

ELI'S SONS & SAMUEL

Week Two | June 11, 2017 | Stories of Our Faith

PREPARATION

MONDAY THROUGH WEDNESDAY

Read through 1 Samuel 2:12–3:21. Pray the Holy Spirit would bring to life the truths of this text and allow you to teach it well to those in your care.

THURSDAY THROUGH SATURDAY

Many questions have been included in this week's guide. Read through this lesson to determine which questions will work best to encourage, push, and grow your group.

DAILY

As you prepare, pray for the preaching of God's Word this coming weekend. Pray also for your time in this week's study.

THIS WEEK

KEY BIBLICAL TRUTH

Believers should seek to live like worthy Samuel instead of the worthless sons of Eli.

THEOLOGY APPLIED

When we live lives that are God-centered and obedient, as Samuel did, we demonstrate that we truly love and know the Lord and we become a vessel of blessing for God to use.

MEDITATE

"Thus says the Lord...And I will raise up for myself a faithful priest, who shall do according to what is in my heart and in my mind." (1 Samuel: 2:27a, 35)

GETTING STARTED

+ Use this section to prepare your heart and mind for the truths of this week. This section will help to introduce the focus of this week's lesson.

Q: *Think of a famous movie or book that tells the story of two totally opposite families? What makes stories like these so interesting?*

Q: *What expectations would you have of a priest or a minister who is considered faithful? How about one who is unfaithful?*

The Hatfields and the McCoys, the Montagues and the Capulets, and Sherlock Holmes and Professor Moriarty. These are just a few culturally known examples of people and families who stood at serious odds with one another. There is no compromise or negotiating—the two are total opposites and will never meet in the middle.

As we move into 1 Samuel 2:12–3:21, we find such a dynamic. The writer of this passage purposefully pits two sides against one another: the worthless sons of Eli and worthy Samuel. The intent of the author is to make us root for the good guy, Samuel. The passage shares the story of Eli and his priestly family who, despite their high title and spiritual role in society, seem anything but pious. Through their constant blunders, they lead the people of Israel away from worshipping God. Interwoven in this story is the rise of a new, unexpected priest from a faithful, humble family. He seems promising enough, though he is just a small boy. As we read, we begin to wonder if God will intervene for this faithful, small boy to replace Eli's priestly family for the Lord's people. Or will the Lord allow Eli's family to continue desecrating the priestly role in Israel? We will unpack this and more as we move throughout this week's lesson.

Q: *Do you think a corrupt person should stay in a certain position at work or in society simply because they have always been in that position? Why or why not?*

Q: *When you hear the words "worthless" or "worthy," what comes to mind? How do you define them?*

■ ■ UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

In this section of 1 Samuel, God instructs us very clearly on the type of person he considers worthless as opposed to worthy. He does this through the story of two families: the priestly family of Eli and the faithful family of Samuel. As we follow along, we realize that Eli's clan has veered off track into serious disobedience, and it's time for God to do something about it. The more we read about Eli's sons in contrast to Samuel, we see the expectations God has for those who minister in his name:

1. A WORTHLESS PERSON: SELF-CENTERED & DISOBEDIENT

2. A WORTHY PERSON: GOD-CENTERED

3. A WORTHY PERSON: OBEDIENT

GOING DEEPER

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A WORTHLESS PERSON: SELF-CENTERED & DISOBEDIENT

■ ■ 1 SAMUEL 2:12-17, 22-36

Q: How does verse 12 describe the sons of Eli?

Q: What is the response of Eli's sons when they do not get their way? (v. 16)

Q: Why does the Lord count the sin of the sons as "very great?" (v. 17)

This section of 1 Samuel opens in verse 12 with a very clear summary statement: Eli's sons, Hophni and Phinehas, were worthless men. The rest of the section supports the conclusion by giving clear examples of their wickedness, both in their priestly roles and personal lives. Having been brought up in the priestly family of Eli, they knew God's law well, but because they did not know or love the Lawgiver, they treated his instructions with flippancy and blatant disrespect.

