

Samuel to Solomon

Part 3

Corruption In Eli's House (vv. 12-17)

When Shiloh was first mentioned in chapter 1 we were told that "the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were priests of the LORD" there (v. 3). We were told nothing more about these priests then. It is now time to become better acquainted with these sons of Eli.

They Did Not Know the Lord (v. 12)

Before we do so, it is instructive to recall how Eli earlier accused Hannah of being a drunken woman, and that she insisted that she was not "a worthless woman" (1 Samuel 1:16). The expression she used was harsh and vivid: "a daughter of *belial*." The Hebrew word *belial* in various contexts is associated with death, wickedness, and rebellion. It later became a name for the prince of evil. In the New Testament Paul speaks of the opposite extremes: "What accord has Christ with Belial?" (2 Corinthians 6:15). While we should not read back all of these associations into 1 Samuel, we are right to hear Hannah using unusually strong language when she begged not to be seen as "a daughter of *belial*."

The last time this language was used in the Biblical narrative was Judges 19:22 and 20:13, where the gang that raped and murdered the Levite's concubine are called "sons of *belial*" (ESV, "worthless fellows"). That provides a vivid background to what we are about to hear about Eli's sons!

We now learn that Hannah's strong language had a terrible appropriateness there at the Shiloh temple: "Now the sons of Eli were worthless men. They did not know the LORD" (v. 12).

The sons of Eli were "sons of *belial*." Their character was drawn more from *belial* (destruction, wickedness, rebellion) than from Eli. This dreadful state of affairs is traced to its source: "They did not know the LORD." They were, in other words, like Pharaoh when faced with Moses. That ruler proudly boasted, "I do not know the LORD" (Exodus 5:2). In his case this was not an admission of ignorance but an assertion of defiance. Pharaoh refused to acknowledge the Lord. He would therefore not heed his demands. In their own way Eli's sons were doing the same. That made them "sons of *belial*."

The description of Hophni and Phinehas as "sons of *belial*" sets them in utter contrast to Hannah who was *not* a "daughter of *belial*" (1:16). The crucial comment "They did not know the LORD" reminds us of Hannah's words, "The LORD is a God of knowledge, and by him actions are weighed" (2:3). Eli's sons may have failed to know the Lord, but the Lord would not fail to know them or their deeds.

Unfortunately, our cynicism about leadership probably means that the description of Hophni and Phinehas does not immediately shock us. We have become used to corruption in high places. It does not surprise or greatly disturb us to hear of people with great responsibilities proving unworthy. Furthermore, many of us do not find ourselves filled with respect for *religious* leaders. We know of church and denominational leaders today of whom 1 Samuel 2:12 could be said! Therefore it is probably not devastating news to our ears to hear that a couple of young priests at Shiloh were rogues.

However, verse 12 is *meant* to shock us. This was *Israel*, the nation chosen by God out of all the earth to be "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exodus 19:6). This was *Shiloh*, the place, for the time being, where the holy tabernacle was set up as God's dwelling place among his people. These young men were *priests*, with the solemn duty to teach the people God's Law and offer sacrifices for the atonement of the people's sins. Therefore the scandal that the young priests at Shiloh were "sons of *belial*" who repudiated knowledge of the Lord was appalling.

Old Testament offerings explained

Note how their needs were met:

- ⇒ Man's need to be delivered from the justice and judgment of God, to be reconciled to God, was met through the sacrifice of the **Burnt Offering**.
- ⇒ Man's need to give thanks and to have a higher purpose to which he could totally dedicate his life was met through the **Grain Offering**.
- ⇒ Man's need to grow in the peace and fellowship of God was met in the **Peace or Fellowship Offering**.
- ⇒ Man's need to secure forgiveness of sins was met in the **Sin Offering**.
- ⇒ Man's need to be set free from the anguish and very heavy weight of sin was met through the **Guilt Offering**.

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the **Guilt Offering**.

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Contempt for the Offering of the Lord (vv. 13-17)

What was it like for the people to have priests like that? Verses 13-17 give us a glimpse of the behavior of young Hophni and Phinehas.

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. (vv. 13, 14)

To be sure, priests were entitled to certain benefits from their work at the tabernacle (see Leviticus 7:28-38; Deuteronomy 18:1-8; and note, later in this chapter, 1 Samuel 2:28), but these priests exploited the people they were meant to be serving. Their "custom" was a far cry from anything laid down in the Law.

