

## **JUDGMENT BEGINS AT THE HOUSE OF GOD**

1 Samuel 2:11-36 1 Peter 4:12-19

### **INTRODUCTION**

Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ,

- The state of things in Israel at this time was not just some personal sadness as perhaps chapter one seems to portray, so that, as we saw, ‘out of a slough of despond, God gave Hannah a son so fond.’ And in that son and the joy he brought to Hannah’s heart she could see ‘the end in the start;’ she could see in that beginning of God’s blessing a wonderful end, and she sang about that in the earlier part of chapter two.
- Nor is it only, though hardly merely, the diagnosis of a president’s annual ‘state of the nation’ address, that there is a kind of political darkness over the land, as some of Hannah’s reflections and the prophecy of a king in her song in the earlier part of chapter two might indicate. And to lighten that darkness, God would send a king with strength who would deal to his enemies.
- It is a terrible religious darkness that hangs over Israel. It is as dark in the temple as it is in Parliament House. For here are the priests flogging prime roasting cuts off the Lord’s offerings. Taking the first fruits for themselves instead of letting God have them, we might say. And for good measure, helping themselves to the temple servant girls in the very cloakrooms of the sanctuary, if you please.

Ultimately congregation, everything in life is religious. At the back of and underneath everything is God and the state of our relationship with God. And for that reason salvation must always be a double-sided affair.

- We see that right from the very beginning. Even as God gave Adam and Eve the promise of a son who would one day come and deliver them from their sin, at the same time he cast them out of Eden for the present, in judgment.
- Even as God forgave Israel for their sins down through the Old Testament times, he did so by requiring that their sins be paid for with the blood of bulls and of goats.
- And we too, of course, are saved from our sins because God condemned them in Jesus Christ.

So too, for Israel to be saved out of its great darkness, there had to be a judgment and there had to be a cleansing. Samuel is, as we have seen already, a John the Baptist kind of figure. So the ideas of Malachi chapter three are what are operating in our text this morning. Perhaps you have even heard it in Handel’s Messiah.

*Behold, I am going to send my messenger and he will clear the way before me and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight. “Behold he is coming”, says the Lord of Hosts.*

*But who can endure the day of his coming and who can stand when he appears, for he is like a refiner’s fire and like fuller’s soap and he will sit as a smelter and purifier of silver and he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver so that they may present to the Lord offerings in righteousness.*

For that new king to come, that king who would deliver Israel, David, the way must be prepared.

Our text this morning is telling us that blessing can only be restored as a right relationship with God is restored and for that, judgment must begin at the house of God. I think we can understand our text this morning if we just follow it through in its natural order. So I have divided the text according to its four natural divisions: verse twelve – “*Now the sons of Eli*”; verse eighteen – “*Now Samuel*”; verse twenty-two – “*Now Eli*”; and verse twenty-seven – “*Then a man of God*”; but I want to say, that as: “*Now a man of God.*” In the Hebrew all of those four sentences begin with exactly the same words. Hebrew has a word for “*and*” that does duty for lots of ideas and it can properly be translated with many English words. But in the Hebrew it’s the same word and I think that in our text this morning, it marks a natural division at each of those verses. So first of all then,

**1. NOW THE SONS OF ELI** (v.12) “*were worthless men. They did not know the Lord.*” Well, that tells us everything. It reminds us of that third generation in Judges chapter two that we saw two or three years ago. But there is more to it than that, “*Nor did they know the custom of the priests with the people.*” In other words they were priests but they did not know their ministry, they did not know their calling.

In Luke chapter two, verse fifty-two, we read about the Lord Jesus Christ that “*He increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and men.*” In one Timothy chapter four the apostle Paul says to Timothy, the young pastor of Ephesus, Timothy, “*give attention to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation and teaching. Do not neglect the spiritual gift that is in you. Take pains with these things, be absorbed in them so that your progress may be evident to all. Pay close attention to yourself and your teaching.*” In other words, Timothy, know your ministry, know your calling.

