

When the Word Goes to War

Series on 1 Samuel

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Bible Text: 1 Samuel 2

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Well, let's take our Bibles this morning and turn to 1 Samuel chapter two. Continuing the story of Samuel and Hannah, a crucial story in the big drama of redemption just anticipating one of the key moves towards the arrival of our King Jesus, the setting up of the story for the arrival of King David whose son, greater son becomes our Savior and King.

We want to pick it up in verse 11, 1 Samuel two verse 11.

And the boy ministered to the LORD in the presence of Eli the priest. 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 priests’ places, that I may eat a morsel of bread.”’”

Now the young man Samuel was ministering to the LORD under Eli.¹

¹ 1 Samuel 2:11—3:1.

There is a new soap opera that is running on some of the television stations. It is called... that is based on the story of the Borgias, the Borgias a famous Italian family that dominated the papacy in Italy for a number of years and whose stories of sex and violence and political infighting and the abuse of church power and material prosperity are such that are the stuff of the kind of things we see in soap operas daily. They are a gift really. They are also a gift for cynics like Richard Hitchens who writes about Christianity and talks about the effects of religion and the effects of Christianity in particular in corrupting the world. The Borgias were, to use a Hebrew expression, the rat finks of clerical professionalism. They are to be avoided.

And they have their predecessors in the sons of Eli in this passage that we read here. The leadership of Israel was a kind of symptom, really, of the spiritual state of the cause of God, the Church of God at that period.

So the story, then, focuses on the worship center at Shiloh. That is where the action takes place and as we look at the action as it takes it place, we find that the action centers around the corrupted worship of God, the disturbing Word of God and the silent work of God.

Well, first of all, there is the corrupted worship of God. Hannah in her song, which you can read at the beginning of chapter two, had reflected, really, on true worship and she had talked in that song about the adversaries of God. Where are these adversaries, these enemies of God to be found? Are they to be found outside the Church in the world, the pagan society, the secular world around us that is so often opposed to the things of God? Well, yes. Of course they are. The adversaries of God are there.

The greatest adversaries of the Church are often found within her and in this story here they are in the sons of Eli. We are told that in the very beginning in verse 12.

“The sons of Eli were worthless men.”²

In the Greek version of the Old Testament the word that is used there for these were worthless men is the same word that the apostle Paul uses when he challenging the Church at Corinth that great riches in Corinth that are drawn from the Old Testament. You really can't read Corinthians without knowing your Old Testament well. And Paul is challenging these people. He says this.

“What accord has Christ with Belial?”³

Belial is our word here. It means worthless, corrupt, degenerate, wicked, due to destruction. Paul is saying you can't have both of those things. You either take the root of Belial, the root of worthlessness, the root of corruption or you are with Christ. Your choice is there.

² 1 Samuel 2:12.

³ 2 Corinthians 6:15.

And I want to put that choice right before you this morning front and central in this sermon so that it is there etched in your mind and we will come to it again. You can't have Christ and Belial.

Well, let me tell you the story of these men who had Belial. They were associated with him. They were worthless men. Do you notice what it says about them? It says they did not know the Lord.

Well, of course, they knew the Lord. These were religious men. They were the professionals. They were the clergy. They taught the Bible. They led the sacrifices. They were the worship leaders. They were there mingling with the people of God and they were working in the shrine of God and they were right at the center of the religious life of Israel. It wasn't that they were ignorant of the things of God.

This little expression has a history in the Old Testament. It is an expression that Pharaoh used. After Moses had been demonstrating the power of the God of Israel and he had seen the effects and the aftermath of God's great work through Moses, Pharaoh says to Moses, he says, "I do not know the LORD."⁴

And what he was saying was this. "Here we are in my court. I am the great Pharaoh. I don't recognize the Lord." In other words, "I am not letting him speak. He doesn't have a say here. He has no place here. This is my court. This is my world. This is where I am the king. I don't know the Lord. The Lord doesn't have anything to do here."

In other words, when it says these young men did not know the Lord, it is an act of defiance in their hearts. They are defiant of God.

