

Corruption in High Places

1 Samuel 2:11-36

Suppose I was a politician and I employed you as my public relations officer. I set you up with a nice office. I gave you a fancy car. I provided you with a considerable salary. I left you to do your job. After two months, I have it on good authority that you've done the following things:

- You've removed half the office stationery to your place of residence.
- You've taken several thousand dollars of government funds for your private use.
- You've told newspaper reporters some story about how my vote in the parliament can be bought for a specified amount of money – a story which is absolutely untrue.
- You've sent a letter to each person in the electorate telling them that I'm not interested in local issues – that I'm only interested in using this electorate as a stepping stone to become Prime Minister.

What do you think your chances are of retaining your employment as my PR officer?

Why then do Hophni and Phinehas expect to retain their jobs as God's priests when they pay absolutely no attention to their job descriptions? What do they think God will do about things when they treat His instructions with such contempt?

But I get ahead of the story – for we haven't yet looked at what Hophni and Phinehas did. It's there for us in black and white in verse 13:

Now it was the practice of the priests with the people

that whenever anyone offered a sacrifice and while the meat was being boiled, the servant of the priest would come with a three-pronged fork in his hand. He would plunge it into the pan or kettle or caldron or pot, and the priest would take for himself whatever the fork brought up. This is how they treated all the Israelites who came to Shiloh.

God's instructions were pretty clear on what bits of the sacrifice – the fellowship offering – went to the priests, what bits went to the one who brought the sacrifice and what bits went up on the altar. It's all set out in Leviticus 3 and 7. The blood, the fat, the kidneys, the liver – all that was burnt on the altar. The breast and the right thigh were given to the priest. The rest of the meat was given back to those bringing the sacrifice.

Eli's two sons, however, weren't satisfied with that. Why not? After all, it was a pretty good deal for them. They got to eat meat more regularly than anyone else in Israel. Perhaps they simply got greedy and wanted more. Maybe they got bored with the same bits all the time – they thought they'd like to sink their teeth into a bit of sirloin rather than the same old silverside they got day after day. I don't know. Whatever the reason, they devised their own method for getting meat – the barbecue fork method. They sent their servant along with this suitably designed three-pronged fork. He shoved his fork into the pot and whatever got hooked on the three prongs was taken off to the priests. The family got diddled out of their meat.

But more than that – have a look at verse 15:

But even before the fat was burned, the servant of the priest would come and say to the man who was

sacrificing, "Give the priest some meat to roast; he won't accept boiled meat from you, but only raw". If the man said to him, "Let the fat be burned up first, and then take whatever you want," the servant would then answer, "No, hand it over now; if you don't, I'll take it by force".

Once again, God's instructions were quite plain. You can check them out in Leviticus 7:22-25.

The LORD said to Moses, "Say to the Israelites: 'Do not eat any of the fat of cattle, sheep or goats. The fat of an animal found dead or torn by wild animals may be used for any other purpose, but you must not eat it. Anyone who eats the fat of an animal from which an offering by fire may be made to the LORD must be cut off from his people'."

Hophni and Phinehas weren't too bothered by that minor regulation. Even when the person making the sacrifice pointed out what the law said, they ignored him. Why miss out on the best bit? The sacrificial system at Shiloh has been turned on its head. The focus is no longer what God requires. The focus is now what the priests require.

In relation to these two guys, the narrator leaves us in no doubt as to their character. Verse 12:

Eli's sons were wicked men; they had no regard for the LORD.

And verse 17:

This sin of the young men was very great in the LORD'S sight, for they were treating the LORD'S offering with contempt.

This is one of those occasions when part of the reason the narrator tells us the story is as a warning. The narrator is saying to us: These guys are particularly ungodly. These

guys treat God with contempt. Don't be like them.

The passage last week finished off with Hannah's song. In that song, Hannah referred to:

- God knowing all about the proud and the arrogant and weighing their deeds (verse 3).
- God being able to break the bows of those who had physical strength on their side (verse 4).
- God silencing the wicked (verse 9).
- God shattering those who oppose Him (verse 10).

People who first heard that song would automatically think of Israel's enemies – the Canaanites and the Philistines. These nations were wicked. These nations had the upper hand against Israel. These nations would incur God's judgment. Yet, in the very next story we find the proud and arrogant and wicked and opponents of God – not amongst the Philistines, but serving as priests at God's sanctuary. From Hannah's song, we're led to expect that these priests will be shattered by God. We won't be disappointed.