These young priests were greedy and lazy. They did even not do their dirty work themselves but had a servant do it for them. In a "frenzy of gluttony" the servant poked a pronged fork into any and every cooking pot at hand. *All that that the fork found, the priests would "take for [literally, "into"] himself."*

This was the "custom" of the priests. There is probably a touch of bitter irony here. The word translated "custom" has a basic meaning of "justice." It is based on the same root as the term *judge*. The leaders God provided for Israel in these days were called "judges." "Justice" is what they were meant to bring to Israel, by delivering them from their enemies and resolving disputes. The young priests at Shiloh brought their own version of "justice" to Israel: taking from the people as much as they could with the threat of force.

Furthermore, if that was the priests' wayward "custom," there were times when they even surpassed that degeneracy:

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." (vv. 15, 16)

In other words, there were times when the priests, through their servant, stepped in earlier in the process and demanded, with the threat of force, that meat be handed over then and there. In line with their gluttony, the only reason indicated for their conduct was their preference for roasted meat!

The sacrificers rightly protested, but to no avail. Force won the day. These priests did not share Hannah's outlook that "not by might shall a man prevail" ([1 Samuel 2:9](#)).

The writer sums up this situation in these solemn words:

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. (v. 17)

"The young men" now refers to Hophni and Phinehas, presumably along with their servant. How very different was their conduct from that of Hannah, who recognized and saw the implications of the fact that "there is none holy like the LORD" ([1 Samuel 2:2](#)).

Thought This is a picture of terrible corruption within the priesthood and ministry. The priests' wickedness had sunk to appalling depths of defilement and depravity. Just imagine the following sins:

- ⇒ a minister who has become so wicked that he is a very son of Belial, the devil himself.
- ⇒ a minister who does not know the LORD, who has never been genuinely converted, and does not follow the LORD nor live for Him.
- ⇒ a minister who desecrates and steals from the offerings.
- ⇒ a minister who abuses and threatens people in order to secure more and more—all because of a heart of greed and lust.
- ⇒ a minister who shows contempt for the LORD and His Word, who does not obey nor attempt to follow the commandments of the LORD.
- ⇒ a minister who commits immorality, adultery ([1 Samuel 2:22](#)).

This was the depth of wickedness into which Eli's sons had fallen. And tragically, some ministers today sink to these very same depths. But God warns all ministers: they will be held accountable, and they will face the judgment of God for their wickedness.

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But Samuel... (vv. 18-21)

But there was another young man at Shiloh. Quietly, perhaps hardly noticed, he provided a stark contrast to the hubris of the others: "Samuel was ministering before the LORD, a boy clothed with a linen ephod" ([v. 18](#)).

A "linen ephod" was a simple garment worn by priests. As the sons of Eli were abusing their position as priests, Samuel did what a priest was meant to do, and looked the part. There is a suggestion of progress since [verse 11](#). There Samuel "was ministering to the LORD in the presence of Eli the priest." He was operating clearly under Eli. In [verse 18](#), however, Eli is not mentioned. Samuel "was ministering in the presence of the LORD" and was wearing the garments of a priest himself.

In total contrast to the abusive behavior of Hophni and Phinehas, we are now given a glimpse of the tender care that Samuel enjoyed from his family and that Elkanah and Hannah enjoyed from the Lord:

"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" ([v. 19](#)).

This reminds us of the beginning of our story. It all began with those visits to Shiloh that were so miserable for Hannah year after year ([1 Samuel 1:3-7](#)). The annual pilgrimage was still taking place, but now it was a time for Hannah's tender motherly love to find expression in the new robe she

brought each year for her growing boy. We can easily picture the care with which that robe was made each year—each year a little bigger!

Samuel would wear a robe for the rest of his life (and beyond!), and his robe will feature at two important points later in the story (1 Samuel 15:27 and 28:14).

It seems clear that Elkanah and Hannah were spared any contact with Eli's sons. Their experience at Shiloh year after year was a wonderful contrast to what was going on for others at the hands of those two rogues.

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. (v. 20)

The "petition she asked of the LORD" was, of course, Samuel, who had been given back to the Lord and who was quietly serving the Lord there at Shiloh. The blessing Eli prayed for Elkanah and Hannah was granted:

"Indeed the LORD visited Hannah, and she conceived and bore three sons and two daughters" (v. 21a).

"The barren has borne seven," she said in her prayer (1 Samuel 2:5). That was almost literally true! As the sons of Eli were disregarding the Lord and treating his offering with contempt, the Lord was at work turning the world upside down. And they had no idea!

This is the last we hear of Hannah and Elkanah. We must assume that they lived out their days at Ramah, busy with their large family and with their annual trips to Shiloh. Our interest is going to be on the son they left there at the temple.