There is a lesson here, right in the very beginning, isn't there, that you and I can be in the courts of God and we can have a relationship with the people of God and we can be baptized people who come to church and who sing the praises and who wash ourselves up so that we are looking presentable when we come to service. And yet for us to go through all of that without really knowing the Lord, in fact, having a heart that is defiant of God, having a heart that says there are some things I will not let God talk to me about. Or there are some people will not let God speak to me through, a defiant heart.

You, see, everyone of us has a responsibility and leaders have a responsibility particularly. Paul summarizes like this when he is talking to the leaders of Israel, the church, rather, in Ephesus and he says to them, "Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers."⁵

Well, these young men had not given any attention to themselves and, therefore, they could care less of the flock of God. They were not concerned.

⁴ Exodus 5:2.

⁵ Acts 20:28.

The people of God, in fact, did you notice the repetition of the phrase? This is what they were doing to Israel. Israel was not their flock. They were not their sheep. These were not people to be cared for, prayed for, nourished, cherished, fed and provided for. These were people to whom they did what they wanted. They treated them like some kind of object, They were not caring for the flock of God.

It gives us an illustration of what they did.

One of the great privileges of working for God as a priest in the old covenant that God made provision for them through the generosity of the people. They weren't allowed to farm or have businesses. Their job was to serve in the sanctuary. They were there to minister the Word of God and to lead the sacrifices. And so they were cared for by the people. They people would give them generously to provide for them and one of the ways this happened was that when you came to sacrifice, you came up to the shrine. You would bring your animal with you. And first of all having killed the animal and taken the fat from the animal, you would burn the fat as an offering to the Lord and you would give the Lord the best cuts and those would be burned on the altar as a sacrifice to God.

And then you were allowed to take the animal away and you were allowed to boil up the pieces of the animal for your family, feed your family and then with what was left, you fed the priest. You gave that as a gift to the priest in the sanctuary.

Well, by the time we get to our story there is a short cut going on here. While the boiling is going on, some of the priests were coming along and do you notice the little reference there that is obviously an eye witness account that Samuel, I think, who is behind this story himself is remembering that when they went around they went around with a three pronged fork and no matter what the instrument was, whether it was a cauldron or a pot or a pan or a kettle, because they came with a variety of goods which is more than we have in our house just now until one or two friends dropped stuff in for us this week. By the way, just so as you know last night was our first night in a bed, a real bed. Nothing else, but we have got a bed. Hopefully there will be more this week.

Anyway, the little eye witness account here is they would go around with a three pronged fork and, you know, they would thrust it into the pot or the bowl and whatever came out, the biggest chunks that came out, they would kept those for themselves.

And it gets worse. Apparently, some of the priests didn't like boiled meat and I don't know if it was Hophni and Phinehas. They were the ones and they said, "Look, we don't want boiled meat. We don't even want meat that has already been cooked. We want to cook our own steaks here. So you go and make sure we get the best cuts for ourselves."

This is God's charge against these people. We are told this.

"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."⁶

⁶ 1 Samuel 2:17.

Very great. You know, in the account we are told that Hannah's godliness was very great. We are told about Samuel that his godliness was very great. But the only thing you could say about these priests, Hophni and Phinehas was that their sin was very great in the eyes of God.

Well, one thing leads to another. There they were. They did not know God in the sense that they did not have time for him. They did not factor him in. They knew about him, believed in him, did the work for him, but they didn't factor him into their lives. It reminds me of some divinity students, theology students at Edinburgh. Someone said about them, "Those young men know all there is to know about God except that he is listening."

They were talking about their own private conversations, their fun times. And let me say this. You can be studying divinity. You can be studying theology and it has become head knowledge without heart engagement. Let the story of Eli's sons be a warning to you. And understand this, that one thing can lead to another. Ungodliness can lead to unrighteousness. Paul makes this point in Romans. And I think he demonstrates in the passage that one thing leads to another where you suppress the truth, that is, where you push it away, where you pretend it isn't there, when you suppress the nagging voice of God in your conscience. When you suppress the truth you put a lid on it in unrighteousness and ungodliness. It leads to unrighteousness.

