

## STUDIES IN SAMUEL No. 4

1 Samuel 2:12-36

January 30, 2000

### Text Comment

- v.12 “wicked men” = lit. “sons of Belial”. Later “Belial” would be personalized as a name for Satan (as Paul in 2 Corinthians 6:15). These sons of Eli “did not know” the Lord. The NIV translation, “had not regard for” does, of course, get the sense of the phrase. The problem is that it misses the irony that is found when these two men are compared with Samuel of whom, in 3:7, it is also said that he “did not yet know the Lord.” This section of Samuel is concerned with the comparison of Samuel with the sons of Eli and that same way of speaking about them draws attention to the different way in which they did not know the Lord. And that is missed when the NIV doesn’t render the same Hebrew words with the same English words. (Lots of English translations of the Bible fail at this point I think precisely because they did not have the same appreciation for the depth of the sophistication and the artistry in the Hebrew narrative.)
  
- v.16 There are some complications here knowing exactly what the point of comparison is between what Hophni and Phinehas did and those regulations laid down in Leviticus and Deuteronomy. But, the general drift is clear enough. These priests were extorting the quality meat from the sacrifices brought by the people for worship, they were ignoring the levitical regulations, those who objected to this sacrilege were threatened, and, all in all, these priests who were responsible for the worship of God’s house were turning that worship into a means of acquiring luxury for themselves. The note in v. 13 that the servant was sent for the priests’ cuts “while the meat was being boiled” indicates how greedy they were. They are “represented in a kind of frenzy of gluttony, poking their three-pronged forks into every imaginable sort of pot and pan.” And, to make it still worse, they threaten anyone who has the temerity to complain. Interestingly, archaeologists have dug up some trident-like forks like these must have been.
  
- v.17 We are given here the “evaluative viewpoint” as a foreshadowing of the judgment that is to follow.
  
- v.18 “Linen ephod” was a priestly garment, so Samuel is being portrayed as a little priest, a priest to be, growing into the responsibilities of his office.
  
- v.19 Here is a beautiful example of the reticence of Hebrew narrative. Just a little touch, but it says so much about the mother’s love for and concern for the son she has lent to the Lord.
  
- v.21 Remember, as we said a few weeks ago, this entire section in the early part of 1 Samuel is a “heavily underlined contrast” between the wicked sons of Eli and the devout son of Hannah. The author alternates between the two, back and forth. Also, interesting and important, is the fact that blessing still comes to Hannah through the benediction of Eli. Eli was a poor father, as we will now be told, but he was still a faithful priest in many ways and a means of God’s blessing to his people.

- v.22 As the years passed, Samuel grew up to love and serve the Lord, but the sins of Hophni and Phinehas continue unabated. We read in Exodus 38:8 of women serving at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting, so that, in itself, was not sinful. But this sexual immorality, a kind of cultic prostitution that was common in Canaanite worship, brought into the context of the worship of the Lord, was another high crime against the holiness of God. And you see the similarity between their sins: grabbing for the best meat and taking the women who were near to hand. Whatever pleasure they wanted, they took, with no thought to the holiness of God.
- v.24 The greater appreciation of the artistry and the depth of Hebrew narrative now makes me think that we should not think too well of Eli here. He is saying the right things, of course, but he saying them far too late to do any good and all he does is speak, he doesn't act. In 3:13 it will be said explicitly of Eli that he failed to rule his sons, to restrain them, to make them obey, when he was in a position to do that. Now, long after that time has passed, his ineffective remonstrance to his sons sounds like a pathetic whine, however true his words may be. (David will appear in a very similar light in the account of Absalom's rebellion.)
- v.25 Eli does not mean, of course, that our sins against one another are not sins against God (David in Psalm 51: "Against thee, thee only have I sinned..."). He is describing in general terms the difference between sins of frailty committed by people who nevertheless have real faith in God and sins "of a high hand" committed by those who have thrown off that faith, apostatized as we would say today. There is no hope for them. They will not turn themselves and God will not turn them.
- v.26 In contrast to the unbelief and stubborn rebellion of Eli's son, the narrator pays the young Samuel a great compliment, indeed, very much the same thing that is said about the young Jesus of Nazareth in Luke 2:52! That reminds us once again how the narrative of the Lord's birth has been influenced by the Samuel history.

