

The Fall of the Proud and the Elevation of the Humble

Passages: 1 Samuel 2:27-36
Luke 1:67-79

It is really hard to understand the Bible sometimes. Even the so-called experts of the Bible, those who write Bible commentaries, can often scratch their heads trying to make sense of it.

Take the story of Eli's sons, Hophni and Phinehas, found in today's passage from 1 Samuel 2. We read in **verse 34** that these two young men had done something so horrible...so terrible...that God sentenced them to die!

(v 34) ***“And what happens to your two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, will be a sign to you – they will both die on the same day.”***

So, what had Hophni and Phinehas done that merited this divine verdict of death? Going back to **verses 12-17** of chapter 2, we're given this explanation:

12 “ Eli's sons were scoundrels; they had no regard for the LORD. 13 Now it was the practice of the priests that, whenever any of the people offered a sacrifice, the priest's servant would come with a three-pronged fork in his hand while the meat was being boiled 14 and would plunge the fork into the pan or kettle or cauldron or pot. Whatever the fork brought up the priest would take for himself. This is how they treated all the Israelites who came to Shiloh. 15 But even before the fat was burned, the priest's servant would come and say to the person who was sacrificing, ‘Give the priest some meat to roast; he won't accept boiled meat from you, but only raw.’ 16 If the person said to him, ‘Let the fat be burned first, and then take whatever you want,’ the servant would answer, ‘No, hand it over now; if you don't, I'll take it by force.’ 17 This sin of the young men was very great in the LORD's sight, for they were treating the LORD's offering with contempt.”

It seems Hophni and Phinehas were guilty of being greedy! Instead of taking a God-ordained portion of each sacrifice for themselves (whatever

appeared on their fork), they decided to take the whole lot...demanding that it come to them uncooked so they could resell it in the market! In other words, Hophni and Phinehas were working the blackmarket, making a profit out of the sacrificial system!

Verse 22 also tells us how these two young priests used their position in the Tabernacle for their own advantage sexually. As priests, they were probably promising God's favour to these women in exchange for sex!

It's clear, then, that these two young men were "scoundrels"! But for God to kill them simply for their enterprising greed makes little sense!

So, what's the real story here? Why does God have them killed? Well, I'm sad to say that there are very few commentaries that offer us any real help! Instead, what you will most often find is an endless supply of *moralisms* which make this horrible story even more difficult to accept.

Let me give you two examples:

In a modern series of Bible studies on 1 Samuel that I found in a popular Bible website, after the lesson on Eli's sons it goes on to offer three points of application entitled, "For Our Learning."

Point 1-- The Lord does not gloss over the sins of people, even though they may be part of a prominent family and hold high positions.

Point 2-- We are to be good stewards of the offerings of the Lord.

Point 3-- Sin is sin.

According to this Bible study, Eli's sons are simply to be understood as bad *moral examples*! Although the lesson doesn't spell it out, it leaves us to make the awful conclusion that **God has a pre-disposition to judge all moral failure with death!**

A second on-line Bible course follows this same moralistic line of approach by offering the following questions for our discussion:

Eli's sons were corrupt. Is it possible for someone to attend Church regularly and not know the Lord?

What evil deeds did the son's of Eli get up too?

How can we prevent our children and indeed ourselves from getting corrupt?

Once again, here's a Bible study that simply moralizes the story... and ends up portraying God as a capricious and moralistic deity, unwilling or unable to forgive sin. Worst of all, the application for us is nothing short of frightening! **God might do the same thing to us if we follow their immoral example!** Of course, that's a great technique for scaring your Sunday School children into submission, but a terrible way of understanding the Bible!

At this point, we need to go back to what I said last week about the books of 1 & 2 Samuel. Last week, I tried to get across the idea that 1 & 2 Samuel are essentially *books of history*. More to the point, they reveal the *theological history* of Israel. They are not a compilation of **morality tales!** They are not **character studies** in how (or how not) we should live! Instead, these OT books are a powerful statement about the failure of *ancient Israel* to fulfill the plans and purposes of God **for the world...** plans that directly depended upon the *leadership* of Israel—*prophets, priests and kings!*

To help explain what I mean, let me outline three key rules for reading the Old Testament:

Rule #1: Whenever we read these OT stories, **we must always start with Jesus!** Every story in the Bible, whether from the Old or New Testaments, must be read in the light of what we already know about God as revealed in Jesus Christ. Today's passage may give you *the impression* that God gets angry over broken rules and rituals, but you must not stop there! You must turn to Jesus and remember that He alone reveals the true nature of the Father. Jesus said, "***I and the Father are one!***" and "***If you've seen me, you've seen the Father!***" Thus, if you can't imagine Jesus being capricious and morally demanding, willing to kill someone simply because they stole meat from the altar, then neither should you think of His Father in this way. Clearly, there must be something else going on in the passage that can explain God's intense anger and His death sentence on Eli's two sons.

