

The Weight of the Crown

Your Servant Hears

1 Samuel 2-3

Mark Vroegop

Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the LORD in the presence of Eli. And the word of the LORD was rare in those days; there was no frequent vision. At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his own place. 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. Then the LORD called Samuel, and he said, "Here I am!" and 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. And the LORD called again, "Samuel!" and Samuel arose and went to Eli and said, "Here I am, for you called me." But he said, "I did not call, my son; lie down again." Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD, and the word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him. And the LORD called Samuel again the third time. And he arose and went to Eli and said, "Here I am, for you called me." Then Eli perceived that the LORD was calling the boy. Therefore Eli said to Samuel, "Go, lie down, and if he calls you, you shall say, 'Speak, LORD, for your servant hears.' " So Samuel went and lay down in his place. And the LORD came and stood, calling as at other times, "Samuel! Samuel!" And Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant hears." Then the LORD said to Samuel, "Behold, I am about to do a thing in Israel at which the two ears of everyone who hears it will tingle. On that day I will fulfill against Eli all that I have spoken concerning his house, from beginning to end. And I declare to him that I am about to punish his house forever, for the iniquity that he knew, because his sons were blaspheming God, and he did not restrain them. Therefore I swear 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." And Samuel grew, and the LORD was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground. And all Israel from Dan to Beersheba knew that Samuel was established as a prophet of the LORD. And the LORD appeared again at Shiloh, for the LORD revealed himself to Samuel at Shiloh by the word of the LORD (1 Sam. 3:1-21, ESV).

If you've ever experienced an eye exam, you probably remember how the optometrist determines if you need a new pair of glasses and what the strength of the prescription lenses should be. In a darkened room, you're asked to read a certain line on an eye chart.

Whenever this happens, I find myself smirking and a bit stressed out. I smirk because it brings back a great memory from when one of our boys had to visit the ER because of a cut on his eyelid. It's a long story about how he got the cut, and it was the most expensive Band-Aid we ever received. But during the triage exam, the nurse asked him to read the third line of the eye chart. It was HSKRN. He proceeded to sound out the line . . . haskren? hisekron? The nurse started to panic. I'm sure she wondered if he had suffered a head injury or something. That's when I said, "Son, just name the letters." "Oh," he exclaimed. "HSKRN." That's why I smirk.

But I'm also a bit stressed because as you read the eye chart, the doctor changes the lenses. And you must determine which one is better. "3 or 4?" "4 or 5?" It's a big deal because the next year is riding on getting a split-second decision correct. And I feel insecure saying, "Uhh, I'm not sure." Eventually, the contrasting lenses help to put together a new pair of glasses.

Comparing one thing to another can be instructive. The differences raise questions and prompt thoughtful consideration. Contrasting allows for the uniqueness to be more evident. Certainly comparison can be bad. You may have experienced this in your family at some level. But compare-and-contrast can be a great teacher.

1 Samuel 2-3 is a text loaded with contrasts and by inspired design. In fact, you are going to see this a lot throughout the books of 1 & 2 Samuel, especially as it relates to Saul and David. When the Bible is making this contrast clear, we need to pay attention to the lessons we need to learn. We need to read narratives with this in mind.

However, let me offer a caution. A number of you have asked me about 1 & 2 Samuel and how some actions of key leaders are described without explicit condemnation. The silence might seem an endorsement. Elkanah's polygamy is a good example, but there are more. We're going to find a way to engage in this important question. Stay tuned. But for now, keep three things in mind: (1) When we are reading narratives (vs. epistle), we need to determine what is descriptive and what is prescriptive. Sometimes the Bible describes things that are good but aren't required. Sometimes it describes things that are bad but aren't explicitly condemned in the story. Sometimes the condemnation emerges as a result of the story. (2) Narratives also require keeping the main thought in mind. Not every detail relates to the main point or the moral argument. (3) Remember that every Bible character has enormous flaws. The purpose of 1-2 Samuel is not for you to be like Samuel, Saul, or David. It's to point you toward another king—Jesus. He's our perfect example.

For today, I want to look at three contrasts in these chapters. There's a rather obvious contrast between Eli and his sons in comparison to Samuel. This chapter is setting up the ministry of Samuel. Think of it as the rising of the sun. Every moment that passes there are new colors that change the view. That's what is happening here with the rise of Samuel.

Disrespect vs. Innocence (2:12-21)

The essence of the contrast is found in comparing 2:12 with 2:18.

- *Now the sons of Eli were worthless men. They did not know the LORD* (1 Sam. 2:12).
- *Samuel was ministering before the LORD, a boy clothed with a linen ephod* (1 Sam. 2:18).

Let me tell you the point and application first. And then I'll unpack this section. Verses 12-17 show us the utter disrespect and corruption that Eli's son had for God and worship. But we also see the innocence of Samuel and the blessing of God on Hannah for her obedience. The lesson or application? God often brings about renewal through quiet acts of righteousness.

