

I Samuel

Lesson 7 - Chapter 3 and 4

We ended 1st Samuel 2 by going over the prophetic judgment against Eli and his family that had come from the mouth of an unnamed prophet. To summarize, God's oracle was that Eli's descendants (who were by custom destined to be the next High Priests and senior-level regular priests of Israel) would serve for only a short time because they would all die young. In addition God cursed Eli's two sons Hophni and Pinchas such that they would both die on the same day and Eli would live long enough to experience that tragic event. Further, at some point in the near future Eli's priestly line of succession would be usurped by another priestly line that was established by the Lord, and that other priestly line would produce a "faithful priest" (as opposed to the growing list of unfaithful High Priests, which included Eli) who would honorably serve both God and His anointed king. In light of history, that faithful priest was probably Zadok, and of course the anointed king was David.

But God also made Eli a promise that the original priestly family (meaning the overall clan of Aaron of the tribe of Levi, of which Eli was a sub-clan) would not be cut off from God's original promise that was made to them back in Egypt. Indeed a descendant of Aaron would be that "faithful priest" and others from Aaron's line would continue to be High Priests and common priests, even if that also meant that Eli's particular family would be more or less excluded from participating. So that we're clear: Eli was NOT the only family line coming from Aaron, there were others. But in the larger sense there remained but two **primary** clans representing Aaron: the clan of Eleazar and the clan of Ithamar.

Aaron had a number of sons and from each of them sprang a clan but two of his sons, Nadav and Avihu, were killed by God out in the Wilderness for being so casual and disrespectful about God's ritual protocols and so their family blood lines terminated. Eleazar, the eldest remaining son of Aaron, thus was given the honor of representing the line of High Priests that would carry on after Aaron's death. Another son of Aaron, his youngest (Ithamar), would represent the line of common priests who were in charge of the Levite blue-collar workers who labored to maintain the Tabernacle and later the Temple. Eli was a descendant of Ithamar and so it is puzzling as to how he wound up becoming the High Priest, and there is a hole in the historical records that if found would explain why a descendant of Eleazar didn't assume that role instead of Eli. In any case, Zadok would eventually become a High Priest for King David and Zadok was of the proper lineage for a High Priest, the line of Eleazar.

As we open chapter 3 the Nazarite child Samuel was still serving God at the Tabernacle in Shiloh under the direction of the aging High Priest Eli, who was now under condemnation from Yehoveh and simply waiting for the shoe to fall. Let's read 1st Samuel chapter 3.

READ 1ST SAMUEL 3 all

Some time had passed since God's curse was pronounced upon Eli and his family; how much time we don't know but probably only a year or two since Samuel was still a child. We must be careful not to mischaracterize Eli as a thoroughly wicked man and thus worthy of destruction; he was not and thus God did not destroy him. Rather Eli was a decent man who loved the Lord, but he was a weak man, not strong enough for the challenging and critical role as Israel's High Priest (a role which he somehow acquired but probably should not have because he was **not** of the God-authorized family line of High Priests). Eli's lack of fortitude led to allowing his sons to run rampant over God's people and even desecrating the Sanctuary, and further his weakness did not allow Eli sufficient backbone to stand up and do what was right according to God's will and His Torah, especially in the face of what was likely stiff opposition and an ambivalent Israelite population. Undoubtedly Eli had inherited (and not created) a dysfunctional priesthood along with 12 dysfunctional tribes to oversee, but there is also no evidence that he did any more than to passively man his post, enjoy the honors and privileges of his lofty office, and abide by the many questionable manmade traditions that developed and now existed and operated in place of God's authorized sacrificial rituals and worship protocols.

There is a lesson here for all who would aspire to be a leader of God's people. First, one had better be called and equipped by Yehoveh for the job because second, if you accept a leadership role of whatever level (whether called or not) you WILL be held responsible by God for what transpires on your watch. Obviously no leader can know everything that goes on or control every detail; but a leader is expected to be diligent, vigilant, and to obey the Lord and do what may be difficult versus what is popular or even usual. Eli took over a mess but rather than endeavor to clean it up, he preferred to leave it a mess. That made it his fault; now he owned it and all the repercussions that came with it (as he sadly discovered).

