

REAL PEOPLE, REAL GOD:

Samuel, Hannah, Eli

Today, we begin with a look at Samuel's parents (before they were parents)—Elkanah and Hannah. They are a wonderful picture of faithfulness to Yahweh during the time of Israel's judges. Remember the time of the Judges?

“Israel had no king, and *everyone did as they saw fit.*” **Judges 21:25** (*emphasis added*)

The Non-Example

To illustrate how low Israel had fallen, not even their priests were being faithful to Yahweh. The sons of Eli, the high priest, were as corrupt as they come. 1 Sam. 2:12-36 tells us that Hophni and Phinehas were sticking forks in the boiling pot and stealing the sacrificed meat for themselves, and forcing people to give them raw meat before the fat was burned as an offering to the Lord.

It may not sound so awful to us, but it would be similar to a couple of pastors sticking their hand in the offering plate and removing some bills as it passed by. Or a crooked treasurer cooking the books so he could embezzle money.

Both Hophni and Phinehas eventually died on the same day as a sign that the Lord removed His blessing from Eli's family. But that's another story. In contrast to these corrupt priests, we have Samuel's soon-to-be parents—Elkanah and Hannah.

The Faithful Couple

We are given a wonderfully refreshing account of some REAL PEOPLE *really* seeking after God in 1 Samuel.

“Year after year [Elkanah] went up from his town to worship and sacrifice to the LORD Almighty at Shiloh, where Hophni and Phinehas, the two sons of Eli, were priests of the LORD.” **1 Samuel 1:3**

Somehow in a world where everyone followed his own way, Elkanah was a devout follower of Yahweh. And Hannah, as we discover, had some kind of relationship with our REAL GOD, that allows her to cry out to Him for a son!

Hannah's Desperate Cry

Misunderstood

Hannah had been barren for years, and was tormented by her husband's second wife, who evidently had children aplenty. Elkanah didn't seem to understand why Hannah was so upset. He basically gives her a "Why do you need kids? You've got me!" reply to her sorrow. (We'll try to overlook his insensitivity for the purposes of this blog post.)

We find Hannah misunderstood, sad, and desperate—feeling completely alone. So during one of their annual visits to the Tabernacle, she displays her emotions. Imagine the scene. Crowds of people seated around the Tabernacle, eating the ceremonial fellowship meal, chatting quietly. Eli, the high priest, is seated near the entrance to the Tabernacle with his sons and other priests while pilgrims from all Israel are scattered over the hillsides. And toward the end of their meal...

“Once when they had **finished eating and drinking in Shiloh, Hannah stood up**. Now **Eli the priest was sitting on his chair by the doorpost of the LORD's house**. In her deep anguish Hannah **prayed to the LORD, weeping bitterly**. And she made a vow, saying, ‘**LORD Almighty**, if you will only **look on 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.*’” **1 Samuel 1:9-11** (*emphasis added*)

Chastized

Because she was praying silently, the high priest thought she was drunk! So he publicly chastises her for this heartfelt prayer! But Hannah remains strong and defends her faith:

“‘I have been praying here out of my great anguish and grief.’ Eli answered, ‘...may the God of Israel grant you what you have asked of him.’...Then she went her way and ate something, and her face was no longer downcast.” **1 Samuel 1:16-18**

It would be like someone in church who danced down the aisle or stood and cried out to God in the middle of a pastor's sermon. Wouldn't the rest of the congregation (all of us prim and proper folks) lower our heads and try not to make eye contact?

Desperate

This scene with Hannah is that-kind-of awkward! But she doesn't care. She knows that Yahweh is the only One who can help her in her desperate state, and she doesn't care what anyone thinks.

Have you ever experienced that kind of abandon? That kind of desperation? Purely seeking God, no matter what the consequences?

And here's the kicker... As she begs for a child with one breath, she promises to *give the child back* with the next!!! Really? And she's not just giving him to the Lord for a week or month or a few years. No. She's giving him to the Lord *ALL THE DAYS OF HIS LIFE?*

These pictures of Hannah show not only her desperation but also the deep measures of her faith. She's getting it right, seeking hard after her REAL GOD with her whole heart.

God Heard

Perhaps one of the most amazing things about Hannah is her faith *in spite of* all the struggles she faced.

- Tormented by hubby's second wife
- Persecuted by Eli the priest
- Silence from Yahweh—until she becomes pregnant

I mean, she didn't get a burning bush like Moses or a ladder to heaven like Jacob.