Rule #2: Whenever we read these Old Testament stories, **we must**

remember God's special role for Israel in the world. When God called Abraham to be the Father of this new nation, God was intending to bless the whole world through Abraham's descendants. God created Israel to be a light to the nations. In fact, God even made this promise to Abraham: ***“Through your offspring, all the nations of the world will be blessed.”*** Every OT story has something to do with this universal promise. It's up to us, the reader, to search for the connections.

Rule #3: Whenever we read these Old Testament stories, **we must always keep an eye on Israel's leaders.** Most importantly, we must take note of whether or not they were leading Israel towards God or away from God... whether they were helping or hindering Israel in becoming a light to the nations?

In today's passage, for example, it's critically important to remember that Eli and his sons were *Israel's anointed priests*. In fact, Eli's grandfather was Aaron, Moses' brother and the first High Priest of Israel. As Aaron's direct descendents, Hophni and Phinehas had only one job in life- to hang around the Tabernacle all day, getting to know God better. Moreover, as priests, God gave them everything they needed to fulfill His purposes. They were given a special place in society; they were endowed with a portion of God's Spirit; they were shown the inner workings of the Tabernacle; they were allowed to stay in close proximity to God's presence. In other words, these priests were incredibly privileged with an insider's knowledge of the mysteries of the faith, living every day in contact with the Holy of Holies.

You need to remember this: **Hophni and Phinehas were not normal Israelites**- they were Israel's divinely chosen leaders, empowered to lead the nation in how to follow and love the Lord their God with all their heart, soul, mind and strength and to love their neighbour as themselves. That's why they must never be regarded as mere moral examples! To the contrary, as Israel's priests, they were meant to be the *revealers of God* to Israel so that Israel, in turn, might be *revealers of God* to the world. Of course, this leadership role did have a moral dimension to it...but morality was only a small part of their role. As priests, they were meant to live in God's presence 24/7. They were meant to be in such contact with God that their

entire being would be gradually and perceptibly transformed by God's glory. This personal transformation was, then, meant to be seen by the people of Israel and result in a sort of “domino effect”—by looking upon these priests the people would be inspired to live for God. The godliness of Israel would then inspire the nations surrounding Israel to live for God so that, gradually, the whole world would be filled with the glory of God as the waters cover the sea.

It's only with this domino effect in mind that we can begin to truly appreciate God's anger against Hophni and Phinehas. Listen again to the prophetic rebuke of Eli found in verses 27-29 concerning his 2 sons:

²⁷ Now a man of God came to Eli and said to him, ‘This is what the LORD says: “Did I not clearly reveal myself to your ancestor’s family when they were in Egypt under Pharaoh? ²⁸ I chose your ancestor out of all the tribes of Israel to be my priest, to go up to my altar, to burn incense, and to wear an ephod in my presence. I also gave your ancestor’s family all the food offerings presented by the Israelites. ²⁹ Why do you scorn my sacrifice and offering that I prescribed for my dwelling? Why do you honour your sons more than me by fattening yourselves on the choice parts of every offering made by my people Israel?”’

This rebuke is not merely focused on the immoral behaviour of Eli’s sons. The rebuke is focused on the family’s privileged position as priests in Israel **and** the responsibility that came with that position...the responsibility to reflect God’s glory to the nation.

Perhaps I can better explain it through the lens of Trinitarian Theology. When the Triune God (Father, Son and Spirit) created the world, they opened up the circle of their life and love and called the human race to participate in it. But when human beings turned away from this circle of life and chose death instead, God began to *elect* certain people through whom He might work. He started with one man, Abraham, and personally called him and his wife, Sarah, to re-enter the circle of life. As a couple, they would become the new *Adam and Eve*, living within that circle of

God's life (the Paradise of the Promised Land), and initiating a new humanity. Gradually, God's plan was that they would draw the rest of the watching world into this new circle of life.

