

Hope for the Hopeless

We are in a series of messages on hope, preparing for our annual Day of Hope next Sunday. I've been hoping I would be able to preach this morning, even though I'm having to do it in a seated position with my leg elevated. I'm doing well in my recovery after surgery and I appreciate all of the calls and cards and prayers and meals and kindness shown to us.

Turn with me to 1 Samuel. I don't know why I felt drawn to this passage and this story but I felt there was something here for us today. It's a lot of narrative, a lot of story here and for a message on hope, it really contains a lot of hopelessness. You'll just need to follow along with me because eventually we will see how to regain hope in the midst of hopeless situations. It's a good thing to remember: **God doesn't leave us without hope!**

1 Samuel opens with the birth of Samuel and his dedication to the Lord. At this time in Israel's history, the nation consists of a loose federation of twelve tribes with elders kind of governing things. God has sent what were called judges, like Gideon and Samson to help deliver and lead and guide his people. At this time the temple hadn't been built yet, Jerusalem wasn't the capitol and the movable tabernacle that had journeyed through the wilderness with the Israelites was permanently set up at a place called Shiloh. Shiloh was the religious center of the land and the high priest was a man named Eli who had two rotten sons who were helping him in the duties of the priesthood. Samuel was being raised by Eli and Samuel would become in essence the last judge as well as being considered a prophet. It is Samuel that would appoint Saul as the first King of Israel at the request of the people. That means 1 Samuel is written in a time of transition from judges to a monarchy and the first king.

1 Samuel begins with this hopeful story of Hannah giving birth to Samuel and dedicating him to the service of the Lord. It begins with hope that God was going to do something extraordinary through Samuel ("I am about to do something in Israel that will make the ears of everyone who hears of it tingle" 3:11), but then it jumps in chapter 2 to the sad story of the high priest Eli's wicked sons. The bible says, "**Eli's sons were wicked men; they had no regard for the Lord.**" **1 Samuel 2:12** King James reads, "they knew not the Lord." They didn't give any thought to God, what he commanded or demanded of them, even though they were priests!

Not much has changed. We still have priests and preachers, supposedly doing the work of God, but having no regard for God and taking advantage of the people. It's not just preachers and priests. There are all kinds of people that attend church and like Eli's sons, know how to go

through the motions; they know how to act religious; they know how to sing and worship, but when it gets down to the nitty gritty, they have no regard for the Lord. We should examine our own hearts and lives.

1 Samuel 2:13-17 describes their sinfulness in regard to the sacrifices that were being offered by the people at Shiloh. The priests were allowed a portion of the sacrifice for themselves and their families to eat. There was a portion for the person offering the sacrifice to eat as well as the portion offered to the Lord. Eli's sons wanted their portion before the Lord received the lawful portion designated for God as a sacrifice. They had no regard for the Lord or his sacrifice, his offerings. Verse 17 says, **v17 "They were treating the Lord's offering with contempt."**

Impudent, arrogant, entitled, impatient and immoral; that was Eli's sons. Not only were they treating the Lord's offering with contempt, they were committing adultery. Verse 22 says of Eli's sons **v22 "They slept with the women who served at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting."** When Eli confronted them the bible says **v25 "They did not listen to their father's rebuke."** Eli didn't do anything else to try to stop them or control them. Consequently, knowing the hardness of their hearts, the Lord decided to judge the house of Eli.

A man of God, unnamed, comes to Eli and tells him, "this is what the Lord says." There will not be an old man in your family line. All your descendants will die in the prime of life and as a sign this will come true, both of your sons, Hophni and Phinehas will die on the same day.

It may seem like a harsh judgement, but you can't disregard God and his commands and expect to get away with it forever. God is merciful, but when you harden your heart against God and refuse to repent, refuse to listen, refuse to obey, there comes a point when God lifts his hand and judgment will fall. Judgment fell upon the house of Eli and it fell upon the land of Israel because they too were sinning against God and against his commandments. The blessings of God cannot be expected to continue in the face of continual disobedience. Hear me, you can't continue to live in sin and in rebellion against God and expect to escape judgment. Eli was a high priest and his sons were priests as well, but God still held them accountable for how they lived and what they did. The same goes for all of us! The sons had no regard for God and apparently Eli had more regard for his sons than he did for the Lord and his commandments. Eli tolerated and permitted their sin, perhaps covering it up or at least ignoring it. The bible says, **"Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows." Galatians 6:7**

The narrative of 1 Samuel goes from this warning to Eli to the story of Samuel as a boy hearing the voice of the Lord. Time passes and Eli's sons continue to sin and Israel itself continues to sin against God and Samuel grows and learns to hear and to speak the word of the Lord. Notice this verse **“The Lord continued to appear at Shiloh and there he revealed himself to Samuel through his word.” 1 Samuel 3:21** God is still revealing himself through his word if we will be faithful to read and study and listen and learn!

