

SMALL GROUP NOTES : 1 SAMUEL 2 vs 12 – 27

Read the passage

Thoughts on the passage

In some ways this passage in 1 Samuel 2 reads like an answer to a “compare and contrast” questions in an exam paper as it ebbs and flows. In verse 11 we see Samuel serving in the temple, then we are shown the sons of Eli the priest, Hophni and Phinehas, committing sins, then Samuel serving, then Hophni and Phinehas committing sins, then Samuel growing before we move into prophecy and judgement in the verses after our reading.

On the one hand we have the Sons of Eli brought up in the home of Eli, a God-fearing parent. They would have been brought up in the ways of God, received instruction from their parents and, we are told, they were honoured or, to put it another way, they were loved, by Eli. In terms of growing up in a way that introduced them to a relationship with God it could be said that things were stacked in their favour. And yet, despite this, we are told that they “did not know” God.

To “know” God is not just intellectual or theoretical recognition. It is not the ability to recite the law by rote nor to understand it with their mind. To “know” God is to enter fellowship with him and acknowledge his claim on your life. To “know” God implies a covenant relationship with him. Despite their upbringing, that on paper would weigh in their favour, the sons of Eli had no relationship with God.

Samuel, on the other hand, had a completely different background and yet, even at a young age, was gently and quietly growing a relationship with God by a life of service, or ministry. There is even an ironic twist to the tale, we are told that the sons of Eli were wicked men, in the same wording that Eli appears to have used in respect of Hannah, Samuel’s mother.

The sons of Eli present a classic case of the abuse of power. They were using their position as sons of a priest to gain for themselves as the expense of the people, after all, who were the people going to complain too? Their Father? It seems they had no fear of the consequences of their actions, either from others or from a God with whom they had no relationship.

Admittedly some of the Old Testament law seems strange to us, but at the time of Eli it was the way that God had decided to structure relationship with his people, and Eli’s sons were disobeying that law with no regard to relationship with God by the way they treated the meat. God was to receive the first portion of meat, by the fat being burned on the altar, and the law further specified that the portion of the priest was to be boiled. By their actions Eli’s Sons were not putting God first and they were acting in a way not consistent with God’s law. Eli’s sons further abused their position of power by having sex with the women who were carrying out certain tasks at the entrance of the temple in a way that resembled the religious prostitution of the Canaanite sanctuaries. We get the clear idea that, with their Godless life, Eli’s sons were not very pleasant people to be around.

Samuel, on the other hand is totally different. He is presented as gentle, quietly going about his life of service and pure. Much is made of the clothing that Samuel wore – a linen ephod. An ephod is a short, sleeveless garment worn by priests as they served in the temple and Linen is thought to be a symbol of purity, in Revelation we read of the bride of the lamb being given “fine linen, bright and clean” to wear.

The contrast is clear. On the one hand Hophni and Phinehas, from a privileged background, bombastic and abusive with notorious actions that everyone could see. One other hand Samuel, with a different family setting, gentle, quiet, and pure, almost fading into background.

But something else was going on, slowly as Samuel grew, we read, he was getting noticed for all the right reasons, by God and by people. In verse 26 we are told that he “continued to grow in stature and favour with the Lord and with men”. That’s not the only time we hear those words, we hear them said of another young boy just after we read of his visit to the temple, in Luke 2 verse 52 “And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and men”.

Questions you may want to ask

- 1) What does the example of Hophni and Phinehas have to say to Christian parents seeking to share faith with their children?
- 2) How should we react when we know of people who are abusing their power?
- 3) Who would be the equivalent of Hophni and Phinehas today? Why?
- 4) Share examples of others who you know who, like Samuel, go quietly about their ministry of service?
- 5) There is something powerful about those who serve in the background, not seeking the limelight, the quiet, gentle type – why do so some people overlook them, but others notice and are drawn to them?
- 6) What do we learn from the example that Samuel sets?
- 7) What do you make of the fact that Luke used the same words of Jesus in a similar setting to those used of Samuel?
- 8) What do you think of the passage in Revelation that says that the bride of the lamb will wear a linen and what that symbolises?

Don't forget to pray!