

A Light that shines in the Darkness (1 Samuel 2:12-36)

Introduction:-

In our passage today, we are introduced to the immediate aftermath of the Song of Hannah in 1 Samuel 2:1-10, where Hannah prophetically spoke about the Lord who weighs the deeds of all people, who also brings death, and makes alive, who also humbles and exalts, and guards the feet of his faithful servants, but the wicked will be silenced in the place of darkness. Many of these parallels, and contrasts, are found in our passage today, as we are introduced to the wicked priestly house of Eli and his sons, in contrast to the faithful Samuel, who is presented as a light that is quietly shining in the darkness of Israel's history. And so, as Eli and his house are falling, Samuel is quietly and steadily rising as the Lord's servant, who will prove to be an important bridge figure in Israel's history between the period of the Judges, and the emergence of the monarchy. And so this passage also serves as an excellent example of events that are both interpreted and governed by the prophetic word, within the books of the Former Prophets. It does this by even introducing a further prophetic voice in verses 27-36 about the specific sin of the house of Eli and its future. Finally, Hannah's song concludes at 1 Samuel 2:10 with the Lord raising up, and giving strength to his anointed king, which has a parallel with the conclusion of the passage before us today, at verse 35, where the Lord's faithful priest, will minister before His anointed king always. Let us now begin to see how this light begins to shine in the darkness within the passage before us, and how it might shine in our lives today.

1. First, we are introduced to the Darkness that reigns within the Lord's House at Shiloh (1 Samuel 2:12-17)

This section begins with a description of Eli's sons as "scoundrels", or literally "sons of Belial" (or "worthless" men). Further, "they had no regard for the Lord", or literally, "they did not know the Lord", which was really the heart of the problem. This may not mean that they did not know "about" the Lord, but when it came to knowing the Lord in terms of personal intimacy, obedience to His Word, and love for God, they were found wanting in every way. They were priests who served themselves, with no respect for the Lord, or for those worshippers who wanted to honour God with their offerings. How tragic is it that such words should describe the spiritual leaders of God's people. Is it little wonder then, that when the spiritual sacrifices were brought by the people to the temple, the priest's servant would come with his infamous three-pronged barbecue fork, and plunge it into the worshipper's pot or kettle, and whatever the fork brought up, the priest would take for himself. The Mosaic law at Leviticus 3:16 and 7:28-36 specified what the priests could take, and also what belonged to the Lord, but even before the fat itself was burned, which indicated an additional abuse by the priests at Shiloh, only the best cuts of raw meat were acceptable for the priest to roast. The law prescribed that the fat portion of the sacrifice must be burned on the altar to the Lord, and not eaten. But at Shiloh, the attendant takes the meat with the fat portion, and appropriates the Lord's portion of the sacrifice. And if worshippers complained about this practice, they were arrogantly threatened with physical violence. Later at verse 29, it appears that Eli is included in this sin, together with his sons, when the word "you" (plural) is used by the prophet, as bringing "scorn" (or literally "kick" against) the Lord's sacrifice and offering. But then in the last part of verse 29, a second use of the word "you" is singular, thus indicating Eli's complicity and accountability for this sin against God. This particular sin of appropriating what really belonged to God, has a parallel in the very first book of the Former Prophets, at Joshua 6:18-19, where all the "devoted" things from the

destruction of the city of Jericho, such as the silver and gold, and the articles of bronze and iron, were sacred to the Lord, and had to go into the treasury of the Lord's house. But when Achan had taken and kept some of these devoted things for himself, Israel only experienced defeat at the hand of her enemies, until Achan was prepared to "honour" the Lord through confession of his sin, and eventual death (Joshua 7:19-26). On this basis, one can begin to understand the severity of the Lord's final judgment upon the sin of the house of Eli. As with Achan's sin, this sin was very great in the Lord's sight, for the Lord's offering itself was being treated with contempt. This also has a parallel with the sin of Ananias and Sapphira at Acts 5, where apparently both sinned in keeping back part of the property price, which was promised to the Lord. Thus their sin was not in withholding part of the money, which was always their right, but in withholding from the Lord what they had originally promised from the sale. A further example is the presentation of unauthorized fire before the Lord by Nadab and Abihu at Leviticus 10:1-3. Again, what was at stake here was God's holiness and honour.

