**3 Sermonettes: 1 Samuel 1:9-2:11; 1 Samuel 2:12-21; 1 Samuel 2:22-36** July 2, 2017

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THREE DEVOTIONAL MEDITATIONS from 1 SAMUEL

**IV. Remember Hannah!**

 *1 Samuel 1:9Once when they had finished eating and drinking in Shiloh, Hannah stood up. Now Eli the priest was sitting on a chair by the doorpost of the Lord's temple. 10In bitterness of soul Hannah wept much and prayed to the Lord. 11And she made a vow, saying, “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…” 20In the course of time Hannah conceived and gave birth to a son. She named him Samuel, saying, “Because I asked the Lord for him…” (selected verses; for full text read 1 Samuel 1:9-2:11)*

 If you know one woman in the Old Testament, it should be Hannah. Look quickly! She is only mentioned in one and a half chapters of the Bible, and never again. Not later in the Old Testament. No New Testament passage refers to her. But you should remember her.

 In spite of her short presence in the divine record, she is presented as the most godly of women in the Hebrew Bible. She is the only Old Testament woman specifically said to pray, the only Old Testament woman specifically said to go up to the Lord’s house to worship, the only woman in the Old Testament to make and fulfill a vow to the Lord (Bergen, 67).

 In our last devotion in this series, we looked for a short time at her life which felt like a curse—you remember, with her loving husband Elkanah and his big blind spot of polygamy. Today we see what she did in that agony of despair, when she felt that there was no blessing upon her life. She did not break the marriage or stop trusting the Lord, as many do in these troubles. Hannah was drawn closer to God. She prayed. She prayed like you and I maybe have never prayed in our lives. She prayed better than most men (or women) ever will.

 But more than pray, she made a vow. A vow to take the greatest blessing she ever hoped for in her life—not a few hundred bucks, but something more valuable than becoming the Queen of Sheba—she promised to hand over an only child born to her in her barrenness.

 How cheaply we make promises. We can’t even show up at the promised time. We promise to help, but then find excuses, or just don’t. We make commitments that we know we won’t keep, even before we finish the sentence.

 God has heard a lot of promises in the anguish of prayer. He hears thieves promise to be honest, prostitutes promise to be chaste, students, professors and preachers promise to prepare better next time if only he will bless them beyond their preparation this time. And God knows that people usually don’t do what they promise.

 But it isn’t the prayer of Hannah, or her promise, or even the Lord’s answer I want us to take away today.

 Instead, remember Hannah’s answer to God’s answer. The Lord gave Hannah what she prayed for—a son, even though she was a barren woman. Hannah’s response was not merely an example, it is nearly the definition of sanctification. She fulfilled a most fabulous promise to God, in response to his even more fabulous goodness, mercy and blessings.

 It almost makes me want to lock up my mouth and throw away the key. *“Lord, help me to speak worthy, not worthless, words!”* (Jeremiah 15:19). Lord, let my *“Yes” be “Yes”, let my “No” be “No”* (Matt 5:37). Lord, teach me to speak the truth always, to only promise what I can and will do. Lord, help me keep my word, even if it hurts! (Psalm 15:4).

 Blessed with a child, probably for three years, Hannah stayed at home and marveled as every mother does. At first she thought she could not possibly love that child more than she already did. Then every day she found that she loved him more and more. She nursed that only child, all the while knowing that when the time came to wean the child, she would say good-bye to him.

 Back in the 90’s in Zambia, when prospective pastors would go to the Lutheran Bible Institute in Malawi for the beginning of pastor training, they would say good-bye to their family for three years. And it was truly good-bye. No visits, no cell phones, no telephones. Maybe a few letters. If you were ever there at their departure, you would have been moved to tears as the parents and surviving grandparents said, “Come closer, my son. Let me embrace you one last time. I might not be here when you return.” When they went off to the LBI, dedicated to the Lord as grown men, the parents cried.

 At least they were grown. But Hannah—she was dedicating a three year old, her only child! Sure, she would see him two or three days every year, but he would never again lodge under Elkanah’s roof. What do you think Hannah did as she left little Samuel in the high priest’s care? Did she cry? Complain? Regret her promise? I will tell you what Hannah did. Let me read a few verses from chapter 2.

 ***“Then Hannah prayed and said: ‘My heart rejoices in the Lord… for I delight in your deliverance. There is no one holy like the Lord; there is no one besides you; there is no Rock like our God’ …Then Elkanah went home to Ramah, but the boy ministered before the Lord”*** (1,2,11).

 Remember Hannah. Amen.