Verse 1 informs us that this was an era when God didn't speak to His people very much or did He show up in visions (a somewhat usual way for the Lord to communicate particularly in ancient times). Why? Because this was a dark time in Israel; the people had fallen far away from YHWH and they weren't prone to paying attention to Him. So when that happened the Lord withheld His instructions and His response to their requests. A word to the wise; its no different now in our day.

Thus this first verse of chapter 3 sets the scene for what comes next by essentially explaining that because God's communication with Israel was so rare that it would be a major surprise if He suddenly broke His silence and spoke.

One day Eli had gone to bed as usual expecting nothing more than a good night's sleep. Eli was now sufficiently advanced in age that he was nearly blind. Late into the night, apparently sometime before dawn, something extraordinary happened. We know it was still nighttime because the Sanctuary Menorah was still burning. The Golden Lampstand held enough oil to burn until morning at which point the fuel ran out and the flames extinguished.

Verse 3 says that Samuel was sleeping in the sanctuary, the location of the Ark. What it actually says in Hebrew is that he was sleeping in the **hekal** not far from the Ark of the Covenant. Some scholars think that meant that Samuel was actually sleeping in the front compartment of the tent sanctuary called the Holy Place, the room where the Menorah, Table

of Shewbread and the Incense Altar resided. While that is **highly unlikely** I suppose it is possible especially considering the rather lax priestly protocols during this era. However it is far more likely that little **Sh'mu'el** was sleeping in one of the many chambers that had been erected in and around what amounted to the courtyard area of the Tabernacle. What throws scholars and causes uncertainty is the use of the word **hekal** in this sentence. **Hekal** was a rather standard word meaning large dwelling, and so was also used to refer to a temple (any god's temple). It seems probable that **hekal** at this time more indicated the general grounds of a god's dwelling place. Thus it's just like when we speak of the Wilderness Tabernacle that (in common terms) not only means the sacred tent itself, but also included everything out to the courtyard screen that surrounded it. Interestingly we see that Scripturally speaking the term "tabernacle" is not being used much by now, and instead is often replaced by the word **hekal**; and at the same time we also read of rooms and doors and antechambers that lead into the sanctuary. The original Wilderness Tabernacle had no attached rooms and certainly had no doors (just heavy curtains).

But what we have to remember is that a cloth and animal skin tent is a rather temporary arrangement. Something approaching 4 centuries have now passed since that heavily used tent was first constructed at the base of Mt. Sinai. There had undoubtedly been countless repairs and patches applied. But since the day Israel crossed the Jordan into Canaan the Tabernacle no longer needed to be portable; Shiloh was considered it's permanent home and the tent material and its wooden skeleton would have long ago weakened and worn out. So most archeologists and Jewish sages say that the priests and Levites would have used more permanent construction techniques to repair and replace as needed. And, because of the permanent location of the sanctuary and the reality that the people no longer camped around it in tents but now lived dispersed in brick and stone dwellings in their own tribal territories, the Levites and priests who served their duty in courses need facilities to sleep and eat during their stay at Shiloh. Generally speaking only Eli and his family lived permanently at Shiloh. For the most part the other priests and Levites would come for a temporary stay when it was their turn to serve at the sanctuary. Thus quarters were constructed using standard construction materials of the day and the Wilderness Tabernacle gave way to kind of hybrid hodge-podge of brick, wood, and (probably) animal skin structures. And that is what we ought to picture in this setting.

In any case the point of the narrator saying that Samuel was near the Ark served an important purpose in the story, as we'll now see because sometime during the night Samuel is awoken when he distinctly hears a voice call out his name. We of course are going to soon find out that the voice belongs to none other than the God of Israel. But we also know that when the Lord is present in His earthly dwelling place He hovers above the Ark, with the Mercy Seat as His figurative "footstool". So it was important for the storyteller to tell us that Samuel was near enough to the Ark where God was, to make it plausible that Samuel could hear Him calling.