"And the young man Samuel grew in the presence of the LORD" (v. 21b)—literally, "with the LORD." This is a delightful expression. It speaks not just of Samuel's activities in the Lord's service, as in verses 11, 18, but now of Samuel himself. He grew "with the LORD." It is true that Samuel's relationship with the Lord had a long way to go. It is equally clear that at this stage his growth was taking place with the Lord's approval. This will be made even clearer shortly.

Ineptitude In Eli's Leadership (vv. 22-25)

It is time for our attention to turn to Eli, the senior figure at Shiloh. Our impressions of Eli so far have been a little mixed. His rebuke of Hannah in chapter 1, mistaking the poor praying woman for a drunkard, was our unfortunate first impression. He quickly recovered and has dealt kindly and well with Hannah and her family since then. For all we can tell, Samuel was prospering under his tutelage. The pressing question, of course, is, what was he doing about his wretched sons?

Old Eli Knew (v. 22)

Perhaps the most important thing for us to understand about Eli is what we are told, for the first time, at the beginning of verse 22—he was "very old." To understand Eli, and to be fair to him, his great age must be kept in mind.

But that is not all:

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. (v. 22)

Because of his great age he was not directly in touch with what was happening at Shiloh. However, word would reach him. There was clearly outrage at his sons' behavior, and it was reported to the old man. He knew what they were doing.

The reports he would hear were worse than we have been told. Eli heard about the greedy bullying described in verses 13-16 ("all that his sons were doing to all Israel"). He also heard that they were

turning the tent of meeting into a brothel! The picture is vague in some details, but clear in essentials. The greed of Hophni and Phinehas had gone beyond roast meat!

Sadly, in the conduct of these young men we recognize two forms that corruption in leadership commonly takes. The greed of verses 13-17, where leaders use their position for personal gain, has damaged many in leadership. The particularly powerful and perverse form of greed mentioned in verse 22, sexual immorality, where leaders use their position to exploit others for their own sexual pleasure, is all too familiar. If we have become too cynical to be shocked, we do well to pause. Leadership like that of Hophni and Phinehas was—and is—evil.

The point made in verse 22 is that old Eli *knew*.

Old Eli Spoke (vv. 23-25a)

But what did he *do*?

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?" (vv. 23-25a)

He spoke to his sons about their perversity.

First, he called them to give an account of themselves: "Why do you do such things?" There can be no justification for the youths' wicked failure in their responsibilities. Eli's "Why?" was as close as he got to calling them to repent.

Second, he told them plainly that their conduct was "evil" and "no[t] good." Their wickedness was known by "all the people."

Third, he explained the seriousness of their deeds. The people they had abused were "the people of the LORD," and their actions were a direct offense against God. They had put themselves in terrible danger. It was not just that they had mistreated other people. In such a situation God has provided means for sins being dealt with. Much of God's Law was concerned with such offenses. The God-given means of cleansing had at its heart the sacrificial system. However, the offense of the Shiloh priests (as we saw in verse 17) was that they showed contempt for the very means provided by God for dealing with their sins. This seems to be the meaning of "if someone sins against the LORD."

The New Testament equivalent to this argument is found in the Letter to the Hebrews. The person "who has spurned the Son of God, and has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified" must understand that then "there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins" (10:29, 26; cf. 6:6). If your sin, like the sin of Hophni and Phinehas, consists of contempt for the very means God has provided for your salvation, what hope remains?

While Eli's words were true and right, there is something pathetic about them. There was not a direct rebuke and demand for repentance, but a pleading "Why?" He did not address them directly as the sons of worthlessness (v. 12) that they were, but appealed to them as "my sons" (v. 24). We sense a certain helplessness in Eli's imploring speech.

Old Eli Was Ignored (v. 25b-c)

We are therefore not entirely surprised to hear: "But they would not listen to the voice of their father..." (v. 25b).

These sons of Eli were really sons of *belial*. They were beyond heeding the voice of Eli.

The writer then adds these chilling words: "... for it was the will of the LORD to put them to death" (v. 25c).

They had gone too far. They were beyond repentance (cf. [Hebrews 6:4-6](#)). The Lord had given them up to their contempt for him and his ways (cf. [Romans 1:24, 26, 28](#)).

This is not a truth about God that we like to hear. But it is a grave mistake to think that [verse 25](#) allows the *blame* for the young men's hardness of heart to be placed on God. Their hardness was both their own choice *and* God's judgment on them for that choice. It was like the hardening of Pharaoh's heart in the days of Moses. Pharaoh hardened his own heart ([Exodus 8:15, 32; 9:34](#); cf. [7:13, 14, 22; 8:19; 9:7, 35](#)), and God hardened Pharaoh's heart ([Exodus 4:21; 7:3; 9:12; 10:1, 20, 27; 11:10; 14:4, 8](#)). The one truth does not exclude the other.

