

1 Samuel 2:12-36 – “Worthless and Worthy”

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Intro: The regular baseball season has come to an end, and the usual post-season firing of baseball managers has begun. It happens every year. A few teams advance to the playoffs, the rest fire their manager in the hope of doing better next season. Something like that is about to happen to the nation of Israel as we open 1 Samuel again tonight. God is getting ready to change managers, so to speak, going from Judges to Kings, and Samuel is His appointed messenger to fire the old team and anoint the new. God’s motive for doing this is simple: The old team was characterized by disobedience and He looked for a new team that would trust and obey. All of this is on display in tonight’s passage where we’ll see that:

Proposition: A believing heart knows God, obeys God, and worships God, and God will tolerate nothing less in His people.

Billboard: I. Two Worthless Young Men
 II. A Worthy Young Man
 III. A Witness Against Sin

I. Two Worthless Young Men – The sons of Eli, the High Priest, are described in verse 12: **1 Samuel 2:12 (ESV) - 12** *Now the sons of Eli were worthless men. They did not know the LORD.* They are called “worthless” in our English translation, but the Hebrew is more definite still. They are called “Sons of Belial.” “Belial” is a synonym the apostle Paul used for Satan in 2 Corinthians 6:15, so that gives us some idea of who these young men were serving. Belial isn’t a proper name in the Old Testament but simply means “lawless.” In other words, it was used to indicate children who shamelessly ignored God’s law – an openly lawless child. And that is what Hophni, and Phineas did as we see in the verses that follow. In verses 13 & 15 the phrase, “*the priest’s servant*” apparently refers to Hophni and Phineas themselves, for they were officially the servants of Eli, the High priest, though they were also his sons. The behavior described in these verses is blatant violation of the Laws of Sacrifice Moses had given which specified the portions of the sacrifice the priest was to receive and the order through which he was to receive it. Furthermore, “*the fat*” was reserved for the Lord alone. Their insistence on taking the meat before the fat was burned was such impropriety by priests that it shocked even the ordinary worshippers. This became a matter of scandal along with their seduction of the women who served at the entrance to the Tabernacle (cf. vv.22-24). How could someone in a position of leadership and possessing a knowledge of God’s Laws do such things? Verse 12 gives the answer: “*They did not know the Lord.*” They were religious leaders by trade, but they did not know the Lord in their hearts. Because of this they were not remotely interested in obeying God’s Word. Their bodies were ritually circumcised, but their hearts were still spiritually uncircumcised – unregenerate in other words. Given every advantage by birth and training, they chose to follow the sinful desires of their hearts rather than the pure revelation of

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God’s words. God’s reaction to this is given in verse 17: **1 Samuel 2:17 (ESV) - 17** *Thus the sin of the young men was very great in the sight of the LORD, for the men treated the offering of the LORD with contempt.* To treat the Lord’s offering with contempt, is to treat the Lord Himself with contempt.

[DOCTRINAL POINT] Hophni and Phineas rejected the knowledge of God, obedience to God, and proper worship of God, because they were unbelieving men at heart.

[APPLICATION] It is useless to put unbelieving men into positions of leadership in God’s church. To do so is to despise the sacrifice of Christ, treat God with contempt, and scandalize the Body of Christ. The quickest way to damage a church is to put it into the hands of men who lack integrity and do not know God. When we choose leaders, we must know the spiritual condition of the men we choose, not merely their education, professional skills, or positions in our community. To do anything less is to treat God with contempt, trample the sacrifice of Christ, and demoralize the Saints. Choosing leaders is not to be taken lightly, for when we choose poorly, disaster is soon to follow.

II. A Worthy Young Man – In distinction to the worthless sons of Eli is the worthy son of Hanna, Samuel. **1 Samuel 2:18 (ESV) - 18** *Samuel was ministering before the LORD, a boy clothed with a linen ephod.* Verse 18 calls him a “boy,” but the Hebrew word used is “young man,” so apparently, he was a bit older than we may imagine. We find that he is “*ministering before the Lord,*” dressed in the garment of a priest, an “*ephod.*” Too young to be a priest himself at this point, he seems to have occupied some type of apprenticeship to the priesthood at this time. His faithful service was appreciated by Eli, the High Priest, as Eli’s blessing of Samuel’s parents indicates. God rewarded the faith of Elkanah and Hanna by giving them three more sons and two daughters we are told. Both verses 21 & 26 indicate the Lord’s favor toward Samuel, saying that “*the boy grew... [and] continued to grow both in stature and in favor with the Lord and also with men.*” Luke 2:52, which speaks of God’s favor on Jesus as He grew to maturity, is virtually identical to verse 26, surely indicating that Samuel was faithful and pleasing to the Lord. The difference between the sons of Eli and Samuel is noteworthy: Hophni and Phineas did not belong to God, but Samuel did. Even from his mother’s womb, Samuel was chosen by God to be His servant, and the heart’s condition is made evident in the hand’s position – Samuel had praying hands; Hophni and Phineas didn’t. Samuel had open hands to receive from God; Hophni and Phineas didn’t. Samuel had hands that depended on God; Hophni and Phineas didn’t. Samuel had hands that worshiped God; Hophni and Phineas didn’t.

