

1 SAMUEL—WEEK 2

HOLY PUNISHMENT



F. Michael Slay

A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

The Cover Picture is David and Goliath by Titian (1487–1576)
On display in the church of Santa Maria della Salute in Venice, Italy

Eli's sons are totally corrupt, disobeying God's commands in very offensive ways—and people are offended. God is offended even more, and His first call to the boy Samuel is designed to lower the boom on Eli's sons.

Amazingly, Eli takes this in stride. He knows something greater is going on.

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! Samuel, Week 2 — Holy Punishment
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1 1 Samuel 2:11–17

Then Elkanah went to his house at Ramah. But the child ministered to the LORD before Eli the priest.

Now the sons of Eli were corrupt; they did not know the LORD. And the priests' custom with the people was that when any man offered a sacrifice, the priest's servant would come with a three-pronged fleshhook in his hand while the meat was boiling. Then he would thrust it into the pan, or kettle, or caldron, or pot; and the priest would take for himself all that the fleshhook brought up. So they did in Shiloh to all the Israelites who came there. Also, before they burned the fat, the priest's servant would come and say to the man who sacrificed, "Give meat for roasting to the priest, for he will not take boiled meat from you, but raw."

And if the man said to him, "They should really burn the fat first; then you may take as much as your heart desires," he would then answer him, "No, but you must give it now; and if not, I will take it by force."

Therefore the sin of the young men was very great before the LORD, for men abhorred the offering of the LORD.

The Hebrew word in verse 17 that's translated as *the young men* (הַנְּעָרִים, ha-narr-eem) frequently refers to male adolescents, though it can mean young men. The Hebrew word used later in verse 17 that's translated as *men* (הָאֲנָשִׁים, ha-ah-na-sheem) means adult males. The distinction is important here because it means that Eli's sons weren't just abhorrent themselves; they were causing *men* to abhor the offering.

This isn't surprising. Imagine going up to give an offering to the LORD and being treated like this. I sure wouldn't want to do it again. The whole thing had the look and feel of a scam, which was how Eli's sons saw it.

They did not know the LORD, and it showed.

Note the stark contrast between Eli's sons and Hannah. Hannah's vow was to give back to the LORD 100% of His gift to her. Eli's sons did the opposite, taking for themselves what was supposed to be 100% given to the LORD. What they took was explicitly forbidden.

"All fat is the LORD's." — Leviticus 3:16b

"For whoever eats the fat of the animal of which men offer an offering made by fire to the LORD, the person who eats it shall be cut off from his people." — Leviticus 7:25

This prohibition is quite specific. That, combined with the effect their sin was having on everyone, makes the actions of Eli's sons strikingly grave.

It's like they were trying to do the most offensive thing they could think of.

Come to think of it, that's an all too common behavior for an adolescent.

2 1 Samuel 2:18–26

But Samuel ministered before the LORD, even as a child, wearing a linen ephod. Moreover his mother used to make him a little robe, and bring it to him year by year when she came up with her husband to offer the yearly sacrifice. And Eli would bless Elkanah and his wife, and say, “The LORD give you descendants from this woman for the loan that was given to the LORD.” Then they would go to their own home.

And the LORD visited Hannah, so that she conceived and bore three sons and two daughters. Meanwhile the child Samuel grew before the LORD.

Now Eli was very old; and he heard everything his sons did to all Israel, and how they lay with the women who assembled at the door of the tabernacle of meeting. So he said to them, “Why do you do such things? For I hear of your evil dealings from all the people. No, my sons! For it is not a good report that I hear. You make the LORD’s people transgress. If one man sins against another, God will judge him. But if a man sins against the LORD, who will intercede for him?” Nevertheless they did not heed the voice of their father, because the LORD desired to kill them.

And the child Samuel grew in stature, and in favor both with the LORD and men.

The commentators estimate that Samuel may have been as old as three years when Hannah delivered him to Eli; children were nursed a long time back then. Now, every year, Samuel would have outgrown his robe and Mama would bring him a new one. Any excuse to spend time with her firstborn, right?