Eli does not seem to have been a wicked man, but in his old age he was not able to provide the leadership that Israel needed. His words to his sons expressed his sorrow and distress at their behavior, but he did not have the strength to curb their conduct. Shiloh suffered from the corruption of Eli's sons and the ineptitude of their old father.

Such was Israel's leadership in those days.

Our cynicism, again, dulls us to the horror of this situation. What was happening at Shiloh is too close to what we have come to expect from leaders.

However, by seeing how appalling it was for Israel to suffer from corrupt and inept leadership, we should be helped to see that it is an atrocious thing for anyone in God's world to endure such leadership. How dreadful it was that the leadership of God's chosen people had descended into grubby, greedy, immoral Hophni and Phinehas and their old, weak father! Is it really any less of a tragedy that human beings in many places in God's world today suffer leadership that displays just the same qualities?

But Samuel... (v. 26)

For the fourth time in our passage (see [verses 11, 18, 21](#)) we are now reminded that there was another young man at Shiloh: "Now the young man Samuel continued to grow both in stature and in favor with the LORD and also with man" ([v. 26](#)).

Just as Hophni and Phinehas were earning a reputation that was "no[t] good" ([v. 24](#)), Samuel's reputation was (literally) "good" with both the Lord and with men. Again (as in [verses 18](#) and [21](#)) Eli's role with Samuel had faded. The lad was standing on his own two feet, so to speak, and was "becoming great" (as "continued to grow" could be translated) and good.

At this stage we are left wondering what this growing lad would become, and what difference he would make to the leadership crisis in Israel.

[First Samuel 2:11-26](#) has an important twofold message for us.

On the one hand, we see corrupt and inept leadership for what it is. The situation at Shiloh has taken us to the heart of the problem: they did not know the Lord. Corruption in high places is not to be measured and understood only by the standards of the media or human laws. Corruption will be found wherever God is not honored.

Our cynicism about leadership needs to be rethought. The problem with our leaders is a problem we share with them. Corruption in high places does its own kind of damage, but so does corruption in "low places." Human sinfulness—defiance of God—is the heart of the problem with our leaders, and it is the heart of the problem with ourselves.

On the other hand, the indications are clear in [1 Samuel 2:11-26](#) that God was at work at this time in Israel's history to do something about Israel's leadership. Keep your eye on young Samuel! If we had been watching life at Shiloh through these years, we might hardly have noticed the quiet lad, there in the background. But our passage presents another view. It is not Samuel who was in the background;

everything else that was happening at Shiloh was the background for the new thing God was doing. To see it, keep your eye on *Samuel*.

We will do that as we keep listening to the story that the book of 1 Samuel tells, but we also need to realize that this story eventually led to another story. The day came when another young lad was growing up. Luke tells us, in words that clearly echo 1 Samuel 2:26: "And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man" (Luke 2:52).

The message of the whole Bible teaches that God has acted not only in corrupt Israel long ago, but in this corrupt world, to provide the leadership needed.

If we had been watching the history of the world—if we are watching what is going on in the world today—we might hardly notice Jesus Christ, there somewhere in history's background. His death, we might think, is a footnote to the history of the world, his resurrection from the dead an interesting story. However, the Bible presents another view. Everything else in the history of the world is the background to the new thing that God is doing. To see it, keep your eye on *Jesus*. Samuel will turn out to be a shadow of him!

God and Corruption

1 Samuel 2:27-36

An the opening scenes of the book of 1 Samuel we have been presented with two starkly contrasting views of the world.

Hannah's understanding was articulated magnificently in her prayer in 1 Samuel 2:1-10. She knew that "There is none holy like the LORD... there is no rock like our God" (1 Samuel 2:2). Hannah saw the whole world in the light of that reality, including the circumstances of her own life. She knew that the Lord makes everything different. Power becomes weakness, and weakness becomes power, and riches become poverty, and poverty becomes wealth when you take into account the God of knowledge by whom actions are weighed. She conducted her life accordingly. Her response to her suffering was therefore prayer. Her response to blessing was praise. It seems clear that her firstborn son, Samuel, was following in her ways as he grew up at the Shiloh temple.

The other view of things was that of Eli's two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, the young priests at Shiloh. In contrast to Hannah, "They did not know the LORD" (1 Samuel 2:12). They, it seems, saw life in the darkness of that ignorance. They conducted their lives accordingly. Greed ruled them. Power served their gluttony. Their response to desire was to *take*, by force if need be. Their response to the God they did not know was contempt. And old Eli was unable to curb them.

The story of the corrupt leadership under which Israel suffered in the days of old Eli raises the question of which view of the world is true.