At this time Israel's arch enemy were the Philistines who occupied territory along the Mediterranean coast and eastward. They lined up to fight against Israel and defeated them. 4,000 Israeli soldiers were killed in the battle. When the elders met together, they asked why the Lord allowed them to be defeated? They decided to send to Shiloh and have the priests bring the ark of the covenant. **“Let us bring the ark of the Lord's covenant from Shiloh, so that it may go with us and save us from the hand of our enemies.” 1 Samuel 4:3**

The ark of the covenant was a wooden box covered with gold with a lid of golden cherubim. Inside were the stone tablets of the 10 commandments and other items. It was kept inside the holy of holies. It was a sign of God's mercy, of his covenant with Israel, his presence. It was not, however, a magic box, a talisman. God's presence was not tied to a box, but rather to the surrendered hearts and lives of the people. Notice what they said, “let's bring the ark so that IT may go with us and save us.” “It” couldn't save anything. A box can't save you. Neither can church membership, or quoting the bible or enjoying southern gospel music or Hillsong worship songs. It's repentance and a relationship with God through Jesus Christ, that's what saves you!

They sent for the ark and Eli's rotten sons escort the ark into the Israelite camp. The whole camp goes crazy. “The ark is here so surely that means God will fight for us. After all, we are going through all the right motions.” They thought they could manipulate God into doing their bidding. God isn't in that box and God isn't in the worship music or the word of faith promises. Understand what I'm telling you. You can quote thirty five verses every morning about how good God is and how he is going to bless you and heal you but if you aren't serving Jesus, if he isn't Savior and Lord of your life, if you are still living in sin and disregarding the commands of God, just like the Israelites, God isn't in your camp, you're just trusting in a box. You can sing all the latest worship songs or cry listening to Gaither videos, but if you continue to sin and refuse to obey God and his word, you are counting on “it” to save you rather than putting your trust in Jesus as Savior and Lord.

The Israelites rejoiced thinking they had done what they needed to do to get God to fight on their side. The Philistines were frightened because they had heard what God had done before for Israel so they told their men to fight and be strong (4:8-11). They fought and God didn't show up. This time Israel lost 30,000 soldiers, the ark of God was captured by the Philistines and Eli's sons were killed. What God had told Eli years before was happening.

Look at 1 Samuel 4:12. A Benjamite ran from the battle line to Shiloh, about twenty miles. His clothes were torn and he had dust on his head, a sign of mourning but Eli was blind now and couldn't see. He was sitting in a chair beside the road, waiting for news. What has happened? "Israel fled before the Philistines, the army has suffered heavy losses, your two sons are dead." Then news concerning his sons didn't shock him. He knew they would die together. He had been expecting that, but the last piece of news was more than he could bear. "The ark of God has been captured." At this, Eli fell over backwards, his neck was broken and he died.

In addition, his daughter in law, the wife of Phinehas was pregnant. She went into labor upon hearing the news. She would die in child birth but before she died she named the baby Ichabod which means "no glory". She said, "**The glory has departed from Israel for the ark of God has been captured.**" **1 Samuel 4:22**

Talk about hopelessness. Everyone in Israel was affected. Thirty thousand soldiers dead. Their high priest and judge Eli was dead, his sons were dead, the ark of God had been captured, the nation was in defeat. Had God lost his power to deliver Israel? Or worse, had he turned his back upon them forever? Is there any hope for Israel?

You may be feeling hopeless yourself. You've suffered loss. Perhaps it was a death. Perhaps it was betrayal, someone you respected sinned against you like Eli's sons had sinned against the women ministering in the temple. Perhaps you're the one that has sinned against God and his commandments. Like Eli, you failed God and things seem pretty hopeless. It seems as if judgement has fallen on you and your household. Is there any hope? Was there any hope for Eli or for Israel? Remember what I said at the beginning. God doesn't leave us without hope.