There now follows a "doom-laden message concerning the destruction of [Eli's] family" [Gordon, 84]. In the larger context, the way is being prepared for the replacement or divestiture of the house of Eli as the controlling house of the priesthood and its replacement by the house of Zadok under David. The Zadokite priestly family would exercise rule over the priesthood in Israel for as long as the monarchy and the state lasted.

- v.26 "Man of God" is a virtual synonym for prophet. Eli's father's house would be the house of Aaron.
- v.28 A summary of priestly duties in the sanctuary and of the provision the Lord made for the support of the priests.
- v.29 Eli is accused of complicity in the sins of his sons because, as we will read in 3:13, he knew about them and did nothing to put a stop to them. It isn't being said that he took the choice pieces of meat as they did, but he did not stop them from doing so. He appeased

his sons, like many parents before and after him, and laid down his responsibility for them. And the result is that he is responsible for the sins they are committing.

Remember, we already said that v. 29, together with v. 31, is a thesis statement for this entire section. The word “honor”, from which letters the words “glory,” “heavy,” and “harden” are also formed, will be key to the unfolding account of the next several chapters and will appear again in the story of David.

- v.30 The promises of God are often put in absolute terms, though we learn in other places that conditions are attached to them and that the fulfillment of the promise requires the meeting of the condition. Eli’s failure was, therefore, a breach of God’s covenant.
- v.33 The judgment is that of either untimely death or a life marked by the miserable envy of the prosperity of others. In 1 Kings 2:26-27, when Abiathar is banished to his country town and from priestly authority and activity, it is said to be in fulfillment of this curse. The NIV’s “in the prime of life” is an effort to make sense of a very difficult reading in the MT. But 4Qsam and LXX(B) read: “by the sword of men.” That is an easier reading and the next verse seems to pick up that thought. Saul will massacre the priests of Nob by the sword (1 Samuel 22) and they were descendants of Eli.
- v.34 Eli won’t live to see all that happens to his house as a result of his sin, but he will live long enough to see what happens to his own two sons, and that will be a sign of the certain eventual fulfillment of the rest of the prophecy.
- v.35 The natural question is whether this “faithful priest” is Samuel or Zadok. The second half of the verse suggests the latter: the establishment of his priestly house (which was not done for Samuel but was for Zadok) and his ministering before the Lord’s anointed, seemingly a reference to David the King.
- v.36 A fulfillment of 2:5 and a punishment well-fitted to the crime of Hophni and Phinehas who gorged themselves on food that did not belong to them.

Some of you may be aware that there is a conversation underway among evangelical theologians about the advocacy, by some of them, of what is being called “the openness of God.” The phrase “openness of God” is relatively new, though the ideas that are represented by it are not. They go way back. Indeed, it is perhaps important to point out that there isn’t much being advocated in these new works that wasn’t advocated by some of the second generation Arminians in Holland in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. But, the fact that the books defending the “openness of God” viewpoint are being published by Inter-Varsity Press is some evidence of how ready some parts of American evangelicalism are to alter the historic Christian doctrine of God.

In sum, the “openness” position holds that God chose to create individuals with a free will, individuals with whom he desires to have friendship and fellowship, but who have the power to thwart his desires and purposes and often do so. But, to defend the perfect freedom of human beings to order their own course, to defend, in other words, the real “openness” of the future, that

is, that it can turn out in whatever way human beings choose to direct it, God's knowledge of and control of the future is also denied, or at least the knowledge of part of the future.

In the past, in the discussions of Christian theology, the question has always been, "if God knows the future in exact detail, how everything is going to turn out, then how can men really be free in the exercise of their will?" And "if men really do have a free will, how can God know what they will do at some future time?" Different theologians and theological schools have given different answers to those questions, of course, but everyone assumed that there was a sense in which man was free even though God had an exhaustive knowledge of the future. The "openness" position seeks to rid us of that problem by accepting, as some of the early Arminians did, that divine foreknowledge must be sacrificed if human freedom is to be preserved. Men are truly free, that is the main thing. The future is what they will make of it for themselves. And, if that is so, God cannot exhaustively know the future; he cannot know what truly free individuals will choose to do before they have done it.

