

1 Samuel 4

I want to show you an old Harry Hill sketch.

☞ *Kevin the teenager*

Of course every age has its generational issues. Parents have been agonising about their adolescent teenagers ever since Adam and Eve had Cain and Abel. For most parents it is a period to be endured between the age of dependent children, and independent adult.

But for Israel there was an extra level of significance. They were the people of God. Called to bring God's blessing in time to the whole world. Each generation was responsible for taking up the baton in that great relay race. Over each generation was a question: who would do that?

As we have looked at the early chapters of 1 Samuel we have seen the rise of a new generation. In 1 Samuel 3 we saw young Samuel, demonstrating servant-heartedness, and learning wisdom, and displaying great courage, on his way to becoming a faithful servant of God, and minister of God's word. Hannah was right in chapter 2 when she proclaimed

1 Samuel 2:8
He raises the poor from the dust
and lifts the needy from the ash heap;
he seats them with princes
and has them inherit a throne of honour.

That is exactly what he is doing with this young man from an obscure family.

But there was another aspect of Hannah's prayer. She repeatedly pointed it out in 1 Samuel 2

The bows of the warriors are broken, v4
The LORD sends poverty....he humbles, v7

He not only lifts up the lowly, he puts down the mighty. As she puts in verse 3.

Do not keep talking so proudly
or let your mouth speak such arrogance,

And it is this other side of God's dealings that we must focus on this week. In chapters 1-3 another story has been unfolding. Not the rise of a humble young man, but the fall of a high-born family.

1. A fading family

In chapter one verse 3 we were incidentally introduced to two young priests Hophni and Phineas. A little later we meet their father, Eli. He is the senior priest but he is not altogether wise. He mistakes Hannah's heartfelt prayer for drunkenness, and rebukes her unfairly. However he is a good man at heart. When she tells him she was praying he blesses her.

Then in chapter 2 we learn more about Hophni and Phineas his sons.



1 Samuel 2:12

"They had no regard for the Lord" is literally "they did not know the Lord". There is not necessarily any moral judgement in that – Samuel is described as "not yet knowing the Lord" in 3:7. But the other description is much more damning. They were wicked – the word is associated with worthlessness – they were a waste of space, wasters.

They were greedy.



1 Samuel 2:13-14

Priests were never short of food. But there were strict rules about what they could and couldn't have. Hophni and Phineas, however, preferred a pot luck supper. In particular the fat had to be offered to the Lord and the meat that they ate had to be boiled. But they liked a good Sunday roast.



1 Samuel 2:15

And they abused their power.



1 Samuel 2:16

In verse 22 we also learn that they were sexually promiscuous.

Money sex and power – they are the toxic cocktail par excellence. But behind them all was the core issue which this text points to. They had a fundamental disregard for God.



1 Samuel 2:17

As Samuel points out to them in verse 25



1 Samuel 2:25a

All the while the horror of this is contrasted with young Samuel “ministering before the Lord” in verse 18 and “growing in stature and in favour with the Lord” in verse 26. And though Eli is a good mentor to Samuel, he is ineffectual with his own sons.



1 Samuel 2:23-25

At this point the die is cast, and God himself is now hardening them. But that is only the culmination of a long term pattern. In 1 Samuel 3:13 God makes it plain that he is judging Samuel because he did not restrain his sons. And even here Samuel’s word seem to be only said in private, and without any follow through. Samuel has not publicly distanced himself from his sons’ behaviour.

A man of God brings a prophecy to Eli.



1 Samuel 2:29

Eli is caught up in this. If only by his passivity.

The questions put to Eli by this man of God are deeply penetrating.



1 Samuel 2:27b

Are you confused about who I am Eli. Did I not make myself clear about how you should behave? Was parting the Red Sea, giving you the written law from Mount Sinai, leading you through the desert in a pillar of cloud and fire and defeating all your enemies in the promised land somehow not enough? We might add “was Jesus not clear to you? Did you read the Bible and think it said “treat me with contempt by all means – that’s fine.”

Or perhaps Eli, you feel you have been dealt a raw deal.



1 Samuel 2:28

If you belong to a family of faith you have the greatest of all privileges. Certainly they won’t be perfect, but to have a childhood in which you were prayed for and with, to belong to the family of God – that is a deep blessing.

But Eli and his family have collectively despised that.



1 Samuel 2:30

The family is not going to be completely cut off from God. But generation after generation will die young, and they will from now on be a minor footnote in Israel's history. How tragic.