Yet, we haven't yet got to the end of their wickedness. There's more. Verse 22:

Now Eli, who was very old, heard about everything his sons were doing to all Israel and how they slept with the women who served at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting.

Many of the other religions of that time involved ritual sexual activities. Shrine prostitutes were attached to the pagan temples of the surrounding nations. Israel was to be different. Again and again in Leviticus we read:

You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.
Israel's religion wasn't about going through certain rel-

igious rituals in order to guarantee "the god" would treat them favourably and do whatever they wanted "the god" to do for them. Israel's religion was about relationship with a holy God – a righteous God, a pure God, a God who was totally separate from evil. Being in relationship with such a God meant they were to reflect that God's character. Part of that involved having a right approach to their sexuality – both in their private lives and in their religious lives (for it was wrong to see the two as being somehow distinct). The one standard covered the whole of their lives.

Hophni and Phinehas ignore that as well. They prefer the practices of the nations around them rather than God's standards. While there's no suggestion in the text that these women were being used as shrine prostitutes, still Hophni and Phinehas brought sexual immorality into Israel's religious precincts. The image of Israel's God as a holy God is tarnished. He's made to look just like all the other so-called gods of the surrounding nations.

Eli warns them about the consequences of their actions. Verse 23:

So he [Eli] said to them, "Why do you do such things? I hear from all the people about these wicked deeds of yours. No, my sons; it is not a good report that I hear spreading among the LORD'S people. If a man sins against another man, God may mediate for him; but if a man sins against the LORD, who will intercede for him?" His sons, however, did not listen to their father's rebuke, for it was the LORD'S will to put them to death.

Many people stumble over those last words. They accuse

God of being unfair. They accuse God of lacking mercy. They accuse God of treating Hophni and Phinehas as mere puppets. But the text doesn't say that. Hophni and Phinehas are treated throughout as responsible human beings.

- They had God's instructions about the sacrifices. They were quite clear – and they were generous for the priests. They chose to ignore them.
- They had God's instructions about the proper use of their sexuality. They too were quite clear – and they had their own wives. They chose to ignore those instructions as well.
- They were warned by those bringing the sacrifices that the fat should be put on the altar. They chose to ignore those warnings.
- They were warned by their father Eli about showing contempt for God. They chose to ignore that warning also.

They had ample opportunity to know what was required by God and to fall into line. Even the judgment that's announced in the coming verses does not fall immediately – there's still opportunity for them to give up their wickedness. They choose not to.

In doing so, they demonstrate the hardness of their own hearts towards God. Resisting God's become a habit they can't break. The opportunities to change their ways keep coming to them, but instead of seeing them as opportunities to change they see them as opportunities to confirm their wickedness and rebellion against God. The word of God's a dangerous thing. Each time you hear the word of God, you face a choice – you're given an opportunity.

- You can choose to hear God's word – to say: My life's wrong at this point and I need to change so

my life conforms to what God's word says.

- Or you can choose to ignore God's word – to say: My life's wrong at this point according to God, but I know better than God or I don't want to do what God says and so I'm not going to change.

You can develop the habit of listening to God's word or ignoring God's word. The warning that comes through verse 25 is that you can so develop the habit of ignoring God's word that it becomes a habit that binds you. When God's word comes to you, you automatically ignore it.

In verse 27, God announces judgment. As Hannah sang, those who oppose God will be shattered.

Now a man of God came to Eli and said to him, "This is what the LORD says: 'Did I not clearly reveal myself to your father's house when they were in Egypt under Pharaoh? I chose your father out of all the tribes of Israel to be my priest, to go up to my altar, to burn incense, and to wear an ephod in my presence. I also gave your father's house all the offerings made with fire by the Israelites. Why do you scorn my sacrifice and offering that I prescribed for my dwelling? Why do you honor your sons more than me by fattening yourselves on the choice parts of every offering made by my people Israel?'

"Therefore the LORD, the God of Israel, declares: 'I promised that your house and your father's house would minister before me forever'. But now the LORD declares: 'Far be it from me! Those who honour me I will honour, but those who despise me will be disdained. The time is coming when I will cut short your strength and the strength of your father's house, so that there will not be an old man in your family line and you will see distress in my dwelling. Although

good will be done to Israel, in your family line there will never be an old man. Every one of you that I do not cut off from my altar will be spared only to blind your eyes with tears and to grieve your heart, and all your descendants will die in the prime of life.