God blesses Hannah further, and Samuel isn’t her only child, but just imagine the emotional intensity of the annual gifting of a new robe. They try to catch up, but there’s so much to catch up on as Samuel grows *in stature, and in favor both with the LORD and men.*

In addition to all the blessings the LORD showered on Elkanah and Hannah, they have an awesome holiday tradition.

Meanwhile, Eli’s sons are a train wreck and Eli is all torn up about it. He confronts his sons, but they’re not interested. They think they’ve discovered a free lunch. There’s no such thing.

But the conclusion to Eli’s conversation with them is disturbing. *Nevertheless they did not heed the voice of their father, because the LORD desired to kill them.* This supports reformed doctrine but in an especially creepy way. Did God really “desire” to kill them?

The Hebrew word translated as “desired” (רָצָה, kha-phates) is rendered “willed” in the ESV. That’s a bit of a paraphrase; the BDB lexicon only lists definitions related to the emotion of wanting to do something. The ESV rendering can, of course, be defended by noting that God must desire to do everything He wills.

And that’s the point. Yes, He desired to kill them. He desires to glorify Himself, and He desires to do it in a holy way. His holy will is always what comes to pass.

3 1 Samuel 2:27–36

Then a man of God came to Eli and said to him, “Thus says the LORD: ‘Did I not clearly reveal Myself to the house of your father when they were in Egypt in Pharaoh’s house? Did I not choose him out of all the tribes of Israel to be My priest, to offer upon My altar, to burn incense, and to wear an ephod before Me? And did I not give to the house of your father all the offerings of the children of Israel made by fire? Why do you kick at My sacrifice and My offering which I have commanded in My dwelling place, and honor your sons more than Me, to make yourselves fat with the best of all the offerings of Israel My people?’ Therefore the LORD God of Israel says: ‘I said indeed that your house and the house of your father would walk before Me forever.’ But now the LORD says: ‘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 that I will cut off your arm and the arm of your father’s house, so that there will not be an old man in your house. And you will see an enemy in My dwelling place, despite all the good which God does for Israel. And there shall not be an old man in your house forever. But any of your men whom I do not cut off from My altar shall consume your eyes and grieve your heart. And all the descendants of your house shall die in the flower of their age. Now this shall be a sign to you that will come upon your two sons, on Hophni and Phinehas: in one day they shall die, both of them. Then I will raise up for Myself a faithful priest who shall do according to what is in My heart and in My mind. I will build him a sure house, and he shall walk before My anointed forever. And it shall come to pass that everyone who is left in your house will come and bow down to him for a piece of silver and a morsel of bread, and say, “Please, put me in one of the priestly positions, that I may eat a piece of bread.” ’ ”

Eli is upset with his sons—but not upset enough. The man of God (obviously a prophet) lights into Eli, not his sons. His prophecy is directed at Eli. *Why do you kick at My sacrifice and My offering which I have commanded in My dwelling place, and honor your sons more than Me?*

Yes, Eli’s sons will pay a great penalty, but the point is not to punish them, or the even just to get rid of them. Something bigger is afoot. *Now this shall be a sign to you that will come upon your two sons, on Hophni and Phinehas: in one day they shall die, both of them.* The sign is more important than the sons.

But that’s not the point either. This will be the kickoff of something great. *Then I will raise up for Myself a faithful priest who shall do according to what is in My heart and in My mind. I will build him a sure house, and he shall walk before My anointed forever.*

All the things that happened—Hannah’s barrenness, Hophni and Phinehas’s sins, the damage their sins did—all these were all to set the stage for a great and holy thing the LORD would do.

Everything was unfolding according to plan.

This is the lesson of the Old Testament. Everything—all the sin, all the disasters—was to set the stage for a great and holy thing the LORD would do ...

... incarnation.

4 1 Samuel 3:1–9

Now the boy Samuel ministered to the LORD before Eli. And the word of the LORD was rare in those days; there was no widespread revelation. And it came to pass at that time, while Eli was lying down in his place, and when his eyes had begun to grow so dim that he could not see, and before the lamp of God went out in the tabernacle of the LORD where the ark of God was, and while Samuel was lying down, that the LORD called Samuel. And he answered, “Here I am!” So he ran to Eli and said, “Here I am, for you called me.”

And he said, “I did not call; lie down again.” And he went and lay down.