Romans Paul kind of spells that out for us. But this story shows it for us, I think, in a very concrete way because not only was there this religious problem in the abusing of the sacrifices, but there was also this moral problem in the abusing of women who were there serving at the entrance of the tent of meeting.

It is one of the scandals of the Old Testament world that Israel throughout its history never at any point until after the exile ever worshipped the Lord exclusively. Never. Not when they were under Moses, not when they were under Joshua, not when they were under David. They were always mixing up the worship of the Lord God with the worship of the nations round about, using their worship practices, using their worship ideas, bringing them in and just laying, overlaying them on the worship of the one true God. The nations round about were interested in productivity just as we are. But they were interested in productivity at every level, productivity in terms of having children, productivity in terms of having crops, productivity in terms of having your business succeed, that kind of fertility and productivity. Understand it that way best today.

One of the ways that they facilitated this was that the cult at the shrines they would have these cult prostitutes who would service the clients as they came to worship. That was an abuse. And this abuse, we are told, was furthered by the bad behavior of Eli's sons.

Then behind of all this there is Eli saying nothing, doing nothing, never challenging them, never rebuking them, never exercising church discipline, to use our New Testament perspective, corrupted worship of God.

And then there comes a disturbing Word of God. The Word gets to work and goes to war. It gets to work. Eli himself becomes the vehicle of the Word of God. You see, Eli is not all bad. He is still a man of God. He is rather weak and ineffective. He does do good things. So, for example, Samuel is ministering to the Lord. His mother used to bring him a little robe. And, by the way, there is a little personal remembrance, I think, a little memory of Samuel himself. He remembered that as he was growing up his mother would bring him a little robe. Every year he gets a size bigger. Next year a size bigger. So kind of... he looked forward to it. He looked forward to his mother coming every year and every time she came she worked skillfully making this little robe specially for him. And for Samuel the boy even when he is a man remembers the little touch of his mother's visits to him there.

And as she came up, Eli would pray for them.

“May the Lord give you children by this woman.”

It was a great prayer. And it was a prayer that God heard. The Lord visited Hannah and she conceived three sons and two daughters, a little family of five that she had at home and that son abroad, Samuel, grew in the presence of the Lord.

Well, Eli eventually says something to his boys. And it is a bit ineffectual, to begin with.

“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.”⁷

That is a bit ineffectual. It is something like saying, “Well, boys, you know, I am hearing these kind of comments and, you know, here and there. Actually it is from everybody saying this and I really don't want to bring up what they are saying, but, you know, it is not good, you know, it is really not good what they are saying.”

And then somehow or other he gets some courage poured into his backbone just about this backbone just about this point and he says something actually positive and clear to his boys. And it is a devastating thing that 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?”⁸

He is saying there is need for repentance here and he is warning these boys that there is this invisible line, you see. I mean, we don't know who the elect and the non elect are. We don't know who the reprobate and the believers are. We can all sit here looking the same, but there are some people, you see, whose defiance is so entrenched in their heart that they have already crossed the line and there is a point in which God says, “That is what you want. That is what you get.”

⁷ 1 Samuel 2:23-24.

⁸ 1 Samuel 2:25.

Part of the judgment of God is not necessarily coming in and zapping you with judgment and fire from above. Some of the judgment of God, the way he works in our lives is simply to say, "Is this what your heart wants? Is this the desire that is nursed in the secret place of your heart and your mind? Ok. You can have it. But you will never ever, ever be affected by my Word ever again. That is it. You have got what you want, but you will never be made uncomfortable by my Word ever again. You will never hear my words of pleading ever again. You may hear them with your ears, but they will never get into your heart, ever again."

Let it be a warning to us. Or the judgment of God is when he gives us up. Three times in Romans God gave them up in the lust of their hearts to impurity. He gave them up to dishonorable passions. He gave them up to a debased mind. He gave them up.