One way we see this is through their handling of their share of Israel's fellowship offering. Verses 13-14 reveal that Eli's priestly line practiced a sacrificial custom very different than what God commanded in the Torah (Lev. 10:14-15; Num. 18:18). In fact, their strange customs practiced in Shiloh can be found nowhere else in the Old Testament. Eli's sons belonged to a line of priests who did sacrificial offerings according to their own convenience and standards, not God's.

In verse 15 we learn that the brothers ate their portion of the sacrifice before the fat was burned off, the fat being the portion dedicated to God alone (Lev. 3:3-5; 7:30). In other words, Eli's sons demanded their share before God received his. And, when his sons were denied their demand in order to keep God's law, they threatened violence in order to have their way (v.16). At every turn, the Shiloh priests were self-centered and disobedient, characteristics totally incompatible with their role among God's people. Their poor priestly habits were giving Judaism a bad name in all of Israel and teaching worshippers that disregarding God's law was acceptable.

While we may feel inclined to judge Eli's sons harshly, we must evaluate ourselves through their story. How easy is it for any of us to fall in line with the "right crowd," yet not really love God or his law? We can, like Hophni and Phinehas, grow up in a good spiritual environment and become familiar with God's Word, yet disobey Lord in our own lives. We must remind ourselves often that while we can go to church, wear the proper attire, and even appear to be God-fearing on the surface, our actual choices and actions will prove where our hearts truly stand before the Lord.

Q: *What other types of disobedience are the sons guilty of according to verses 22-25? What sin is Eli guilty of according to verse 29?*

Q: *What is God's response to the disobedient, priestly line of Eli? [v. 27-35]*

In addition to their ceremonial misconduct during sacrificial offerings, which alone would have been grounds for removal, Hophni and Phinehas were also selfish and disobedient on the personal level. Verses 22-25 tell us that instead of setting an example of purity, they were sexually immoral with women who served at the entrance of the meeting tent. While scholars debate on the identity of these women, it is clear that Eli's sons are treating them like temple prostitutes.

Eli attempts to warn his sons that the flagrant neglect of obedience to God will cost them greatly if they do not repent, but his warning comes too late. He does not see their sin as something they are just doing to themselves, but as something they were "doing to all Israel" (v.22). Additionally, Eli himself is not off the hook. The passages tell us that he is already very old and has known of his son's sins for a long time before intervening (v.22). He has

participated in getting the fat off of illegitimate sacrificial offerings, and has ultimately placed his own sons above his loyalty to God (v. 29). From top to bottom, this priestly family has set a destructive example for God's people regarding worship and obedience to God, and their misdeeds will cost them not only their roles but their lives.

The writer outlines these wicked practices of Eli and his sons to help the reader see the need for God's intervention. The worthless line of Eli needs to be removed to make way for a better priest who would minister to both the Lord and the people with a faithful heart. In verses 27-36, God does just that. He rejects Eli's household with harsh judgment and promises that he will raise up another priest, one who is worthy.

May we learn from this part of the story, keeping high alert on our own lives, and may we, unlike Eli's sons, repent when confronted with our wrongdoing. While these verses may seem difficult, they help us remember that God does not deal lightly with sin, and that he cares about the public and personal examples we set in our everyday lives.

Q: *When modern-day ministers fall into corrupt or wicked practices, what kind of impact does it have in our culture and our churches?*

Q: *Do you see your self-centeredness and disobedience as something that affects your entire family and church? Why or why not?*

A WORTHY PERSON: GOD-CENTERED

■ ■ 1 SAMUEL 2: 18-21, 26, 35

Q: *Why do you think the author mentions again that Samuel "was ministering before the Lord"? (v. 11, 18)*

Q: *Samuel is referred to as a "boy," (v. 18), while Eli's sons were mentioned previously as "men" (v.12). What could be significant about this detail?*

Interwoven throughout the story of Eli's worthless sons is the story of a worthy son, Samuel. Immediately after revealing the horrible sacrificial practices of Hophni and Phinehas, the writer of 1 Samuel intentionally mentions a second time that Samuel was "ministering before the Lord" (2:11,18). To mention this activity twice is the author's

way of telling us that Samuel's ministry to God was an ongoing activity, an engrained lifestyle of faithfulness. He was dressed in a "linen ephod", which indicates he was officially recognized as a member of the Levitical, priestly tribe.

