

## Chapter 16 1 Samuel 1-15

### To Obey Is Better Than Sacrifice

*“Does the Lord delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the voice of the Lord? To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams. For rebellion is like the sin of divination, and arrogance like the evil of idolatry.”*

1 Samuel 15:22-23

In the ancient Hebrew text of the Old Testament, the Book of Samuel immediately follows Judges and the Book of Ruth was placed in the third section of the Old Testament composed of what we call the “Writings” or the Wisdom literature. In the Christian canon, however, the book of Ruth is placed in its historical context. The story of Ruth, the great grandmother of David, sheds a glimmer of hope in an otherwise bleak and depressing downward cycle of apostasy and judgment recorded in Judges. Although there is nothing positive about Israel’s syncretistic, idol prone society, the story is told of courageous individuals who remained faithful to Yahweh. Our attention is drawn to women like Naomi and men like Boaz who continued to trust and obey the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in spite of the depressing cultural scene.

### Bad Human Systems

The way the story is told is important. Salvation History is developed primarily from a relational point of view. It is biographical in nature. It explores the human dynamic of personal trust, practical faithfulness and heartfelt commitment. It is not mainly a history of thought or a record of military campaigns or a chronicle of rulers. Ideology and politics remain in the background, while the saga of Yahweh’s revelation and faithfulness persists, inciting in some rejection and calling forth from others faith and trust. The Bible assumes that human systems have been thoroughly infiltrated by evil. Family, church and society are by no means safe places. Yet the details of depravity, while graphically laid out, are never the center of the story. The real story is not how evil *evil* can be, but how faithful Yahweh can be. In the book of Samuel, the heart of the story is found in Hannah’s faith and Samuel’s obedience. It is centered in Jonathan’s trust in Yahweh and David’s passion for the Lord God.

The tension between good and evil runs through the center of relationships. Out of a polygamous marriage, a barren womb, and Peninnah’s humiliating scorn, Hannah’s humility before God shines through. As far as the Bible is concerned polygamy, infertility, jealousy, and triangulated relationships don’t make up the story. Evil is found anywhere. The real story is Hannah’s resolve, her goodness, her lamentation and her praise. There is no story in the self-serving, manipulative power plays put on by King Saul. There is no plot to his compulsive behavior and his obsessive sense of religious duty. Such evils can be found anywhere and everywhere. The real Salvation History story is found in the boldness of Samuel who stands against the worldly powers with God-centered conviction. The real story is found in Jonathan who experiences freedom in the will of God in spite of the will of his father. The real story is found in David, who

lets God be God, even though it means repeatedly risking his life.

The core value of first and second Samuel is summed up in Samuel's line, "To obey is better than sacrifice" (1 Sam 15:22). The deeply ingrained and pervasively practiced religious rite of sacrifices no longer stood for a repentant heart. God intended sacrifices to underscore the need for repentance and the gift of God's mercy, but their true meaning had been lost in the era of the Judges. In the book of Samuel, sacrificial offerings rarely glorified the Lord. More often than not, such rituals testified to a wilful heart and flagrant disobedience. Religion-as-usual continued, but righteousness failed. For years Hannah's most humiliating experiences took place at Shiloh, the place where Elkanah brought his family annually to sacrifice and worship. And every year Peninnah, Elkanah's other wife, used the occasion to shame Hannah for her barrenness.

The wickedness and greed of Eli's two priestly sons, Hophni and Phinehas, was especially evident when the people came to them to offer their sacrifices. Eli's sons made it their practice to grab the meat for themselves before it had been properly sacrificed (1 Sam 2:12-17). Later, King Saul usurped his authority when he refused to wait for Samuel and went ahead and offered up the sacrifices (1 Sam 13:9-10), because he feared that his troops would scatter if he didn't do something. On another occasion, Samuel explicitly told Saul to take no spoil from the Amalekites, but fearing the people, Saul spared the best of the sheep and cattle. When Samuel arrived, he challenged Saul's disobedience, "What then is this bleating of sheep in my ears? What is this lowing of cattle that I hear?" Saul countered that the soldiers had "spared the best of the sheep and cattle to sacrifice to the Lord your God, but we totally destroyed the rest" (1 Sam 15:15).

Sacrifices no longer pointed to Israel's unique relationship to the Lord, but instead, provided the occasion for illustrating their disobedience. Ironically, sacrifices were also used as a cover for obedience. When the Lord told Samuel to go to Bethlehem and anoint one of the sons of Jesse, he told him to tell people he was going to offer a sacrifice in order to calm Saul's suspicions (1 Sam 16:2). Likewise, Saul's son, Jonathan, used the excuse of attending a sacrifice in Bethlehem in order to see David (1 Sam 20:29). Sacrificial observances provided the context for displaying either faith or faithlessness. In and of themselves they were no longer a positive indication of humility and obedience.

What began in the book of Samuel became a major emphasis in the Prophets: religious observance is no substitute for righteousness. The message, "To obey is better than sacrifice," was emphatic in the prophecy of Amos, "I hate, I despise your religious feasts; I cannot stand your assemblies. Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them...But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!" (Amos 5:21-22). The very practices that the Lord God instituted to affirm Israel's faithfulness had become a cover for disobedience and a tool of deception. What was done ostensibly to please God only served to illustrate a bad human system of priestly oppression and spiritual deception. But obedience, not disobedience, is always at the heart of the story. Amidst the darkness and depravity of Israel's situation arises Hannah's faith in Yahweh and her song of praise and deliverance.

## Hannah's Story

The story of Hannah sets the theme for the book and her song captures the essence of the message. Year after year Elkanah brought his family to Shiloh to offer sacrifices and to worship Yahweh. And year after year Peninnah her rival took advantage of the situation by humiliating Hannah and scorning her infertility. Although Elkanah seemed powerless to reconcile his two wives, he sought to express his love to Hannah by giving her a double portion of meat. This may remind the reader of cultures in Africa where a very similar dynamic exists today. It is natural for us to immediately relate to Hannah and reflect on the ways we have been treated unjustly. But what if we are more like Peninnah? What if out of jealousy and insecurity we seek to irritate and provoke those around us? Undoubtedly, Peninnah saw herself as the proud wife of Elkanah, a respected citizen of Israel and a faithful worshiper, but to Hannah she was a merciless rival who wanted her out of the way.

The Bible does not dismiss this situation as a petty rivalry. It does not belittle the belittling of Hannah. Peninnah's jealousy is as evil as the wickedness of Eli's sons or Israel's rebellious insistence on a king. Evil is evil. It is never in the abstract. It separates us from one another and from the Lord. It is significant that the biography of Samuel begins with Hannah and her difficult family situation, because it shows how personal and practical true faith must be. For the mother of Samuel, the last of the judges and the first of the prophets, represents the kind of faith and trust that all of Israel might have demonstrated if they had chosen to obey rather than sacrifice. Hannah, as Naomi and Ruth before her, exemplified real resolve and true faith in Yahweh even though it seemed that she had little to live for. Hannah's example teaches us how to respond to life when we feel overwhelmed by our problems. She teaches us how to pray when we feel that God has forgotten us.

The first truth we recognize is a truth about *relationships*. Even though Hannah's husband was sensitive to her he was unable to meet Hannah's needs. He loved her dearly but that was not enough to save her life. It never is. Even if Elkanah had been effective in controlling Peninnah, he would not have been effective in meeting all of Hannah's needs. So even though he repeatedly showed he cared and reminded her of his love ("Don't I mean more to you than ten sons?"), he could not remove Hannah's pain. We must not impose on friendship and marriage a burden that cannot be carried. If we look to our spouse or our friend to solve the issues of life that only God can we will end up destroying our closest relationships. Hannah did not yield to that temptation.

The second truth evident in Hannah's example is the importance of *determination*. One line in the narrative reflects the fact that after all these years of irritation and humiliation, Hannah had had enough. The line simply reads, "Once when they had finished eating and drinking in Shiloh, Hannah stood up." She had had it, but instead of declaring war against Peninnah, as we might have been inclined to do, she headed for the temple to pray. Hannah took the course of action that Yahweh was always encouraging Israel to take. When faced with unsurmountable odds, don't take the situation into your own hands, but take it to God in prayer. Like Hannah we have

the freedom, in the face of deeply disturbing trouble, to either declare war against our enemy or to turn to the Lord in prayer. Our determination can be to fight fire with fire or to “overcome evil with good” (Rom 13:21). By the grace of God, Hannah went beyond hate and poured out her bitter soul to the Lord.

The third truth is about *commitment*. The only way out of humiliation is by humbling ourselves before God. In Hannah’s powerlessness, she prayed, “O Lord Almighty, if you will look upon your servant’s misery and remember me, and not forget your servant but give her a son, then I will give him to the Lord for all the days of his life, and no razor will ever be used on his head” (1 Sam 1:11). What makes the nature of this prayer the kind of prayer we should pray? Consider the following: God delights in a clearly articulated passionate dependence upon him. We can’t go wrong if we follow Hannah’s example in yielding wholeheartedly to God. Consider as well that God stands ready to bring us out of our small worlds of misery and strife and into his large world of salvation history. Finally, Hannah’s vow to give back to God the son she was praying for demonstrates that honoring the Lord meant more to her than removing her reproach. Herein lies the root of Samuel’s faith and strength. Hannah’s vowed commitment causes Christian parents to ask whether they are willing to give their daughters and sons to the Lord. To some extent are we not all “foster parents” of our children, praying that the Lord will have his way in their lives?

The fourth truth is about *passion*. As Hannah was pouring out her soul to the Lord, Eli was watching her. We learn soon enough that the temple was an attraction for a very different type of woman and that the priests, Eli’s own sons, were in the habit of having sex with women, “who served at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting” (1 Sam 2:22). Eli thought Hannah was one of those types and that she had been drinking. “How long will you keep on getting drunk? Get rid of your wine” (1 Sam 1:14). Hannah shot back, “Not so, my lord. I am a woman who is deeply troubled. I have not been drinking wine or beer; I was pouring out my soul to the Lord. Do not take your servant for a wicked woman; I have been praying here out of my great anguish and grief” (1 Sam 1:15-16). Not only does Eli’s misunderstanding reflect the sad state of affairs which surrounded worship at that time, but it calls attention to the polar opposite response to grief and problems that many confessing believers yield to. Instead of resolving to bring the concerns of life to God in prayer they attempt to escape their problems through substance abuse. The situation in Eli’s day is not unlike our own. We do well to heed the admonition of the Apostle Paul, “Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise, but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord’s will is. Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit” (Eph 5:15-18).

The fifth truth is about *faith*. Having made her passionate plea to the Lord, Hannah paid her respects to Eli, “went her way and ate something, and her face was no longer downcast.” Hannah did exactly what the Apostle Peter challenged the early church to do: “Humble yourselves...under God’s mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you” (1 Pet 5:6-7). She allowed, as it were, “the peace of Christ to rule in her heart” (Col 3:15). In time, the Lord “remembered” her, and she conceived and gave

birth to a son. She named him Samuel, saying, “Because I asked the Lord for him” (1 Sam 1:20). Hannah shows us what it is like to be in partnership with God, and to know that what we have comes from the Lord. When the time came she gladly gave Samuel up to the Lord. “I have prayed for this child, and the Lord granted me what I asked of him. So now I give him to the Lord. For his whole life he will be given over to the Lord” (1 Sam 1:27-28). The occasion was marked by a special sacrifice, a three year old bull. A younger lamb would have done just as well, but Hannah wanted to make a statement. Her worship reminds us of David’s psalm: “The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise...” Having obeyed from the heart, Hannah was really ready to offer a sacrifice. “Then there will be righteous sacrifices, whole burnt offerings to delight you; the bulls will be offered on your altar” (Ps 51:17-19).

Her doxology is the result of her prayerful, passionate, humble determination to let God be God in her life. Her song of praise celebrates the great reversal accomplished by God alone. The proud talkers and greedy takers are put down, while the hungry are filled and the barren are blessed. Hannah’s worship psalm is an anthem for the entire book of Samuel, condemning the evil of wicked priests and ego-centered kings and celebrating the victory of those who have a heart for God. Hannah’s praise reminds us of Mary’s Song, “My soul praises the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me—holy is his name” (Lk 1:46-49).

There is one more important word for those who seek to follow Hannah’s example of faithfulness. Life isn’t like a three hour final exam that you can finish in two and half hours if you’re smart. “But when the time itself is the task,” wrote Soren Kierkegaard, “it becomes a fault to finish before the time has transpired” (*Parables of Kierkegaard*, p.85). Don’t let years of bitterness or even years of success cut you off from the will of the Lord. Cynicism can rob us of the joy of finishing well. “To be finished with life before life has finished with one, is precisely not to have finished the task” (p.85). In other words, don’t finish with life until it’s finished with you.

Some people blame their spouses for life’s harsh realities, but Hannah didn’t blame Elkanah. Some confuse putting up with life with the courage and resolve to change it, but Hannah knew the difference between passivity and prayer. Some respond to humiliation with anger and resentment, but Hannah knew the power of humility before God that overcomes bitterness. Some people try to drown their sorrows in drinking too much or working too hard, but Hannah poured out her soul to the Lord. Some cannot rise above their feelings, but Hannah let her faith rule her feelings. She let the joy of the Lord be her strength.

### **Leadership by Faith**

By this point in the history of salvation we are used to the fact that the line of succession is not by birth order, but by God’s grace. Yahweh chose Isaac over Ishmael, Jacob over Esau, and Joseph over Reuben. Leadership, then as now, was by divine appointment, not human achievement. Divine providence did not follow the family pecking order. Yahweh raised up

Moses out of nowhere to lead his people out of bondage. And Joshua, Moses' handpicked successor, was not his son, but his apprentice. And when it came to leadership in the era of the judges, they were, for the most part, a disappointing group who were often used by God in spite of themselves. The radical freedom of God to elect whom he would to lead his people belies any notion of a humanistic understanding of divine providence. Salvation history affirms that God will be God.

The great irony in the book of Samuel is that Israel refused to live with the dynamic leadership and the faith-filled freedom God had provided. Instead of letting God be God, they insisted on a king, so that they could "be like all the other nations," with a king to lead them and fight their battles (1 Sam 8:20). Israel wanted to follow the pattern of the world rather than trust in the providence of God. On the surface, their reasoning sounded sensible. Samuel was old and his sons did not walk in his ways. Both facts were true: Samuel was old and his sons had "turned aside after dishonest gain and accepted bribes and perverted justice" (1 Sam 8:5). But two other facts were ignored: Israel had in no way suffered under Samuel's divinely appointed leadership, and God's pattern of appointing a successor had consistently stressed faith over family and grace over works. The Lord was perfectly capable of raising up a leader. As he did with Samuel he would do with others. Remember the Lord's midnight conversation with young Samuel, "See, I am about to do something in Israel that will make the ears of everyone who hears of it tingle..." (1 Sam 3:11). The Lord established Samuel as his prophet and "he let none of his words fall to the ground" (1 Sam 3:19). In time, all Israel from Dan to Beersheba "recognized that Samuel was attested as a prophet of the Lord" (3:20).

Comparing chapters seven and eight in 1 Samuel contrasts two very different ways of living. It was not by chance that these two chapters were put side-by-side. In chapter seven the people listened to God's prophet, Samuel, and turned away from their worldly dependencies, their idols, and their conformities to the pattern of this world. Samuel led Israel into a showdown with the Philistines at Mizpah. The forces of the Philistines were arrayed against the people of God and the situation looked hopeless apart from God. They said to Samuel, "Do not stop crying out to the Lord our God for us, that he may rescue us from the hand of the Philistines" (1 Sam 7:8). When the people looked to a judge, such as Samuel, they had a greater sense of their dependence upon Yahweh. They were acutely aware of their vulnerability. They prayed and fasted and sacrificed. They knew they were living on the edge. The risk factor seemed about as high as it could be. Their faith in God was being put to the test. At Mizpah God routed the Philistines with a thunder and lightning show that threw them into such a panic, the Israelites were able to conquer them. There was no question in the people's mind as to who was responsible for their remarkable deliverance. And Samuel dedicated a memorial stone there with the name "Ebenezer," which means, "stone of help," and declared, "Thus far has the Lord helped us" (1 Sam 7:12).

This is how God wanted them to live: boldly dependent, prayerfully perceptive, and authentically related to Himself. Eventually King David would live the kind of life that God intended for all his people, exuberantly holy, passionately committed, and faithfully God-centered. That is not to say that David wasn't sinful, but he did embody what it meant to have a heart for God. The

people of God at Mizpah, under the leadership of Samuel, foreshadowed a davidic lifestyle, but at Ramah they sought a worldly lifestyle. They sought for a security modeled after the politics and economics of the world. They demanded a leadership that would enslave them, even though the Lord had intended a leadership that would free them.

They longed for a king in spite of the explicit warning given by Samuel. "Listen to them," God said to Samuel; "but warn them solemnly and let them know what the king who will reign over them will do." Samuel needed no special revelation to warn the people about kings. That should have been clear to everyone in Israel, but it was precisely that knowledge that was being stifled at the expense of the truth. So Samuel spelled it out, "This is what the king who will reign over you will do: He will take....He will take....He will take...He will take...He will take... He will take" (1 Sam 8:10-18). Six times Samuel reiterates that the king will be a *taker*. Nothing they owned was safe from the king's confiscation, not even their sons and daughters. If the people thought Eli's sons were *takers* and Samuel's sons were greedy for dishonest gain, under a king they would be in for a dramatic escalation in exploitation.

The contrast between *takers* and *receivers* is important throughout Samuel. On the one hand there are *takers*, Peninnah, El's sons, Samuel's sons, King Saul and David's son, Absalom, and on the other hand, there are *receivers*, Hannah, Samuel, Jonathan and David, although David was both a *taker* and *receiver*. One might think that the contrast is between taking and giving, but such a contrast presumes too much on our ability to give. The more biblical contrast, in the light of Salvation History, is the contrast between *takers* and *receivers*. For anything worth giving must first have been given by God and received by us.

Under a king, *taking* was about to be institutionalized. A king could never say what Samuel said in his farewell speech. "I have been your leader from my youth until this day...Testify against me in the presence of the Lord and his anointed... Whose ox have I taken? Whose donkey have I taken? Whom have I cheated? Whom have I oppressed? From whose hand have I accepted a bribe to make me shut my eyes?" And the people could never say to a king what they replied to Samuel, "You have not cheated or oppressed us. You have not taken anything from anyone's hand" (1 Sam 12:2-4).

Samuel solemnly warned the people, "You will cry out for relief from the king you have chosen, and the Lord will not answer you in that day" (1 Sam 8:18). But they were not listening. They had made up their minds before they ever spoke to Samuel. Their one word response to Samuel was "NO!" They were adamant, "We want a king over us!"

What made conformity to the world so attractive and appealing to Israel? Why did they insist on living under a king instead of living by faith in Yahweh? Evidently, they were ready to sacrifice the will of God for a false sense of personal peace and security. Conformity to the world was more appealing to them than commitment to God. They were unwilling to remember all that the Lord God had done for them. The psalmist's description of an earlier time in Israel's history fits here as well, "In the wasteland they put God to the test. So he gave them what they asked for, but sent a wasting disease upon them." Or as the KJV says, God "gave them their request, but sent

leanness into their soul" (Psalm 106:14-15).

It is sobering to realize that God conceded to the people's request for an institutionalized monarchy even though it conflicted with the pattern of leadership God initiated with Moses. God accommodated his plan to Israel's stubbornness and continued to work with them in spite of the fact that they opposed his will. "Listen to all that the people are saying to you; it is not you they have rejected as their king, but me" (1 Sam 8:7). Instead of depending on Yahweh to raise up a faithful leader like Samuel, Israel wanted to have the pseudo-status and false security of a king like the other nations.

Leadership by faith in divine action, as opposed to leadership by dependence on human institutions, is a relevant issue for the church today. It can be argued that there is a parallel between the institutional monarchy and the institutional church. Immediate faith and trust in God is replaced by a reliance and dependency on institutions. Many of today's denominations can be likened to Europe's old state church. The institutional church is a large bureaucracy, a political organization, driven by a business mentality and career professionals. That is not to say leadership by faith minimizes the importance of administration. An analysis of leadership under Moses and Joshua reveals a carefully devised infrastructure that preserved accountability and community.

Israel's desire for a king can be likened to the modern church's expectations for a pastor. Just as Israel longed for a king to achieve status and security, contemporary congregations seek a vision-casting, executive-style, religious CEO to achieve for the church what they have given up doing for themselves. It is more convenient to vicariously experience a super-pastor's energy and spirituality than to depend upon the Lord God personally. Today's so-called entrepreneurial pastor is just another version of yesterday's hierarchal state church pastor. Both pastoral types are in the tradition of Saul and shun the example of Samuel. Israel's desire for a king ought to be studied by every pastoral search committee. Many may find that they are looking for a Saul, when what they truly need is a pastor like Samuel, whose "greatness lay not in the originality of his ideas or in the initiatives he took, but in carrying out the instruction of the Lord: what mattered was simple obedience" (Joyce G. Baldwin, *Samuel* p.121).

Israel's desire for an institutional monarchy can also be likened to today's reliance on the modern denomination. The dynamic of the biblical community, dependent upon the wisdom and power of the Holy Spirit, is often lost in a denominational bureaucracy held together by standing rules, regulations, and per-capita fees. As Israel looked to a human king instead of Yahweh, Christians are tempted to look to their denomination instead of Christ. In place of the worldwide body of Christ they substitute an organization of their own making. For reasons of security, status and identity believers have institutionalized themselves, unionized their pastors, politicized church leadership, and commercialized the interests of the church. In many cases the theological pluralism that they have accepted is untenable and heretical. Denominations are political organizations like any other worldly corporation or secular institution. Instead of being the church, the Body of Christ, believers end up running religious corporations. There is a great divide within most mainline denominations. On the one hand there are those who are committed

to the reality of revealed truth given by a transcendent God. And on the other there are those who wish to re-symbolize the Christian Faith according to prevailing religious and cultural traditions. There is a huge difference between these two positions that cannot be whitewashed with the vague notion that the Bible is important to both sides. We have come a long way from *devoting* ourselves “to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of the bread and to prayer” (Acts 2:42).

Like Israel in Samuel’s day, Christians turn to the world to establish their security, status and identity. It may be through a charismatic leader or a bureaucratic organization or market-driven growth agenda, but in the end human initiatives replace devotion to Yahweh and the discipline of surrender. Denominational loyalists, whether they be liberal or evangelical, espouse the ethos and participate in the political strategies reminiscent of Israel’s quest for a king. Those of who remain in a mainline denomination, in spite of the drift away from the Gospel, may take courage in the example of Samuel, who remained faithful in spite of Israel’s dependence on a king. And the word of the Lord to Samuel can be appropriately applied to them, “it is not you they have rejected as their king, but me” (1 Sam 8:7).

In the tradition of Joshua, who marked the Lord’s victories with simple stone memorials, Samuel placed a stone near Mizpah and named it *Ebenezer*, saying, “Thus far has the Lord helped us” (1 Sam 7:12). Like an altar of undressed stones (Ex 20:25) it bore silent testimony to the people’s dependence upon the Lord. In the course of Salvation History, the simplicity of Samuel’s Ebenezer stone contrasts with the magnificent stones of the temple edifice in Jerusalem. One day as Jesus was leaving the temple, one of his disciples excitedly exclaimed, “Look, Teacher! What massive stones! What magnificent buildings!” He was awed by the beauty of the buildings and proud of what they symbolized, the enduring status and significance of Israel’s greatest institution. Jesus however did not share his disciple’s enthusiasm. “Do you see all these great buildings?” he replied. “Not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down” (Mk 13:1-2). For Jesus the buildings symbolized what must come down. The temple did not represent the future of the Faith but the end of religion. However, there was an even greater contrast than the one between the present and the future. One that was clearly in the mind of Jesus when he said, “Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days” (Jn 2:19). In his own person he rendered the temple obsolete and its adoration inappropriate. In the light of Salvation History a disciple’s enthusiasm for an edifice or an institution is at best embarrassing and at worst idolatry.

Israel sought to resolve the leadership issue once and for all by conforming to the other nations and establishing a monarchy. This meant that Israel’s leadership was no longer by faith, but by family succession. Instead of depending upon the Lord to raise up a new judge or prophet through whom Yahweh would lead, they sought for a security they could visualize and calculate. They wanted more than a “spokesperson,” they wanted a savior who would set the agenda and cast the vision, a king who would fight for them. It is ironic that Israel should want to root their leadership in a royal line of succession, even though they had ample evidence that the sons of important men turned out badly.

## **Faith is Thicker than Blood**

The book of Samuel offers tragic commentary on the relationship between fathers and sons, but it also offers real hope that men and women of God can rise above poor parenting and serve Christ faithfully. On the subject of parenting, the Bible is neither sentimental nor wordy. It is straightforward and to the point. Take the apostle Paul's admonition: "Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord" (Eph 6:4). The Book of Samuel draws out the significance of St. Paul's bottom line admonition by illustrating what fathers should not do.

Eli's family history was depressing. His sons represented all that is bad in institutional religion. They used their position as priests to exploit the people. They showed no regard for the Lord or for the people. They treated the Lord's offering with contempt and literally turned the temple into a house of prostitution. Samuel's sons were not much better. "When Samuel grew old, he appointed his sons as judges for Israel...But his sons did not walk in his ways. They turned aside after dishonest gain and accepted bribes and perverted justice" (1 Sam 8:1-3).

Even King David was a failure as a father. His affair with Bathsheba nearly destroyed his own family. David's firstborn son, Amnon, raped his sister Tamar, which incited his third born son, Absalom, to plot for two years to revenge his sister's disgrace and murder Amnon. For the next three years Absalom stayed in exile until David sent word that it was safe to return to Jerusalem. Yet even then, David refused to see Absalom for another two years. Eventually, David reconciled with Absalom, but by then Absalom's love for power overruled whatever love he had for his father. "In the course of time," he conspired to overthrow his father. With a carefully organized publicity campaign Absalom stole the hearts of the men of Israel (2 Sam 15:6). Under the pretense of offering sacrifices at Hebron, he gathered his supporters and headed toward Jerusalem forcing his father to flee.

The humiliation of David's flight from Jerusalem was heightened by the fact that it was his own son who caused his disgrace and threatened his life. In an unforgettable scene, one of Saul's descendants ran alongside David and his soldiers, throwing stones and hurling curses, shouting, "Get out, get out, you man of blood, you, scoundrel!... The Lord has handed the kingdom over to your son Absalom. You have come to ruin because you are a man of blood!" Abishai, one of David's officials, said to David, "Why should this dead dog curse my lord the king? Let me go over and cut off his head." David's response revealed a father's painful humiliation. "My son, who is of my own flesh, is trying to take my life. How much more, then, this Benjamite! Leave him alone; let him curse, for the Lord has told him to. It may be that the Lord will see my distress and repay me with good for the cursing I am receiving today" (2 Sam 16:11-12).

Passing the Faith from one generation to another appears to be an unobtainable goal in the book of Samuel. Men of strength, Eli, Samuel, Saul and David, spoke of the Lord constantly yet failed as fathers miserably. Their powerful presence among the people contradicts their passive relationship to their children. In the book of Deuteronomy, Moses focused on the generations in his mandate for faithfulness. "These are the commands, decrees and laws the Lord your God

directed me to teach you to observe in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to possess, *so that you, your children and their children after them* may fear the Lord your God as long as you live by keeping all his decrees and commands that I give you, and so that you may enjoy long life” (Deut 6:1-2).

Moses taught the people how to teach their children. First of all, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.” In a deeply personal and passionate way the parent’s entire being was meant to be a testimony to the love of God. Having internalized this love, the love of God and a love for God, parents are in a position to influence their children. Moses moves on to the second step. “These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates” (Deut 6:6-9). In other words, make the truth of God so tangible and practical in daily life that God’s Word is evident in everything we say or do. There should be no disconnect between theory and practice. There should be no divided loyalties or interests that compete with our devotion to the Lord. In the third step, Moses emphasized the importance of telling the story to the next generation. “In the future, when your son [or daughter] asks you, ‘What is the meaning of the stipulations, decrees and laws the Lord our God has commanded you?’ tell him [or her]: ‘We were slaves of Pharaoh in Egypt, but the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand...’” (Deut 6:20-21). There ought to be a running commentary on the meaning of Salvation History. Moses envisioned the parent and child in continual dialogue over the history of God’s merciful redemption.

These are the deeply personal and practical ways that Moses gave for the generations to stay in the story. He never implied that good parenting was as easy as one, two, three. His Spirit-inspired instructions are not reducible to a formula or a technique. Faithful parenting is obviously an all consuming commitment to internalize God’s love, apply and teach God’s truth, and learn how to tell the salvation history story. No one said it would be easy. Nor did Moses suggest that good parenting is a secret that belongs to the experts. He offered no pat answers for parenting, but neither did he present a great mystery. The agenda for faithful and effective parenting is clearly laid out. There are no short-cuts and there are no guarantees, but we must take up this God-given responsibility to “train up a child in the way he or she should go,” with the hope and confidence that when they are older they will not turn from it (Prov 22:6).

Good parenting may be costly, but as the record in Samuel clearly shows, the cost of poor parenting is even higher! The parenting strategy encouraged by Moses is absent in the pattern of passivity found in the book of Samuel. Starting with Eli, we find examples of what not to do. Although Eli “heard about everything his sons were doing to all Israel” he did nothing. Years of disobedience, greed, injustice and sexual immorality, went unchecked. Eli’s long overdue rebuke was weak and ineffective. “Why do you do such things? I hear from all the people about these wicked deeds of yours. No, my sons; it is not a good report that I hear spreading among the Lord’s people” (1 Sam 2:23-24). Eli had turned a blind eye to the activity of his sons and all of Israel paid a price for one father’s passivity. For good or evil, our parenting has a profound

impact on people well beyond our family circle.

When a man of God confronted Eli about his sons, he began, “This is what the Lord says: ‘Did I not clearly reveal myself to your *father’s* house when they were in Egypt under Pharaoh?’” (1 Sam 2:27). The legacy of faithfulness from one generation to the next, which led to Eli’s faith, was now broken and the privileges of priestly service exploited. Eli’s passivity against the evil was an indictment against his own soul. His complicity made him an accessory to the crime. He never meant to participate in his sons’ scorn for the sacrifices of the Lord, but he did so indirectly. He became fat with the meat that his sons had ripped off from the people. Eli was passive in the face of evil and benefitted from his sons’ greed, and he also shared in their judgment. His own complicity condemned him. The man of God made that clear. “Why do you honor your sons more than me by fattening yourselves on the choice parts of every offering made by my people Israel?” (1 Sam 2:29). Undoubtedly, Eli cherished the ark of the covenant and the law of the Lord, but that reverence for the things of God did not translate into a passion for God. Years of neglect and passivity rendered him powerless and ineffective when it came to exercising leadership over his sons. No father can afford to follow Eli’s example and expect to be blessed by the Lord. Sadly, Eli was responsible for his grandson being named Ichabod, which meant, “no glory.” The glory had departed from Israel because of Eli’s sins of omission and his sons’ sins of commission. His lack of courage to confront his sons cost Israel dearly. His passivity and complicity overruled his passion for God and a commitment to righteousness.

Little is said about Samuel’s relationship with his sons, but one glaring contradiction stands out. In his old age, Samuel apparently ignored the disobedience and deceptive ways of his own sons and appointed them as judges for Israel. Samuel’s favoritism was a grave mistake, for “they turned aside after dishonest gain and accepted bribes and perverted justice” (1 Sam 8:1-3). Although Samuel had a first hand experience of Eli’s dysfunctional family and the terrible consequences suffered for their disobedience, he favored his own wicked sons and placed them in power. The very man who opposed an institutional monarchy, and passionately confronted Saul for his acts of disobedience, appears to have lived by the principle that blood is thicker than faith.

The relationship between Saul and Jonathan may be both the saddest and most hopeful father and son relationship in the book of Samuel. Saul appeared to be a brave and sincere man, yet he was driven by insecurities and ego. These weaknesses resulted in a compulsive religious behavior that he imposed on himself and others. Israel sought a king to be like the other nations and ended up with a king who was just as pragmatic and self-serving as other kings.

Under pressure, Saul reacted foolishly and faithlessly. When the Philistines mounted an offensive, Saul panicked and overstepped his authority. Instead of waiting for Samuel to offer the burnt offerings he went ahead and did it himself. He rationalized his actions in spiritual terms to an outraged Samuel. “I thought, ‘Now the Philistines will come down against me at Gilgal, and I have not sought the Lord’s favor.’ So I felt compelled to offer the burnt offering” (1 Sam 13:12). Saul wrongly used religion as an excuse to rally the troops and boost morale. However, his reliance on ritual was in marked contrast to Jonathan’s reliance on the Lord. Unlike his

father, Jonathan did not presume to dictate how the Lord would lead them in the situation. He told his armor-bearer, “Perhaps the Lord will act on our behalf.” Unlike his father, Jonathan personally expressed confidence in the Lord. “Nothing can hinder the Lord from saving, whether by many or by few” (1 Sam 14:6). Unlike his father, Jonathan inspired loyalty and confidence. “Do all that you have in mind,” his armor-bearer said. “Go ahead; I am with you heart and soul” (1 Sam 14:7).

Whereas Jonathan sought the Lord’s favor in the situation, Saul imposed a foolish and arbitrary fast upon his troops. “Cursed be any man who eats food before evening comes, before I have avenged myself on my enemies!” (1 Sam 14:24). Saul’s oath served only to make it more difficult for his troops and to increase their vulnerability (1 Sam 14:34). What was for Jonathan the Lord’s battle had become for Saul his personal battle. Instead of challenging their faith in Yahweh, Saul tried to turn the battle into a loyalty test for himself. Unaware of his father’s edict, Jonathan ate some honey. Later when it came out, Saul confronted his son. Jonathan explained, “I merely tasted a little honey with the end of my staff. And now must I die?” But Saul was beyond reason and carried away by his own self-righteous indignation. It was after all the word of the king that was at stake. Saul responded, “May God deal with me, be it ever so severely, if you do not die, Jonathan.”

Undoubtedly Jonathan would have died that day if it had not been for soldiers more committed to Yahweh than to King Saul. The soldiers rescued Jonathan. They said to Saul, “Should Jonathan die—he who has brought about this great deliverance in Israel? Never! As surely as the Lord lives, not a hair of his head will fall to the ground, for he did this today with God’s help” (1 Sam 14:45). In this unique father–son relationship the clash between the institutional monarchy and leadership by faith came to a climax. Unlike his father, Jonathan was devoted to what was right and able to discern the will of God for the future. Although he was first in line for the royal succession and honored his father throughout his life, Jonathan loved and defended David, whom his father hated. He accepted what Saul could not, that one day, David would be Israel’s king. Jonathan was aware of the verdict of God through the prophet Samuel and he honored God’s decision. The fact that he himself would not be king caused no feelings of jealousy or animosity. He loved David “as he loved himself” (1 Sam 20:17). In an otherwise tragic father–son relationship, Jonathan proved beyond doubt that faith is thicker than blood. In this sad saga, Jonathan reveals the tremendous promise and hope of a transformed life. He rose above his father’s pragmatic religion and evidenced a true personal relationship with Yahweh. He resisted the compulsive behavior of his father and experienced the freedom of knowing and obeying the will of God. He challenged his father’s jealousy of David and at the risk of his own life protected the Lord’s anointed.

Jonathan’s life proves that bad fathers are no excuse for bad faith. Like Eli, some fathers are too passive and accepting, permitting their children to do their own thing at the expense of faithfulness to God. Some fathers may be like Samuel, who show undue favoritism even though their children are unworthy of trust and responsibility. And there are fathers who are like Saul, religious, overbearing, compulsive and insecure. Jonathan’s life testifies that in spite of poor fathers we have a powerful God. A person whose life and strength depends on God will rise

above poor parenting. Like Hannah, who exemplifies true parenting in the book of Samuel, Jonathan also found himself by losing himself. Hannah gladly gave up her son to the work of the Lord and Jonathan willingly gave up his right to be king. Together, they proved the Gospel truth, “For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it” (Mt 16:25).

Is blood thicker than faith or is faith thicker than blood? Jesus showed us where he stood on the matter: “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters—yes, even his own life—he cannot be my disciple” (Lk 14:26). When pride of family takes precedent over faithfulness to Christ the problems associated with poor parenting emerge. When blood is thicker than Faith, family harmony is valued over holiness, and present moment happiness is substituted for long-term joy. However, when a passion for Christ is our core family value, children emerge who become like Hannah and Jonathan, not by the dictates of family ties, but by faith in the living God.