And if you listen to the Word of God and you suppress it again and again and again, and instead nurture a desire that is a desire that is defiant of God, be afraid of the day when God says to you, "I will give you the desires of your heart, but I will not speak to you ever, ever again."

God's Word gets to work through Eli. God's Word goes to war through this unnamed prophet. Do you know? God introduces into the story somebody we know nothing about. We know nothing about this background, where he came from, what his credentials were. God speaks to them through this third, this individual who is unknown to us. And it is a long word, it is a long prophecy. I am not going to break it all down for us today. I just want you to read it for yourself. But in this prophecy God uses this man to challenge the house of Eli. And he makes it clear that at that time to that house there was a conditional covenant of works relationship. God had made a promise, but it was conditional on obedience, just as Israel's place in the land was conditional on their obedience. And they lost their land because of their disobedience at the exile, never ever recovered it again.

And that is the... that is the background to the promise here. It was a conditional promise and God is saying to Eli and his house, "Look, you had your chance. You have had the time. You have been in the business. You have been doing the work. You have been serving me. You have been being provided for by the people. And what have you done? You have used them. You have abused them. And my judgment is coming."

And even that word, harsh though it is, is a word full of grace. The word through this unknown prophet reminds the house of Eli of all the benefits and blessings that God had poured upon them.

Do you know, you understand that all sin is sin against sovereign love. All sin is sin against generous grace. It always is.

God provides for us. He provides for people.

If you are not a Christian person you say, “Well, what kind of generous grace have I been shown?”

Well, you have been shown the generous grace of God’s common grace. God causes his sun to shine on the righteous and the unrighteous and the rain falls on the godly and the ungodly. There must be a lot of ungodly people in Scotland. We get lots of rain there.

God is generous in his common grace to everybody. He is good to all that he has made.

Even more so, those of you who have lived under the sound of the Word of God, you have lived under the sound of the gospel. You have been in the company of God’s people. You have felt something of the powers of the age to come. How much more should you respond to God?

Rather than living as these men were living like practical Atheists when it came to the God of Israel.

What this second man, this prophet says is that God is passionate about his own honor. And if Eli had been passionate about the honor of God, Eli would have spoken up earlier. Some of us, you know, we just want to be liked. We just want to be nice. We just want to be accepted. We want to be loved, especially as we get older, we become a bit soft and flabby and we want to leave a good legacy and we don’t want to get involved in controversy and we don’t want to be unkind to anybody and we don’t say the hard word because we are afraid people will think badly of us.

And, frankly, we are now nearing retirement and we just can’t be bothered. Maybe Eli was in that case. It is emphasized that he was getting old.

Listen. You are getting old. Don’t give up your passion for the honor of God. God is passionate about his own honor.

Well, while this is all going on, there is a silent work of God going on in the background. Interesting. Throughout this story, did you notice that God is at work even in all of this mess that is going on and chaos at Shiloh, there is an immediate sense in which God is at work. There was a fourth priest, you see, at Shiloh. It wasn’t just Eli and Hophni and Phinehas. There was a fourth priest. We are told that he wore a linen ephod that was the badge, the suit of the priest and he wore that and God was secretly and silently at work. You wouldn’t have known that, of course. You would have seen the abuses that were going on at Shiloh. You would have seen the terrible chaos that was taking place. You would didn’t know that in the heart of one little boy and then teenager and then young man, God was working in that individual’s heart. That is why when Jesus is talking got the churches in Revelation he addresses the individual.

He says to the boy, the girl, the young men, the young women, the old man, the old

woman, he says to the individual, “He who has an ear to hear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”⁹

Because the history of redemption shows that when nobody else is listening there is one person who is listening. When everyone else’s heart has been turned away from God, there is one person’s heart that God is addressing personally by his Word.

When you read the story you see the signs of it. Clues are left deliberately throughout the section.

Verse 11. The boy was ministering to the Lord.

