

When Children Let You Down

I Samuel 2:12-36

By Dr. Derek Thomas

I want to read this evening from I Samuel 2, and we're going to pick it up at verse 12 and we're going to read through to the end of the chapter. This is a distressing chapter, and there are some more chapters like it to follow. Wickedness of monumental proportions is in the house of God, and as we come to this passage tonight we're going to look at God's reaction to that. We live in an age where sin is lightly thought of, and God is a God who easily forgives "because that's His business." But, my dear friends, it is not so in Scripture, and we need tonight as we approach this passage to have our worldview (and moreover, our view of God) shaped by God's own self-disclosure of himself.

Now let's look to God in prayer.

Father, we thank You for the Scriptures that holy men of old wrote as they were borne along by the Holy Spirit. We need Your help now, as we always do when we read the Bible. We don't want to read things into the Bible and we don't want to miss what's there. We want to understand the Bible, because it is Your letter to us. You wrote it. You caused it to be written. So come, Holy Spirit, and enable us to read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest, and all for Jesus' sake. Amen.

Now the sons of Eli were worthless men. They did not know the Lord. 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. 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." 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.

Samuel was ministering before the Lord, a boy clothed with a linen ephod. And 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. Then

Eli would bless Elkanah and his wife, and say, "May the Lord give you children by this woman for the petition she asked of the Lord." So then they would return to their home.

Indeed the Lord visited Hannah, and she conceived and bore three sons and two daughters. And the young man Samuel grew in the presence of the Lord.

Now Eli was very old, and he kept hearing all that his sons were doing to all Israel, and how they lay with the women who were serving at the entrance to the tent of meeting. And 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. If someone sins against a man, God will mediate for him, but if someone sins against the Lord, who can intercede for him?' But they would not listen to the voice of their father, for it was the will of the Lord to put them to death.

Now the young man Samuel continued to grow both in stature and in favor with the Lord and also with man.

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? 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. 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?' 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. 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. 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. 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 priest's places, that I may eat a morsel of bread."

Well, so far God's holy, inerrant word.

The temple, the worship center in Shiloh is rocked by scandal — sexual scandal.

Roman Catholic priests who molest little boys; evangelical leaders who have affairs with their secretaries; graduates of RTS arrested on a street in a city in this land known for prostitution.

So what's new? Let's not look at this passage with hypocrisy. This passage could have been written today, in a church, alas, of today. What's shocking is that Shiloh is where Hannah left her little boy, her three-year-old/four-year-old little boy. I'm not sure how much Hannah knew what was going on in Shiloh, although the text seems to say that all Israel knew what was going on in Shiloh. And if she knew, it is — and don't mistake this — it is further evidence of her remarkable faith in God to trust him in God's care in such a wicked place.

I. The hand of God on Samuel.

Time is passing by here. The reference in verse 11, "And the boy ministered to the Lord in the presence of the priest," and then in verse 18, "Samuel was ministering before the Lord." In verse 11, he's ministering in the presence of Eli, but in verse 18 he seems to be ministering by himself. He perhaps by this time is a teenager. Perhaps ten years, a dozen years have passed by. And you have this little ritual, little scene, little cameo of Hannah knitting a little garment for her little boy, and getting all excited at the thought of an annual journey — just once a year — to go and see her little boy and take him this little whatever it was. And how proud, in the right sense of the word, she must have been when she would see him.

Worship in Shiloh was a farce. We're introduced to something that reminds us of Kentucky Fried Chicken™ I suppose, here, because it's about an offering, and it's about a peace offering, and it's about a ritual that you can read about in Leviticus 7. And sure enough the priests in Shiloh, Eli and his two sons, knew what Leviticus 7 said: that the breast and the right thigh of the offering...after the offering had been made, the breast and the right thigh was to be given to the priests. It was how they were fed. It was how they were supported. Everyone knew that. Everyone understood that. It was written in the word of God. But in Shiloh, things were different. In Shiloh the priests, Phinehas and Hophni, would come along with a three-pronged fork and into the pot of stew and boiling meat they would plunge this fork, and whatever came up was theirs. And they would plunge it again, and if they didn't get what satisfied them they asked for portions of meat that hadn't been boiled. [Oh, a filet mignon here and a New York strip

there for supper.] And we laugh and find it odd—is it thigh, or is it breast, or is it chicken wings? But you understand what they were doing was utterly contrary to the revealed will of God. There was thuggery and greed in the name of religion, in the name of the God of Israel.

