Prince of Wales to compromise his principles, Liddell held firm, determined to honor the Lord above his personal well-being and before even his country.

A compromise was reached in which Liddell would bypass the 100 meters and would compete instead in the 400 meters, one of the few races with no heats on a Sunday. Liddell had not trained for this event, yet he would run it as his sole opportunity to win at the Olympics. That morning as he prepared, a member of the British training staff approached Liddell and handed him a note. Eric opened the piece of paper on the track before the race. On it were written these words: 1 Samuel 2:30: "He who honors Me, I will honor." With the piece of paper balled in his hand, Liddell ran the race, not only winning the gold medal but shattering the world record.

Britain went wild with adulation for Liddell, but instead of cashing in on his fame, he fulfilled a commitment to return to China as a missionary. When he departed from Scotland, the crowd seeing him off was so large that more than a thousand people were unable to be admitted to his farewell. Twenty years later, Liddell was still honoring the Lord in China when he valiantly died in a Japanese internment camp shortly before the end of World War II. At the end

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<sup>8</sup> Blaikie, *First Samuel*, 47-48.

of movie made in Liddell's honor, "Chariots of Fire," the screen bore these words: "Eric Liddell, missionary, died in occupied China at the end of World War II. All of Scotland mourned." He had honored God behind the scenes and on the international stage, and God honored his name before angels and men.

## A PRIEST TO SERVE

Just as Eric Liddell stood out in his generation, young Samuel made quite a contrast to the condemned house of Eli. As God was preparing to tear down, he was also preparing to raise up, providing a godly leader for his forlorn people. God's last word on this sad situation is thus a word of hope: "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" (1 Sam. 2:35).

We can see the beginnings of this purpose taking shape in young Samuel's life. He would indeed serve faithfully as a priest to the Lord, and as Israel's prophet and judge he would do God's will. These words also refer to faithful Zadok and the priestly line of his house that would serve in the days of King Solomon. But this divine resolution could only be fulfilled truly in the coming of Jesus, God's true high priest. A priest was ordained, God said, "to go up to my altar" (1 Sam. 2:28), presenting the sacrifices to atone for the peoples' sin. Only Jesus makes the true sacrifice for our sin, having been made "a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people" (Heb. 2:17). Jesus is the true priest who offer the true atoning blood – the blood of his cross – to cover our sins forever in the presence of God.

The priests were also called "to burn incense" (1 Sam. 2:28), representing the intercessory ministry of prayer before the heavenly Father. Though the Son of God, Jesus became man in order "to sympathize with our weakness" (Heb. 4:15), and thus pray to God the Father on our behalf. God promised that the priest he would raise up would serve in his house, going in and going out, "forever." Indeed, the heavenly temple would be his own house – the house, God says, of "my anointed" (1 Sam. 2:35) – so that Jesus ministers forever as priest in the house where he is both Savior and King. Hebrews 7:25

says that “he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.”

And just as the high priest was to wear the ephod, bearing the stones of the twelve tribes into God’s presence, so also Jesus is the true and eternal priest who bears all of his redeemed on his heart and secures their place in glory, having engraved their names on the palms of his hand (Isa. 49:16).

What is the lesson of little Samuel in the failing priestly house of Eli? The first lesson is to look behind the scenes to where God is working with grace. Regardless of fleshly appearances, the real action is always taking place wherever God is honored, where his Word is revered, and where humble commitment to the Lord is sincerely lived out. The message of godly little Samuel and the wicked sons of Eli is that nothing is ever more important than individual godliness, than godly and gracious families, and a simple commitment to God’s Word and to prayer. If we want to make a real difference with our lives we will not seek out arenas of worldly influence, especially when they require us to compromise biblical principles. It is better for God’s people humbly to serve the Lord, often behind the scenes, remembering his promise, “those who honor me, I will honor” (1 Sam. 2:30).