

## **Rise & Fall of King Saul, I**

I want to begin with prayer.

*Father, we thank You for this day. We thank You that You are here in our midst. We pray that You would be pleased with our efforts, that they would be not simply our human efforts, but that they would be facilitated and empowered by Your Spirit. We ask that You would teach us from Your Word, that You would give us understanding of some very difficult stretches of text. We also ask that You would enable us to learn the lessons that You would have us learn from these texts in the book of 1 Samuel. I thank you for the students, and we pray that You would be at work in each life, meeting the needs that are felt and present, and also giving motivation and encouragement to press on and know the Lord. We thank You for that great privilege of knowing You. And we pray that You would do in our lives what we cannot do, which is to draw us close to Yourself. We could not find our way back to You, and we cannot even draw ourselves close to You. But we pray that You would draw us close to Yourself, that You may be honored and praised in our lives. We pray this in Jesus' name, amen.*

In this lecture I will begin covering 1 Samuel. I will spend some time on the books of Samuel, because these are very interesting books. They are some of the best literature in the Old Testament. Some very intriguing stories are told in the books of Samuel. These are books that involve some important and sometimes enigmatic characters: Samuel, Saul, and David. They also raise some difficult theological questions. What happened to Saul? God chose him and then soon rejected him. Was God being fair to Saul? We will ask those kinds of questions as we study these books.

The first chapters of 1 Samuel establish the perspective from which we are to judge the remainder of the books of 1 and 2 Samuel. In particular, we have recorded in 1 Samuel 1-3 the rejection of the house of Eli. Though it is often overlooked by commentators, what we can learn from the rejection of the house of Eli is very helpful in enabling us to answer questions that arise about the rejection of Saul. So it is important to read carefully as we proceed through these books.

I give 1 Samuel 1-3 the title, "God's man: Samuel and Eli at Shiloh." Shiloh is the location where the events take place. Samuel is not born at the beginning of the book of 1 Samuel, but he was very much desired by Hannah, who was barren, and who was provoked by her rival wife. These early chapters will set the tone and establish important themes. The circumstances surrounding Samuel's birth are described beginning in the first chapter through 1 Samuel 2:11, with the first 10 verses of chapter 2 describing Hannah's song. Then in 1 Samuel 3 we have the description of the establishment of Samuel as a prophet. In between the accounts of Hannah and her son Samuel is the account of the rejection of the house of Eli.

Let us look first to the birth of Samuel and Hannah's song, which are in 1 Samuel 1:1-2:10. In this section several themes stand out. We meet Eli and there is mention of his sons who were priests in Shiloh. But Eli is not the main character. Hannah is the main character. We encounter Eli only as he encounters Hannah.

Eli is found at the temple, where he observes Hannah's fervent prayer. His response is, "Stop drinking." That response is indicative of the period of time we are reading about. It is the end of the period of the judges, which was that very dark time in which there was no king in Israel and everyone did what was right in his own eyes. Eli was apparently more familiar with drunkenness in the temple than he was with fervent prayer. He did not seem to recognize what Hannah was doing, so he admonished her. But she

responds by saying something like, “Do not think of me as a wicked woman. I have not been pouring down the booze. I have been pouring out my heart to God.”

We also encounter in this section the birth of God’s new man. Many have argued that what we have in these chapters was not originally the birth narrative of Samuel, but the birth narrative of Saul. Looking at 1 Samuel 1:17, it says, “Eli answered, ‘Go in peace, and may the God of Israel grant you what you have asked of him.’” The word “asked” is from the Hebrew root *shaal*, which means “to be asked for.” It sounds similar to the Hebrew root *shaul*, which is the name “Saul” and means “one who is asked for.” That alone would not make people start thinking this was originally a birth narrative of Saul instead of Samuel. But then in 1 Samuel 1:20 we read, “So in the course of time Hannah conceived and gave birth to a son. She named him Samuel, saying, ‘Because I asked the Lord for him.’” Again, the root is *shaal*, from which we get the root *shaul*, which is the name Saul. As we get to the end of the chapter in verse 27 Hannah says, “I prayed for this child, and the Lord has granted me what I asked of him.” Though it does not come through in most translations, there are two occurrences of the root *shaal* in that verse. Hannah continues in the next verse, “So now I give him to the Lord. For his whole life he will be given over to the Lord.” In that verse there are two more occurrences of the root *shaal*, which is again related to the root *shaul*, from which we get the name Saul.