Then the LORD called yet again, “Samuel!”

So Samuel arose and went to Eli, and said, “Here I am, for you called me.” He answered, “I did not call, my son; lie down again.” (Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD, nor was the word of the LORD yet revealed to him.)

And the LORD called Samuel again the third time. So he arose and went to Eli, and said, “Here I am, for you did call me.”

Then Eli perceived that the LORD had called the boy. Therefore Eli said to Samuel, “Go, lie down; and it shall be, if He calls you, that you must say, ‘Speak, LORD, for Your servant hears.’ ” So Samuel went and lay down in his place.

Here, the word that’s translated as “the boy” (הַנָּעָר, ha-narr) is the same word that was translated as young men in 1 Samuel 2:17 (except singular, without the “eem” plural ending). Samuel is now old enough to minister to the LORD, but not yet full grown. Ha-narr is translated as “the boy” because Samuel is living as a child with Eli.

Eli is keeping Samuel close—within earshot. Might it be that he’s trying to not make the same mistakes he made raising Hophni and Phinehas?

It sure looks like it.

In the previous passage (1 Samuel 2:27–36) the man of God made specific reference to Eli’s treatment of his sons. *“Why do you kick at My sacrifice and My offering which I have commanded in My dwelling place, and honor your sons more than Me, to make yourselves fat with the best of all the offerings of Israel My people?”*

It isn’t clear what is meant by “honor” there. Thus, we don’t know exactly what Eli did wrong in raising his sons. However, tomorrow’s passage will add that Eli *“did not restrain them.”*

In any case, “the boy” seems to have virtually no freedom at this point.

In today’s passage, Samuel’s response to hearing his name called indicates a totally subservient existence.

5 1 Samuel 3:10–18

Now the LORD came and stood and called as at other times, “Samuel! Samuel!”

And Samuel answered, “Speak, for Your servant hears.”

Then the LORD said to Samuel: “Behold, I will do something in Israel at which both ears of everyone who hears it will tingle. In that day I will perform against Eli all that I have spoken concerning his house, from beginning to end. For I have told him that I will judge his house forever for the iniquity which he knows, because his sons made themselves vile, and he did not restrain them. And therefore 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.”

Samuel lay until morning; then he opened the doors of the house of the LORD. And Samuel was afraid to tell the vision to Eli. But Eli called Samuel and said, “Samuel, my son.” And he said, “Here I am.” And Eli said, “What was it that he told you? Do not hide it from me. May God do so to you and more also if you hide anything from me of all that he told you.” So Samuel told him everything and hid nothing from him. And he said, “It is the LORD. Let him do what seems good to him.”

Q: According to today’s passage, what is the LORD’s immediate goal in His action toward Eli and his house?

A: To make everyone’s ears tingle.

And the first ears to tingle were Eli’s. As always, God’s glory is what matters and everything else is just collateral.

Amazingly, Eli is okay with this. *“It is the LORD. Let him do what seems good to him.”* While he can’t be pleased, He knows that it’s from God and therefore right.

Note also that the word “seems” isn’t in the Hebrew. Many translations (e.g., ESV) include the word “seems” but the Hebrew (הַטֹּב, ha-tove) is literally just “the good.” Verse 18b is literally, “Let the LORD do the good in His eyes.”

But what’s really profound is that Eli will never even attempt to change God’s mind. No prayers like what David prays after Nathan confronts him about his sin with Bathsheba. The beginning of Verse 13 (*“For I have told him”*) remind us that Eli has had some time to think through what God is up to. That explains why he was so set on hearing the full update when he said, *“Do not hide it from me. May God do so to you and more also if you hide anything from me of all that he told you.”*

As horrible as this is for Eli personally, he recognizes that other things take precedence.

This means that Eli gets it at a very deep level—a level we should all strive for. His sons are a write-off, but many great and exciting things are happening, and Eli is privileged to play a major role.

He seems dead set on not messing it up.

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. When have you seen disobedience seem to be deliberately "in your face" defiant?
2. What is your favorite holiday tradition?
3. When have the pieces come together over a long period of time?
4. In what areas should a child be given freedom?
5. When have you detected honor or privilege in a tough assignment?

Items for prayer: