

Eli and Samuel as Fathers

As I ponder Eli's life in Chapters 2 and 3 of I Sam, I find myself shocked at how angry God is at this poor guy! I have to admit, I have always been rather fond of this bumbling old priest. He really doesn't do anything all that wrong; he goes about his priestly duties without involving himself with all the wickedness around him like drunkenness and immorality. But just look at how incensed God is ... in fact, I know of very few, if any, individuals in the Bible that get such a prolonged tongue-lashing! GOD IS HOT!

Just look at how he tears into him in 2:27-36 and 3:11-14! The gist of the matter is that God will never forgive him and that all his posterity will be condemned to die young through all generations. Those who survive – their eyes will grow dim from weeping over their misfortunes, and will go about as beggars. His two sons will both die on the same day as a sign that God means business!

What made God so mad? As far as I can tell, it was not so much what he did, but what he was! He was a **weak man**! All around him a circus of immorality and debauchery was playing with his sons as the ringmasters, and he didn't do anything about it! It is one thing to be evil in the usual way; God will deal with this! But a weak man, especially a weak man in a position of authority, really inflames the wrath of God. Eli was considered a "Judge" of Israel for forty years (4:18), and the blame for Israel's poor spiritual state can be squarely laid at his door. But when all is said and done, it was his weakness in the matter of his wicked sons that brought God's wrath down on him and his house (3:13).

Now we turn to Samuel in I Samuel 8:1-3. Here we find Samuel old, and like Eli, his sons are wicked. What surprises me here is that God doesn't even so much as chew him out! Surely he had some responsibility in this matter! Certainly he made a mistake in setting them up as rulers in the land! Moreover, his failure was used as an excuse at this critical time by Israel to rebel and ask for a king (8:5)! Why didn't God unload on Samuel?

This to me is very mysterious! What compounds the difficulty for me is that these sorts of inexplicable things happen often in these narratives. Manoah, the father of Samson, Eli (if we consider him at least a moral person), Samuel, and David were all decent men, and they have sons who disappointed them! The irony is that the most wicked man of the narratives, Saul, has the only good son – Jonathan is a veritable angel.

We may call this phenomenon the "reversals" motif! God is always going against human expectations. Why? Because we are proud by nature and believe that we can penetrate into the essence of life with our natural wisdom, and control our lives. In fact, we are so proud that we live under the presumption that our children, our reputations, and even our pain, is ours and only ours. Divine reversals in life are shocking reminders that this is not the case. In truth, we are only vaguely aware of the meaning of the drama surrounding our lives. God allows Satan to take the lives of Job's children, and Job

doesn't have the faintest idea of the heavenly dialogue concerning him. Samson tells his parents "Go get me this Philistine woman for a wife, for she pleases me!" The parents are understandably upset, but the text says that the parents "did not know it was from the Lord" (Judges 14:4).

Now these things go against our sensitivities! In fact, they may even make us angry when we consider that our children are at stake! What is more precious to us than our children? We invest so much in them, and yet we ultimately have little control over the choices they make! How many of us know lovely Christian parents who ache daily for their children who have gone in wrong directions?

This is all very mysterious – one of the dark secrets that are locked up in God's heart and mind, making Him all the more inscrutable to us. Still, there are a number of things we can take from these reflections. The first is that in all our trials with our children, God is working on us. We tend to be completely wrapped up with our children's issues; God, while certainly concerned about our children, is working on us through our Children. We lose sight of the fact that God is zeroing in on us. We are the ones that must grow in faith, turn our hearts to the Lord, learn to grow in ceaseless prayer, and bend our souls toward heavenly realities. Truth be known, we tend to be idolaters, loving our children more than God. Children make poor gods.

We must also come to grips with the "reversals" motif. Reversals are a part of our lives; they make God inscrutable to us. But this is not a bad thing. There are many who, like Job's wife, would suggest that we curse God and die in the face of God's inscrutability. Those who love God in the midst of parental anguish experience the most delightful reversal of them all. God gives them "songs in the night" (Psalm 42:8). They know in their heart of hearts that God is good, just, and loving. Way deep down, if they listen carefully, they hear the song of exaltation, for they know that God is going to show forth His glory in their situation, although they do not have the faintest idea how. There is even a close identification with God Himself in parental grief that draws the soul closer to God, for God knows only too well the disappointment of rebellious children. Any identification with God, even if it is an identification of sorrow, is a profound thing.

Finally, we may, perhaps, work our way towards a solution to the problem why God didn't chew out Samuel like He did Eli for having wicked sons. Unlike Eli, there is no indication that Samuel became the comfortable "shopkeeper" that got fat off the sacrifices of God's people. Samuel never lost his zeal for the high pursuit of God's calling. He would never capitulate to Israel's clamoring for a King "to set up shop". Sure, Samuel made mistakes as a parent, we all do. But his sons saw the integrity of their father (I Sam 12:4), and deliberately chose the other way. We must not beat ourselves up over our children's poor decisions. Here at the community, Bishop Phil always reminds us to "keep to your call" in the face of parental crises. In the end, all we can do is walk humbly in our integrity like Samuel, and hope that our children will likewise embrace the high calling of God. Let us not be weak in our relationship with God like Eli. It is the best thing we can do for our children.