It does appear that the name Saul is hovering in the background of this account. This is, of course, common vocabulary. But it has led some to suggest that this was really the story of how Saul was born. They argue that it would have been more natural for her to name the son Saul, not Samuel, based on her explanation that she asked for him from the Lord. We need to be very careful here, because biblical etymologies, which are the explanations of where a name comes from, do not always operate on a strict scientific basis. They often operate on the basis of wordplay. Think of the name Jacob. His parents probably did not name their son “deceiver.” But the name Jacob, which was a fairly common name, sounded like the verb that means “to deceive.” Esau was able to say that their parents named Jacob correctly, because his name sounds like the word for “deceived.”

What could the name *shemuel*, or Samuel, mean? There have been many theories about that. Some have suggested that it sounds like “heard of God.” *Shema* is the Hebrew word meaning “to hear” and *el* means God. So *shemuel* sounds like “heard of God.” So that is not scientific, but it might make sense for Hannah to say that she named her son Samuel because she asked God for him and He heard her. Others have suggested that it might mean “he who is from God.” Or it may mean “name of God” because *shem* is the Hebrew word for “name.” Some have even suggested that it might mean “son of God,” as in “given” or “promised” by God. There are many different theories as to what this name means. The significant point is that there is sufficient logic to the account for us to believe that this is indeed the birth narrative of Samuel.

Why, then, is there an apparent stress on the *shaal* root? First, it is a common word, so it may simply reflect that it was the word that was used when the event occurred. If the narrator has highlighted the word intentionally, it may be to suggest that here is an individual who was asked for in the righteous prayer of Hannah. And this individual will be one who will eventually have significant contact with another individual who will be asked for in chapter 8 by the elders of Israel. In that chapter, the asking was not righteous. It was a sinful request, as God made clear. So there may be an intent to anticipate that the book will involve another Saul, another one who was asked for.

In this early account we have the story of Samuel’s birth. It begins with Hannah’s vexation with her rival wife, Peninnah. There is much we can learn from this story. Sometimes we find ourselves in vexing circumstances, and sometimes people make things worse for us. And sometimes we are tempted to deal

with those circumstances in various ways, some of which might not be good. Hannah's trouble was that she could not have children. But what she did have was the love of her husband. Hannah could have reacted by using her husband's love as a weapon against Peninnah. Or Hannah could have denied she had a problem, hardening herself to her situation. But Hannah did not deny what she was feeling, nor did she retaliate against the one who was provoking her. She also could have tried dealing with her problem by focusing on something else other than her want of a child. Instead of any of those things, Hannah dealt with her problem by praying. She took her concerns to God.

In 1 Samuel 1:11 Hannah prayed, "O Lord Almighty, if you will only look upon your servant's misery and remember me, and not forget your servant but give her a son, then I will give him to the Lord for all the days of his life, and no razor will ever be used on his head." That is a Nazirite vow, the vow of someone set aside for God. This prayer sounds much like bargaining with God. We are not told all of what went on in Hannah's mind and heart. Surely this was not the first time she prayed to God for a child. Perhaps she was not so much bargaining with God as she was submitting to a prompting that she had from God. Perhaps she knew that God was saying to her that if He gave her a child she would have to give the child to Him. The tendency of someone who wanted a child as much as she did might have been to hold on to that child so tightly that she might smother him. But God had a special purpose for Samuel. So it could be that Hannah is simply saying, "Okay Lord, I will do it on your terms." If that is the case, then she has quite a different attitude than she appears to have in laying down her terms. I do not know if that is the case, but it is quite possible. It is quite possible God had been at work in her life, because it is clear that God had special plans for her son Samuel. That is also stressed by the fact that it is his birth narrative that is emphasized. Even though this is the book about the institution of kingship, it is the prophet's birth that is recorded.

When Samuel is born, Hannah does fulfill her vow. She brings him to the temple, to Eli, which must have been a tremendous step of faith, given Eli's track record as a father. Then she prayed a prayer that seems anticipatory in many respects of the prayer prayed by Mary, the Magnificat, at the birth of Jesus. If you set the two prayers in parallel, you can see how much they share in their themes.

Both Hannah's song and Mary's song open with jubilation over the Lord's deliverance. In the opening of Hannah's song, in 1 Samuel 2:1, she says, "My heart rejoices in the Lord; in the Lord my horn is lifted high." The horn is a symbol for strength. Just as a powerful wild animal may have horns, a horn is used as a metaphor in the Old Testament for strength. She continues, "My mouth boasts over my enemies, for I delight in your deliverance." Likewise Mary, in Luke 1:46-48, begins her prayer with jubilation over God's deliverance of her and kindness to her.

Then they both extol the Lord's uniqueness and holiness. We see it in verse 2 of Hannah's song when she says, "There is no one holy like the Lord; there is no one besides you; there is no Rock like our God." She begins to establish themes that will occur at the end of 2 Samuel in the poetry of David, when he uses terms like "rock" and "horn" that are used here. And we find a similar theme in Luke 1:49-50 in Mary's song.

Then both continue by condemning proud boasting. Hannah makes this point in 1 Samuel 2:3, saying, "Do not keep talking so proudly or let your mouth speak such arrogance, for the Lord is a God who knows, and by him deeds are weighed." When Hannah says God "knows," that word in Hebrew can also mean "choose." That fits with a condemnation of pride, because God is the one who chooses. God is the one who establishes people in their position of prominence. Or if your estate is a humble one, He has a plan for you there. There will come a time when the last shall be first and the first shall be last, which is related to the point that both Hannah and Mary make next. God is in the business of reversing fortunes.

The song of Hannah tells us in 1 Samuel 1:4-8, “The bows of the warriors are broken, but those who stumbled are armed with strength. Those who were full hire themselves out for food, but those who were hungry hunger no more. She who was barren has borne seven children, but she who has had many sons pines away. The Lord brings death and makes alive; he brings down to the grave and raises up. The Lord sends poverty and wealth; he humbles and he exalts. He raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap; he seats them with princes and has them inherit a throne of honor.” So the Lord is in the business of turning the tables. If we think we stand, we should take heed lest we fall. But if we are feeling abased, we should delight that God can reverse our fortunes. And He takes delight in doing so. This same theme is in the Magnificat, in Luke 1:51-53.

The two prayers also express the Lord’s care for those who are His. Hannah says in 1 Samuel 1:9, “He will guard the feet of his saints, but the wicked will be silenced in darkness.” God watches over those who are His. The same idea is expressed again in Luke 1:54-55.

That theme is the end of the Magnificat, but Hannah’s song concludes by asserting that while human strength is no match for the Lord, the Lord Himself will give strength to His king, to His anointed. That is a remarkable reference. Some have thought this must be an anachronism, because Hannah could not really have said that because there was not a king yet. What we need to keep in mind is that kingship was not unknown at the time. It may have been understood in Israel that it was about time for a king to take leadership. God had made it clear that it was His plan for there to be a king in Israel. Abimelech, in the book of Judges, had set himself up as a king. It is quite possible that Hannah, in a spirit of prophecy, anticipated that the time was right for there to be a king.

This song establishes themes that will be very important throughout the books of Samuel. There are themes of God’s sovereignty, of honoring God and recognizing that He is the one who raises people to positions of power and removes people from power. God’s human creatures are to be submissive to His will.

After this focus on Hannah and Samuel, the focus shifts to Eli. We are told in 1 Samuel 1:12, “Eli’s sons were wicked men; they had no regard for the Lord.” Some translations simply say “they did not know the Lord.” When you read that word “know” in Hebrew, you have to recognize it has a broad range of meaning. It can mean not only “to know,” but also “to acknowledge” or “to recognize.” My suggestion is that the meaning is “they did not at all recognize the Lord,” or “He did not gain recognition in their sight.” The reason we should adopt that understanding is that when we eventually come to 1 Samuel 3:7, we encounter something that I think is an intentional wordplay by the author. That verse says, “Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord: The word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him.”

If you recognize that the word “know” from *yada* in Hebrew can also mean “to acknowledge” or “to recognize,” then this wordplay gives us as readers a little bit of anxiety. An initial reaction might be to think that Samuel has begun to turn out like the sons of Eli. We were told that they were worthless men because they did not know the Lord. Now it says that Samuel did not know the Lord. Is Samuel also worthless? But with a careful reading we can recognize the word is being used in two different senses, just as we use words with different senses. Eli’s sons did not know the Lord in that they had no regard for Him. Samuel did not know the Lord in that the Lord was unfamiliar to him. He had never received a vision or a voice from heaven before as was happening in the scene in chapter 3. I do not think this means that Samuel had no knowledge of God or was not a believer in God. It is simply saying that Samuel did not know he was hearing the Lord’s voice. That is why he keeps running to Eli.