" And what happens to your two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, will be a sign to you – they will both die on the same day. I will raise up for myself a faithful priest, who will do according to what is in my heart and mind. I will firmly establish his house, and he will minister before my anointed one always. Then everyone left in your family line will come and bow down before him for a piece of silver and a crust of bread and plead, "Appoint me to some priestly office so I can have food to eat".' "

If you didn't have the warning about Hophni and Phinehas clear by the end of verse 25, it should be patently obvious by now. These guys have shown contempt for God. They're full of greed and corruption. These guys are going to be wiped out by God. Notice a couple of things about God's judgment on them.

First, it's not immediate. They're not hit by a lightning bolt straight away. In fact, at the end of chapter 2, they're still very much alive. We're left waiting to see when God's word will be fulfilled – or, for those who have less confidence in God's word, if it will be fulfilled. The fact that it's not immediate is a further opportunity for Hophni and Phinehas. Hearing the judgment pronounced, they could repent – they could turn aside from their wickedness. They don't take that opportunity, but the opportunity's still there. God's announcement of future judgment is, in fact, an expression of His grace.

Secondly, the judgment extends to Eli and the rest of his family. Some say: That's a bit unfair. What's poor Eli done? The text doesn't say he participated in the abuses of the sacrifices or he was sleeping with these other women. Why should he suffer for his sons' sins? He honoured his sons more than God. He merely warned them rather than removing them from office. He may not have been able to stop them from sexual immorality – after all, they're married sons – but he could've stopped them being sexually immoral priests. As head priest, he could've insisted the sacrifices be done properly. The announcement of judgment also gives Eli an opportunity to take action in relation to his sons – but he doesn't. In chapter 4, when the ark's taken off to battle, it's the priests Hophni and Phinehas who are there with it.

Thirdly, being God's priest brings responsibility. Yes, there's a certain privilege involved in the job – chosen by God for the job; permitted to approach God's altar; given meat from some of the sacrifices. There's a certain prestige that goes with the title *priest*. But it must never be forgotten that it's **God's** priest. It's like the politician's PR officer – there may be a certain prestige associated with the job, but that must never be allowed to obscure the fact that the job involves serving the politician. So with God's priest – it's not a matter of using the position to get additional personal perks; it's a matter of serving God and following His instructions and trying to honour His wishes in the way He wants them honoured. If God's priest won't do that, then God will find one who will.

The story does bring a warning not to treat God with contempt – don't be like Hophni and Phinehas. How did

they treat God with contempt? They ignored God's word. They didn't pay attention to what God said. They did their own thing rather than God's thing. People still do that today – both non-religious people and religious people. With the non-religious ones, it's usually pretty obvious they're ignoring God. They don't bother pretending they want anything to do with Him.

With the religious ones, it's not always so obvious. They find ways to disguise the fact they aren't paying attention to God's instructions. And so, for example, in the area of money and possessions, there are people claiming to be Christians who ignore God's standards.

- Instead of considering how God would have them use His resources, they make their decisions based on their own wants and their own desires.
- Instead of giving generously to the work of gospel ministry, they spend it on themselves and their own pleasures.
- Instead of caring for the poor, they turn their noses up in disdain.
- Instead of heeding the warnings about the love of money being the root of all evil, they daily bow to the idolatry of their greed.

It's treating God and God's word with contempt.

Others show contempt for God's word by ignoring the way God's provided for us to approach Him. Instead of being satisfied with having a free approach to God in Jesus, they want to find some other way of coming to God.

- Some say you've got a better chance of getting to God if you try going through Mary or one of the saints.

- Some say you've got a better chance if you do something penitential – like crawling up the stairs of the church on your knees or wearing sackcloth and ashes.
- Some say you've got a better chance if you follow the right magic prayer formula – if you say the right words or you say them often enough.
- Some say you've got a better chance if you've done the right worship – whether they define that worship in terms of ritual done in church or in terms of a series of appropriate songs or in terms of living a godly life.

Our access to God isn't on the basis of what we've done or do – it's on the basis of what Jesus did for us.