This is a warning to fathers in particular. It is not a call to be harsh. The apostle Paul quite specifically says to fathers "do not exasperate your children" in Ephesians 6:4. It is a call to be faithful to God. Not accommodating God's commands to suit the taste of your children. As Paul goes on

Bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.

Young people need courageous, God-honouring, Christ exalting fathers – not ineffectual wimps like Eli.

And this is a warning to those raised in a Christian home. Hophni and Phineas are not treated as innocent victims of their inadequate fathering. They are judged for their sins.

If you were raised in a Christian home then you will be comfortable with coming to church. You will know all the stuff, and be able to say all the right things. When they are young such people often rise to early prominence, in school and student Christian unions. But there is a battle to be won in their hearts. The three great alternative gods of every age – money, sex, power – need to be dethroned. They are all three of them wonderful servants – money is such a valuable tool, sex makes marriages and families strong and joyful, power, authority, status, can be used for God's glory. But they are terrible masters. Like a little pack of wolves they harry, and chase, and, if they get a chance they ravage human souls. Like sirens they beckon unsuspecting voyagers onto the rocks – especially men.

Just because we are here in church this morning doesn't mean that the battle has been won. Hophni and Phineas served as priests in the sanctuary, but actually served their gut, groin, and ego.

Let me say to you. I have seen it all. I have seen the love of money eat the heart out of a person like some rotting fruit, until finally there is only a thin skin of godliness, with dark blemishes that just grow and grow until the whole person is consumed. I have seen the love of power and respectability go to people's heads until they finally

sneer “you church people are just muppets, you don’t know how the world works”, and how many times have I seen sex capsize a person!

God will not be mocked.

Those who honour me I will honour, but those who despise me will be disdained.

In chapter four, though, we see how the sins of this family lead to a national crisis.

2. A national crisis

The story is simple. Israel’s perennial enemy at this time were the Philistines. They meet in battle and Israel is defeated. Then they ask an important but fateful question.



1 Samuel 4:3

The question is not the problem. The answer is. They think that just bringing the ark of the Lord which symbolises the presence of God just bringing this token of God’s presence into their midst will be enough. The stupidity of their answer is hinted at in verse 4



1 Samuel 4:4

Hophni and Phineas are there. Corrupters of true worship.

The rest of the story unfolds with a terrible momentum. They go to battle a second time, and Israel loses even more decisively. Hophni and Phineas are killed, along with thousands of others. But there is something else more significant: the ark of the covenant is captured.

This is the real story even for old blind Eli. A messenger brings the news to Shiloh.



1 Samuel 4:14-18

The death of his sons is tragic, but the loss of the ark causes him to drop down dead. Has God deserted Israel? Well yes, for a time he has. He will not have his ark treated as a talisman.

And yet people still think the same way as those Israelites did. A church is not thriving. What should they do? Change the music, change the service style, change the pastor! Perhaps but they are not fundamental. Fundamentally God blesses a humble, Christ-exalting, God honouring commitment to righteousness.

We should have known Israel was doomed when we read

Hophni and Phineas were there.

Sin tolerated at the heart of God's people, dulls their senses, so that they produce fatuous answers to their deep questions, and leads to wholesale disaster. I have seen it.

God walks away from his people if they tolerate Hophnis, and Phineases – even if in the short term it brings his reputation into disrepute.

Those who honour me I will honour, those who despise me will be disdained.

How will you respond to this tragic story? There is a horrible inevitability about it here. We saw that the sons did not respond in the end

“because it was the Lord's will to put them to death” 2:25

Samuel has to tell Eli in 3:14 that

‘The guilt of Eli's house will never be atoned for by sacrifice or offering.’

Reading this story you feel like a helpless bystander who can see the loose rail on the railway track, but you can only stand by and wait for the train crash. Is that your life?

The New Testament says it need not be. It offers us Jesus whose sacrificial death on the cross is greater than any sacrifice or offering that Samuel or Eli knew about. And it promises that family patterns can be broken. Because now God has sent his Spirit to change hearts, to bring new life.

That is why here we have former drug addicts, sons and daughters of deeply flawed parents, people raised with all sorts of distorted pictures of God, people once enslaved by money sex and power.

Your story is not inevitable. Break free. You don't need to be an Eli, a Hophni, a Phineas, a footsoldier who falls in the battle and is forgotten. You can be a Samuel. You can be a person who is being conformed to the likeness of Christ. You can be born again by God's Spirit. Break free!