**Corruption and immorality in the house of God** 30/1/22 dkm

Read: 1Samuel 2:12-26, Hebrews 10:19-39

Text: 1Samuel 2:12-26

Psalms: 122old, 8, 14, 72old

When God made a covenant with the people he saved out of Egypt, he told them how they were to worship him. The second half of the Book of Exodus is all about the building of a house of worship and the ordination of Aaron and his sons as priests. As priests, they conducted worship that involved animal sacrifices and other offerings the people brought to the Lord. When the Lord brought the people into Canaan, the tent of meeting was set up at Shiloh, just north of Jerusalem. As a theocracy, the priests effectively ruled in Israel, although the Lord raised up judges from time to time to administer justice and lead the people in battle against enemies. The tribes were not always united, but there was one place where all came to worship- until Jeroboam set up his gold calves as alternative places of worship.

We do not hear much about the priesthood during the days of the Judges, but with ‘everyone doing what was right in his own eyes’ (Judg 21:25), clearly the priesthood was in a bad state (cf. Judg 17:5). Here in 1Samuel, the extent of the ‘rot’ within the priesthood is portrayed in shocking detail. The extent of the decline is highlighted by a comparison of two families, the family of Elkanah and Hannah, and the family of Eli the priest. The godliness of Hannah in teaching her infant son, and in keeping her vow by giving Samuel to serve the Lord, stands in contrast to the failure of Eli to teach or discipline his sons. The corruption of the priesthood contributed to the demand for a king.

**1. Corrupt priests**

The significance of the insignificant, barren woman called Hannah from the hills of Ephraim having a son starts to become clear when we hear about the sons of Eli. We previously noted the corruption within the population when Eli mistook Hannah’s behaviour in prayer for that of a drunk woman. But Eli listened to Hannah’s rebuke and blessed her. When she brought her infant son to Eli, he took Samuel ‘under his wing’ and went on to bless Elkanah and his wife when they came each year to worship in Shiloh (2:20).

The wonderful story of the birth of Samuel and the whole-hearted rejoicing in the Lord of his parents (2:1) comes to an abrupt end with the words, ‘Now the sons of Eli were corrupt/wicked’ (2:12). The Hebrew reads, ‘were sons of Belial’ meaning, ‘sons of Satan’. Declaring the priests of the Lord to be sons of Satan is tragic but by no means unique in the history of worship under the old covenant, or the new. What did Jeremiah find in his day but corrupt priests, and what did Jesus find, and what do we find in our day? Is it time for judgment to begin in the house of God (1Peter 4:17)?

Before telling us about the wickedness of the sons of Eli, the narrator says, ‘They did not know the Lord’ (2:12). Knowledge of the Lord was basic to the covenant relationship the Lord had established with his people. This relationship was marked by the fear of God, by faith, and by obedience and devotion. The sons of Eli had grown up in a priestly family and were set aside to serve the Lord in the tent of meeting. But they failed to understand the covenant and the responsibilities of the office they inherited. They accepted the privileges and abused these privileges as they satisfied the lusts of the flesh.

The first sin of the sons of Eli was corruption with regard to the sacrifices, and the second with the people, especially the women, bringing the sacrifices. The people wanted a king to be like other nations but these priests were a step ahead, already behaving like the priests of other nations.

Under the covenant established through Moses, priests were well provided for. In addition to getting a share of the offerings brought by the people, they were allocated specific ‘cuts’ from the animals they sacrificed on behalf of the worshipper. They were allowed to take the right thigh and breast (Lev 7:31, 32). The meat of the sacrifice was boiled, except for the Passover lamb. The priests at Shiloh had adopted their own custom it seems (2:13,14); they sent a servant with a ‘three- pronged fleshhook’ to thrust into the pot of boiling meat and took to the priest whatever this hook brought out. Maybe they reasoned that whatever the fleshhook brought up was by divine providence, but it was still a violation of the divine command.

The sons of Eli went a step further and demanded raw meat for roasting (2:15). As we know, roasted meat tastes better with the fat on. But under the law given to Moses, the fat of the sacrifice belonged to the Lord, and had to be burned (Lev 3:3-5, 16). The priest was not free to take whatever portion he demanded, and certainly not free to take what belonged to the Lord.

Under the old covenant the Lord gave instructions as to how he was to be worshipped, and he has done the same under the new covenant in the blood of Jesus Christ. Let no one presume they are free ‘adapt’ the way they worship as they see fit, especially when such ‘adaptions’ are for the benefit of themselves- which is usually the case!

Even the worshippers at Shiloh knew that the fat of their sacrifices belonged to the Lord (2:16). They put up with the priests stealing meat that belonged to them and their children, but taking the fat portion was a sin against God. When they told the servants or the ‘thugs’ of the priests, they were met with threats of violence: ‘Give it now or we will take it by force’ (2:16). The narrator makes the solemn and ominous comment: ‘The sin of the young men was very great in the Lord’s sight, for they were treating the Lord’s offering with contempt’ (2:17 NIV).

We come across churches in which worshippers know the truth of the gospel better than their pastor. We also see churches in which worship is no longer reverent, and may be rejected by the Lord. We must worship the Lord with reverence and godly fear or awe (Heb 12:28). We must worship in ways that are acceptable to the Lord, which means in ways that the Lord has ordained in his word.

The narrator pauses to draw a contrast: ‘But Samuel ministered before the Lord’ (2:18). But we will continue for the moment with the wicked sons of Eli and touch on Eli’s response to their wickedness. Their wickedness extended to sexual immorality, to sleeping with women coming to the tent of meeting (2:22). ‘They had turned the tabernacle into a brothel, a place where sin was committed rather than confessed’ (Davis). When there is no fear of God, when reverence and awe go out the door, all manner of wickedness enters in, and all aspects of life are corrupted. Again, we know churches that no longer regard the Bible as the word of God, and see these same churches accepting adultery, as well as homosexuality, in their male and female pastors. They argue that such behaviour is permissible under the law of the land. Eli’s sons, no doubt, argued that prostitution was permissible for pagan priests so why not for them.

**2. Conduct of Eli**

‘Now Eli was very old’ (2:22). This comment is given as fact, not as an excuse for his behaviour as father of Hophni and Phinehas. We have seen him blessing Elkanah and Hannah, and maybe envying them as parents of a boy like Samuel. The fact is, Eli knew what his sons were doing but did nothing to stop them, apart from a speaking a few words, which they ignored. Their immoral behaviour was common knowledge in the land. The people were complaining to Eli about his sons and asking why he did nothing to stop them. Why was he letting them corrupt their worship? Sure, he was old and his sons might have ‘roughed’ him up, but he could have removed them from their roles within the house of God.

We will see that Eli was severely reprimanded when an unknown ‘man of God’ came to announce judgment upon his sons (2:27). He rebuked his sons but they did not listen (2:25). Clearly, he had failed to teach them obedience and the fear of God when they were growing up- in contrast to the parents of Samuel. He may have been a loving father, but love must include correction and discipline, especially when they are young. His sons were now adults, so what could Eli do? If they were simply adults in the wider population he could not do much besides grieve and pray. But they were priests in the house of God and he should have removed! The apostle Paul insisted that a sexually immoral member of the church at Corinth be cut off from the church and handed over to Satan (1Cor 5:4, 5).

Eli admitted that his sons were making the Lord’s people transgress (2:24). He makes the profound and prophetic comment: ‘If one man sins against another, God will judge him. But if a man sins against the Lord who will intercede for him’? (2:25). Who indeed! All sin is against God but some sin is in direct defiance of God, sin akin to trampling the Son of God underfoot, to counting the blood of the covenant … a common thing, and insulting the Spirit of grace (Heb 10:29). These words apply to the new covenant, which makes them all the more relevant to us. But we have a picture of trampling on the blood of the sacrifice and treating God’s holy law with contempt here with the sons of Eli. Eli was, in effect, telling his sons, ‘It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God’ (Heb 10:31). The prophetic aspect of his words to his sons is that under the new covenant God has provided a mediator for us in his Son, our Lord Jesus Christ (Heb 7:25, 26).

The apostle Paul writes of the immoral man being ‘handed over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord’ (1Cor 5:5). Eli refused to remove his sons from ministry, but the Lord would do so. In fact, he had already willed to do so by killing them (2:25). ‘God will not be mocked’ (Gal 6:7), or as God says here in verse 30, ‘Those who honour me I will honour, but those who despise me shall be lightly esteemed’. The Lord willed to put these reprobates to death. The sovereign, omnipotent and holy God had given these impudent and immoral priests up to the lusts of the flesh for the destruction of the flesh.

**3. Quiet Samuel**

‘But Samuel ministered before the Lord, even as a child, wearing a linen ephod’ (2:18). Back in verse 11 we also read of Samuel ministering to the Lord before Eli the priest, and again in the first verse of the next chapter. The narrator cannot refer to Eli’s sons as ministering before the Lord but points to the child as doing so! Samuel, as we will see, obey the voice of Eli and then the voice of the Lord- Eli’s sons did nether. Even as the Lord willed to kill Hophni and Phinehas, he was preparing a new man to minister before him as priest, as well as prophet and also judge in Israel (7:6, 9).

To sharpen the contrast between the two families, we are reminded of the sacrifice Hannah made in lending her son to the Lord (1:28). Each year she made her growing son a new robe and brought it to Shiloh when she came with her husband to ‘offer the yearly sacrifice’ (2:19). The linen ephod was a sleeveless garment that priests wore over their robe. The description of Samuel’s growth and development is similar to the description of Jesus’ growth as a child (2:21, 26, Luke 12:52).

‘The key note of verse 19-21 is Yahweh’s generous kindness in giving Hannah five additional children’. ‘The Lord visited Hannah and she bore three sons and two daughters’ (2:21). As we just noted, ‘The Lord honours those who honour him’, and he is powerful to bless those who look to him for blessing. That Eli could bless Elkanah and his wife in the name of the Lord makes his failure to bring blessing to his own family especially tragic, and is a stark warning to all servants of the Lord, and indeed all fathers, with regard to teaching their children.