In the account of Eli's sons, we see their abuses as priests. When the people would come to sacrifice, Eli's sons would stick their forks into the pot and take whatever they wanted for themselves. Eventually even that was not enough. They wanted uncooked meat, including the fat, so that they could cook for themselves. Remember the fat was to be given to God. The fat was considered the best of the animal. It was to be given to God and completely consumed. But the sons of Eli said that was not good enough. They wanted the uncooked meat.

We learn that Eli had to hear of their abuses. He was not immediately aware of them. We get an impression of Eli. It is said that his eyes were growing dim-sighted, and it appears that he is growing dim-sighted spiritually as well. He does not notice what his sons are doing, but instead he has to hear of it. He goes to them in 1 Samuel 2:24 and rebukes them, saying, "No, my sons; it is not a good report that I hear spreading among the Lord's people. If a man sins against another man, God may mediate for him; but if a man sins against the Lord, who will intercede for him?" His sons, however, did not listen to their father's rebuke, for it was the Lord's will to put them to death." That is a very interesting comment about God's sovereignty in the affairs of individuals. Sometimes God punishes continual unrepentant sin with an inability to do otherwise. Sometimes we fool ourselves by thinking that we can stop a particular sin at any time. We need to recognize that when there is an opportunity to repent, we should take it, because God is the One who is providing the opportunity. Apart from Him our hearts are hard and we will not repent.

Then in 1 Samuel 2:27 a prophet arrived to pronounce a judgment speech upon the house of Eli. It begins by expressing all the good things God has done for the house of Eli. The speech begins, "This is what the Lord says: 'Did I not clearly reveal myself to your father's house when they were in Egypt under Pharaoh? I chose your father 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 father's house all the offerings made with fire by the Israelites.'" This is an expression of God's previous beneficence to the house of Eli, and it is the way judgment speeches often begin. Then the prophet asks the accusing question, "Why do you scorn my sacrifice and offering that I prescribed for my dwelling? Why do you honor your sons more than me by fattening yourselves on the choice parts of every offering made by my people Israel?"

Eli is asked why he honors his sons more than the Lord. The text uses the word "honor" as a keyword that threads itself through this chapter and anticipates the way it is used in the chapters about the ark traveling through the land of the Philistines. The word "honor" in Hebrew has a basic meaning of "to be weighty" or "to give weight to." We have a similar expression when we say something such as "Her opinions are weighty," which means that we value those opinions. So we might read this text in this way, "Why do you give your sons more weight than you give me? Why are your sons a weightier concern than I am?" It is not that Eli did not care about God, but when the moment of decision came he gave his sons more consideration than he gave his God. What is interesting is that there is a blending of the metaphorical use of "weight" and the physical use of "weight," because the expression has to do with the abuses of God's sacrifices. They were taking what they should not have taken, and the sons were actually becoming fat. So Eli was asked, "Why do you give your sons more weight than me by fattening yourselves?"

In 1 Samuel 2:30 comes the pronouncement of judgment. "Therefore the Lord, the God of Israel, declares: 'I promised that your house and your father's house would minister before me forever.' But now the Lord declares: 'Far be it from me! Those who honor me I will honor, but those who despise me will be disdained.'" To retranslate what the Lord is saying, "Those who give me weight, to them I will give weighty consideration. But those who make light of me, I will lightly esteem." This is also typical of judgment speeches of the Old Testament. There is a correspondence between the offense and the

punishment. We will read when we come to the account of Saul that because he has rejected the Lord, the Lord has rejected him as king over Israel.

This is a very important moment in these early chapters when the judgment upon the house of Eli is pronounced. We need to attend very closely to why it is that Eli is being rejected. The issue is one of honor. God is not the weightiest consideration in Eli's life. But God's leaders must make God central. He must be the center of gravity in one's life. Without that, we are in danger.