You see the verdict in verse 17: “The sin of the young men was very great.”

There's a contrast here. It's a deliberate contrast on the part of the writer of I Samuel, because the godliness of Hannah was very great and the sin of Eli's sons is very great. There's great godliness here in the godliness of Hannah and the godliness of Samuel. And in the midst of this great godliness, there's this great ungodliness.

Now what I want you to see is this. You notice they are called in verse 12 “worthless men.” Actually, literally in Hebrew they are “the sons of Beliel,” and it doesn't get more offensive than that. They're worthless men. They did not know the Lord. They're in the ironic service of the priesthood, but they didn't know the Lord. They didn't know God. They cared nothing for God. They cared nothing for God's word. They cared nothing for God's law, for God's people. They lived entirely for themselves. And in the middle of that, shocking and revolting as all of that is — it's worse than that, because they were sleeping, having sexual relationships with ancillary workers in the temple, womenfolk who served in the Shiloh temple. And everybody knew about it.

And right in the middle of that there's this little description of Samuel: that Samuel grew “in stature and in favor with the Lord, and also with men.” He's like [and it's deliberate, you see]...he's a Jesus-like figure in the midst of great ungodliness.

Now here's my point. I haven't got the voice to expand on it, but I want to get to this point: that great godliness can exist among a young man, a teenager. Do we have teenagers here tonight? We've got a few teenagers here tonight. Young men, I want you to listen to me just for a second, because you think it's hard to be godly in school, you know, when all the boys are talking about their achievements and all the things they've done at the weekend, and all their accomplishments and all the boasting they have to make — and most of it is ungodly. And the jokes they tell! And they poke fun at you because you're a Christian and you love the Lord, and there are certain things that you don't do and there are certain things that you won't do, and there are certain things you don't laugh at. And I want you tonight to see Samuel in a most ungodly place. And as far as I know, there is no one here to help him. There is no evidence here of anyone that helps him, that's a mentor to him. He has no mentor. He has no father figure. And yet...and yet...in the midst of all of that, he shines like a bright and shining light for God. Now I'm saying to you, you can't do that by yourself. There's no way that you can do that by yourself. But if you call on the Lord, you ask the Holy Spirit to fill you every day to overflowing, you can be that Samuel by the grace of God, by the strength of God, in a wicked place...in a *wicked*

place...and not succumb to the temptation and allurements of the world.

II. The wrath of God.

But secondly, not only do we see here the hand of God on Samuel, but the second thing I want us to see is the wrath of God on Eli's two sons. A prophet of some description appears — he's nameless in verse 27 — and he comes with a word of denunciation. Now notice what the Scripture says in verse 25. This is part of what he says: "If someone sins against a man, God will mediate for him, but if someone sins against the Lord, who can intercede for him?" Now listen:

"They would not listen to the voice of their father, because it was the will of the Lord to put them to death."

Now notice what it's not saying. And hold on to your seats, now! Notice what it's not saying. It's not saying they wouldn't listen to their father, therefore the Lord put them to death. Now that's shocking enough, but that's not what it's saying. What it's saying is they wouldn't listen to their father because God had already decided to put them to death; that the time for repentance is past.

Now while you dwell on that note of divine sovereignty and judgment — and it's a sobering thought — while you dwell on that, let me explain just a little bit of the judgment that this prophet delivers to Eli and his house. It comes in four waves.

Firstly, there was a promise, you see, to Aaron (to Moses' brother) that Aaron's house and his four sons would be priests forever. That was the promise, the general promise that God had made. But that will not be so for Eli's house, because that line of Eli who descends somehow or other from one of the sons of Aaron, that line of Eli's house is going to disappear.

