

1 Samuel 1-3 • How God Deals with Bad Leaders

Introduction

It's worth examining the first 3 chapters of 1 Samuel as a whole to contrast and compare all the people presented, who and what they represent, and how they relate to our own calling and ministry. Throughout all these examples a common thread is discovered that regardless of title, office, position or lack thereof, personal obedience is always elevated above all other qualifying factors. Within the lives of these characters we see how God deals with bad spiritual leaders, our own role in the process, and what we should seek to emulate.

¹²Now it came about, as she continued praying before the LORD, that Eli was watching her mouth. ¹³As for Hannah, she was speaking in her heart, only her lips were moving, but her voice was not heard. So Eli thought she was drunk. ¹⁴Then Eli said to her, "How long will you make yourself drunk? Put away your wine from you."

¹⁵But Hannah replied, "No, my lord, I am a woman oppressed in spirit; I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink, but I have poured out my soul before the LORD. ¹⁶Do not consider your maidservant as a worthless woman, for I have spoken until now out of my great concern and provocation."

¹⁷Then Eli answered and said, "Go in peace; and may the God of Israel grant your petition that you have asked of Him."

¹⁸She said, "Let your maidservant find favor in your sight." So the woman went her way and ate, and her face was no longer sad.

¹²Now the sons of Eli were worthless men; they did not know the LORD ¹³and the custom of the priests with the people. When any man was offering a sacrifice, the priest's servant would come while the meat was boiling, with a three-pronged fork in his hand. ¹⁴Then he would thrust it into the pan, or kettle, or caldron, or pot; all that the fork brought up the priest would take for himself. Thus they did in Shiloh to all the Israelites who came there. ¹⁵Also, before they burned the fat, the priest's servant would come and say to the man who was sacrificing, "Give the priest meat for roasting, as he will not take boiled meat from you, only raw." ¹⁶If the man said to him, "They must surely burn the fat first, and then take as much as you desire," then he would say, "No, but you shall give it to me now; and if not, I will take it by force." ¹⁷Thus the sin of the young men was very great before

Introduction to Eli

[Read 1:12-18]

Q: What can we learn about Eli by the way he jumped to conclusions about Hannah?

A: He either wasn't used to seeing people pray, or he'd become accustomed to seeing people drunk. (?) In either case, he seems to lack the ability to discern good from bad behavior. (Note the play on words by Hannah: "I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink, but I have poured out my soul before the LORD.") He easily concedes to her situation, invoking God's name, without really knowing what her petition is about. (Again, no spiritual discernment on **either** end of the spectrum.)

Q: What does this say about Eli as a spiritual leader?

A: He wasn't much of one. As the High Priest he seems to have become more accustomed to worldly behavior than inspiring spiritual behavior; he might just be "going through the motions" as holder of an office.

Introduction to the sons of Eli

[Read 2:12-18]

Q: How are Eli's sons described in verses 12 & 13?

- As "worthless" (NASB) or "wicked" (NIV) men. Literally, the term "Sons of Belial" is applied which was a Hebrew way of saying base, worthless, or wicked men. (Paul uses this phrase in 2 Corinthians 6:15 to refer to Satan.)
- They did not "know" the LORD. Eli's sons, acting as priests, had no personal experience of, nor fellowship with, the LORD. They're working **IN** the church—so to speak—but are not **OF** the church. It's strictly a job for them.
- They did not follow the customs of the priestly service.

Q: What is wrong with the way they handled sacrifices as described in v.13-14?

A: "Now this shall be the priests' due from the people, from those who offer a sacrifice, either an ox or a sheep, of which they shall give to the priest the shoulder and the two cheeks and the stomach."—Deuteronomy 18:3 They were taking for themselves whatever they wanted rather than

the LORD, for the men despised the offering of the LORD.

¹⁸Now Samuel was ministering before the LORD, as a boy wearing a linen ephod.

²²Now Eli was very old; and he heard all that his sons were doing to all Israel, and how they lay with the women who served at the doorway of the tent of meeting. ²³He said to them, “Why do you do such things, the evil things that I hear from all these people? ²⁴No, my sons; for the report is not good which I hear the LORD’S people circulating. ²⁵If one man sins against another, God will mediate for him; but if a man sins against the LORD, who can intercede for him?” But they would not listen to the voice of their father, for the LORD desired to put them to death.

the portions allowed and designated by God.

Q: What is wrong with the references to the utensils such as the fork and pan and kettle, et al?