The spiritual scene in Israel is dark. Verse 12 is blunt. The sons of Eli (who were serving as priests) were worthless men. It literally reads "sons of Belial," which was a name for evil personified. They were sons of Satan, worthless priests. They did not know the Lord.

Just let that sink in for a moment. They grew up in Shiloh, around the tabernacle, observing sacrifices. But somehow respect and honor for the one true God never caught hold in their hearts. Worse, they found a way to use worship practice to serve their greedy, sinful desires. They manipulated the offering of sacrifices for themselves.

Verses 13-16 describe two egregious actions. First, they violated the Levitical law by taking more of the sacrifice for themselves. They were allowed to take the breast and the thigh (Lev. 10:14-15). But they would take additional parts of the sacrifice. This became a common part of the Shiloh worship culture. Secondly, they would send a servant to collect the sacrificial meat before it was offered to the Lord and while the fat was still on the portion. Both actions were violations.

Making things even worse, if the people offering sacrifices objected, they were threatened: "Give it now, and if not, I will take it by force" (v. 16). The conclusion is provided for us in verse 17:

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 (1 Sam. 2:17).

Hophni and Phineas are presented here as cautionary figures. They are representatives of what can happen when people are near the things of God, but they aren't near to the heart of God. It's a warning about the real possibility of figuring out the religious language and activities and using them for selfish advantage. Being raised in a Christian home is a great blessing. Having lots of people at school or in your community claim to be Christian is an incredible grace. But there's also a cautionary dark side that's common in the Bible. It's when religious activity becomes cultural and not personal. When faithfulness is replaced with manipulation. It's when you use God for control instead of God controlling you.

It's a cautionary warning that should push us toward making our relationship with God personal. It's a reminder to aim for the heart when it comes to the next generation. It's a calling to do our best to follow the Lord with genuine love for the Lord and to do our best to model that for the next generation.

This is a dark day in Israel, but it's not without hope. Verse 18 points to our first contrast with Samuel. While Hophni and Phineas are worthless men, Samuel is described as "ministering before the Lord, a boy clothed with a linen ephod" (v. 18). In the midst of corruption and disrespect, here is this little boy wearing the garments of the priesthood.

What's more, there's this beautiful image of Hannah, his mother, making him a robe and bringing it to him every year when they visited Shiloh. The tenderness and maternal nature of what's described here should be noted. Additionally, we learn (v. 20) that Eli pronounces a blessing over Elkanah and Hannah, even linking the prayer to Hannah's prior prayer in the tabernacle, "the petition she asked of the Lord."

The Lord did in fact bless Hannah with more children: three sons and two daughters. Her heartfelt request and quiet obedience was honored by the Lord. And while the sons of Eli are worthless, Samuel "grew in the presence of the Lord" (v. 21).

As we'll see, Samuel will grow into one of the most renowned prophets in Israel's history. Despite the darkness, the seeds of spiritual vibrancy are planted with Hannah's quiet obedience and Samuel's innocence.

Wicked vs. Faithful (2:22-3:1)

The second contrast is just a continuation of the first. It shows the difference between the wickedness of Eli's sons and the spiritual growth of Samuel. There's a declining priesthood under Eli, but a special increase in Samuel.

We can see the sovereign hand of God at work. The contrast makes it clear that God is responding to the situation in Israel. It will move slowly and take time, but God is at work, even though the wickedness is great.

In verses 22-25, Eli is back in the picture. But this time he's described as very old. It's toward the end of his ministry as a priest, and the actions of his sons have become intolerable. He hears a report of their rampant immorality. They were committing sexual immorality with women who were volunteering at the sanctuary. Apparently, it was a widespread report ("doing to all Israel" - v. 22, "hear...from all these people" - v. 23). It was a well-known problem.

Eli confronts them, even letting them know that it's being spread abroad (v. 24). But they refused to listen. A sobering comment is provided that speaks to the hardness of their heart: "it was the will of the Lord to put them to death" (v. 25). The two sons had apparently crossed the line, and God's judgment was coming.

We'll come back to verse 26 in a moment, but let's continue with verses 27-34. This connects to the sins of Hophni and Phineas, but it's a word from the Lord for Eli. A "man of God" or a prophet arrives with a stern announcement that must have been devastating to Eli. Let me give you an overview:

- vv. 27-28 – The man of God links this conversation back to the founding of the priesthood through Aaron. This is part of Eli's heritage.
- vv. 29 – The charges against Eli are "scorning my sacrifices . . . and honoring your sons above me." Eli refused to restrain his sons, and he allowed their wickedness to corrupt the worship of God.
- vv. 30-34 – The judgment is severe: priesthood responsibilities are removed from his family line, the favor of God is gone, and Hophni and Phineas will die on the same day.

- vv. 35-36 – God will raise up a faithful priest who will “do according to what is in my heart and in my mind.”