Hophni and Phinehas were priests of the Most High and the Most Holy God and they couldn’t have cared less. They didn’t know their job description and they wouldn’t have bothered to read it if somebody had given it to them. But they knew their rights and given their inch, they took a mile.

When you brought a peace offering in Israel the offerer and his family and friends would eat most of the beast. Deuteronomy twelve, verse seven says, “*You shall eat before the Lord your God and you shall rejoice, you and your households in all that you undertake in which the Lord your God has blessed you.*” And the priests had a special portion of that peace offering with them – the breast and the right thigh; after, of course, the Lord’s portion, the kidneys and the fat and so on, had been burnt on the altar. But Hophni and Phinehas didn’t want only their special portion, they wanted whatever they could get their hands on. And still with the fat on it so they could roast it. They weren’t into stews and casseroles. And if the people, who, it appears, had a better appreciation of the holiness of God than the priests, and a better understanding of the priest’s calling than the priests, tried to remind them that God’s portion should be offered on the altar first, they would simply take it by force.

That wasn’t all. We’ll come to the immorality later. But this was the worst of it because this was a sin directly against God. Here they openly robbed God of what God claimed for himself. “*Thus*”, verse seventeen, “*the sin of the young men was very great before the Lord, for the men despised the offering of the Lord.*”

**2. NOW SAMUEL** (v.18) “*was ministering before the Lord as a boy.*” What a contrast straight away. Hophni and Phinehas were men, young men but men nevertheless, and they had to be at least thirty to serve in the priesthood, so they were mature men, and they didn’t know their calling. Samuel was a little boy who could not possibly have known his calling but such as he did know, Scripture tells us, he did. Verse eleven; “*The boy ministered to the Lord before Eli the priest.*” Verse eighteen; “*Now Samuel was ministering before the Lord, as a boy, wearing the linen ephod.*” But he would know his calling one day for what we read about Jesus and what we read about John the Baptist, we read about Samuel: verse twenty-one; “*And the boy Samuel grew before the Lord.*”

And, by-the-bye, Hannah and Elkanah, who gave Samuel to the Lord, were blessed also. Hannah had given Samuel to the Lord and she had no intention of going back on that. Every year she brought him a new priest’s robe so that he could continue on in his temple service for another year.

I said a couple of weeks ago that Hannah did a very dangerous thing when she requested that son from the Lord, making that vow to dedicate him as a Nazarite. Perhaps she did the right thing. And indeed, congregation, if we can keep a vow, the wise thing. For as the saying goes, “*The Lord is no man’s debtor.*” As the man of God would soon say to Eli, “*Those who honour me I will honour.*” And what Eli knew was not true about himself, he knew in principle, so he blessed Hannah and Elkanah; “*“May the Lord give you children from this woman in place of the one she dedicated to the Lord.’ And they went to their own home and the Lord visited Hannah and she conceived and gave birth to three sons and two daughters”* (vv.20b-21a).

Perhaps, brothers and sisters, that is what we ought to do with our heartaches and our losses. Or even with what God does not give us first of all to lose, whether it be children or husband or wife, whatever; that we dedicate it to the Lord. After all, that is only what Jesus said, isn’t it? One day he and his disciples were talking about just this sort of thing and Peter said to him, Mark chapter ten,

“*Behold, we have left everything and followed you.*” Jesus said, “*Truly, I say to you Peter, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or farms for my sake and for the Gospel’s sake but that he shall receive a hundred times as much now in the present age, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and farms, along with persecutions, and in the world to come eternal life.*”

However rightly we are to do that today, that must be our attitude. That must be our frame of mind. That must be the way we think about anything the Lord has given us, or not given us. It all belongs to the Lord. As Paul said, “*What do we have that we have not first been given.*” “*So the Lord visited Hannah and she conceived and gave birth to three sons and two daughters and the boy Samuel grew before the Lord.*”

“*Now the sons of Eli; ... now Samuel*”;

**3. NOW ELI** (v.22) “*was very old*” and life, as we say, had not been kind to Eli. Whereas “*the boy Samuel grew before the Lord,*” Eli “*heard all that his sons were doing to all Israel.*” The reports got back to him. The desecration of the offerings of

the Lord's people, the fornication with the temple servant women. It all came to Eli's ears.