A: They’re not following the correct priestly procedures for offering sacrifices according to the Law. From their behavior, it’s apparent that they were not acting with **ANY** kind of priestly or religious pretense at all--they were treating **everything**—the Tabernacle, the office of priest, the sacrifices—as if it were for them and them alone.

Q: What is wrong with the way they treated the fat in v.15-16?

A: “The priest shall offer up the fat in smoke on the altar, but the breast shall belong to Aaron and his sons.”—Leviticus 7:31 They took what they wanted for themselves before they gave the Lord His portion—**IF** they gave Him anything at all. But an even greater offense than completely forsaking the law in this manner is their effect on those came and tried to keep the Law. In other words, Eli’s sons—the priests that were supposed to be the highest living example of God’s Law—were causing followers of the Law to stumble. They were offending **BOTH** God and man.

Q: What is the basic picture of their behavior?

- They took for themselves what was designated for the Lord.
- They wanted their unlawful portion before the Lord received His.
- They were the worst example possible to those they were supposed to teach and lead.
- It can be assumed also that they were drinking the wine, eating the bread, etc., and thus gorging themselves, a picture of feeding themselves at the expense of the flock they were supposed to care for.
- **EVERYONE** in both heaven and on earth recognize their horrible behavior and lifestyle.

Q: In verse 17, how was their behavior described, and to whom are they contrasted?

A: Their behavior is described as a sin because they despised the offering of the Lord. They are contrasted to Samuel in verse 18 and to Hannah who was not drunk (1:15).

Application: What does “despising the offering of the Lord” mean, and apply that principle to Christians today. How is this different than merely disagreeing on a point of doctrine or theology?

[Read 2:22-26]

Q: Did Eli confront his sons? What did he do after he confronted them?

A: The text is clear: Eli knew what was going on but used only words, never administering actual discipline. The Old Testament Law itself mandated death not just for disobedient children but for the kind of sacrilege taking place inside the tabernacle as described in this passage. (Contrast this to Numbers 25 when their forefather—also named “Phinehas”—actually plunged his spear through a couple desecrating the tabernacle.) Eli was the kind of parent that, at the most, yelled at the children occasionally but never took any real actions that might have had the chance to change the children’s behavior.

Application: What is the result for our failure to discipline our children?

²⁶Now the boy Samuel was growing in stature and in favor both with the LORD and with men.

²⁷Then a man of God came to Eli and said to him, “Thus says the LORD, ‘Did I not indeed reveal Myself to the house of your father when they were in Egypt in bondage to Pharaoh’s house? ²⁸Did I not choose them from all the tribes of Israel to be My priests, to go up to My altar, to burn incense, to carry an ephod before Me; and did I not give to the house of your father all the fire offerings of the sons of Israel? ²⁹Why do you kick at My sacrifice and at My offering which I have commanded in My dwelling, and honor your sons above Me, by making yourselves fat with the choicest of every offering of My people Israel?’

³⁰“Therefore the LORD God of Israel declares, ‘I did indeed say that your house and the house of your father should walk 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 will be lightly esteemed. ³¹Behold, the days are coming when I will break your strength and the strength of your father’s house so that there will not be an old man in your house. ³²You will see the distress of My dwelling, in spite of all the good that I do for Israel; and an old man will not be in your house forever. ³³Yet I will not cut off every man of yours from My altar so that your eyes will fail from weeping and your soul grieve, and all the increase of your house will die in the prime of life. ³⁴This will be the sign to you which will come concerning your two sons, Hophni and Phinehas: on the same day both of them will die.

³⁵“But I will raise up for Myself a faithful priest who will do according to what is in My heart and in My soul; and I will build him an enduring house, and he will walk before My anointed always.

³⁶Everyone who is left in your house will come and bow down to him for a piece of

Q: Again, who are Eli’s sons contrasted to in verse 26?

A: Samuel. There is a stark contrast between the wickedness of the sons of Eli and the son of Hannah; the sons of Eli hated by both God and man, Samuel “growing in stature and in favor both with the LORD and with men.”

Q: Was Samuel a Levite like Eli and his sons? (cf. 1:1)

A: No, he was a Ephraimite. Thus the conclusion being drawn here is that the Levitical priesthood is so corrupt God is about to replace them temporarily with a non-Levite.

Application: Why doesn’t God make an immediate change? What is the application for church leadership and how WE should deal with it?

Introduction to the “man of God.”

[Read 2:27-36]

Q: What is Eli’s sin as stated in verse 29?