Secondly, in verse 31, Eli's strength is going to be cut off. And that's a reference to the fact that his two sons (let alone Eli himself) will be put to death, and they will be put to death in chapter 4 of I Samuel when the ark of the covenant is taken by the Philistines.

Thirdly, there's a reference here to the coming massacre of all the priests. We will read that much later on, in I Samuel 22. And the only priest that escapes that massacre is Abiathar. And then notice verse 34: "This shall be a sign to you...." All of the previous Eli will not see for himself, but this one he will see: "You will see both of your sons die on the same day." This is God's verdict. This is God's judgment on Hophni and Phinehas. He's going to kill them. Now what do you make of that? I mean, honestly? In 2009? What would CNN make of that? What would the religious channels on TV make of that? What kind of God is this that comes and says to a man that I'm going to kill your two sons, Hophni and Phinehas?

III. The mercy of God.

And you can respond in one of two ways. You can say, as some commentators that I was reading this week said in their pontifications: that this, you see, is an example of primitive religion. What really happened is that the two boys died in war with the Philistines. But some — you know, some writer, some religious figure — interpreted that as this was God's judgment. But you know he was just primitive, and we understand better because we know God doesn't do things like that. Believe that, if you dare. If you dare approach the Day of Judgment and the day of everlasting wrath and damnation, believe that if you dare.

Or, you can say what many of my students say about my grading policies: "That's not fair." I mean, let's be honest. Does it strike you as fair that because these two boys are doing ...well, let's be honest...are they doing any more than some of our own sons have done when they've gone off to college? And what is this nonsense about stealing a few prime ribs for supper and God would come and kill them? And is there, my friends, there lurking in your minds tonight the thought, "That isn't fair. That isn't right. That isn't just"?

In 1741, on July 8, at Enfield in Connecticut, Jonathon Edwards preached that infamous sermon. We all know the title of the sermon, even if we've never read it: *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God* (Jonathan Edwards, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God"). It's gone down in history. You can look it up on the web. You can read it tonight. [I dare you to read it!] His text was from Deuteronomy 32: "Their foot shall slide in due time." He uses a number of images, one of which is that we are like lead balls that God is holding, and the only reason why that lead weight doesn't sink to the ground and sink into hell is because God is still holding on to it. He uses the metaphor of a dam that is about to burst. And behind that dam there are millions and millions and millions of gallons of water. And the only reason that dam doesn't burst is because God is holding it up. And if He were only to remove His hand for a moment, a deluge would come.

Who wants justice tonight? Is it justice we want, you and I? Forget about Phinehas and Hophni; let's think about ourselves for a minute. If it's justice we want, with all of our sins and all of our guilt, I don't want justice. I do not want justice. I want grace. I want mercy.

There's a story that Harry Ironside used to tell of the days of the prairies, when the pioneers made their way across the central states in pursuit of homesteading. And as they had crossed a river and they'd gone a certain distance, all of a sudden they saw this smoke — tell-tale smoke — filling the skies ahead of them. And it was fire. Brush fire was heading in their direction, and they had no time to go back and cross the river. And what they did was in a circle around them they burnt the brush, ever widening that circle so that when the fire came they were

within that circle. And when a little child grew alarmed that they would be burned by this fire, an elderly man said to the little child, “My child, the flames cannot reach you, because we’re standing where the flames have already burnt.”

That's what it means tonight to be in Jesus Christ, because He has borne the judgment and the wrath of God for us. I believe the story of Hophni and Phinehas should remind us of the attribute of God's holy wrath against sin. And if you're not a Christian tonight, if you're not a believer, if you've never trusted in Jesus Christ — my dear friend, all that awaits you is this judgment, the judgment of God against your sin forever. So trust in Jesus Christ. Come to Jesus Christ and confess your sin, and say to Him tonight, “Lord, I know I am a sinner, and it's not justice that I want, it's mercy.”

You know Jesus says to you, dear friend,

“Come unto Me, all ye that are weary and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn of Me, for My yoke is easy and My burden is light.”

Let's pray together.

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