

“Hypocrisy and Faith in the Tabernacle of God”

(The Great Story of the Bible, Chapter 71)

1 Samuel 1 – 2

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As we turn the page in our Bibles and begin reading the books of Samuel, we meet a new cast of characters. Another generation has come and gone; the judges are all dead; in every age there are some people who earnestly desire to be faithful, others who say the right words but fail to act rightly, and some who simply couldn't care less. We're about to meet some of each.

First: Meet Hannah, a poor woman, one of the two wives of a man named Elkanah. The other wife, Penninah, had given birth to multiple children, but Hannah was childless. Penninah ridiculed Hannah for her apparent inability to conceive a child, causing Hannah to cry and not eat. There is jealousy and bitterness in Elkanah's house. From Hannah's point of view, all is not right with the world.

Some people blame God when life doesn't work out the way they want it to. They complain, they lose faith, they doubt God's goodness. A *lot* of people are like that in our world today. But Hannah didn't turn away from God; she turned *towards* God. She takes her tears to God. She pours out impassioned prayers. “LORD of heavenly forces!” she cries. “Look at your servant's pain and remember me! Don't forget your servant! Give her a boy! Then I'll give him to the LORD for his entire life.” (1 Samuel 1.11) Hannah's plight hasn't made her faithless – on the contrary, it has *increased* her faith. She turns with utter desperation, casting all her cares on God, crying out to the very depths of her soul.

You'd be surprised what can happen when you do that. A lot of us give up way too soon.

Next, meet Eli. Eli is a priest in the temple of the Lord. In the *tabernacle*, I should say; this story takes place before the temple has been built, and the Israelites are still using that portable tabernacle that they had constructed at Mount Sinai, following the instructions God had given Moses back in Exodus. Basically, it's just a large structure made of curtains and wooden poles, set aside for a sacred purpose. At this point in Israel's history, some eleven centuries before Jesus, it's set up in the town of Shiloh. That was where the Israelites would bring their sacrifices, in the days before the temple was built in Jerusalem. Eli the priest serves the Lord in the tabernacle at Shiloh. He's an old man. He's retired from many of his responsibilities; he's handed a lot of responsibility over to his two sons, Hophni and Phineas. But Hophni and Phineas were – as the biblical writer puts it – “despicable men who didn't know the LORD.” Presumably Eli had taught them in the ways of the Lord, but now, as grown men,

they're among those Israelites who couldn't care less. They take more than their fair share of the meat from the sacrifices that the common people bring to the tabernacle. They also sleep with the women who serve at the entrance to the tabernacle. They are turning the holy tabernacle of God into a house where hypocrisy reigns. The biblical writer says, "The sin of these priestly assistants was very serious in the LORD's sight because they were disrespecting the LORD's own offering." (1 Samuel 2.17) Eli, it seems, is aware of what his sons are doing, but so far he's just been turning a blind eye, because they are his sons. Eli should have known: if there was injustice and hypocrisy in the temple of God, it was *his* responsibility to put an end to it – even if that meant that he needed to risk rupturing his relationship with his sons. But he loved them – arguably, too much. He kept silent ... so the hypocrisy continued.

One day, Hannah shows up at the tabernacle in Shiloh. Elkanah has brought his family there to offer sacrifices. They make their offerings, then Hannah goes back to the tabernacle again, bringing her tears and fervent prayers. She is so distraught that Eli thinks she's drunk. She's not. She tells him her plight: "This whole time I've been praying out of my great worry and trouble!" (1 Samuel 1.15) Eli blesses her: "Then go in peace. And may the God of Israel give you what you've asked from him." (1 Samuel 1.17) Hannah returns home with her husband, continuing to offer her fervent prayers to God.

God answers her prayers. Hannah becomes pregnant and gives birth to a son, whom she names Samuel, which means, "God hears." Deep in her heart, Hannah knows: *God had heard her prayers.*

It's important to note here that Hannah had been praying to God for *years*. Too often, we want a quick fix. We lift up our prayers to God, and we expect an *immediate* response, and when we don't get it within our desired time frame, we think that God hasn't come through. Then we get discouraged, and we stop taking our heartfelt prayers to God, because we feel like it doesn't work. But Hannah kept praying, year after year after year. She never gave up. She never lost faith. In God's own time, God answers her prayers. Hannah then fulfills the vow she made. She takes her baby, after he has been weaned, and returns to Shiloh to presents him to Eli. "Excuse me, sir!" she calls out. "I am the woman who stood here next to you, praying to the LORD. I prayed for this boy, and the LORD gave me what I asked from him. So now I give this boy back to the LORD. As long as he lives, he is given to the LORD." (1 Samuel 1.26-28) She dedicates him as a Nazirite, that special group of people whose lives were to be especially devoted to the Lord. Thankfully, it will work out better with Samuel than it did with Samson.