We are also given another detail: Samuel is a "boy" at this stage (v. 18). While Eli's sons were considered "men" (v.11), God is showing us that a humble little boy has the ability to do a better job than a long-standing priest when his heart is set on the Lord. The author is making a clear point as he interweaves Samuel's story in contrast to the story of Eli's sons: Samuel is a different kind of priest. Where Eli's sons are self-centered, Samuel is interested, even as a child, in God alone. To the Lord, this is what matters most.

🔗: *Samuel's family and their yearly habits are mentioned in this passage. Why do you think God includes this information?*

🔗: *Compare Eli's family and Samuel's family in your own words.*

As verses 19-21 illustrate, not only is Samuel different from Eli's sons on an individual level, his whole family differs from Eli's family. Whereas God had a major problem with all of Eli's priestly household due to their sin and negligence, the writer shows us that the Lord gives great favor to Samuel's faithful household due to how God-centered they were. With Eli's family, we saw rebellion at every turn, but when it comes to Samuel's family, we see consistent obedience instead.

Samuel's parents faithfully made their yearly sacrifices, both before and after their prayers for a son had been miraculously answered. They did not forget God once they got what they wanted, but continually returned to worship him. Additionally, Samuel's mother showed great loyalty and love to her son by making him a robe and visiting him yearly. Their choices and lifestyle were focused on worshipping God and staying true to him.

In fact, because they were so God-focused and sacrificial with their only son, the Lord gave the once barren couple five more children (v. 21). In contrast to Eli's household of priests known for their wickedness, Samuel's family is known for their faithfulness to God, receiving God's blessing of fruitful multiplication. Similarly, when it comes to the treatment of children, Eli was characterized by getting (2:29) while Hannah was characterized by giving (2:19). These two families could not be more opposite.

It's clear that a new priestly line is necessary to help Israel worship God with integrity, and the Lord knows just the man for the job. Eli's line is priestly, but not righteous, and they will ruin Israel's view of God if they are allowed to continue in their service. In their place, God is about to raise up a new priest who puts the Lord at the center, valuing God's heart and mind over his own. As we move into chapter three, we see that the new priestly line will start exactly

where we predicted, with Samuel. Through these verses, God makes it clear that our deeds—whether faithful or faithless—will reveal if we are truly God-centered or self-centered. May we all, by our faithfulness to God’s Word, walk humbly as those who hold God, and not ourselves, at the center of our lives.

🔍: *Why do you think it would be easy for the sons of Eli to assume they are safe from God’s judgment?*

🔍: *Compare Hannah and Eli as parents. Share what you have learned about the role of a parent in the stories of these two families.*

A WORTHY PERSON: OBEDIENT

■ 1 SAMUEL 3:1-21

🔍: *Why did Samuel not discern God’s voice at first? (v.7)*

🔍: *Once Samuel realizes God is calling to him, what does he immediately do? (v. 9-10).*

While we have God’s Word in the form of the Bible, we often struggle to be obedient. How amazing it is, then, that Samuel has shown such obedience in his daily life up until this point, never having heard a word from God. At this time, God spoke sporadically through his prophets, and due to the sin in Shiloh, the Lord’s word had not been revealed very often in recent years (v. 1). However, God was about to speak again through the long-awaited, faithful vessel of Samuel, even though he was still just a boy (v. 8).

Even in the dark hours before dawn, Samuel obediently gets up multiple times when he believes he is being called by his priestly mentor. He does not argue or complain, but simply says, “Here I am,” even when being called over and over again. Once he realizes that God is the one calling him, he willingly responds exactly as he is supposed to. The Lord hears his obedient response, and for the first time in a very long time, God speaks to his people through Israel’s new prophet, a young boy.

Q: How does Samuel respond when he is given a command by Eli? (v.16-18) How does this response compare to that of Eli's sons?

Q: How does God show his favor to Samuel? (v.19)

When Eli commands Samuel to relay what the Lord said, he plainly tells him. Here, even in his fear as a small boy speaking to his spiritual authority, Samuel is obedient to not only the Lord, but also to his mentor (v. 15-18).