And from time to time he talked to Hophni and Phinehas about these things and we read in verse twenty-three, "*Why do you do such things, the evil things that I hear from all the people. No my sons, for the report is not good which I hear the Lord's people circulating.*"

- And he would go on and he would say, Look sons, "*if one man sins against another, God will mediate for him.*" Listen boys, this fornication, this sin against these women, and their husbands therefore – if they were married, can be forgiven for God has made provision for that in his law. God mediates between man and man.
- But boys, "*if a man sins against the Lord, who can intercede for him?*" This despite that you do to God's offerings, it is a defiant robbery of God "*and what third power is there that can intervene between man and God? The quarrel must go on to the bitter end and God who is your opponent will punish you.*"<sup>1</sup>

"*Now Eli*" – don't you feel a little bit sorry for Eli? He's a defeated old man and it's a sad way to end one's life. Well I'm afraid, that's not all there is to it but we'll leave that just for the moment. But note this, verse twenty-five, "*But they would not listen to the voice of their father for the Lord desired to put them to death.*" These young men had sinned blatantly. They had sinned persistently. They had sinned against what they knew. For all his weakness, Eli had instructed them in the Word of God. But like Pharaoh before them, they hardened their hearts.

People of God, that is a basic principle of the way God works in this world. We read, for example, in Romans chapter one, and here Paul is talking in a very general way – he says, "*For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men.*" All this that we see, these terrible things that we prayed about a minute ago – in Palestine, in Israel, in Iraq, in South Africa, in Zimbabwe, in New Zealand and anywhere else, that is

*the wrath of God being revealed from heaven against all the ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness because that which is known about God is evident within them for God made it evident to them. For since the creation of the world, his invisible attributes, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that mankind is without excuse. For even though they knew God, they did not honour him as God or give thanks. Therefore God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity. Therefore God gave them over to degrading passions. And just as they did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer, God gave them over to a depraved mind to do those things which are not proper (Romans 1:18-21a, 24, 26a, 28).*

Brothers and sisters in the Lord Jesus Christ, the depths of depravity into which our world has fallen is not an accident. It is itself a judgment from God. And the fact that people continue to reject the Gospel may itself also be the sentence of God's final and eternal judgment. But "*Hophni and Phinehas would not listen to the voice of their father for*" – because – "*the Lord desired to put them to death.*"

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<sup>1</sup> R Payne Smith, Pulpit Commentary, quoted in D R Davis, 2 Samuel, p.27.

And yet congregation, even this great darkness is not dark to God. He is still working. For at the end of this paragraph about Eli we are brought back to Samuel and what do we read? “*Now the boy Samuel was growing in stature and in favor with the Lord and with men.*” You would hardly think it was the beginning of a revival or a reformation, but it was. Even as his spirit was stirring Samson down there a little to the south in Mahaneh-dan, so he was quietly working in Samuel up here in Shiloh. Even though Samuel is more a John the Baptist figure than a Christ figure, you would have to say of Samuel as Isaiah says of the Lord Jesus Christ, wouldn’t you? “*He grew up before him as a tender plant in dry ground.*” There could hardly have been a less congenial environment for a little boy to grow up to know the Lord.

Why could God not be doing the same today? People of God, we must never give up hope, we must never think the world has gone too far. It is pretty hard to imagine that things could get much worse in the Church than this in Shiloh – desecration of the offerings by the priests; fornication in the cloakrooms by the priests. But God had his man, or his boy, and who’s to say it may not be your son so fond? or whatever is so dear to you? Either what God has given to you, or he hasn’t, but you’ve consecrated that gift or you’ve consecrated that frustrated desire to his service and who knows but that that may not be the seed that, as Jesus put it in Mark chapter four, “*grows secretly in the earth, you know not how but the earth produces a crop by itself. First just the blade*” – a little boy? – “then the ear, then the grain in the ear.” “*That’s what the kingdom of God is like*”, said Jesus.