Think of it this way, they say. God's providence is relational, like the relationship that may exist between two people. Each may want the other to do something. But, to coerce the other would be to violate the truly personal quality of their relationship. Hence they must proceed rather by attempting to persuade, with sympathy, respect, and love. Relationships like that are risky. The other may not be persuaded. And the openness men like to speak of God as a risk-taker. You can't be sure how a relationship will turn out and, sometimes you are disappointed. God may want a certain result, but his will is often defeated and he is left disappointed. Love is a precarious and vulnerable thing. To be precise, some of these men hold that God is omniscient or could be, but limited the exercise of his knowledge to respect the freedom of men. Others doubt that God knows or can know what men will do in the future. God is sovereign, because the Bible says he is, but that sovereignty means only that he has sovereignly chosen to relate to men and women in openness, making rules that limit his own behavior, and so making a real human freedom possible. "He is not so much a chess Grand Master as a theater director, allowing the actors their own creativity." [The above taken from Paul Helm's review of John Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, in *Modern Reformation* (Nov/Dec 1999) 46-50]

Now a great many things could be said in response to this. It is simply a modern form of the old Arminianism, not the more evangelical Arminianism of the Wesleys. It fundamentally underestimates the effects of sin upon the human heart and will and, in many other ways, simply cannot be made to square with what the Bible says plainly, repeatedly, and emphatically about God, man, the future, and salvation. It also mistakes what is necessary for a true relationship in its worship of human freedom. When a parent picks up his child and carries him or her away from danger, it is not a violation of the child's humanity. It is an act of love appropriate for one far wiser, stronger than the child. In any case, throughout the Bible it is perfectly clear that God establishes relationships with people who would never have chosen to have relationship with him. He is the sovereign God and we are helpless in our bondage to sin. This is the only way a relationship of love between God and man will ever be established. The Apostle Paul on the Damascus road did not "decide" to choose God! The "openness" position is the kind of position that is interesting to seminary professors but cannot be made persuasive to the multitude of Christians who read and love their Bibles.

But, the reason I raise this is that the claim is being made by these men that this openness idea, this notion of a risk-taking God, a God that does not control and does not always even know the future, is particularly the teaching of the Bible's historical narratives. Obviously there are a great many texts that seem to say straight out that God knows the future, controls the future, that he does what pleases him in heaven and on earth, that even the sinful acts of human beings do not escape his control (as we saw in the Joseph history: "You meant it for evil; God meant it for good.") "I make known the end from the beginning." "All our days were ordered for us before their was a one of them." He "works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will." And literally hundreds of statements like that all through the Bible. What is more, the Bible often teaches us that God knows all possibilities in the future as well. "This is what the Lord God Almighty, the God of Israel, says: 'If you surrender to the officers of the king of Babylon, your life will be spared and this city will not be burned down, you and your family will live. But if you will not surrender...'" (Jeremiah 38:17)

The teachers of this openness position typically don't talk too much about those texts – how could they – , but argue, rather, that if you read the historical narrative you encounter a God who is always, as it were, a part of the rough and tumble of life, responding to what humans do, changing his mind, adjusting his plans as one thing happens or another. It is the Bible's historical narratives, they claim, where we find the true picture of things and there we find a God who, as it were, has to make it up as he goes along because he has to react to the free choices that men are always making.

Well, don't you believe it. The biblical historical narrative, we have been finding over these past months, is as richly theological as a Pauline epistle, and its doctrine of providence is exactly the same doctrine you get everywhere else in the Bible. Free will? Of course. Personal accountability for one's choices and actions? Of course. Men do what they please and they are responsible for their lives before God. Let no one take our crown in the assertion of those facts. They are taught everywhere in the Bible.

But, so is the sovereignty of God and his absolute rule over all things, including the unfolding of human history whether the history of an individual life or the history of nations. In the Joseph history we just studied we saw that in spades! The whole history begins with Joseph's dreams by which God told him what was going to come to pass. We are told on several occasions that the way in which that history came to pass – the wicked scheme of Joseph's brothers – was also a part of the divine plan. Further, all of that is part of the larger promise that God had already made to Abraham, that he would take his descendants down to Egypt, that they would live there for four hundred years, and that only then would they return to take possession of the Promised Land.