The Bible's message could be summed up as the news that the first view is true and a call to live in its light. Hannah's perspective is vindicated in the news about Jesus Christ who turned riches and poverty, power and weakness, triumph and tragedy upside down. The power of God, the wisdom of God, the riches of God's grace, the victory of God are all seen in an act of apparent weakness, foolishness, poverty, and defeat: Jesus' death on the cross (see, for example, 1 Corinthians 1:18-25; 2 Corinthians 8:9; Philippians 2:5-11; Colossians 1:19, 20; cf. 2 Corinthians 12:9, 10).

The state of the world could be summed up as people believing that the second view is true, and living in that darkness. The Hophni and Phinehas approach to life is well expressed in the words of Paul about all human beings:

... they are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise they became fools.... And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done. They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. (Romans 1:20-22, 28, 29)

A perfect description of Eli's two sons!

Do you see the world as Hannah did, or more as Hophni and Phinehas did? The true answer to that question will be seen in how you live, your response to suffering, to desire, to power, to weakness, to blessing.

The Hophni and Phinehas approach to life is more familiar to us than we like to admit. It is important, therefore, to listen carefully to the words of a certain man who came to visit Eli one day. The incident is recounted in 1 Samuel 2:27-36.

There is a degree of mystery about this visit. First Samuel 2:12-26 describes what was going on at Shiloh over a number of years, as Samuel was growing up. Biblical narratives do not always arrange events in strict chronological order. We therefore do not know when the visit mentioned in verse 27 took place. Nor do we know who the visitor was. All that we are told about him is contained in the first words of 1 Samuel 2:27: "And there came a man of God to Eli...."

"A man of God" means a prophet. Like many other prophets in the Bible, particular details about this man are largely hidden by the prominence given to the words of his message.

Indeed it was clear from the moment he opened his mouth that his words were of utmost importance. He began like this: "Thus the LORD has said..." (v. 27b).

This simple introduction, characteristic of the speech of prophets, is profound in its significance. The man came as the bearer of the words that God had spoken. In this context we must understand that they were the words of the God of whom Hannah spoke so effusively: *the God of knowledge by whom actions are weighed, the one who kills and brings to life, who will judge the ends of the earth* (1 Samuel 2:3, 6, 10). This God had spoken, and the visit from the man of God to Eli was for the sole purpose of telling him what the Lord had said.

Therefore the rest of our passage is entirely taken up with the words God had spoken. Apart from the obvious importance of this message for Eli, these words of God are recorded here to illumine every reader of this book.

There is a clear logic to the message. The Lord had spoken, first, of what *he* had done in the past for the house of Eli; second, of what the house of Eli had done; and third, of what the Lord will therefore do -- with a surprise at the end.

What The Lord Did For The House Of Eli (vv. 27c, 28)

The Lord's past actions toward the house of Eli are summed up in three sentences: "I [did] reveal..." (v. 27c), "I [did] choose..." (v. 28a), "I gave..." (v. 28b).

"I [Did] Reveal..." (v. 27c)

"Did I indeed reveal myself to the house of your father when they were in Egypt subject to the house of Pharaoh?"

The question is designed to stir Eli's conscience. Eli could not deny that he occupied his position as priest at Shiloh because God revealed himself to his father's house many years previously in Egypt. The reference is to Aaron and his sons in the days of Moses. The available evidence indicates that Eli was a descendant of Ithamar, Aaron's fourth son.

One of the small puzzles of Biblical history (simply because we lack complete information) is how Eli came to be Israel's leading priest. Although he is never called "chief" or "high" priest, it seems clear that he was in charge at Shiloh. Aaron was the first "chief priest" (Ezra 7:5), and the priesthood was given by God to his sons "forever" (Exodus 29:9). The role of chief priest passed to Aaron's third son, Eleazar (Numbers 3:32; 20:24-29; Deuteronomy 10:6; cf. Numbers 4:16), the first two sons of Aaron having died in rather unfortunate circumstances (Leviticus 10:1, 2). From Eleazar the chief priesthood passed to his son Phinehas (who was a far cry from his later namesake at Shiloh!) and his descendants, who were given by God "the covenant of a perpetual priesthood" (Numbers 25:13; cf. Judges 20:27, 28; 1 Chronicles 9:20). While the role of chief priest appears to have been passed on from father to eldest living son for several generations, there is no clear indication that this was a divine requirement. We do not know how the responsibility for the tabernacle/temple at Shiloh came to be in the hands of Eli, who was not a descendant of Eleazar but of Aaron's fourth son, Ithamar. It is possible that a chief priest in Eleazar's line may have died without leaving a son old enough to take on the role. In addition to his credentials as a descendant of Aaron, Eli may have been related to the Eleazar family by marriage. He may, therefore, have been the best available person to take over the responsibility.