A: In verse 27, the “house of your father” refers to Aaron and the Aaronic priesthood, of which Eli is a descendant. The prophet is speaking for God Who is reminding Eli that his status and position are not something he earned or achieved, but was a gift from God by His sovereignty. Eli’s rebuke is for failing to discipline his sons for their heinous acts during worship. In effect it’s idolatry because Eli is honoring his sons before honoring God. It is also clear in verse 29 that Eli is enjoying the fat portions as well. He’s a part of the problem! (How seriously do you take someone that says, “Do as I say, not as I do”?)

Q: What is the curse placed on Eli in verses 31-33?

A: That his family line will eventually die out, and that the sons will die prematurely.

Q: What will be the sign to Eli that this curse will be carried out? (v. 34) Does this take place?

A: Both his sons will die on the same day. (The prophecy is fulfilled in 4:11.)

Q: In verse 35, who is the priest being referred to?

A: In immediate history, he is referring to Samuel; in prophetic history, the reference is to Christ.

“Therefore, holy brethren, partakers of a heavenly calling, consider Jesus, the Apostle and High Priest of our confession; He was faithful to Him who appointed Him, as Moses also was in all His house. For He has been counted worthy of more glory than Moses, by just so much as the builder of the house has more honor than the house.”

– Hebrews 3:1-3

Q: Why are we not provided the name of “the man of God”? What is the application for us?

A: The first and foremost reason he is nameless is to serve as an example to **everyone** in the body that it is their duty to speak out against even the highest church official leading a life of sin. There is no special requirement, education, or office that one must hold to speak against sin—just that one is a “man of God” their self.

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silver or a loaf of bread and say, "Please assign me to one of the priest's offices so that I may eat a piece of bread."'"

¹Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the LORD before Eli. And word from the LORD was rare in those days, visions were infrequent.

²It happened at that time as Eli was lying down in his place (now his eyesight had begun to grow dim and he could not see well), ³and the lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the temple of the LORD where the ark of God was, ⁴that the LORD called Samuel; and he said, "Here I am."

⁵Then he ran to Eli and said, "Here I am, for you called me."

But he said, "I did not call, lie down again." So he went and lay down.

⁶The LORD called yet again, "Samuel!"

So Samuel arose and went to Eli and said, "Here I am, for you called me."

But he answered, "I did not call, my son, lie down again."

⁷Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD, nor had the word of the LORD yet been revealed to him. ⁸So the LORD called Samuel again for the third time. And he arose and went to Eli and said, "Here I am, for you called me."

Then Eli discerned that the LORD was calling the boy. ⁹And Eli said to Samuel, "Go lie down, and it shall be if He calls you, that you shall say, 'Speak, LORD, for Your servant is listening.'" So Samuel went and lay down in his place.

¹⁰Then the LORD came and stood and called as at other times, "Samuel! Samuel!"

And Samuel said, "Speak, for Your servant is listening."

¹¹The LORD said to Samuel, "Behold, I am about to do a thing in Israel at which both ears of everyone who hears it will tingle. ¹²In that day I will carry out against Eli all that I have spoken concerning his house, from beginning to end. ¹³For I have told him that I am about to judge his house forever for the iniquity which he knew, because his sons brought a curse on themselves and he did not rebuke them. ¹⁴Therefore I have sworn to the house of Eli that the iniquity of Eli's house shall not be atoned for by sacrifice or offering forever."

Q: Everyone in Israel knew and complained for years about Eli and his sons. What is significant about how this "intervention" is handled through "the man of God"?

A: It's all in God's timing and according to **HIS** words, not man's. The lesson for us is to submit to and seek God's will even and act according to **HIS** direction even though things look "obvious" to us.

Introduction to Samuel

[Read 3:1-21]

Q: What do you think is the reference to "ears will tingle" in verse 11?

A: A total defeat at the hands of the Philistines and the capture of the Ark of the Covenant (4:11). This is one thing no one had ever imagined could possibly happen. There could be few symbols more powerful to the people of this time that had the power to convey God's personal displeasure with Israel.

Q: What does the Lord tell Samuel He will do to Eli's house? (vs. 11-13) How long will this curse last, and will there be any way to atone for it?

A: The Lord will judge his house forever, and there will be no way to atone for it.

Application: God and God **ALONE** initiates judgment. Why does He tell us in advance what He is going to do? What is the appropriate action(s) on our part?

Q: Why is Eli being disciplined so severely?