As the great Benjamin Warfield put it:

"Throughout the Old Testament, behind the processes of nature, the march of history and the fortunes of each individual life alike, there is steadily kept in view the governing hand of God working out his preconceived plan – a plan broad enough to embrace the whole universe of things, minute enough to concern itself with the smallest details, and actualizing itself with

inevitable certainty in every event that comes to pass.” [*Biblical and Theological Studies*, 276]

Well, that is exactly what we find here. We’ve already had a prophecy of Israel’s king before there was a king, in Hannah’s wonderful song of praise. Now we have a prophecy of the judgment of Eli’s family, a priestly family that was unfaithful to God. A prophecy of its judgment that is precise and definite and will come to pass just as was foretold.

But, we have even more than that. In v. 25 we have one of those statements, of which there are scores in the Bible, -- I’ve commonplace my Bible on this class of biblical statements at Romans 9:18 (“...God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden.”) and have some twenty texts listed in the margin there that illustrate the principle with illustrations from biblical history. And we have it here in 1 Samuel 2:25: “His sons, however, did not listen to their father’s rebuke, for it was the Lord’s will to put them to death.”

Are the sons then responsible for their stubbornness, for their intransigence, for their wicked rebellion against God or their father? Of course they are. They loved evil and hated good and the sins they committed, they committed out of the desires and intentions of their own hearts. God did not force them to rebel or to ignore the admonition of their father, Eli.

But, at the same time, we deny God’s Word if we deny that even in this the will of God was done; even in this God’s purposes were accomplished. He had determined to punish these wicked men, as they deserved to be punished. And no one can shorten the Almighty’s hand or say to God, ‘What have you done?’ They laughed at their father, Eli, behind his back, at his fuddy-duddy ways, not only because they loved evil and were thoroughly corrupt men, but because God was unwilling to bring them to repentance.

Is there a great mystery here? Of course there is. Are there problems here that vex our minds? Absolutely. We are dealing with Almighty God, the infinite mind, whose ways are so far above ours and whose thoughts so far surpass our own that we never understand anything but the outskirts of God’s ways. We hardly understand the life and the ways of man, much less those of God!

Manasseh was a thoroughly corrupt man late in his life and God granted him repentance and new life. Paul was a persecutor of the church and Christ appeared to him and transformed him into the champion of the church he had just moments before sought to destroy. But, here, God will not give to Hophni and Phinehas what he gave to Manasseh. Instead a judgment on Eli’s house is pronounced. Samuel is going to lead us to the king of Israel, but Eli’s house is going to fall. All of this has been told us before any of it happened!

Don’t tell me the historical narratives show us the so-called “openness of God”! Don’t tell me we find in the histories of the Bible a God who has exposed himself to risk and doesn’t really know how the story will turn out. The opposite is true. And thanks be to God that it is. For you and I are sinners like Hophni and Phinehas – in ourselves and by ourselves and left to ourselves and given the right circumstances – we would be as corrupt as they became. But God granted us

repentance and the knowledge of the truth. And since we began to walk with him, he has preserved us in faith and kept us walking in the narrow way. And he knows precisely by what road he must take us to glory. God forbid that my salvation or yours should ever depend upon me or you! By ourselves you and I couldn't get one step nearer the eternal city. We'd take a wrong turn and never get back to the narrow way. God forbid that God himself would be surprised to find us heading off in the wrong direction and that he would refuse to grab us by the scruff of the neck and pull us back for fear of trampling on our right to freedom and independence. He who cares more to preserve his independence than he cares to confess and to trust in a sovereign God, will find that he gets what he wanted only in hell.

"The one principle of hell is – 'I am my own,'" said George MacDonald. And C.S. Lewis similarly. "There are only two kinds of people in the end: Those who say to God 'thy will be done,' and those to whom God says, 'thy will be done.'"

I do not imagine that I can explain the ways of Almighty God. But that he has his ways, that he knows precisely what he is doing, that the Judge of all the earth does right, and that all men depend upon him absolutely for grace and mercy and salvation, I do not doubt. The Word of God tells me this everywhere, in Samuel as surely as in the letters of Paul.