At the end of the judgement pronounced against Eli and his sons, God added this word of hope. "**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.**" **1 Samuel 2:35** In the midst of the hopelessness, God speaks of hope. In spite of sin and failure, God will raise up a faithful priest, God will establish his house, he will minister

before my anointed one forever. It all seemed hopeless, but God still offers hope. Years later the prophet Jeremiah would witness God's judgment upon the people of Israel. He saw Jerusalem destroyed, the people taken into exile, but in a hopeless situation he writes, **"Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope: Because of the Lord's great mercy we are not consumed for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. The Lord is good to those whose hope is in him, to the one who seeks him...For men are not cast off by the Lord forever. Though he brings grief, he will show compassion, so great is his unfailing love."** Lamentations 3:21-32

There is still hope. It isn't all over. Not yet. It seems obvious that Samuel was the one of whom God is speaking in his word to Eli. But there were layers to this prophetic word. Israel didn't need to fear because God indeed raised up Samuel to be a judge and a prophet; he would speak the word of God to them. But that promise to firmly establish his house would point beyond Samuel to one that was to come. The house of David would be established, a source of hope, but ultimately, it was not even David's house or kingdom he was referring to, instead, the hope, the only hope for Israel and for the world would ultimately be found in Jesus Christ. Of his house and kingdom there would be no end. He is the Supremely anointed one. The writer of Hebrews says God designated Jesus to be THE high priest. **"He became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him and was designated by God to be high priest in the order of Melchizedek."** Hebrews 5:10 (Melchizedek, was the ancient priest-king of Jerusalem.)

Jesus is the only source of hope because Jesus alone is the ultimate and supreme judge and priest and prophet and king forever. If only Eli could have seen what was to come. All was not lost. It wasn't all hopeless. Even though Eli and his sons died that day, Eli would yet have descendants (through Ichabod's older brother) who would serve as priests, by God's mercy, although as God had said, none would live to be old men. I'm telling you there is still hope. But how do we lay hold of it? That's what I need to tell you.

We don't have time to tell all that happened after the ark was captured by the Philistines and they took it back to one of their cities. Let's just say things didn't work out for the Philistines as long as the ark was in their possession. They finally figured out a way to send the ark of the covenant back to Israel and eventually the ark ended up at a place called Kiriath Jearim, for twenty years.

After twenty years of defeat and hopelessness, living under the thumb of the Philistines, paying them tribute, finally the bible says the people of Israel mourned and sought after the Lord. They were ready to put their hope in the Lord again and Samuel told them how to lay hold of that hope. He said, **“If you are returning to the Lord with all your hearts, then rid yourselves of the foreign gods and the Ashtoreths and commit yourselves to the Lord and serve him only and he will deliver you out of the hand of the Philistines.” 1 Samuel 7:3**

You’ll find hope when you turn to the Lord with all your heart. You’ll find hope when you repent and turn away from sin and serve the Lord only. You’ll find life giving hope when you come in surrender and obedience to the source of hope. Turn to the Lord with all your heart.

Samuel said, “Let all Israel gather together at Mizpah and I will intercede with the Lord for you.” The people gathered and the bible says, **“On that day they fasted and there they confessed, ‘We have sinned against the Lord.’” 1 Samuel 7:6**

The Philistines heard that all of Israel had gathered and thought now is a good time to attack. The Israelites were afraid but they told Samuel, “Don’t stop crying out to the Lord our God for us, that he may rescue us from the hand of the Philistines.” Samuel offered a young lamb as a burnt offering, a sacrifice on behalf of the people and he cried out to the Lord on Israel’s behalf and the Lord answered him. The bible says the Lord thundered against the Philistines and Israel pursued them and defeated them and for the rest of Samuel’s lifetime there was peace.

Hope for the hopeless. That was a lot of story to get us to this one point. Jesus is the high priest, the one who offers hope and deliverance to us. He alone is our source of hope. If we are going to have hope, if we are going to find deliverance and help, we have to repent of our sins and turn completely to the Lord. It’s time for surrender! It’s time for repentance. It’s time to stop sinning. It’s time to stop playing church like Eli’s sons. It’s time to take action. **The action of hope, the way to lay hold of hope is to turn away from sin and turn to the Lord with all your heart!** Samuel said, If you are returning to the Lord with all your heart, show me. Get rid of the idols and commit your whole life to God. Isn’t it time you stopped living in rebellion and started living in hope? It’s time to turn your life over to Jesus!

If everything feels hopeless today, there is hope to be found in Jesus. Turn to him. Repent, confess and call upon him. Surrender your life to him and he will pardon and forgive, he will rescue and save you, he will renew you and he will give you hope! Hope in the Lord!