Samuel thinks it's the blind and frail Eli calling to him for assistance, and so answers back, "here I am". Then he ran to Eli's bedside. Eli said he didn't call him so to go back to his own bed. No sooner had Samuel crawled back under the covers than it happens again. So sure is Samuel that it must be Eli calling that he runs again to Eli's chamber and Eli again informs him that he didn't call him. Any Hebrew reader of 2000 years ago and more by now would have

asked themselves why Samuel didn't immediately know that it was Yehoveh calling; after all the voice MUST have been quite different and distinct from that of the aged Eli's.

So verse 7 tells us that Samuel didn't get it that it was Yehoveh calling him because he didn't yet know the Lord because the word of the Lord hadn't yet been revealed to him. Put another way: that special relationship between Adonai and Samuel (much like Believers have with God) hadn't formed yet partly because Samuel was much too young to understand such lofty spiritual matters and also partly because Eli apparently hadn't done much to teach him. As logical and easy as it is for us to understand that, I think there's something else present that we ought not miss; Samuel was doing regular daily service before the Lord in the Lord's sanctuary, but at the same time he didn't KNOW the Lord nor did he know the Word. What this tells us is that anyone with the aptitude and a decision can perform repetitive religious services in a house of God; but that doesn't mean that they have any sort of knowledge of, or intimate relationship with, Him.

We see this sort of thing regularly at all levels within institutional Christianity. Sometimes its with Sunday school teachers, or deacons, or elders who it turns out have served in some capacity for years but are not saved, or who have nothing but the most minimal understanding of God's Word. But one particularly troubling example is that hundreds of Pastors and ordained Ministers leave their positions every year and go back to the secular world. Some because they are burned out, others because they couldn't make enough money to support their families, but at least as many because they came to the conclusion that they never really believed or had faith in the first place and so it was all a big mistake. Yet some of these have served as our Church leaders for years and years, performing Baptisms, leading worship and prayer, teaching our children and acting as the spiritual authority over an unsuspecting flock. Just because someone does service in the name of the Lord doesn't necessarily mean that person has a personal relationship with God. Samuel was young and not yet at an age of accountability. Eli seems to have been somewhat derelict in teaching Samuel anything about spiritual matters except for traditions and customs and rituals. Samuel knew that God existed, but he didn't know God and He didn't know His laws and commands. That was about to change.

So as Samuel obediently snuggled back into his bed the voice calls his name yet a third time, and Samuel runs again to Eli. Because the Lord's presence had become so rare, it took this long for Eli to begin to suspect that something supernatural was going on here; but suspect it he finally did and so instructed Samuel to go to his chamber and if he heard that voice again to say, "speak, Yehoveh, your servant is listening".

It's important to notice that the Lord called to Samuel 3 times; when something happens in 3's in the bible it often means that there is important spiritual significance to it. In reality it was also common in all Middle Eastern cultures that a threefold repetition involved magic. It was probably that triple repetition that made Eli think more seriously of the matter. But then the Lord calls Samuel a 4th time and the boy responds as instructed by Eli.

Yehoveh proceeds to explain that He is about to make some serious changes in Israel; something so significant that everyone will pay attention. The change is that on that one day a

lot is going to happen, and it will revolve around the promise of punishment that He ordained against Eli and his family. One wonders just how much of what the Lord was saying that this young boy was able to assimilate. The Lord was confiding in **Sh'mu'el** what he was going to do to Eli and why; and the why was that Eli's family had turned to wickedness and for that there was no possibility of atonement. Eli's personal wickedness was primarily that he didn't rebuke his incorrigible sons Hophni and Pinchas for their despicable behavior.

Preparation was underway to make Samuel the Lord's official earthly messenger and for Samuel to be a judge over Israel. He would have to grow up fast, now. He had learned of the Lord's intent to severely harm Eli and his family and it must have frightened little Samuel terribly especially since it was all so open-ended. How the punishment would happen, and when it would occur, and how Samuel might be affected by it was left unanswered. It seems that the first thing that the boy who did 't know God learned was that God will punish wickedness among His own people and especially among those set-apart to serve Him. I would imagine that this event had much to do with shaping Samuel's life and his determination to be faithful to God at all costs.