**V. A Study in Contrasts**

 *1 Samuel 2:11Then Elkanah went home to Ramah, but the boy [Samuel] ministered before the Lord under Eli the priest.*

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

 *18But Samuel was ministering before the Lord—a boy wearing a linen ephod. 19Each year his mother made him a little robe and took it to him when she went up with her husband to offer the annual sacrifice. 20Eli would bless Elkanah and his wife, saying, “May the Lord give you children by this woman to take the place of the one she prayed for and gave to the Lord.” Then they would go home… 26And the boy Samuel continued to grow in stature and in favor with the Lord and with men.*

 You may have never read a page of English author Charles Dickens, but you surely have heard his most famous sentence: “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness...” Whether Dickens’ is interesting or boring to you, those opening words of *A Tale of Two Cities* grab our attention. Something about contrasts makes us curious.

 Few greater contrasts are there than in the three men serving alongside each other in our reading.

 Briefly, we must acquaint ourselves with the situation. The tabernacle was an elaborate tent which was God’s holy precinct. There was a courtyard around the tabernacle. In that courtyard was an altar. This was the one and only place God allowed the entire nation of Israel to make their sacrifices.

 The two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, and the son of Hannah and Elkanah, Samuel, all served the Lord at this tabernacle in a town called Shiloh. (About a century later, the tabernacle would be replaced by Solomon’s temple in Jerusalem.) This tabernacle was not a spacious place. The tabernacle *and its courtyard* only covered ¼ acre. That’s probably smaller than the lot your house is built on! Hophni, Phinehas and Samuel all serving at this tabernacle could not help but bump into each other.

 The most noteworthy sin of Eli’s sons was regarding the Lord’s offerings. We lack the time to go into all the Mosaic rules and regulations, but we see the kernel of Hophni and Phinehas’ character. There burning on the altar every day – just burning to ashes mind you – was all this good meat. Not just any meat, but the fat, the best cuts. So here were these men of God, perhaps hungry men with hungry children back at home and maybe a wife who wished they did not have to struggle to make ends meet, and all that good meat going to waste. “Who is it helping anyway? Doesn’t God say in Psalm 50, *‘I have no need of a bull from your stall or of goats from your pens… If I were hungry I would not tell you, for the world is mine’* (10,12). God says he really doesn’t *need* these offerings. But they would make a big difference in my life!”

 And so the theft began. Maybe it started with Eli’s sons, maybe with Eli, maybe with some priest a few generations before. We don’t know. But we know how sin works. It starts small and grows. It grew so that by the time of our reading Eli’s sons took the best meat for themselves. They even threatened to beat up worshipers who wouldn’t give in to their demands.

 Meanwhile we watch Samuel’s birth parents, Elkanah and Hannah. They make their annual journey to the tabernacle in Shiloh. They visit their young son while there. They are godly people who know that God gave them all they have, and so they will use their lives for God. Samuel, whatever else was going on around him, continued to grow in his knowledge of God and his service to him.

 How could these three, serving in such close quarters be such opposites? Two of them were so evil that God chose to forever memorialize their wickedness and punishment in the pages of Scripture. Serving in the tabernacle alongside them was another one named Samuel. He is described as one who ***“continued to grow in stature and in favor with the Lord and with men.”*** That description was quoted almost verbatim to describe our Lord Jesus in his childhood (Luke 2:52)! How could the worst and best, the iniquitous and devout, the blasphemous and the godly, the self-serving and the selfless, coexist?

 Hophni, Phinehas and Samuel—what contrasts! All grew up in the temple of the Lord. All three, doubtlessly had received the Old Testament sacrament of circumcision on their eighth day. All three often heard God’s care for his people proclaimed in the tabernacle. All three frequently saw the animal sacrifices that reminded them of God’s forgiveness. And yet…

 These words of God describe the opposites, but they do not try to explain them. Which is maybe good. Because it doesn’t matter how one gets into unbelief that matters, it is simply being in unbelief that damns. And it doesn’t matter how one comes to saving faith in Jesus, just that one does trust in Jesus as his Savior from sin.

 What our reading does show us is how each lived out his conviction. The contrasts were clear portrayals of what was in the heart. Two thought that God ought to give them what they wanted in life, and so they used God to get what they wanted. Samuel, in contrast, used his life to serve God because he knew that God had given him all. The contrast in deeds was a reflection of contrasts in the heart.

 Just maybe—no, almost certainly—when you see the selfishness, the argumentativeness, the negativity in yourself, you will see that it is a reflection of something inside of you, something not right. That is what sin is. It is a problem within. Not outside of us. May God give you a receptive spirit that will realize this truth, repent, and trust your Savior to forgive. And then may God give you the resolve to use your life in his service, wherever he has put you. Amen.