[DOCTRINAL POINT] In distinction to Eli’s worthless sons, God had provided for Himself Samuel, a young man of true worth.

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[APPLICATION] The heart’s condition is revealed by the hand’s position. Faithful hands are open to receive God’s revelation of Himself and to respond in genuine obedience and worship to the one who has made Himself known through His Word. The condition of the heart determines everything. Hophni and Phineas had all the advantages given to Samuel, the perpetual Nazirite vow excepted. They were raised by Eli to be priests just as Eli raised Samuel, giving him access to all the truths he had doubtless taught to Hophni and Phineas. Yet, the results of that training could not have been further apart! Hophni and Phineas shut God’s truth out of their hearts, while Samuel welcomed God’s presence in his life. That makes all the difference. Faith is not passed on from parent to child as if it were DNA. The old track coach said it best when he observed that, “You can’t put in what God leaves out.” Samuel welcomed God into his heart. Hophni and Phineas refused God’s grace. The heart makes all the difference, and the hands reveal the condition of the heart.

III. A Witness Against Sin – Hophni and Phineas were *worthless*. Samuel was *worthy*. But what of Eli? Eli was *weak*. **1 Samuel 2:22–23 (ESV)** - *22 Now Eli was very old, and he kept hearing all that his sons were doing to all Israel, and how they lay with the women who were serving at the entrance to the tent of meeting. 23 And he said to them, “Why do you do such things? For I hear of your evil dealings from all these people.* It is emphasized in verse 22 that Eli was very old and the implication from these verses is that he no longer actively served at the Temple but had turned day to day duties completely over to his sons, for his knowledge of their sins came second hand from the scandalized people they had wronged. Eli rebuked his sons, but his rebuke was notably weak. It was within his power to remove them from office, but he chose not to do so. He permitted their damaging behavior to continue rather than acting to clear the name of God before the people. He gave good counsel in verse 25 saying, **1 Samuel 2:25 (ESV)** *25 If someone sins against a man, God [or “the judge”] will mediate for him, but if someone sins against the LORD, who can intercede for him?”* but Eli’s good advice went unheeded, because the sins of Hophni and Phineas had reached such a point that God had determined to put them to death, as the last half of the verse tells us: **1 Samuel 2:25 (ESV)** - *But they would not listen to the voice of their father, for it was the will of the LORD to put them to death.* Light from God constantly refused leads to total blindness and hardness of heart that cannot be cured but only condemned to continue forever.

God sent a witness to Eli revealing what would come next. To Hophni and Phineas, He had nothing to say, but Eli still had the opportunity and authority to do what was right. God’s prophet (a “*man of God*”) delivered God’s message in three movements: past, present, and future. God reminded Eli of all the blessings He had given his house in the past (vv.27-28). Then God spoke of Eli’s sin in the present (v.29). Finally, He told what He would do in the

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future (vv.31-36): He would revoke His privileges and blessings to Eli and his house. He would cut off all the strength He had given to Eli and his family, leaving them destitute. He would remove Eli's line from the High Priesthood, replacing them with one who would be faithful forever. And all of this would be sealed before Eli's eyes with a sign: Hophni and Phineas would die on the same day. How did Eli respond to this warning? He was warned, but still took no action. He honored his sons more than he honored God, and God held him accountable: **1 Samuel 2:30 (ESV) - 30** *Therefore the LORD, the God of Israel, declares: 'I promised that your house and the house of your father should go in and out before me forever,' but now the LORD declares: 'Far be it from me, for those who honor me I will honor, and those who despise me shall be lightly esteemed.* This is a principle that cannot be ignored.

[DOCTRINAL POINT] God sent a witness that He is seeking faithfulness from His people and accepts nothing less.

[APPLICATION] The Old Testament Scriptures give us vivid illustrations of God's dealings with mankind. Essential lessons stand out: God judges sin. God warns before His wrath falls. God preserves a remnant through the ultimate redemption in Jesus, His Son. God requires complete faithfulness in His people. Each of those elements is in this story. God judged Hophni and Phineas; warned Eli; and preserved faithful Samuel who would anoint David, forefather of the ultimate king, Jesus. The entire Old Testament is about these things. The sacrifices of the Temple were despised by God's priests. We need a better sacrifice, and we need a better Priest. The prophets of the Old Testament were faithful, but not able to heal the sins of God's people. We need a better Prophet. The judges of the Old Testament were ultimately set aside from leadership as were the kings. We need a better King. It all points forward to Jesus – the better Sacrifice; the better Prophet; the better Priest; the better King.

Conclusion: 1 Samuel sets the tone for all that is leading to Jesus. And it begins here in the story of Samuel, God's instrument to fire the old manager and bring in the new.