Verse 18. “Samuel was ministering before the Lord.”¹⁰

Verse 26. “Samuel was growing in stature and in favor both with the LORD and with men.”¹¹

Chapter 3:1. “Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the LORD.”¹²

You can’t avoid it. It is there in the text. The text is littered with these clues. This is the solution. This is the answer. God is at work, not through the well known personalities that we were introduced to right at the very beginning of the book, Eli, Hophni, Phinehas, the leaders of Israel. No, through the boy who came as a help to them, working in the background. God is at work in this boy’s heart.

That is very interesting. But later on in the Bible when we are reflecting on the life of Jesus the Messiah growing up it is to the story of Samuel that the New Testament writers revert when they are talking about Jesus growing up with favor in the sight of God and in the sight of man, just like Samuel. God was at work.

“And the Word became flesh...”¹³

And nobody who visited Nazareth and needed some work done in their home and went to the local carpenter shop would have known that that was the Word made flesh. And no one would have guessed this is the Savior of the world. No one would have come to the conclusion this boy is God with skin on.

Secretly and silently the work was going on. And there is an ultimate sense in which God was at work. For in this prophetic word to Eli, do you notice the promise is given?

⁹ Revelation 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22.

¹⁰ 1 Samuel 2:18.

¹¹ 1 Samuel 2:26.

¹² 1 Samuel 3:1.

¹³ John 1:14.

“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.”¹⁴

Now I don't know what that prophet thought he was saying and I don't know what Eli thought he meant. I think I know what Samuel thought he meant, because Samuel recorded and I think that Samuel probably thought of a priest who would serve David the anointed one of God and it probably did one level refer to Zadok the priest.

But actually if you read it, it is saying more than can be fulfilled in Zadok the priest. God is saying that he is going to set up this faithful priest “who shall do according to what is in my heart and in my mind. And I will build him a sure house.”¹⁵

He uses a similar language of the building up of David's house.

“And he shall go in and out before my anointed.”¹⁶

We have already discovered in chapter two verse 10 that the king is the anointed. So he will go in and out in the presence of the king.

New Testament tells us that these two offices of priest and king are to be merged in the person of the Messiah himself, the anointed. God promises a faithful priest.

One of the New Testament revelations is that Jesus is the faithful priest in the house of God. He is passionate of the holiness of his people. Twice in the ministry of Jesus, at the beginning and end of his public ministry, what does he do? He goes into the house of God and he cleanses the house of God, he cleanses the temple. He demonstrates that he is the faithful priest, he is passionate for the glory of God. He will not allow sin to go unchecked in the temple of God and he goes in there, all guns blazing, and he clears the temple of unrighteousness.

We have a faithful priest. Our faithful priest has entered the house of God and cleansed it. He is a faithful priest who will never use you. He will never use the people of God. He will never because the people of God.

He listens to our confession. He pardons our sin for his own sake. And far from abusing us, what does he do? He will make us kings and priests.

You see, in verse 36 everybody is going to come along and say, “Put us in one of the priests places that we may have a morsel of bread. Make us like the priests are.”

God, in this new regime, is going to make it so that to be one of his priests is to be

¹⁴ 1 Samuel 2:35.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

exalted. Today that is exactly what Jesus has done for his people. He has raised them up and he has made them kings and priests in his God.

Now here is the choice. We started with this. Let's finish with this. It is either Christ or Belial. It is either Christ or worthlessness. What is it you give your life for? What do you get up for in the morning? What do you long for in this brief uncertain life and pilgrimage in which you are living? Can you say, as we heard sung earlier this morning, "Give me Jesus"? You can have all the world, but give me Jesus. You can have all the perks, all the benefits. You can have them. But give me Jesus.

Does your heart cry, "Give me Jesus, my faithful priest. Give me Jesus, my Savior? Give me Jesus, my provider. Give me Jesus"? Is that your heart cry?

Let's pray together.

Father, we pray that we today as the people of God would so be cleansed by your Holy Spirit, purified and renewed that from our hearts we would look to you and cry, "Just give me Jesus." May that be our heart be our heartbeat, the heartbeat of this church, our heartbeat as individuals to the praise of your glory. Amen.