According to plan, as Israel grew in number, the world took notice. However, with a growing nation came a growing need for leadership. The business of nationhood meant that a certain individuals were chosen to be specifically set apart to spend time with God on Israel's behalf, keeping the circle of life alive for the entire nation. This is where the **priesthood** came in. God chose Aaron's lineage to live their lives within the circle of Trinitarian life to such a degree that they would overflow with God's life to the rest of Israel. As Israel absorbed God's love through the priesthood, they, in turn, would become such a beautiful nation that the rest of the world would be drawn to her in wonder and praise to her God. (They would be a *royal priesthood* to the world.)

Now we can understand the privilege that was bestowed on Eli and his sons! They were called to spend their lives in God's presence, being transformed by His glory, and sharing that glory with the rest of Israel! Tragically, however, they showed a total disregard for their privileged position, and the circle of God's glory was broken.

But, you may be asking, was this serious enough for God to have them Killed? Think about it with me. The Bible says that **God is love**, right? It also says that **God loves the entire world**, right? In other words, He has always desired that the world come back to Him and receive his life-giving love, entering into the dance of the Trinity. But, tell me, how can the world know about His love without messengers? And how can they believe in His goodness without some tangible proof that His goodness has transformed the lives of those who say they know him?

As Jesus pointed out to the Pharisees, "***To whom much is given, much will be required!***"

Clearly, Eli's sons were not only bad witnesses to the love and life of God, but they actually *turned people away* from knowing the truth about God.

They made a mockery of their special position of proximity to God. Hence, God had them taken out of the way in order to raise up another priest who would be a true witness in their place...a priest who would show the world the true nature of God's love and life by being, himself, fully engaged and transformed by that love and life.

This is where **the key verse of today's passage** comes in-- Look now at **verse 35!** God says...

35 I will raise up for myself a faithful priest, who will do according to what is in my heart and mind. I will firmly establish his priestly house, and they will minister before my anointed one always.

St. Augustine was right when he said, "*The whole of Scripture is about Christ alone*". As we know from the Gospels, Jesus understood and accepted His Father's plans; never did he go his own way or try to please himself. As the NT book of Hebrews says, "***He was a faithful priest set over the household of God.***" In other words, Jesus lived in the glory of His Father 24/7. He was saturated with that glory and was, therefore, perfectly able to mediate that glory to the world, drawing the nations back to God. Jesus thus fulfilled what Hophni and Phinehas failed to do: He was a shining light of the Father's love to a loveless world. In Jesus, the dominos now fall correctly:

His godly life as a priest, nourished in a life of intimacy with the Father, now touches you and me. Through Christ, we are drawn into the circle of life and love.

Gradually, as we dwell in the circle of the Triune God, we too are transformed by God's glory so that we, in turn, become reflections of God's life and love outwards to others. Like Christ, we become priests, mediating and drawing the world into the circle of God's life.

As God's priests, we are called to so live in the intimacy of God's life and love that we reflect it outwards to the nations. Peter writes to Christians when he says,

“⁹ But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him

who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.

Jesus has brought us the circle of life...into the privilege of knowing the Triune God! There is, however, always a responsibility that goes with that privilege...to live life in God and be soaked in His love until we radiate that love and life outwards to the nations!

So...are we allowing His glory to so transform us that we are reflections of His glory to the world? Are we **reflections** or, like Hophni and Phinehas, are we **obstacles** to the love and light of God? If we stand as obstacles to the world's knowledge of God, we, too, can expect God's judgment to begin with the household of faith! Like some of the churches in Revelation, we, too, may have our candle extinguished so that the testimony of God's love for the world is not be blasphemed among the nations.

Of course, as it was throughout the Old Testament, God's greatest warnings and rebukes are reserved for the leaders of God's people, the pastors and teachers of His church! James 3:1 says, "Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly!" In his letter to Timothy, Paul lays out the criteria for leadership in order to insure that the church's elders and deacons lead the church in the integrity of godliness and truth. Clearly, God's judgment begins with the leaders!

That is something worth thinking about. But remember, **it is not because God is some sort of capricious tyrant in the sky! To the contrary, it is because He loves the world so much that He cannot tolerate it when His own people, the royal priesthood of His church, fails to radiate His love and life outwards to the nations.**

Let's pray.