Let's take a moment to revisit this statement by the Lord that "the wickedness of Eli's family will never be atoned for by any sacrifice or offering". Way back when we studied the Law in the Torah, it was made clear that not every sin a man might commit could be atoned for by an animal sacrifice. The two central principles to animal sacrifice were that 1) only the shedding of blood (the loss of life) could expiate sins, and 2) that in His grace God would provide that the blood of an innocent animal could be used as a SUBSTITUTE for the human who deserved to have his or her own blood shed in payment for that sin.

But YHWH deemed certain sins as beyond the scope of the sacrificial system.

CJB Numbers 15:30 "But an individual who does something wrong intentionally, whether a citizen or a foreigner, is blaspheming ADONAI. That person will be cut off from his people. 31 Because he has had contempt for the word of ADONAI and has disobeyed his command, that person will be cut off completely; his offense will remain with him."

The RSV says it a little more literally than the CJB:

RSV Numbers 15:30 But the person who does anything with a high hand, whether he is native or a sojourner, reviles the LORD, and that person shall be cut off from among his people.

A high-handed sin is often translated as an "intentional" sin. At other times it is translated as "blasphemy". You need to go back to earlier Torah lessons to get a fuller understanding of this concept, but "intentional" doesn't necessarily mean quite what it sounds like. Obviously if someone steals something it was "intentional", and we know that stealing is a sin for which there is atonement available. Rather it is better to translate this as "high-handed" or "extremely serious" or some such thing because the idea is that not only are there lesser sins and greater sins, but also there comes a point that the sin is so offensive to the Lord that His

justice cannot allow the blood of an animal as a substitute and so the trespasser will pay the price with loss of his physical life and/or his eternal life. By definition, blasphemy against the Lord falls outside of any divine system of atonement. So maybe this is also a good time to revisit just what “blaspheming” means. Practically all Christians are told that the only unforgivable sin is to “blaspheme the Holy Spirit”; but practically all Christians also have no good idea of what that means.

CJB Mark 3:29 however, someone who blasphemes against the Ruach HaKodesh never has forgiveness but is guilty of an eternal sin."

This is why it is so critical to not render the Old Testament as dead and gone and “nailed to the cross”. It is in the Old Testament that we find out what blaspheming the Holy Spirit means, and it means to commit a sin of such grievous nature, and to do it with utter disregard for the spirit of God who lives within us, that no forgiveness is available. Further, embedded in the concept of blasphemy against God is the sinner’s lack of repentance. In other words, like Hophni and Pinchas who stole the Lord’s sacrifices knowing they were sinning directly against God, and even when confronted with this sin by their father Eli they expressed no remorse and had no intent to repent, blasphemy is a combination of a great sin against God PLUS no repentance by the violator.

Now I have heard the argument that Mark 3:29 is actually just a hypothetical statement that isn’t even possible among Believers; but to accept that explanation completely neuters God’s Word and makes Mark 3:29 some kind of fairy tale or toothless threat. But let’s look at the verse just preceding Mark 3:29:

NAS Mark 3:28 "Truly I say to you, all sins shall be forgiven the sons of men, and whatever blasphemies they utter;

Again, once we have a good understanding of Torah we can grasp what is meant by, “blaspheming the Holy Spirit”. All throughout Torah there are two primary kinds of statutes: those concerning men sinning against other men, and those concerning men sinning directly against God. What the Gospel of Mark tells us is that Yeshua’s atonement has the efficacy to forgive us for anything one man can do against another man (even murder). However, things that are blasphemous (high handed sins, the worst of the worst) of a man directly against God are NOT covered by Yeshua’s blood. Further, some of these high-handed sins are so terrible that while Yehoveh might have accepted Yeshua’s blood as payment IF the violator had expressed true regret and changed his ways, instead the Lord will harden that person’s heart such that they will NOT repent. High-handed sins without repentance equals eternal death.

Now you can debate among yourselves whether any Believer is capable of doing such a thing, but the pattern we see set down in the Old Testament is that not only is a Believer in the God of Israel capable of blasphemy but so are even the Priests of the God of Israel. Hophni and Pinchas have just been declared as guilty of blasphemy against God, he has hardened their hearts and so they are not repentant, and thus not eligible for atonement. And we see precisely the same thing in the New Testament. You decide for yourself whether a Believer is immune to direct blasphemy against God.

