

What's the Message? – Lesson 47

Today we begin our study of the books of Samuel, with his birth and early years.

Before we begin today's lesson, a word of explanation is in order for those who may have expected that following the book of Judges we would be studying the book of Ruth, for that is the sequence of books in your Bible. But that is not the sequence in the Hebrew Bible. There are two groups of books, one called the "Wisdom Books", and the other called "The Five Scrolls" that we will not be covering in this course. The book of Ruth is included in this second group. These eight books are indeed valuable for the lessons they have to teach us, but they do not fit well into the focus of this course, which is to give you the major themes of the Bible. So we shall save the study of those eight books for another time.

Greetings in the name of Jesus, our Savior. Our prayer today is to thank you Lord for providing us with leaders such as Samuel. For centuries you have cared for us and helped us in this manner, and we can not praise you enough for the love you have thereby shown for your people. Amen.

Last time we saw how trying to live without God only led to a life of misery and bloodshed. But it was a lesson that Israel was never able to fully retain. They would struggle with the obedience required by Yahweh throughout their history. Today, however, we meet a man who was able to master putting God first in his life – Samuel.

Our story begins with an introduction to his parents, Elka'nah and his wife Hannah, who lived in the hill country of the tribe of Ephraim. Verse 3 tells us : *Now Elka'nah used to go up year by year from his city to worship and to sacrifice to the Lord of Hosts at Shiloh, where the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas were priests of the Lord.*

But Hannah had no children, and this fact caused her great remorse. This was so burdensome to her, one time while they were in Shiloh, she wept bitterly as she stood beside the door of the tabernacle of the Lord and prayed to Yahweh. As verse 11 tells us, she made a vow and said, *O Lord of Hosts, if thou will indeed look upon the affliction of thy maidservant, and remember me . . . and will give thy maidservant a son, then I will give him to the Lord all the days of his life, and no razor shall touch his head.*

As she prayed, her lips moved, but no sound came out. And the priest, Eli, stood nearby and saw this. But he assumed she was drunk. So he criticized her, but she defended herself saying: *I have been speaking out of my great anxiety and vexation.* So he corrected himself, and blessed her, and said: *Go in peace, and the God of Israel grant your petition which you have made to Him.*

In due time, Hannah did conceive and bore a son, and named him Samuel. After he had been weaned, she took him back to Shiloh and presented him to Eli, saying: *For this child I prayed; and the Lord granted me my petition which I made to Him. Therefore I have lent him to the Lord; as long as he lives, he is lent to the Lord.*

So Samuel grew up learning to minister to the Lord, in the presence of Eli the priest. But Eli had two grown sons who are described as “worthless men” because they had no regard for the Lord, and treated the sacrifices made by the people with contempt. And they would not listen to the admonitions of Eli.

Now in chapter 3 comes the familiar story of God calling to Samuel in the night. Three times he rose up and went to Eli, saying, “Here am I, for you called me.” But it was not Eli who called. Finally, the old man perceived that it was the Lord calling Samuel, and told him the next time he heard the call to say “Speak, Lord, for thy servant hears.”

And God said to Samuel, *I will fulfill against Eli all that I have spoken concerning his house . . . and I tell him that I am about to punish his house forever, for the iniquity which he knew, because his sons were blaspheming God, and he did not restrain them.*

Chapter 3 concludes with this description of the character of Samuel: *And Samuel grew, and the Lord was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground. And all Israel from Dan to Beer-sheba knew that Samuel was established as a prophet of the Lord. And the Lord appeared again at Shiloh, for the Lord revealed himself to Samuel . . . and the word of Samuel came to all Israel.*

Teacher, I must say from the beginning that this lesson has a very different tone and feeling than the last few, and it is encouraging that Israel – after so many years – had received a real leader that was faithful to God. The lessons in the book of Judges all had a very negative tone, but this one begins on such a positive note. In spite of all that, I still must ask, what does this mean for us today? Teacher, what’s the message?

You are right about the contrast we see here with the time of the judges. There was chaos, to be sure – and we shall see that more clearly in the next several chapters – but more importantly, we have the birth and training of one called by God to lead His people.

We also have the contrast of a priest who did not raise his sons to love, respect, and obey God – as was commanded by Moses. Instead of honoring God, and respecting the sacred office of priest they had inherited, they showed disrespect. In fact, chapter 2, verse 17 says that “they treated the offering of the Lord with contempt.” Now compare that with the obedient lives of Elka’nah and Hannah, and the prayer for a son. Then, when that prayer had been answered, the decision to give him back to the Lord for service. What a positive example for us!

But there is another lesson here that should not be forgotten. A good and dedicated leader in our church is not an accident, it is a gift of God, and is to be remembered as such. If you have a pastor, dedicated to God and faithful such as Samuel was, you are fortunate indeed. And it is our privilege to follow and care for such a leader. It is a blessing, one that should never be underestimated or taken for granted.

Next time we shall see a major turning point in the history of the People of Israel.