

1 Samuel 2:12-36

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[0 : 0 0] So, I want this morning, quite simply, just to look at three of the characters in this chapter. Well, four, if you count Hophni and Phinehas. And I just want to look at each of these guys and see some of the comforts, some of the challenges, some of the encouragements we can take from each of them.

So, we're going to begin with Hophni and Phinehas and see how God deals with the wicked. And then we'll look at Eli and see how God deals with the weak, before finally looking briefly at Samuel and just see how God provides for his people.

So, let's begin by taking a closer look at Hophni and Phinehas, the two sons of Eli. The book of 1 Samuel begins at the end of the period of Judges, right?

Israel's come into the promised land, and as God has promised, he's delivered the land of Canaan into the hands of the Israelites, who have delivered, driven out its inhabitants, or at least most of its inhabitants.

But following Israel's conquest of Canaan, the people of Israel, the people of God, start becoming more and more like the Canaanites, right?

[1 : 2 6] The very thing they were commanded not to do, which is so often what happens to God's people in a sinful world, right? We stop seeking God and start seeking the world.

And so, God sends these judges who come and go, briefly bringing respite to God's people. But the situation is ever deteriorating.

So much so that at the end of the book, we have civil war in Israel. God's people fighting against God's people. And we come to the beginning of 1 Samuel with this sort of background in mind, right?

Israel's in a bit of a mess, but this is a new book, right? So hopefully, there'll be a new start. Hopefully, the story will take a new turn. And it starts off promisingly with the story of Hannah in chapter 1, where we have Hannah bringing her sorrows before the Lord and her prayer for a child.

And the Lord answers her prayer and gives her this little boy, Samuel. And you think this is good news. We have new hope. But then comes Hophni and Phinehas.

[2 : 3 9] And the author doesn't try and pull his punches here. He's straight to the point in verse 12 of chapter 2. Eli's sons were scoundrels. Right, and you sort of think, here we go again.

We just had to deal with all the judges. And now we've got these two scoundrels appearing on the scene. You think, surely it's time for a fresh start.

But that's not what we're getting, at least not quite yet. Because Hophni and Phinehas, the two sons of Eli, are straight up worthless. And scoundrels sort of makes them sound a bit mischievous.

But when you start reading on, like, scoundrels become something of an understatement. Because what we get a taste of in the following verses is just how wicked these two priests are.

And let's be clear, they were priests. They were there to serve God and serve His people.

[3 : 52] They were there to lead by example. And yet, what do we find them doing? First of all, verses 13 and 14. Just look down at those verses with me.

We'll read them again. Now, it was the practice of the priests that whenever any of the people offered a sacrifice, the priest's servants would come with a three-pronged fork in his hand while the meat was being boiled, and which plunged the fork into the pan or kettle or cauldron or pot.

Whatever the fork brought up, the priest would take for himself. This is how they treated all the Israelites who came to Shiloh. That this was a deliberate act on the part of the priests to take away for themselves what the people were offering to God.

And it's important to remember, or to know, that the priests got a lot out of their job. Right? Every sacrifice, the priests would get the breast and the right leg.

That was provision for them. We find that in Leviticus 7, that the priests, they were very well looked after. It's not like that they were desperate for food or on the brink of starvation.

[5 : 09] That they were already allotted and given a significant portion of every sacrifice. But then in verse 13, along comes one of the priest's henchmen, and with his big fork, goes fishing for more.

The people of Israel, they were taking what they had and offering it to God in an act of worship. And remember, they wouldn't have been anywhere near as well off as we are today.

Giving an animal as a sacrifice to God was a big deal. You're giving up a lot because you want to give what you have to God. You want to serve the God who has done so much for you.

You want to show him the love and the honor and the respect and the reverence that you have for him. By giving the little that you have back to him.

And yet along comes one of the priests. One of the people who's supposed to be helping you serve God. And he starts taking away the sacrifice for himself. It's like, I'm going to pick on John here because I know him and I love him.

[6 : 17] Right, John's the youth worker here. And so he spends a lot of his time and his energy helping other people to worship God. Whether that's through the music or the teens or the students.

And for all that, John is quite rightly paid a salary by the church. Right, that's the allotment that he's given. So that he can survive. And that is a good thing. But imagine you came in here every Sunday morning.

And John was standing at the box next to the collection box. And every time anybody put some money in, John would go fishing for a bit. And he'd sit the 20 quid back in his back pocket. Every time you choose to give sacrificially to God's work, you see it immediately go into John's back pocket.

Just to be clear, I don't think he does that. He doesn't do it. But that's exactly what's going on at the tabernacle at Shiloh. Right, these people are going and giving what they have to God and the priests are just taking it straight from themselves.

But that's not all. They're not just taking it from the people in verse 13 and 14. In verse 15, we see that the priests are taking from God.

[7 : 32] So we see, if you just look down there at verse 15, the priests would demand the portion, their allotted portion, before the fat was burned.

And on face value, you can look at it and think, what's the big deal there? But the fat of the sacrifice was specifically for God. Right, that is, it's as clear a cut as it comes.

Leviticus 3, verse 16, literally says, all fat is the Lord's. Which is a strange verse if you take it out of context. But the point is pretty basic.

Right? Some parts of the sacrifice were for the priests. Some parts were for the people. Some was for God. But under no exception was the fat for anyone other than God.

The fat was to be burned off for God and God alone. And yet, along come the priests, those serving under Hothnai and Phinehas, and they demand that what is God's and God's alone goes to them.

[8 : 43] And if, in verse 16, if the worshiper was willing to give the priest his whole sacrifice, he was saying, you can take it all, just let me give to God what is God's, so long as the worshiper just wanted to do the one thing that mattered most, the priest would then say no and threaten to take it by force.

This was worship at Shiloh. Right? It's an absolute farce. This was where God's people were going to try and offer their thanksgiving to him, and yet it was almost impossible for the faithful people of Israel to worship properly because of the wickedness of Eli's sons.

And as if that wasn't all bad enough, we find verse 22, that they're sleeping around with the women at the tabernacle. They are spiritually and morally as wicked as they come.

And the big problem in all of this, the big problem with Hothai and Phinehas, is there in verse 12, right at the beginning.

Second half of the verse. In the end of it, it says, they had no regard for the Lord. It's literally, they did not know the Lord. The very people who were supposed to be pointing others to God didn't even know them themselves.

[10 : 20] That's pretty scary, right? That there are people in a position to lead God's people, to shepherd God's people, and yet they don't even know the God they're supposed to be pointing to.

And so it's hardly surprising when we read a little later on that God has no time for people like this. Hothai and Phinehas are unbelievably wicked.

They do not know God, and they intentionally hinder those who do know Him. They are morally and spiritually depraved. And so when we see God's judgment proclaimed upon them in verse 34, just look down there, what happens to your two sons, Hothai and Phinehas, will be assigned to you.

They will both die on the same day. There's a recognition, right, that this is right, this is just. God will not let the scoundrels, the worthless, the wicked, He will not let them go unpunished.

And that can be a comfort to a great many people, right? It's a stark warning to some. But there are plenty of people out there, plenty of people in churches, maybe some of you in here today, who have been in churches with people like Hothai and Phinehas, who have been in churches that are led by people who did not know the Lord.

[11 : 57] There are plenty of people in churches who have been abused by leaders in the church, whether physically or spiritually or mentally. And I trust it's not something that happens here, but it's always something we have to watch out for.

But for those who have been abused in any way, for those who have been seeking to faithfully serve God and yet have been led astray or forced astray, we can see here that God's judgment will come upon the wicked.

It's not clear exactly when. It might not happen soon, but God will not let the wicked go unpunished. But what is frightening about this chapter, the wicked, they'll be punished.

And we see that and we go, yeah, that's right. But it's not only the wicked that go unpunished, it's the weak as well. Eli, right?

Eli was the father of Hophni and Phinehas. Unlike his sons, Eli did know God. We see that clearly from chapter 1 and from the following chapters of 1 Samuel.

- [13 : 16] Eli knew God and he served him. But what we see here is God's punishment doesn't just fall on the wicked, it falls on the weak. I obviously don't mean physically weak, I mean spiritually weak.

Just look back at verse 22. And we see Eli's response to the actions of his sons. So verse 22, he hears about what's going on, about everything his sons were doing to all Israel and how they slept with the women who served at the entrance of the tent.

So he said to them, why do you do such things? I hear from all the people about these wicked deeds of yours. No, my sons, the report I hear spreading among the Lord's people is not good.

If one person sins against another, God may mediate for the offender. But if anyone sins against the Lord, who will intercede for them? His sons, however, did not listen to their father's rebuke, for it was the Lord's will to put them to death.

Eli sees and hears about his son's wickedness. And his solution is a verbal rebuke. Right, he tells them off.

- [14 : 30] He says, you've got to change, guys. What are you doing here? He pleads with them to fix their ways. He wants them to do better.

The problem for Eli is, and this is where things can get really challenging for us, the problem for Eli is that his concern was for his sons, which might not sound wrong in itself, but the problem with Eli is that his greatest concern was for his sons.

In Eli's world, Eli's sons were the number one priority, not the worship of God. Eli was more concerned about fixing his sons than he was about fixing worship at the tabernacle.

And for prioritizing his own sons ahead of God, Eli's judgment is no less severe than that of Hophni and Phinehas.

