

Eli

I, Eli, was priest of the LORD at Shiloh, first capital of Israel. I was an unworthy priest. I failed as a father but was given a second chance to parent a boy destined to be great in Israel.

It began as I was sitting on a chair by the doorpost of the LORD's temple and saw a man named Elkinah with his two wives. Hannah, the childless wife, was weeping and I, not being a spiritually perceptive man, exhorted her to give up drink. She responded, "I have not been drinking wine or beer; I was pouring out my soul to the LORD." I told her, "Go in peace, and may the God of Israel grant you what you have asked of him." Just to show how the LORD hears the prayers of the unworthy, that year she gave birth to a son, exactly what she had been praying for. They named him Samuel.

Several years later, she came back and said, "I prayed for this child, and the LORD has granted me what I asked of him. So now I give him to the LORD" And she left him with me at the Temple I no longer had a wife, there were no servants and I carried a dismal record of having failed to raise my own sons. Her prophecy said it all. "My heart rejoices in the LORD. There is no Rock like our God." She gave her son to the LORD.

Each year, she brought a new robe for Samuel and I blessed her, "May the LORD give you children." The LORD was gracious to Hannah – and to me, answering that prayer. She conceived and gave birth to three sons and two daughters. The boy Samuel grew up strong and true in the presence of the LORD.

My own sons? They were evil beyond belief. They took the best part of the sacrifices before they had been offered to the Lord and engaged in immorality with the women at the Temple gate. Nothing I said affected them.

A man of God spoke the LORD's word to me, "I chose your father out of all the tribes of Israel to be my priest. Why do you honor your sons more than me by fattening yourselves on the choice parts of every offering made by my people Israel? There will not be an old man in your family line. Your two sons, Hophni and Phinehas will both die on the same day. I will raise up for myself a faithful priest. I will firmly establish his house, and he will minister before my anointed one always."

I could see it now. I had set the pattern of selfishness, taking a little bit of the sacrifice, roasted, before offering it to the LORD. It had seemed a small thing at the time and was always cautious and controlled. My sons had merely taken it to the next level and moved on from gluttony to debauchery!

But the LORD was already preparing that prophesied faithful priest at that very time. Samuel would be the faithful priest.

In the middle of the night, Samuel came to me and said, "Here I am." I said, "I did not call; go back and lie down." So, he went and lay down. A short time later, Samuel came again. "Here I am; you called me." "My son," I said, "I did not call; go back and lie down." A third time, Samuel came to me and said, "Here I am; you called me." Then I realized that the LORD was calling the boy. So I told him, "Go and lie down, and if he calls you, say, 'Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.'"

Samuel lay down until morning and then opened the doors of the house of the LORD. I called him and said, "Samuel, my son." Samuel answered, "Here I am." "What was it he said to you?" I asked. "Do not hide it from me. May God deal with you, be it ever so severely, if you hide from me anything he told you."

Samuel looked very small and young but with a determined look on his face. He stood straight, looked me in the eye and recited as if it were a lesson, "GOD said, 'Listen carefully. I'm getting ready to do something in Israel that is going to shake everyone up and get their attention. The time has come for me to bring down on Eli's family everything I warned him of, every last word of it. I'm letting him know that the time's up. I'm bringing judgment on his family for good. He knew what was going on, that his sons were desecrating God's name and God's place, and he did nothing to stop them.'"

I looked at this little boy, speaking truth to power, and I knew that I was looking at a man of God. Then I said, "He is the LORD; let him do what is good in his eyes." I saw it happen, as Samuel grew and took more and more responsibility, it was truly said, "The LORD was with Samuel as he grew up, and he let none of his words fall to the ground. And all Israel from Dan to Beersheba recognized that Samuel was attested as a prophet of the LORD."

I saw the development of the prophet, but also the fulfillment of the prophecy. We were constantly losing the war with the Philistines. The elders of Israel said, "Let us bring the ark of the LORD's covenant from Shiloh." Hophni and Phinehas were with the ark. When the ark of the LORD's covenant came into the camp, all Israel raised such a great shout that the ground shook.

Hearing the uproar, the Philistines asked, "What's all this shouting in the Hebrew camp?" When they learned that the ark of the LORD had come, the Philistines were afraid. "A god has come into the camp. Be strong, Philistines! Be men, and fight!"

I now clearly saw the problem, but it was too late. The Ark was no longer a reminder of the LORD who brought us out of Egypt. It was just a magic charm, to the pagans and also to the Israelites. I had not taught Israel the meaning of. "Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength."

I was waiting for news of the battle when the whole town sent up a cry. The messenger hurried over to me, "Israel fled before the Philistines, and the army has suffered heavy losses. Also, your two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, are dead, and the ark of God has been captured."

When he mentioned the ark of God, I fell backwards off my chair by the side of the gate. I knew my neck was broken before I died, for I was an old man and heavy. I had led Israel for forty years as an unworthy priest. But the LORD had allowed me to be mentor of the greatest of the judges of Israel.

Deuteronomy 6, 1 Samuel 1 - 4