After reading this pronouncement by a prophet, it is an appropriate time to discuss the difference between priests, prophets, and seers. Prophets and seers are not very distinguishable. We learn in 1 Samuel 9 that in those days prophets were called seers. There may only be a chronological distinction between the terms. Priests and prophets were distinct offices, but they were not at odds with one another. A true priest, who was acting in a godly fashion, would not come under fire from a true prophet who was speaking for God. But both priest and king were liable to rebuke from a prophet if they became regenerate in their life or office. The prophet was God's spokesperson. In this case, though Eli was a priest, he needed rebuke and even rejection from office. This is not rejection from the household of God or from the faith, but merely a rejection from his position of leadership. It was just as anyone in the church today might lose a position of leadership due to some sin, but it would not mean that that person lost his salvation.

In chapter 3 we encounter the story of Samuel's elevation to the position of prophet. So far we read the introduction of Samuel in his birth narrative in chapter 1. Then we read of the rejection of the house of Eli in chapter 2. Many commentators have noted the way the story of Eli is intertwined with the story of the growth of Samuel. There is an apparently intentional contrasting between the downward spiral of the house of Eli, and the misbehavior of Eli's sons, and Samuel's growth in wisdom and in stature. One example is in 1 Samuel 2:17-18, which says of Eli's sons, "This sin of the young men was very great in the Lord's sight, for they were treating the Lord's offering with contempt. But Samuel was ministering before the Lord—a boy wearing a linen ephod." The contrast is even more striking in the Hebrew, because the same word is used for "young men" and "boy."

While the stories of Eli and Samuel intertwine throughout this section, Eli is the focus of chapter 2. In chapter 3, Samuel becomes the focus. As we read, we need to consider what the purpose is for relating this story of Samuel's calling to be a prophet within the larger course of the narrative. I argue that the significance of this chapter is to present a transition of power. In the previous chapter, Eli is the authority. When young Samuel keeps hearing a voice call his name, he keeps running to Eli to ask for an explanation. Finally Eli realizes that the voice must be that of the Lord. Early on in the chapter it said that visions were infrequent in those days. So Eli, who is dim-sighted and old, did not immediately recognize what was going on, though eventually he did. By the end of the chapter the tables are turned and Eli comes to Samuel. Samuel has been established as the prophet and as the leader. Samuel is the one through whom God speaks.

When the former high priest comes to Samuel he asks, "What did God tell you? Do not withhold anything from me." Samuel is reticent, because he probably cares for Eli and does not want to be the bearer of bad news. But Eli insists, so Samuel tells him all that the Lord had said. Eli's response was, "He is the Lord; let him do what is good in his eyes." Some have taken a negative interpretation of this response. In that view, Eli is essentially dismissing what the Lord has said. But I do not read it that way. I think it is an indication that Eli has turned a corner. While he was growing old and dim-sighted and spiritually lethargic, he did not perceive as he should. But once God removed him from power, he did

not respond by making plans to get his ministry back. He simply submitted to God's plan. It seems that he recognized that his disqualification had been earned, and what God was doing was just.

That is how I read Eli's response to his rejection. And I think that establishes a benchmark for how we are to read further accounts of rejection throughout the books of Samuel. When Saul is rejected, he tries to hang on to his office until the last moment. This account with Eli and Samuel forms a pattern that provides us with a way of assessing what comes later.

An event that is described later in the narrative may support my contention that Eli's response indicates that he is expressing some sort of repentance. In the next chapter, the ark of the covenant has been taken out to battle. We read in 1 Samuel 4:13 that "there was Eli sitting on his chair by the side of the road, watching, because his heart feared for the ark of God." It is a curious phrase about a man that was virtually blind to say that he was "watching." But it is an indication that his spiritual eyes have been opened and he is again concerned with the things of God. While he also expresses concern for his sons, his concern for the ark is highlighted. Eli is told his sons were killed and he is also told that the ark was captured. His response in 1 Samuel 4:18 is that "when he mentioned the ark of God, Eli fell backward off his chair by the side of the gate. His neck was broken and he died, for he was an old man and heavy." That word "heavy" is the same word that was used for "honor." So it can be said that Eli's honoring of himself before God really led to his death. He died under his own weight. At the risk of being too mystical, we can see the danger in trying to bring too much honor to ourselves that should belong to God. If we try to absorb the Lord's honor as our own, we can become proud, arrogant, and it could be our downfall by causing us to die under our own weight.