You see what's being said there. Look down at verse 29. This sort of mysterious man of God appears and speaks what the Lord says to Eli.

- [15 : 48] And he first of all outlines everything that God's done for Eli and his people. So look at all that God's done for you. And what have you done in response, verse 29? Why do you scorn my sacrifice and offering?

Remember, speaking to Eli here, not Hophni and Phinehas. Why do you scorn my sacrifice and my offering that I prescribed for my dwelling? Why do you honor your sons more than me by fattening yourselves on the choice parts of every offering made by my people Israel?

He's saying, Eli, what are you doing? Eli was asking his sons, what are they doing? And God comes to Eli and says, what are you doing? There was an obvious but very difficult solution for Eli.

Eli, who was the older priest, he could have removed his sons from the tabernacle. He knew what they were doing was wrong, but he put them above not only all of Israel, but above God himself.

Eli was more concerned with keeping his sons happy, with keeping his family close, than with keeping God's worship pure. And, well, you might not think that sounds that serious, but it doesn't matter what we think, right?

- [17 : 12] It's pretty clear what God thinks when you read on. Let's read from verse 30 again. This is God's response to Eli's failure to deal with his sons.

Therefore, the Lord, the God of Israel declares, I promised that members of your family would minister before me forever, but now, declares the Lord, far be it from me.

Those who honor me, I will honor, but those who despise me will be disdained. The time is coming when I will cut short your strength and the strength of your priestly house so that no one in it will reach old age, and you will see distress in my dwelling.

Although good will be done to Israel, no one in your family line will ever reach old age. Every one of you that I do not cut off from serving at my altar, I will spare only to destroy your sight and sap your strength, and all your descendants will die in the prime of life.

God will not stand for Hothnay and Phinehas' wickedness, but he's not standing for Eli's weakness either. It's hard to know the exact reasons for Eli's actions, but there's plenty of warnings in there for us in the severity of God's words to Eli.

[18 : 31] And notice, none of the passage is about Eli's wickedness. That's not the problem here. The problem is how Eli deals with other people's wickedness. It's all about the wickedness of his sons and his failure to do anything about it.

What is Eli doing here? He's putting his family first, which sounds good in the world, but it's not in the church, right, because we don't put family first, we've got to put God first.

At least that's how it should be. Eli is putting people's comfort above God's name. He's more concerned with keeping people happy than with protecting the name of God.

He's more worried about breaking relationships than he is about breaking worship. He finds it easier to stand up for God, for his sons, than to stand up for God and for what is right.

And God quite simply says, no, that is not okay. You might not be so spiritually dead as Hophni and Phinehas. You might not be nearly as immoral, but if you fail to stand up for me, we see there in verse 30, why will I stand up for you?

[19 : 54] If you fail to defend my name, why will I defend yours? And that is a scary prospect, right?

I mean, Jesus says in Matthew 7, there will be people who will say, Lord, I did many great things in your name, and Jesus will say, I don't know you. And I think when we start looking at our own lives, right, and I'm no different here, if we're being honest with ourselves, we realize very quickly just how like Eli we can be.

There's a sense in which Eli's in a position of greater responsibility, right? He's responsible for the worship of the whole country of Israel. And that, in part, is probably why the punishment is as severe as it is.

But we've still got to ask the question, what are we putting before God? Do we put our family and our friends before? Are we more concerned with doing what is pleasing to the people around us than doing what is pleasing to God?

Are we more concerned with being nice than we are with being zealous for God and His name? Being nice is a good thing, right? But there are plenty of times when we as Christians are, we think it's more important to be nice than to stand up for God.

[21 : 26] Because, I mean, how often, even just think about it, day to day, do we hear the name of God being slandered, of Jesus being used? And how often do we, do we actually stand up and defend it?

I think we all just, we convince ourselves that it would be better not to cause a scene. That that would be unhelpful, and so we just turn a blind eye to it. Even when it comes to just being honest with people about, about the condition of their own souls, right?

We're more concerned with not hurting other people's feelings. But the gospel is a pretty offensive message, right? It starts with how bad you are. It starts off with making it very clear to people that they suck.

And yet, how often do we put their feelings ahead of God's glory? How often do we put other people's feelings ahead of their salvation?

And if you don't care about standing up for God in the world, then what is it that you're doing? Right, what are you saying is the most important thing in my life? What are you saying it means to be a Christian?

[22 : 48] And if you're sitting there and you just don't care and you think it doesn't seem that important, there's a good chance you're more like Hothnay and Phineas than you are like Eli. Because if you don't care about the name of God, there's a good chance you don't know Him.

Because to know Him is to know His name. I mean, just think of the Lord's Prayer, right? Number one petition.

Hallowed be your name. That's what this is all about. This is all about God's name and God's name being glorified above everything else. That is what we're here to do and for many of us, and I know I'm not alone here, it's something we want to do, it's just something we fail to do.