In verse 15 we find Samuel lying there wide-eyed after His encounter with the Lord until the sun rose and it was time to perform his first daily duty, which was to open the door into the sanctuary. This indeed means the door into the Holy Place and it was undoubtedly a wooden door and not a curtain or veil as it used to be. Opening the door was so the priests who were on duty could enter and service the Menorah and perform whatever priestly duties were customary inside that sanctuary chamber. Of course this meant that Samuel would encounter Eli; what would he tell Eli about it? Would he divulge to Eli what Yehoveh had revealed to him? Samuel was afraid to say to Eli the awful things that would happen to Eli's family.

Notice that it says that Samuel got this information in a vision, a *marah* in Hebrew. This connects back to verse 10 when we're told that the Lord "stood" before Samuel. So these two statements connect again back even further to verse 1 where we're told that God's word was rare and visions few in Israel in that day. Well, things have changed; Samuel received God's word AND experienced a vision. A new era was dawning and Samuel was about to behave as a prophet for the first time and tell Eli about God's oracle to him.

Eli insisted that Samuel tell him everything the Lord told him during the night, and the shivering boy complied by repeating to Eli every devastating word he heard but a couple of hours earlier. Eli responds in quiet resignation by saying, "It is Yehoveh; let Him do what seems good to Him". This was no childhood nightmare *Sh'mu'el* had suffered; it indeed was the Lord and the message was clear; Eli's family's fate was sealed and there was no hope for a reversal.

Verse 19 explains that Samuel kept growing; the inference includes natural physical maturing, but less so than it means that Samuel's gift as a prophet was also developing. In other words the boy who did not know God now knew God intimately and was maturing spiritually as his body grew. Thus every word that the Lord gave to Samuel he passed along faithfully, and so in time all Israel from Dan to Be'er Shiva knew about Samuel and his prophetic accuracy. They grew to trust Samuel. Further we see another very important development; for the past 3 centuries or so Israel had no common national leader that all 12 tribes looked to. In the era of the Judges they looked to their own tribal leaders and the occasional Shofet who God at times raised up to deliver a tribe or two from trouble or oppression. That Israel would begin to accept a nationwide leader in Samuel was paving the way for them to also accept a national king.

Let's get partway into chapter 4.

READ 1ST SAMUEL CHAPTER 4 all

The first words of chapter 4 connects us to chapter 3 and confirms that Samuel was a prophet for all Israel, not for just one or two tribes as had been the norm up to now.

We see that the dreaded Philistines were still the primary foes of Israel and that the battle for the Holy Land had by no means been settled. What we just read is one of the most infamous stories in the Bible; the story of the Ark of God being lost into the hands of Israel's worst enemy.

As a context note that Samuel was NOT the military leader leading Israel into battle against the

Philistines; in fact who functioned as the field general was apparently irrelevant to the story because it was left out. We might expect that by this point Samuel would be established as a political leader of Israel as there seemed to be no one else with his stature; but instead we are focused to the priesthood. To our surprise Eli was still the judge and High Priest of Israel and so he would have been the official who gave the stamp of approval for Israel to wage war.

Normally, as High Priest, he would have been present at the battle sight (though stationed at a safe distance); but instead we find his two sons Hophni Pinchas involved. Eli was blind and infirm and was now strictly a figurehead of a High Priest.

Even so there is no doubt that's Samuel's word played a role in Eli's determination to have this battle. There seems to be no reluctance on Eli's part, or even his son's part, to accept Samuel's position as God's prophet. Interestingly although we're not told what God's oracle was to Samuel that precipitated this particular battle, we can see from what proceeded that sometimes God's directions to us don't wind up accomplishing what we might hope for or expect. There is no way this Hebrew militia of farmers and herdsman would have banded together and fought if they thought the outcome would be anything other than victory.

But as Job and so many others have discovered in their journey with Yehoveh, God usually gives us information on a "need to know" basis; and apparently Israel didn't need to know anymore than that they were to take on the Philistines in the area between Even-Ezer and Afek, which (to their credit) they did. The outcome was obviously beyond their wildest nightmares.

We'll examine this battle next week.