**4. NOW A MAN OF GOD** (v.27) “*came to Eli.*” And he did not quite see things as we have so far: that life has not been kind to Eli; he’s a poor, defeated old man. We cannot always be held responsible for what our children do, for they grow up and they become adults in their own right. But that life has not been kind to Eli is often the way we want to see things because seeing it that way we can excuse our own shortcomings.

The man of God wants to stir Eli’s conscience so first of all he reminds him of his great privilege, “Eli, out of all the tribes of Israel, God chose your forefather Aaron and your family to be priests, to offer sacrifices on behalf of the people, to intercede between them and God, **and** I gave you the best cuts of the peace offerings along the way. But that was not good enough for you Eli. Your sons take the best of **every** offering.” And maybe even Eli ate that meat as well. At least he allowed his boys to go on with it.

“*Thus you, Eli, kick at my offerings,*” verse twenty-nine. “*Therefore*”, verse thirty. “Yes you were supposed to have that priestly privilege forever Eli but you despise me and I honour only those who honour me.” So the man of God told Eli that none of his descendants would live to see old age. But they would live long enough to see something that would make them weep. The condition of the temple would decline, the ark would be forgotten, the shrine in Shiloh would deteriorate. Even though God would do good for Israel as a nation and as a people, “since you despise my worship, you and your family will suffer the heartbreak of seeing my worship decline even in prosperous times.”

Congregation, especially men, elders, fathers, it is all very well to strive to be righteous ourselves. It is all very well to remonstrate with those who despise the Lord whether it be members of the Church or whether it be our own children. Eli did all that but God said he despised God and kicked at his offerings just as much as his sons did.

True, elders, be they ever so godly in themselves, cannot make others righteous; and fathers, be they ever so good examples to their children, cannot make their children righteous or save them. That is the work of God's Spirit. Yet God's Spirit uses the means of godly training and instruction, backed up by discipline. Genesis eighteen tells us that "*God chose Abraham **in order** that he would **command** his children and his household to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice **in order** that the Lord may bring on him all the blessings he promised.*"

And the same applies in the Church. Where there is deliberate, unrepentant sin, the elders must discipline. Where there is deliberate, unrepentant sin in the home, fathers must discipline. For what, brother elders and fellow-fathers, are we doing when we don't? According to our text, verse twenty-nine, we become guilty of the same sin. We honour our Church member or we honour our children above the Lord. And there is much of that going on in the Christian Church and in Christian homes today.

God has a line of authority and responsibility in this world – fathers in homes, leaders in nations, priests and elders in the Church. And he holds those who hold authority responsible for what goes on under them. Or at least he holds them responsible for what they do about it. Maybe Eli couldn't have stopped his son's sexual immorality but he could have stopped it taking place in the temple. And he could have preserved the holiness of the temple and the offerings by deposing them as priests.

God had good intentions for Israel – verse thirty-five, "*But I will raise up for myself a faithful priest who will do according to what is in my heart and in my soul and I will build him an enduring house and he will walk before my anointed always.*" Eventually Eli's line of priests was finally deposed when Solomon deposed Abiathar and replaced him with Zadok from another family of Aaron's descendants. Ultimately of course, the prophecy was fulfilled when the Lord Jesus Christ became the great high priest.

But before David, a man after God's own heart, could be given as king to Israel to bring it to greatness and prosperity, the house of the Lord, the worship of God had to be cleansed. As Peter puts it, "*Judgment must begin at the house of God*" because our relationship with God is the foundation of our lives and if that is not right we cannot expect anything else to be right.

Brothers and sisters in the Lord Jesus Christ, it is wonderful to have the Gospel. It is wonderful to have our Bibles and to read them every day with our children but it is our duty also to make sure that they are lived – by members of the Church, elders; by our children, fathers, at least while they live under our roofs.

For surely, we want to honour God above everything else, don't we? "*You shall have no other gods beside me.*" No, not even fellow Church members who might be very

good friends. Not even our own dear children. Rather, “*love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind and with all your strength.*”

Let us do that fellow-elders, fathers, mothers, teachers, any of us, however it falls to us, for that is the path of blessing; that is the path of salvation.

Amen

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