Then Hannah prays again. "My heart rejoices in the LORD. My strength rises up in the LORD! My mouth mocks my enemies because I rejoice in your deliverance. No one is holy like the LORD – no, no one except you! There is no rock like our God!" (1 Samuel 2.1-2) On and on she prays, in one of the longest prayers in the Bible outside of the book of Psalms. She cries out against the injustice she has experienced in this world; she rejoices in the goodness God has shown to poor people like her. "Those who were filled full now sell themselves for bread, but the ones who were starving are now fat from food! ... God raises the poor from the dust, lifts up the needy from the garbage pile.... God guards the feet of his faithful ones, but the wicked die in darkness.... The LORD! His enemies are terrified! God thunders against them from heaven! The LORD! He judges the far corners of the earth!" (1 Samuel 2.5, 8, 9, 10) A thousand years later, Mary will offer a remarkably similar prayer, when she's pregnant with Jesus. Dedicating Samuel, giving birth to Jesus – both events will bring about good things in this world.

So Samuel grows up in the tabernacle, under the care of Eli the priest. Every year, Hannah and Elkanah would return to offer the annual sacrifice, and Hannah would bring Samuel a new robe to wear. God blessed Hannah for her faithfulness; in time, she gives birth to three more sons and two daughters.

But Eli's grown sons continue their hypocrisy. Finally, Eli has had enough, and he confronts them: "Why are you doing these terrible things that I'm hearing about from everybody? No, my sons. Don't do this. The report I hear spreading among God's people isn't good." (1 Samuel 2.23-24) But Hophni and Phineas don't listen to their father. They continue their sinful ways.

Finally, a prophet comes to Eli. "A man of God," the text calls him: some otherwise unknown person who was compelled by God to bring a strong message to Eli. God thinks Eli should have tried harder to get his sons to behave. It's a stern message, filled with the judgment of the Lord: "The days are coming soon when I will eliminate both your children.... You'll see trouble in my dwelling place.... Any descendants in your household will die by the sword.... I will establish for myself a trustworthy priest who will act in accordance with my thoughts and desires. I will build a trustworthy household for him, and he will serve before my anointed one forever." (1 Samuel 2.29, 31, 32, 33, 35) The judgment is severe; Eli's household will be wiped out and another household rise in its place. The "trustworthy priest" will be Zadok, the first high priest in the temple that Solomon will build in Jerusalem, though Eli might have thought the prophet was talking about Samuel. Either way, the judgment is clear: Eli *should* have acted more strongly ... and he didn't. Because *Eli* didn't take sufficient action, *God* will.

Some of you wish I would just skip over passages like this one – passages where God's judgment is in full view, passages where God holds people responsible for their sins, and justice is meted out – some of you wish I could just gloss over that stuff. Eli probably wished that God had glossed over it too. The uncomfortable truth, in both the Old and New Testaments, is that *our actions matter to God*. God does not simply allow sin to go unchecked. Sooner or later, there will be a day of reckoning. For those who care about justice, about goodness, about faithfulness – for people like Hannah – that's good news. *That's why she's singing!* She envisions a world in which God's justice and goodness and faithfulness will reign, and reign supreme. She praises the Lord of heavenly forces because *he holds unjust people accountable for the things they do*.

It's easy to feel sorry for Eli when he hears this news. He's old. His sons are grown adults. What power do you have, over *your* grown adults, when they are straying from God's path? But God says, "That doesn't matter. Sin is still sin. And sin in the tabernacle of the Lord is the worst of all." Because this is a place where people come to be faithful. This is a place where people like Hannah come to pour out their heartfelt prayers. The last thing faithful people want is to find out that, behind the curtain, there's sin and hypocrisy in the temple of God. It cheapens everything the place stands for. It undermines the authority of those who say they serve the Lord. It put people like Hannah at risk.

Sin and hypocrisy have *no place* in the tabernacle of God ... nor in the church of Jesus Christ. Never have. Never will. For faith to shine in places dedicated to God, for places like this to be safe for people like Hannah, we *all* have to work to eradicate sin and hypocrisy from our lives.

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