A: In spite of knowing their sins, he failed to rebuke his sons (v. 13), thus fostering a disreputable priesthood and leading to national calamity at the hands of the Philistines. His choices have inevitably led to spiritual disaster on the personal, professional, and national levels.

Q: How did Eli respond when he forced Samuel to tell him what the Lord had said? (v. 18)

A: Fatalistic, but still not taking action towards his sons. A few biblical figures have repented at this point, some have become even more rebellious; Eli once again displays his complete lack of discernment in knowing how to interpret and apply God's Word and does nothing.

Q: Why didn't Samuel immediately assume his appointed role as High Priest? Why did God tell Samuel what would happen so many years before it would actually happen?

A: One cannot enter the priesthood until the age of 30. This is an example of God's calling and predestination, how He has plans for us far in advance. In Samuel's case, this also provides him with the time to develop and grow into his calling, and to know from this point on that Eli and his sons are **NOT** the role models by which to serve God either personally nor as a priest.

Application: It may not be our place to force action, but it's most certainly our place to publicly identify sinful behavior, communicate the contrasts of a life "going through the motions" of godliness vs. ungodliness, and it our responsibility to learn from bad examples and walk in personal obedience in order to perfect God's calling in our own life and ministry.

¹⁵So Samuel lay down until morning. Then he opened the doors of the house of the LORD. But Samuel was afraid to tell the vision to Eli. ¹⁶Then Eli called Samuel and said, “Samuel, my son.”

And he said, “Here I am.”

¹⁷He said, “What is the word that He spoke to you? Please do not hide it from me. May God do so to you, and more also, if you hide anything from me of all the words that He spoke to you.”

¹⁸So Samuel told him everything and hid nothing from him. And he said, “It is the LORD; let Him do what seems good to Him.”

¹⁹Thus Samuel grew and the LORD was with him and let none of his words fail. ²⁰All Israel from Dan even to Beersheba knew that Samuel was confirmed as a prophet of the LORD. ²¹And the LORD appeared again at Shiloh, because the LORD revealed Himself to Samuel at Shiloh by the word of the LORD.

¹And it came about when Samuel was old that he appointed his sons judges over Israel. ²Now the name of his firstborn was Joel, and the name of his second, Abijah; they were judging in Beersheba. ³His sons, however, did not walk in his ways, but turned aside after dishonest gain and took bribes and perverted justice.

⁴Then all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah; ⁵and they said to him, “Behold, you have grown old, and your sons do not walk in your ways. Now appoint a king for us to judge us like all the nations.” ⁶But the thing was displeasing in the sight of Samuel when they said, “Give us a king to judge us.” And Samuel prayed to the LORD.

⁷The LORD said to Samuel, “Listen to the voice of the people in regard to all that they say to you, for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected Me from being king over them. ⁸Like all the deeds which they have done since the day that I brought them up from Egypt even to this day—in that they have forsaken Me and served other gods—so they are doing to you also. ⁹Now then, listen to their voice; however, you shall solemnly warn them and tell them of the procedure of the king who will reign over them.”

Introduction to Samuel’s Sons

[Read 8:1-9]

Q: It appears that Samuel and Eli have the same problem as parents. Is this true?

A: The righteousness or unrighteousness of a parent is never the “deciding factor” as to how children turn out; ultimately they make their own choices. However, in Samuel’s case, he may have recognized something about his sons in that he did not make them priests, but judges.

Q: What in v.3 shows the difference between Samuel and Eli both as parents and spiritual leaders?

A: Samuel’s sons “...did not walk in his ways, but turned aside...” Whereas Eli was never a good example to his sons—and actually participated in their sin—Samuel on his part provided a good example, which his sons chose to reject.

Q: Samuel does not dispute the people’s assertion either that his sons are not trustworthy or that he himself is in the last days of service to Israel. What is he reacting to and how?

A: Samuel is disturbed at the spiritual ramifications of the people’s desire for a king. But his initial reaction is **NOT** to speak his mind but to seek the mind of God.

Application: Do we stop to seek God’s counsel first, particularly when all the circumstances just seem so “logical” and in no need of interpretation as to what we should do?

Q: How do we know that this is a spiritual issue?

A: "...they have not rejected you, but they have rejected Me from being king over them." (v.7)

Overall Application

With whom do you identify most: Eli, Eli's sons, Hannah, Samuel, the man of God, or the people? Does this suggest something to you that needs to be addressed in your life? In the way your ministry interacts with others?