2. Secondly, the Light begins to shine out of the Darkness with the introduction of Samuel (1 Samuel 2:18-26)

The beginning and end of this middle section refer to Samuel as a "boy" (vv. 18, 26). The same Hebrew word is used for the priest's "servant", and for Eli's sons as "young men" (verse 17). As such, they serve as a foil to Samuel, who is not involved in any extortion or bad practice in the Temple, but is rather found ministering acceptably before the Lord. And in this way, at the centre of this narrative, the piety of Samuel and his parents, shines the brighter for being surrounded by that of the darkness of the impious arrogance of Eli's sons, and Eli's compromised example. In the meantime, in connection with the blessing of Eli at the annual sacrifice, the Lord gave Hannah another five children, whilst Samuel grew up in the presence of the Lord. But as things grow brighter for Samuel and his family, things are getting even darker for Eli and his sons. All the people are now reporting the evil deeds of Eli's sons, which are being done to "all Israel", by also taking advantage of their holy positions, sleeping with the women at the entrance of the tent of meeting. Being in holy roles in holy places is no protection from greed and immorality, but rather, may be perversely used to justify such behaviour. And even though Eli did verbally rebuke his sons for such ungodly behaviour, he did not take the final step of removing them from holy office. Perhaps at this stage, he felt himself to be too old (in his late nineties) for this step to be taken. Further, Eli reminds his sons that while God can mediate between his sons and the people that they sin against, there is no-one to mediate for the sins that the sons have committed against God. This passage concludes with the statement that in not listening to their father's rebuke, it was the Lord's will to put them to death, because of their own self-chosen course, in open defiance of the Lord's Word and calling upon their lives. But in contrast to this, Samuel continued to "grow" in stature and favour with the Lord and with people, recalling the words spoken about Jesus at Luke 2:52. And so, whilst evil practice can do great damage to God's church, the introduction of Samuel tells us that the Lord is quietly providing for the next moment even in the darkest of moments. How appropriate is this word for us today!

3. Thirdly, when the Word of God has the last say, and saves the situation (1 Samuel 2:27-36)

In this final section, an anonymous prophet announces the first words from the Lord in the book. The message is one of judgment, and it begins in the house of God (cf. 1 Peter 4:17). In this speech, the prophet traces the beginning of Israel's priesthood,

from the time of the exodus from Egypt, highlighting the current rejection of the laws relating to sacrifice, as well as "fattening" themselves on the choice parts of every offering made by my people Israel. The issue now arising from this situation becomes one of misplaced "honour" (verse 29). Will it be God, or Eli's sons? The question "Why have you done this" is spoken by the Lord with a tinge of sadness. And now in verse 30, God reverses what he promised to Eli's family because they broke the terms of the promise; they no longer "honour" him, but rather "despise" him. Had the initial wonder of God's call and provision become commonplace? Was Eli to blame? Already we have discussed this issue at verse 29, suggesting that Eli was somehow linked to his sons actions, even if it was to take no hard action against them. Also, the fact that Eli dies on the same day that he receives news of the death of his two sons, plus the fact that he dies by falling off his chair and breaking his neck because he was both old and "heavy", may also offer further possible clues about his involvement in the sin and judgment of his sons. God's final reply is, "Those who honour me, I will honour, but those who despise me, will be likewise treated with contempt (verse 30). In time, Eli's line will come to an end, but God will continue to do good to Israel (v. 32). All of Eli's descendants will die in the prime of life (v.33). This prophecy is fulfilled when Saul massacres the priests of Nob (1 Samuel 22:11-23). Also, verse 33 refers to Abiathar, the only priest to escape Saul's execution (1 Samuel 22:20-23). Under David, Zadok and Abiathar both served as joint high priests (2 Samuel 15:27-29), but Solomon later exiled Abiathar to Anathoth during a palace intrigue, which fulfils the prophecy against Eli's house (1 Kings 2:27, 35). The concurrent deaths of Hophni and Phinehas (v.34) will also serve as a "sign" to Eli that everything the man of God prophesied will come true. Finally, the Lord will raise up a faithful priest, and house, and they will minister before my anointed one always (v.35). Initially, this may refer to Samuel himself, but in the long-term, this probably refers to Zadok, a descendant of Aaron through his son Eleazar (2 Samuel 8:17; 1 Chronicles 24:3, 31). In contrast to the line of Eli, the Zadokites will conform their priesthood to the Lord's command, and the survivors of Eli's line will perform the most menial of tasks for the Zadokites so that they might survive the ravages of God's judgment upon them (v.36).

Conclusion.

Today, God is looking for a faithful priesthood, who will bring "honour" to His name, through the way in which we serve Him as a church. Peter reminds us of this important truth at 1 Peter 2:9-12. Will the world see in us the kind of deeds that will cause them to glorify our Father in Heaven? In this respect, we are finally challenged with the words of 1 Samuel 2:30: "Those who honour me, I will honour." I will never forget the story of Eric Liddell, in the movie "Chariots of Fire." In 1924, whilst boarding the boat to France for the Olympic games in Paris, Liddell discovered that the heats for the 100 metre race for which he was chosen to compete in, would be run on Sunday. He refused to run the race, despite strong pressure from the Prince of Wales and the British Olympic committee, because of his Christian convictions. Soon a solution is found, when Liddell is offered another race for which he was not originally entered, the 400 metre race, on the following Thursday. This made headlines around the world. Before Liddell's race, the American coach remarked dismissively to his runners that Liddell had little chance of doing well, in his new, far longer event, the 400 metre race. But one of the American runners, handed Liddell a note of support, just before the race, quoting 1 Samuel 2:30: "He that honours me, I will honour." That day, Liddell the flying Scotsman, ran like the wind, and against all the odds, he defeated the American favourites, and won the gold medal. It was considered to be one of the greatest feats in Olympic history. May this story also inspire us to honour the Lord in all that we do today. Amen.