The point made in verse 27, however, is that the Lord had revealed himself to Aaron's family in the days before the exodus. Indeed, God spoke directly to Aaron in Egypt and told him to go out to the wilderness and meet with his brother Moses (Exodus 4:14). The Lord subsequently spoke to both Moses and Aaron about bringing the people of Israel out of Egypt and about the Passover (Exodus 6:13, 26; 7:8; 9:8; 12:1, 28, 43, 50). Just as God had made Moses "like God to Pharaoh," so he made Aaron Moses' prophet (Exodus 7:1, 2).

God's self-revelation was, as it always is, more than the disclosing of information. When God makes himself known, he makes his will known. The revelation to Aaron took place when the people of Israel were slaves in Egypt and in effect belonged to Pharaoh. God's self-revelation to Eli's ancestor Aaron and his brother Moses began the great act of redemption by which the Lord liberated the Israelites to become a holy nation to the Lord (Exodus 19:6) and freed the house of Aaron to become priests of the Lord.

That is the first mentioned great act of God toward the house of Eli's "father."

"I [Did] Choose..." (v. 28a)

A second rhetorical question was addressed to the conscience of the old priest:

"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?" (v. 28a).

The redemptive self-revelation of God to Aaron in Egypt had benefited all Israelites. However, Aaron had the additional privilege of being chosen out of all the tribes of Israel (just as Israel had been chosen out of all the nations on earth, Exodus 19:5, 6; Deuteronomy 7:6; 10:15; Psalm 147:20; Amos 3:2). The occasion referred to is probably recorded in Exodus 28, where God said to Moses:

Then bring near to you Aaron your brother, and his sons with him, from among the people of Israel, to serve me as priests—Aaron and Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu, Eleazar and Ithamar. (Exodus 28:1)

God's gracious work of choosing is an important theme of the Bible. Israel had been "chosen" by God (Deuteronomy 4:37; 7:6, 7; 10:15). In 1 Samuel we will be hearing about God's "choosing" a king for his people (see especially 1 Samuel 16:8-13). God's choice is reason for humility and praise. Eli must acknowledge the gracious sovereign choice by God not only of Israel but particularly of the house of Aaron, to which he and his family belonged.

The one chosen to be the Lord's priest had three duties.

The first of these was to ascend the Lord's altar (see Exodus 28:43; Leviticus 1:5-8; 6:14; 9:7-14). The altar was the place of sacrifice. This was God's provision for the cleansing of the people of Israel and the atoning of their sins. The one chosen by God "to go up to my altar" (1 Samuel 2:28) had a supremely important task to perform.

The second duty seen in 1 Samuel 2:28 was "to burn incense" on the special gold altar of incense (see Exodus 30:7, 8; Numbers 4:16; 16:40). This was a task specifically given to Aaron to be performed twice a day. It was an integral part of the regular functioning of the tabernacle and therefore represented the weighty responsibility that had been given to the house of Aaron for the tabernacle itself, God's very dwelling among his people (Leviticus 26:11).

The third duty given to Aaron was "to wear an ephod before me." This is not the linen ephod worn by ordinary priests, even young ones like Samuel (1 Samuel 2:18). This ephod was exclusive to the high priest. Within this rich and elaborate garment were two onyx stones, called "stones of remembrance for the sons of Israel," on which were engraved the names of the twelve tribes of Israel. Aaron was to "bear their names before the LORD" (Exodus 28:6-12; 39:2-7). In other words, Aaron was to represent all Israel before the Lord.

Eli's "father" [Aaron] had been chosen by the Lord out of all the tribes of Israel for this extraordinary responsibility.

"I Gave..." (v. 28b)

The third great and gracious act of God toward Eli's "father" was this:

"I gave to the house of your father all my offerings by fire from the people of Israel" (v. 28b).

The responsibility for which Aaron was chosen was enormous, but he (and his descendants) were generously provided for. This provision came from the very offerings they were appointed to administer (see Leviticus 2:3, 10; 6:16; 7:7-10, 31-36; 10:12-15; Numbers 5:9, 10; 18:8-19; cf. Deuteronomy 18:1).

Eli and his sons were the inheritors of this immensely important role, on which the survival of Israel as God's people depended, and of the abundant provision for their needs that went with the task. This is the preamble to the terrible indictment that the Lord now brought against Eli.