“So in the course of time Hannah became pregnant and gave birth to a son. She named him Samuel, saying, ‘Because I asked the Lord for him.’” **1 Samuel 1:20**

When the Lord finally answers her prayer, she names him *Samuel*, meaning: “Heard by God.” 1 Sam. 2:21 tells us God not only heard her prayer for one child, but He honored her faith by giving her three more sons and two daughters.

Faith After the Birth

For the first few years after Samuel's birth, Hannah didn't make the annual journey to the Tabernacle with Elkanah, but instead stayed home with Samuel. Elkanah allowed it but—faithful spiritual leader that he was—reminded her of her vow to God.

“‘Do what seems best to you,’ her husband Elkanah told her. ‘Stay here until you have weaned him; only may the LORD make good [your] word.’” **1 Samuel 1:23**

Was Elkanah happy about giving up the firstborn son of his favored wife? I'm sure he wasn't, but true to his character, he was more concerned with Hannah's spiritual health than their earthly comfort.

When Samuel is weaned (age 3-4 in those days), Hannah finally takes him to the tabernacle to give him back to the Lord. Can you imagine the faith it took to give her young boy into the care of the corrupt priesthood? Eeee-gad!

God Reveals Himself to Samuel

God establishes a connection with Samuel at a very early age—a connection like we haven't seen since Moses or Joshua. And even though their stories were only a few audio studies ago, over 300 years has passed since Joshua in terms of Israel's history. God's revelations to Samuel are a really BIG DEAL!

Especially when we consider that Samuel shouldn't even have been serving in the tabernacle. He wasn't a Levite! He was born into the tribe of Ephraim. But our REAL GOD had a plan for this child, and He began their intimate relationship soon after Hannah fulfilled her vow...

“The boy Samuel ministered before the LORD under Eli. In those days **the word of the LORD was rare**; there were not many visions. One night Eli, whose eyes were becoming so weak that he could barely see, was lying down in his usual place. The lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the house of the LORD, **where the ark of God was**. Then the LORD called Samuel. Samuel answered, ‘Here I am.’ And he ran to Eli and said, ‘Here I am; you called me.’ But Eli said, ‘I did not call; go back and lie down.’ So he went and lay down.” **1 Samuel 3:1-5 (emphasis added)**

Bewildered

Samuel didn't know it was the Lord's voice, because this was the *first time* the Lord has spoken to Him.

“Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD: The word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him.” **1 Samuel 3:7**

This whole “God speaking” process happened two more times before even Eli realized what was happening. After some instruction from Eli, Samuel finally knows what to do when the Lord calls his name...

“The LORD **came and stood there**, calling as at the other times, ‘Samuel! Samuel!’ Then Samuel said, ‘**Speak, for your servant is listening.**’ And the LORD said to Samuel: ‘See, I am **about to do something in Israel** that will **make the ears of everyone who hears about it tingle.**’” **1 Samuel 3:10-11**

The Lord came and *stood there*. Not even Moses or Joshua had the Lord just STAND THERE in their presence!

Grace for Eli

But here's sort of a cool thought...why didn't Yahweh just visit Samuel like that the first time He called his name? I believe our REAL GOD wanted to include Eli in this process. Our GRACIOUS God wanted Eli to experience His presence at least once before he died. Another picture of our REAL GOD who wants to *relate* to His people. Eli—like all of us—had some good moments and bad moments, but he's still able to connect with God and be used by God.

Prophet, Priest, and Judge

During God's initial visitation in the tabernacle, He reveals to Samuel the judgement He plans for Eli's family. This young boy is called to tell "his boss" the bad news. Eli encourages him to tell all, and Samuel recites EVERYTHING, even the hard stuff—the mark of a true prophet. It's the beginning of a lifetime of successful ministry...

“The LORD was with Samuel as he grew up, and he **let none of Samuel's words fall to the ground**. And **all Israel** from Dan to Beersheba **recognized that Samuel was attested as a prophet of the LORD**. The **LORD continued to appear at Shiloh**, and there he revealed himself to Samuel through his word.”

1 Samuel 3:19-21 (emphasis added)

Samuel plays an important transitional role in Israel's history:

- Restores regular encounters with our REAL GOD
- “All Israel” recognized him as a national leader, not just a regional judge.
- He was established as a spiritual leader (a prophet of Yahweh), not just a military one, like the other judges.

Samuel was prophet, priest, and judge—but Israel still had no king.