**VI. It’s about HIS Honor!**

 *1 Samuel 2:22Now Eli, who was very old, heard about everything his sons were doing to all Israel and how they slept with the women who served at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting. 23So he said to them, “Why do you do such things? I hear from all the people about these wicked deeds of yours. 24No, my sons; it is not a good report that I hear spreading among the Lord’s people. 25If 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…*

 *27Now a man of God came to Eli and said to him, “This is what the Lord says… 29‘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?’” (For a full reading, also read verses 30-36)*

 There were problems in Shiloh, weren’t there? At the tabernacle, God’s priests, Hophni and Phinehas, used their position to fill their stomachs and satisfy their desires. I wonder if that’s why they became priests?

 Whatever their reason, everybody knew about it. Therefore – and now I am reading from the sacred record – therefore ***“[Their father Eli] said to them, ‘Why do you do such things? I hear from all the people about these wicked deeds of yours. 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?”*** A breath of fresh air finally blows through Shiloh. Good job, Eli! And yet…

 Let me ask you who have been in authority, perhaps as NCOs. You hope and expect, that people will do what you tell them to do. But when they don’t, this is where life becomes unpleasant. You have to pull rank. You force someone to go against their will or face consequences. Sergeants need to do this—and pastors, and parents, and floor managers. Anyone in a position of authority and trust will have to do this some time.

 Eli is the high priest. He holds the highest religious office in the land. His sons are next in succession. It is his duty to ensure that the office of God’s high priest is honored and protected. His sons bring disgrace to the office, so he talks to them. And that is it. It dies there. Eli’s sons go on their merry way.

 Eli did a good thing, but the point of 1 Samuel chapter 2 is this: ***“His sons did not listen.”*** And do you know what Eli did next? Nothing. Hophni and Phinehas went on adulterating the women and stealing the offerings.

 In a sense, I have sympathy for Eli. He knew what was right. He addressed the issue, even if it was too little too late. But he did address it. His own flesh and blood were the traitors who refused to listen.

 When you come into a position of spiritual authority, you enter the rebuking business. Oh, that sounds negative, but it is true. A pastor, an elder, a parent must first be a proclaimer of God’s love in Jesus Christ. But we live in a sinful world. And a pastor’s, an elder’s, a parent’s job is to do something that most people do not have the courage to do: to rebuke in love.

 But you worry what they will think! They might think, “There he goes again, so high and mighty, thinking his way is the only way, demanding that I bow down and kiss his feet.” It hurts us to think that people think that way about us. And maybe that is what made Eli pull his punches.

 Some don’t rebuke because they do not want to lose a friend. Or maybe, like Eli, it is his own child who bucks against criticism, and the parent mentally worries, “If I confront my son about his sin, he might never come back. I need to ‘keep communication open.’” Yes, those are wise-sounding words, and there is just enough truth in them that if you squint hard enough you can imagine everyone living happily ever after. But they won’t.

 It isn’t about you and your honor. It is about God and God’s honor. And in failing to restrain his sons, perhaps Eli kept communication open but he earned God’s curse, and pushed his sons a few steps farther down the road to perdition.

 Was God punishing Eli for his sons’ sins? No. God punished Eli for his own sin (Bergen, 83). His sin was, as God said, ***“You honor your sons more than me…”*** And then he pronounced a divine curse on Eli and his house that would make your ears tingle.

 There is perhaps no job more unpleasant than confronting people with sin. This sort of stuff keeps you awake at night. You know it needs to be done. And then you will start to count what you can lose: maybe friends. People will brand you as intolerant. Others will call you old-fashioned. And so you will do what Eli did. After much worry and prayer and far too much time, you will finally bring up the subject. And when you see the fire in their eyes and hear the shouts in your ears, you will run like a chicken chased by a Rottweiler. You will be careful to never bring it up again. You will be Eli. And you will deserve what Eli got, because Eli forgot that this was not about him, or even his sons, but about God and God’s Honor.

 Heavenly Father, forgive us for Jesus’ sake. Heavenly Father, strengthen us, we ask in Jesus’ name. Heavenly Father, give us the courage to be most concerned about *your* honor.

 Now let us leave the sad example of Eli. Let us go to a glorious benediction in Revelation, God’s blessing upon those who speak God’s words in the most difficult of times: *“The accuser of our brothers [the devil], has been hurled down. [Our brothers in the faith] overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death. Therefore rejoice, you heavens!’”* (12:10-12).

 May God give us courage and wisdom to confront sin as the Good Shepherd desires. Amen.