So time and again, we know what we should do, but we just don't do it. I mean, there's no easy solution here, right?

There's no cheap way out. There's no way that you can live a life that keeps the world happy and keeps God pleased. You've got to choose one or the other.

[24 : 03] And if we choose God, which I hope we all do, we've got to realize that means making very difficult decisions. That means standing out from the crowd, right?

That means standing up for Jesus when everyone else is going to think you're a lunatic. It means making a stand for the gospel when people will just laugh at you.

It means putting God, in Eli's case, but before your family. And there are times, not always, but there's going to be times when that's going to break down relationships.

And there are times when it's going to hurt. But that is what we're called to do. It all comes down to whether you are more concerned with pleasing God or with pleasing the world.

But the message isn't hopeless, right? Those last few verses of 1 Samuel 2, 35, I will raise up for myself a faithful priest.

[25 : 09] Eli's weakness is not the same as Hophni and Phinehas' wickedness. We need to realize that. We need to make that clear, right? But they both get judged.

But one is far worse than the other. Eli's weakness is a failure on his part to do what he needs to do. But God can do it for him.

And God has done it for him. And that is the faithful priest that God has raised up for himself. God has raised up a priest far better than Eli because that's what Israel needed.

And that's what we need. Right? We need God himself in Jesus to be the one interceding for us. We need Jesus to be there bridging that gap for us.

Eli's weak and he can't do it on his own. We are weak and we fail miserably on our own. But we have Jesus there. Now, 1 Samuel 2 isn't all doom and gloom.

[26 : 12] There's the promise of a priest to come. But also, throughout the chapter, I don't know if you noticed it while we're reading it, there is one final character I just want to briefly mention before we close.

Samuel. Here in this passage, he keeps on appearing throughout. Right? This is a story of the wickedness of Eli's household, basically. But every now and again, we see Samuel.

It starts in verse 11, which we didn't actually read. Verse 11 says, Then Elkanah went home to Ramah, but the boy, that's Samuel, ministered before the Lord under Eli the priest.

Then in verse 18, But Samuel was ministering before the Lord. And then again, at the end of verse 21, Meanwhile, the boy Samuel grew up in the presence of the Lord.

Verse 26, Boy Samuel continued to grow in stature and in favor with the Lord and with the people. And then again, at the very beginning of chapter 3, just after the chapter we read, the boy Samuel ministered before the Lord under Eli.

[27 : 21] It might look like an absolute mess. And it would have looked like an absolute mess, worship at Silo, to all of Israel and to all the world around. God's people, God's church, looked like an absolute shambles.

But God never gives up on his people. And God will never give up on his church. In the midst of the treachery of Hothnay and Phinehas, we see Samuel growing more and more in his service of the Lord.

God is raising up someone who will faithfully serve his people. Someone who knows him, unlike Hothnay and Phinehas. Someone who can actually point people to their God. I know it's just how quietly God raises up his servant.

There's no show and dance about it. Samuel is just there in the background all along. While the focus is on all that is wrong, God is working to set things right.

And that is so often the case. We see all that is wrong with the world, but God is at work. God is raising up people to deal with the problems of this world.

[28 : 39] Think about Jesus himself, right? 30 years of his life, totally unknown. For 30 years, God was busy preparing himself to save his people.

Quietly in the background. Bad leaders like Hothnay and Phinehas. Bad shepherds of this church will not thwart God's plans for his people.

Hothnay and Phinehas didn't stop God's plans. The church has been in far worse states through history than it is now. You might not think it's particularly good now, but throughout the Middle Ages, right, the church was so corrupt it would have put FIFA to shame.

And yet, here we are today. And you might not think it looks good today, but it will be here forever.

That the wicked and the weak, that they will perish. But I can absolutely guarantee you, and I can guarantee it because God guaranteed it, that while the wicked will perish, the church will last forever.

[29 : 49] Because God will always, always provide for his people. Let's pray. Father, we just thank you again for your word.

Lord, we thank you for the story of Hothnay and Phinehas. Lord, we thank you that you are a just God who will not let the wicked stand in the congregation of the righteous.

Lord, but we pray for strength and boldness as we seek to live as your people in this world. Lord, help us to put you above everything else. Lord, we know we are weak and on our own we fail time and time again.

Lord, forgive us for the times when we have been like Eli, when we have put others above you or ourselves above you. Lord, help us give us a zeal for you.

Help us to stand up for you and do what is right no matter what the world thinks. And Lord, we just thank you so much that you will never give up on your church.

[31 : 06] Lord, we thank you that no matter the trials that your people go through. You are always there working. Lord, we pray that you would grow your church here so that your name may be glorified in all that we do.

Pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Thanks a lot. Amen.