What The House Of Eli Did (v. 29)

"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?" (v. 29)

Yet another rhetorical question introduces the accusation. Previously we saw the ugly greed with which Hophni and Phinehas behaved at Shiloh. We heard the narrator's comment that they "treated the offering of the LORD with contempt" (1 Samuel 2:17) by their conduct. However, now we can see the appalling nature of their crime in a still clearer light, the searching brightness of the Lord's past dealings with them.

They had "scorn[ed]" (literally "kicked") the sacrifices ("my sacrifices!") and offerings ("my offerings!") that the Lord had commanded for dealing with Israel's sins and for which they, the priests, had been chosen, and from which they were generously provided for. Why had they done that? the Lord asked.

Eli himself, by doing no more than rather feebly rebuking his sons, had honored them more than he had honored the Lord. They should have been expelled from the priesthood long ago! Why had he done that? the Lord asked.

Not content with the very great importance of their duties and the ample provision God had made for their needs, the priests had "fattened themselves" with the very parts of the people's offerings intended to be given to God. Gluttony had triumphed over honoring the gracious God who had dealt with this people, and in particular the priests, so mercifully. Why?

Here we have a clear example of the God of knowledge weighing actions (1 Samuel 2:3)!

Therefore What The Lord Will Do (vv. 30-34)

The word "Therefore" in verse 30 now has an ominous ring. The behavior of Eli and his sons must now meet the Lord who will judge the ends of the earth (1 Samuel 2:10).

The Promise Forfeited (v. 30)

"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.'" (v. 30)

Eli and his sons had been the objects of the extraordinary grace of the Lord, the God of Israel. It was summed up in a promise. The terms of this promise are important to understand. Eli's house (that is, of course, his family and descendants), being part of the house of his "father" (that is, of Aaron), should "go in and out before" the Lord forever. This refers to the activities of priests in the tabernacle or temple.

The promise was God's promise to the house of Aaron. It was given in connection with the consecration of Aaron and his four sons as priests. God had said, "And the priesthood shall be theirs by a statute forever" (Exodus 29:9). This promise was reiterated with fresh emphasis to Aaron's grandson, Phinehas, after he had demonstrated remarkable zeal in his service of God and Israel. God said, "Behold, I give to him my covenant of peace, and it shall be to him and to his descendants after him the covenant of a perpetual priesthood, because he was jealous for his God and made atonement for the people of Israel" (Numbers 25:12, 13).

The promise was that the descendants of Aaron would serve as priests, one of them, of course, being the high priest. Eli represented one family among the descendants of Aaron. He therefore enjoyed the blessing of this promise.

"But now" (1 Samuel 2:30) the Lord declared that the house of Eli had forfeited the promise. It was not that God's promise to the house of Aaron was nullified or revoked. The priesthood would continue to be in the hands of descendants of Aaron. However, the present generation of serving priests would be all but destroyed, and the family of Eli would be removed from the priesthood, either by death or other means.

The reason for this devastating pronouncement, said God, is that "those who honor me I will honor, and those who despise me shall be lightly esteemed" (1 Samuel 2:30). The truth of God's sovereignty in revealing himself, choosing, and giving does not nullify but intensifies the demand for holiness in the recipients of his grace (cf. Leviticus 19:2; Amos 3:2; Romans 6:1, 2). God will not honor (or glorify) those who do not glorify him. Hophni and Phinehas, and even old Eli, had failed to honor God as God (cf. Romans 1:21). They could not, therefore, expect to continue as beneficiaries of God's promise. "God is not mocked" (Galatians 6:7).

The Punishment Incurred (vv. 31-33)

The contempt shown toward God by the house of Eli did not only mean that they forfeited any claim to the promise—they also incurred punishment:

"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." (v. 31)

The Hebrew is more violent in expression: "I will cut off your arm and the arm of your father's house." This forceful metaphor spoke of a blow—or a number of blows—that would devastate Eli's house. The first of these will be three deaths to be reported in chapter 4. Later, in chapter 22, there will be a horrendous massacre. The consequence ("so that there will not be an old man in your house") is far from subtle when we remember verse 22: "Eli was very old!"

The coming devastation is elaborated with some vague but disturbing details:

"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." (v. 32)

Eli is included in the suffering that will come on his descendants. "The prosperity that shall be bestowed on Israel" seems to allude to the coming days of Solomon's glorious kingdom. In those days there will be a surviving descendant of Eli, by the name of Abiathar. However, he will look on "in distress," for one of Solomon's early acts as king will be to expel Abiathar from the priesthood and banish him. When the historian records these events, he will add the comment, "thus fulfilling the word of the LORD that he had spoken concerning the house of Eli in Shiloh" (1 Kings 2:27).