This conversation serves as a turning point for Israel, and the official beginning of a new prophet coming onto the scene. At the time, the prophetic process often went like this: the new, inexperienced prophet would hear a divine revelation from God and hesitate to tell it in fear that he is wrong. Typically, he would receive an encouragement from the recipient, and eventually, after the prophet shares the entire revelation from God, the recipient would receive it willingly. As we read through conversation between Samuel and Eli, we see this process unfolding to a tee.

Now that we know what this conversation means, we realize that we have been given a very important piece of information by the writer: not just a new priest, but a new prophet has just landed in Israel. Finally, a mouthpiece for God's people to hear from the Lord again. Because of one little boy's obedience (learned from his faithful family), a new era has begun for the people of God. To confirm that he is God's choice, the Lord allows all of Samuel's words to come true, the test of a true prophet at the time (v. 19).

This story helps us see just how important our small acts of obedience are. While we may think our unseen acts (much like the tedious tasks Samuel did in the temple) aren't important, God sees them. Any one of our moments of obedience—whether unseen ministry tasks or respecting someone we don't think deserves it—could be used in a mighty way to bless God's people. May we, like Samuel, have the same daily, obedient attitude that God desires us to have.

Q: Why do you think obedience in the unseen things is difficult?

Q: God comes to Samuel multiple times before he responds correctly. Share why this is encouraging to you in your own walk with God.

NEXT STEPS

+ *Connect the truths from God's Word to your daily life. Process how what you've learned this week will impact the way you live beyond today and into the future.*

🕒: *The sins of Eli's sons hurt all of Israel. Consider the various ways that your sin struggles could harm not only you, but your family, friends, and church.*

🕒: *In what areas of your personal life and your ministry are you self-centered instead of God-centered? Ask those in your group to help you come up with ways to put God back at the center.*

🕒: *Do you struggle more with obeying God or obeying those he has put as authority figures in your life? List some practical steps you can take to be more obedient.*

🕒: *At some point, we all have wandered from the Lord like Eli's sons did. While they did not take warnings seriously, we can. Where in your life do you need to repent of disobedience or self-centeredness? Explain why you don't have to fear death in your wandering seasons, because of Christ.*

PRAY

+ *Use these prayer points to connect your time in prayer to this week's focus.*

- God, give me eyes to see where my sin is not only harming me, but also others around me.
- God, through your power and grace, help me become a person worthy of ministering in your name.
- God, help me become centered on you in my everyday life. Convict me by your Spirit when I am wandering into self-centeredness.

- God, increase my faith in your Son—that he’s already paid the price for my “worthless” seasons. Help me believe that when I return to you, I don’t have to be afraid of the death I deserve, for Jesus has already died in my place.

COMMENTARY

1 SAMUEL 2:13-16: In ancient Israel, priests were instructed to be supported by portions of the sacrifices of the people. In the Law of Moses, a particular portion of the animal was designated to the priest, depending on the type of sacrifice being offered. For example, in Deuteronomy 18:3, we see that they were to be given the shoulder, cheeks, and stomach. In Leviticus 7:31-32, they were to be given a breast and right thigh. The readers of 1 Samuel would have known the official protocol regarding what priests were (and were not) allowed to eat. The practice shown in 1 Samuel 2:13–16 is very different than the eating regulations that God commands in Moses’ Law. While these customs are foreign to us and seem like minor details, for the readers of 1 Samuel at the time, it would have been obvious and shocking that these priests were neglecting to make sacrificial offerings God’s way.

1 SAMUEL 2:22: The identity of the women mentioned here has been a topic of debate for theologians. Some say that the mention of these women is evidence that the trend of Canaanite cultic prostitution had become mixed into Israelite worship practices. Others say that these are Nazirite women who had volunteered to serve at God’s worship site—meaning that they were originally devout Israelites whom the priestly brothers seduced out of their own lust and disregard for God’s laws. Whether these women were actual temple prostitutes or not, it is clear that Eli’s sons are treating them as such. This treatment was something totally outside of God’s design for sexuality, and another critical reason behind the Lord’s decision to remove Eli and his family out of priestly service, and replace them with the worthy line of Samuel.

**All commentary resourcing for Lesson 6 was provided by the New American Commentary Series, ESV Study Bible Commentary Notes, The Reformation Study Bible Notes, and the NIV Compact Bible Commentary.*