The list of possibilities is endless. God's word covers all aspects of our lives. Thus, all aspects of our lives are candidates for us to find ways of ignoring God's word – for us to show contempt for God. For these priests, it was how they conducted the sacrifices and their sexual immorality. For you, it may be a tongue that's quick to tell untruths or spread gossip or a hand that refuses to use your resources for God's glory. God's not looking for innovation – He's looking for obedience. He's not impressed by our arrogance that thinks we know better than Him.

Yet, the narrator hasn't included this story simply for the warning at the personal level. The story also deals with the leadership question in Israel. Israel's current leaders are corrupt. Eli himself may get a passing grade in terms of what the people think of him, but his sons are a disaster even by their standards. With such corrupt leadership, what hope is there for the long-term future of

God's people?

The story tells us their corruption isn't God's final word for Israel. God's quietly working for His people. It's not something greatly dramatic that bursts on the scene with flashing lights and a loud PA system. It's God patiently working out His purposes for saving His people.

Throughout the story of Hophni and Phinehas, the narrator sprinkles these little snippets about someone else. Verse 11:

Then Elkanah went home to Ramah, but the boy ministered before the LORD under Eli the priest.

Verse 18:

But Samuel was ministering before the LORD – a boy wearing a linen ephod.

Verse 26:

And the boy Samuel continued to grow in stature and in favor with the LORD and with men.

Chapter 3, verse 1:

The boy Samuel ministered before the LORD under Eli.

This child from chapter 1 is kept before us. Amidst all the corruption of Shiloh, we have these glimpses of this young boy growing up under Eli's direction and apparently unspoiled by all the evil going on around him. He continues to grow. He continues to quietly minister. He's a great contrast to this family God will judge.

More than that – look again at the second half of verse 32

Although good will be done to Israel, in your family line there will never be an old man.

God hasn't abandoned Israel – even though Israel's lead-

er ship's abandoned Him. Indeed, if the end of Judges is anything to go by, most of the people have also abandoned Him. Yet, God still works for the good of this nation He's chosen. Indeed, the very judgment of Eli's family is for the good of Israel.

- It removes this corrupt influence from Israel's sanctuary – from a place where the corruption could very easily spread to others.
- It says to the people that God takes sin seriously. It warns them of the very real dangers of persisting in sin.

Still more than that – look again at verse 35:

I will raise up for myself a faithful priest, who will do according to what is in my heart and mind. I will firmly establish his house, and he will minister before my anointed one always.

If Eli and his family can't do the job properly, then God will find someone who can. God's not interested in those who are simply willing to enjoy the privileges of the position – He wants someone who'll take the actual responsibilities of the job seriously and who'll be faithful to those. If these people abuse the position, God'll get someone who won't.

At first glance, we expect that priest will be Samuel. He comes from a priestly line. Perhaps his family will be the one to replace Eli's. Yet, as the story progresses, we find his kids are just as bad as Hophni and Phinehas. It's not until we get to Solomon in 1 Kings that the line of Eli is replaced and Zadok becomes high priest. Then we have a faithful priest and an anointed king. The line of Zadok continues down to at least the time of Ezra. From outside the Bible, we know they continued even longer than that

– down to 171^{BC} in Jerusalem and even longer outside Jerusalem. Moreover, the prophet Ezekiel speaks of them as remaining faithful even when the rest of the Israelites went astray (44:15; 48:11).

Yet, even then, there remain questions.

- Solomon, as the anointed king, goes off the rails. His many wives seduce his heart to follow other gods. The anointed kings that follow Solomon are generally no better – many of them are decidedly wicked.
- Zadok and his line, as human priests, suffer the same failings as the rest of us humans. They too sin. They too must bring sacrifices for their own sins. Their sacrifices must be repeated again and again – both for themselves and for others. There is no permanent effectiveness to their sacrifices.

And so, at the opening of New Testament times, some people expected two Messiahs – one from the line of David who'd be a kingly Messiah and another who'd be a priestly Messiah.

It's not until we get to Jesus that we find the true King and the true High Priest.

- Jesus is of the line of David and is God's anointed King – not just over Israel, but over the universe.
- Jesus is the High Priest who offers the one true sacrifice for sins – once for all time.

It's in Jesus that the leadership of God's people finds its true fulfilment. In Jesus, God has a faithful leader for His people – for all time.