Israel Wants a King

Regardless of what a fantastic job Samuel has done (for an entire lifetime), he can't live forever. And his sons are a disappointment...

“When Samuel grew old, he appointed his sons as Israel's leaders...But his sons...turned aside after dishonest gain and accepted bribes and perverted justice. So...all the elders of Israel...came to Samuel at Ramah. They said to him, ‘You are old, and your sons do not follow your ways; now appoint a king to lead us, such as all the other nations have.’”

1 Samuel 8:1-5

Where They Were Headed

Let's pause for a moment and do a quick review of Israel's kings (since we have the benefit of hindsight). During Samuel's days, Israel showed some revival of spiritual health, but with the ushering in of Israel's kings, God's people deteriorate again until God eventually scatters them among other nations as judgment for their sins. The books of 1 and 2 Kings and 1 and 2 Chronicles shows the process of that deterioration, how Israel splits into two nations (Israel and Judah), and things go from bad to worse.

But our REAL GOD lets it all unfold, giving His people over to their desires, the worst kind of discipline. However, He does send a fair warning through Samuel.

“Samuel told all the words of the Lord to the people... ‘This is what the king who will reign over you will claim as his rights: He will take your sons and make them serve with his chariots and horses... Some he will assign to be commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and others to plow his ground and reap his harvest, and still others to make weapons of war and equipment for his chariots. He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive groves... He will take a tenth of your grain and of your vintage... Your male and female servants and the best of your cattle and donkeys... He will take a tenth of your flocks, and you yourselves will become his slaves...’ **1 Samuel 8:10-19**

Samuel's Farewell

In the final years of Samuel's ministry, he anoints Saul from the tribe of Benjamin as Israel's first king. Saul is an impressive young man without equal among the Israelites, a head taller than anyone else, but his heart doesn't measure up.

Samuel's ministry continues in the waning years of his life, and today we want to end with his “Farewell Address.” At this point in his ministry, he's setting things in place for the next generation to follow after him.

I'll summarize parts of 1 Samuel 12 and directly quote the rest. My hope is that you'll get a sense of Samuel's heart as he passes the baton. The heart of one who has had a lifetime of intimacy with God. What I love here is the prophet's heart, reminding Israel of who God is and beseeching them to turn to *their* One, True God and **know Him**.

1 Samuel 12:1-5

He begins by basically saying, “I've walked with you all these years. Have I done any wrong to you? Stolen anything from you? Wronged anyone?” And those present affirm that he has been God's faithful leader among them.

1 Samuel 12:6-16

He gives a quick overview of their history from Moses through the judges to their current circumstances under their new king that Samuel himself anointed. He assures them of God's faithfulness if they and their king are obedient to God's commands and God's wrath if they and their king are disobedient.

1 Samuel 12:17-19

Samuel, in a rare and dazzling spectacle of God's power, calls down thunder and rain on their wheat harvest to prove God's displeasure with Israel's desire for a king. The people are stunned and repent of their sinful desire for a king and ask Samuel to pray for them so they won't die.

1 Samuel 12:20-25

With a prophet's heart, Samuel is able to show both God's love and His judgment on Israel and promise them Yahweh's blessing if they remain faithful and His wrath if they turn away and serve idols. He promises to continue to teach them the good and right way but warns that if they persist in choosing evil, both they and their king will perish.

How Do You See God?

REAL PEOPLE's View of God

Lyndsey and I have been struck by the Israelites' (and sometimes current culture's) view of God—that He is either pleased or angry with little in between. It seems that Israel often sees God as only a means to an end, wanting his pleasure or approval as an avenue to His power.

Much like the pagan deities of their time, they try to “bribe” Yahweh with good works or sacrifice in order to win His power on their behalf. Is that so different than many folks today who hope to BE good enough to win God's favor? How many times have we heard, “They were such good people. How could God do that to them?” Does God owe us anything because we act rightly?

Prophets' View of God

It seems to me that Samuel (and other prophets like him) saw God's love as the motivating emotion from which ALL His action stems. God's anger came from His love. His justice...because of His love. The working of His power was and is a natural outpouring of His love that works toward the goal of bringing His people to Himself.

He chose Israel as His treasured possession and was willing to do *anything* to bring them back into relationship with Himself—even if it appeared He was against them. The prophets seemed

to understand that our God is with us, even when He is against us. And when He is against us, it is for good and right purposes. Our REAL GOD is never NOT with us.

Today's Question:

- Could you share a small example of how you have seen that our God is with you or someone you know, even when it seemed He was against you?

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