It’s stunning, isn’t it? This level of judgment indicates that the situation in Israel must have been really bad. Yet, God isn’t hindered by the wickedness of the culture, worship, or its leaders. Dale Ralph Davis writes this:

Human resistance and disobedience will not stymie Yahweh’s purpose. Trenchant rebellion does not send El Shaddai into a state of helpless frustration. Yahweh will rule his people, if not through particular leaders then apart from them and in spite of them.¹

Back to Samuel. While the religious system and spiritual leadership is collapsing, God’s favor is on little Samuel. Remember verse 26? “Now the boy Samuel continued to grow both in stature and in favor with the LORD and also with man.” This verse might sound familiar because it is how Luke 2:52 describes the early days of Jesus’s life. This description points to the fact that something is different about Samuel. It’s similar to the reaction of the people in Jesus’s day when they heard his teaching. God is moving despite the darkness.

We find something similar in 3:1. Samuel is described as “ministering to the Lord in the presence of Eli.” But the sad description is “and the word of the Lord was rare in those days; there was no frequent vision.” The sinfulness of the people led to silence from the Lord.

And yet all of this is about to change. God is not finished with his people. He’s going to work through a faithful new prophet named Samuel. The wicked and the worthless are going to be replaced.

Judgment vs. Renewal (3:2-21)

What follows is the well-known story of Samuel hearing the voice of God. The point is that God is bypassing Eli and speaking directly to young Samuel. The message God delivers is confirmation of the word spoken by the prophet. This is the launch of a day of renewal and the beginning of Samuel’s ministry. The revelation of God and the calling of Samuel happen in the same moment.

The Lord is speaking again! Samuel, through no action of his own, is God’s chosen person for the renewal of the nation.

The narrative begins with Eli being described as nearly blind. This seems to be more than merely a physical description. It probably is also intended to be representative of Eli’s spiritual condition. Samuel is tending to the lamp of God inside the tabernacle where he’s also sleeping.

The first and second call from God, “Samuel,” resulted in a conversation with Eli who told him to lie back down. Verse 7 is important: “Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD, and the word of the LORD had not

¹ Dale Ralph Davis, [*1 Samuel: Looking on the Heart*](#), Focus on the Bible Commentary (Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 2000), 37.

yet been revealed to him.” The third calling causes Eli to surmise that God may be the one speaking. Can you imagine what Samuel is thinking as he lays down?

Sure enough, the Lord calls for him again (v. 10). When Samuel responds as he’s been instructed, the Lord delivers a strong prophetic word related to Eli and his sons.

Then the Lord said to Samuel, “Behold, I am about to do a thing in Israel at which the two ears of everyone who hears it will tingle. On that day I will fulfill against Eli all that I have spoken concerning his house, from beginning to end. And I declare to him that I am about to punish his house forever, for the iniquity that he knew, because his sons were blaspheming God, and he did not restrain them. Therefore I swear to the house of Eli that the iniquity of Eli’s house shall not be atoned for by sacrifice or offering forever” (1 Sam. 3:11-14).

You can imagine the hard spot for Samuel. When Eli asks him about the word from the Lord, Samuel told him everything. At this point, Samuel didn’t know about the former prophet. But Eli did. He responds to this vision with “It is the Lord. Let him do what seems good to him” (v. 18). The ministry of Eli and his sons is drawing to a close.

The new prophet, Samuel, will lead a renewal throughout the nation. Verses 19-21 ring with hope:

And Samuel grew, and the LORD was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground. And all Israel from Dan to Beersheba knew that Samuel was established as a prophet of the LORD. And the LORD appeared again at Shiloh, for the LORD revealed himself to Samuel at Shiloh by the word of the LORD (1 Sam. 3:19-21).

A new era is starting to dawn upon the people of God. Hannah’s grief and obedience led to Samuel traveling from the top of Israel to the bottom (Dan to Beersheba) bringing the Word of the Lord to God’s people. The contrast between the sons of Eli and Samuel is so clear. The darkness of the situation is changing. The silence of God has ended. God uses a little boy to bring spiritual renewal to the nation.

I trust you know that this is not the only time God has done this. But we need to watch closely, or we might be inclined to miss or dismiss what God is doing.

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!²

Some of you may be here today in need of a contrast—turning from the old and looking for the new. The Bible tells us that God has spoken now through his son.

² John Woodhouse, [*1 Samuel: Looking for a Leader*](#), Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2008), 61.

Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world (Heb. 1:1-2).

Jesus told a religious leader that his need was so great that he needed to be born again (John 3). And the simple message of the Bible is this:

. . . to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God (John 1:12-13).

You see, there's no culture too dark, no corruption so deep, and no sin so entrenched that God can't rescue you. In surprising and sovereign ways, God delivers his people in order make them new.

That's the story of Samuel. That's the story of the gospel.

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