"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." (v. 33)

As the story of 1 Samuel unfolds, we will learn of a terrible massacre of the priests, from which there will be one survivor. That survivor will be Eli's great-great-grandson Abiathar (see 1 Samuel 22:6-23). His escape will leave him bearing the sorrow of the tragedy and the distress of his eventual banishment.

A Terrible Sign (v. 34)

Much of what had been announced lay in the future, and Eli himself would not see it. However, he would see a terrible sign that would confirm the message of this man of God. The Lord was dealing with Eli's house in judgment. "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" (v. 34).

That is exactly what happened, as we shall see in 1 Samuel 4.

There is one more vital point in the message that the man of God brought to Eli that day. Before we hear it, let us take care to understand the truth of the first three points.

The grace of God toward the house of Eli (vv. 27, 28), like the grace of God toward us, calls the recipients of such kindness to "renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age" (Titus 2:12).

The contempt for God displayed in the behavior of Eli's sons and in his failure to curb them is all the more serious in the light of God's grace (v. 29). It is like the contempt for God displayed today in our behavior "if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth." We are then acting as "one who has spurned the Son of God, and has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has outraged the Spirit of grace" (Hebrews 10:26, 29).

The certain consequence for such disdain toward God, whether in the house of Eli or among us, is "a fearful expectation of judgment" (Hebrews 10:27).

But Samuel...? (vv. 35, 36)

The last point in the message delivered to Eli is remarkable. Wickedness would certainly bring God's judgment to the house of Eli, but judgment would not be God's last word. God's grace had been spurned, and therefore forfeited by Eli's house. However, God's grace cannot be frustrated in its good purpose by human wickedness.

Therefore the final point in the message from God to Eli began:

"And I will raise up for myself a faithful priest, who shall do according to what is in my heart and in my mind" (v. 35a).

It is important to understand that a promise such as this does not necessarily have only one fulfillment.

From all that we have read so far in 1 Samuel we may reasonably suspect that Samuel will prove to be the "faithful priest" whom God was raising up for himself. Although Samuel will turn out to function more as a prophet than a priest, there is no doubt that with the demise of Eli and Shiloh, Samuel will take over priestly functions and will be faithful in them. He will indeed do "what is in [God's] heart and... mind."

In the longer term it is reasonable to see the commitment of God expressed in this promise realized in the appointment of Zadok in the place of Abiathar. The house of Zadok then became the priestly line (see 1 Kings 2:35; 4:1).

Looking even further ahead, we should recognize that the faithful priest whom God finally raised up is Jesus. He became "a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people" (Hebrews 2:17).

Of the "faithful priest" to be raised up for himself, God said:

"And I will build him a sure house, and he shall go in and out before my anointed forever" (v. 35b).

This aspect of the promise does not fit Samuel. His "house" -- that is, his sons -- will fail, just as Eli's had (see 1 Samuel 8:1-3). Zadok's "house," however, continued until the exile.

"My anointed" is a surprise again. Hannah had spoken of "his anointed," clearly identified as "his king," to whom God will "give strength" (1 Samuel 2:10). Samuel himself would serve as a faithful priest, as well as a prophet, before Israel's first two kings. Zadok and his descendants would serve "all the days" of the kings in David's line.

In Jesus the work of faithful priest and anointed king would be combined in one person (see Hebrews 6:20; 7:1).

The message concludes with the assurance that the certainty of God's positive purpose does not diminish the severity of the judgment on the house of Eli already pronounced:

"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.'" (v. 36)

The punishment will fit the crime. The gluttonous bullies will become hungry beggars. It is just as Hannah had said: "Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread" (1 Samuel 2:5).

The message delivered to Eli that day has been quite complex in its details. We must make sure that we do not lose sight of the forest for the trees. All of the details contribute to two major truths that are emerging as important themes of 1 Samuel.

The first is that the very great problem of leadership in Israel was the failure of human leaders to honor God as God. This failure was the root cause of corruption of various kinds. It made leadership self-serving and therefore exploitative. Its seriousness is exposed when it is set alongside the grace of God that was being spurned.

The problem is that the corruption that showed itself in the conduct of Hophni and Phinehas is common to human nature. We have noticed more than once that the Apostle Paul's analysis of the human condition in Romans 1 fits very well the character and conduct of the sons of Eli. If that is the case, we must ask what hope there is of human leadership ever doing any better than those two rogues.

The second truth answers that question. God intends to provide for himself faithful and secure leadership, "a faithful priest" and "my anointed" (v. 35). The story of how God has done that takes the rest of the Bible to tell. With Eli, Hophni, and Phinehas in mind, the New Testament words about Jesus should fill us with wonder:

For it was indeed fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens. (Hebrews 7:26)