

The Books of 1 and 2 Samuel

Lesson 2: Eli's Wicked Sons and the Lord Calls Samuel -- 1 Samuel 2:12-3:21

Two pictures hang side by side in this passage, and the longer you look at them, the more they unsettle you. In one frame stand Hophni and Phinehas, the sons of the high priest, men with the best religious pedigree in Israel, robed in the holy garments, standing at the very altar of God. In the other frame is a little boy in a linen ephod, sweeping the floors, lighting the lamps, sleeping near the ark. The two priests have everything: position, privilege, access. The boy has nothing but a borrowed bed and a willing heart. And yet the text tells us, almost like a refrain, that the boy "grew on, and was in favour both with the Lord, and also with men," while the priests are called "sons of Belial" who "knew not the Lord."

That phrase should arrest us. They knew not the Lord. These were men who handled holy things every single day, who could recite the law, who wore the uniform of God's service, and they did not know Him. Familiarity with religion had become a substitute for fellowship with God. They used their office to fatten themselves on the people's offerings and to defile the worship of God with their sin. Here is a sober warning that proximity to holy things is no guarantee of a holy heart. You can grow up in the church, know all the answers, even lead in worship, and remain a stranger to God.

And then there is Eli. He is not a wicked man like his sons, but he is a weak one. He hears of their sin and offers a mild rebuke, "Nay, my sons; for it is no good report that I hear," but he does not restrain them. He honored his sons above God, and a heavy word of judgment falls on his house. There is a quiet ache in Eli's story for every parent and every leader: it is possible to love God in our hearts and still fail to honor Him in our homes, to know what is right and lack the resolve to do the hard thing.

But the night is not all darkness. In a time when "the word of the Lord was precious," when revelation was rare and the lamp of God had nearly gone out, God speaks. He does not speak to the high priest. He calls a boy by name, again and again, until the boy is taught to answer, "Speak; for thy servant heareth." That is the turning point of the whole passage, and perhaps of your week. God still speaks. God still calls. And the question that hangs over us is not whether He is speaking, but whether we have learned to listen, and whether, when we hear, we will say yes.

Group Discussion: Hophni and Phinehas held the highest religious office in Israel, yet the text says they "knew not the Lord." How is it possible to be deeply involved in religious activity and still not truly know God, and how can we guard our own hearts against this danger?

Personal Reflection: Samuel learned to pray, “Speak; for thy servant heareth.” Are you living more like someone who tells God what you have already decided, or like a servant who is genuinely listening for His direction? What would help you become a better listener this week?

Read 1 Samuel 2:12–3:21

Study Questions

1. What does the contrast between Eli’s sons and the boy Samuel reveal about what God values, and why does nearness to holy things never guarantee a holy heart?
2. The priests used their sacred position to serve themselves rather than God and the people. Where are you tempted to use a role, gift, or position God gave you for your own advantage rather than His glory?
3. Scripture says Hophni and Phinehas “knew not the Lord,” though they served at His altar daily. What does it mean to truly know God, and how is that different from merely knowing about Him or being busy in His service?
4. Samuel “grew on, and was in favour both with the Lord, and also with men.” What habits and choices help a person grow steadily in favor with God rather than drifting, and which of those do you most need?
5. Eli rebuked his sons but failed to restrain them, honoring them above God. What does this teach about the seriousness of how we lead in our homes and in the church, and about the difference between mild disapproval and real correction?

6. Eli knew what was right yet lacked the resolve to act on it. Where in your own life do you already know what God requires but are hesitating to do the hard, costly thing?
7. God's word was "precious" and rare in those days, yet He chose to speak and call Samuel by name. What does this teach us about God's initiative in seeking and calling His people even in dark times?
8. Samuel did not at first recognize the Lord's voice and needed Eli's guidance to respond. Who has God placed in your life to help you discern and respond to Him, and how can you both receive and offer such help?
9. God gave Samuel a heavy word of judgment against Eli's house, and Samuel had to deliver it faithfully though it was painful. What does this passage reveal about God's holiness, His justice toward persistent sin, and the cost of speaking His truth faithfully?
10. Looking back across this lesson, name one specific way the Lord is forming you to be more like Jesus, whether in genuinely knowing God, leading faithfully, or saying with Samuel, "Speak; for thy servant heareth."

Digging Deeper

Reflect on these passages: Matthew 7:21-23, those who did mighty works in His name yet hear 'I never knew you'; John 10:27, the sheep that know the Shepherd's voice and follow Him; 1

Samuel 2:30, them that honour God He will honour; 1 Timothy 3:4-5, an overseer who rules his own house well; Hebrews 3:7-8, today if you hear His voice, harden not your heart.

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