

E'wood Bap (AM, 15/7/'18) **"THOSE WHO HONOUR ME I WILL HONOUR"** (1 Sam 2:12-3:21)

My name is Eli. God honoured me by making me his priest at the great sanctuary in Shiloh, and he blessed me with sons to follow in my footsteps. But my sons Hophni and Phinehas were not faithful priests of the LORD. Rather, they were men who used their positions as priests to satisfy their own selfish and lawless desires. They took from the sacrifices meat which was not their rightful portion, and they abused their authority by persuading the women who served at the entrance to the tent of meeting to sleep with them. I had expected that my sons would be my great joy as I grew older, but I gradually realised that I could take no joy in these sons, and had little reason to have hope concerning the children of my sons. I wished that I could choose for them, choose that they would honour God and serve him faithfully. But I could not.

The Boy Samuel But there was one great source of joy in my life. That was the boy Samuel. He ministered faithfully before the LORD, sincerely honouring the LORD and showing consistent respect for me. Every year his mother made a little robe for him and brought it to him when she came up with her husband to offer their annual sacrifice. And every year I gladly pronounced a blessing over Elkanah, saying, "May the LORD give you children by this woman to take the place of the one she prayed for and gave to the LORD." And the LORD was again gracious to Hannah, granting her three more sons and two daughters. Meanwhile, the boy Samuel grew up before the LORD, the pride of his parents and a constant joy to me. And yet... And yet... Samuel's growing up in the ways of the Lord GOD was a joy to me, but at the same time it made me grieve all the more over my sons. His faithfulness contrasted with their faithlessness, and that sad contrast was constantly apparent to me. Reports of their behaviour reached my ears, and at first I told myself that these reports couldn't be true. Then I told myself that the reports must be exaggerated, and I made excuses to myself for my sons. But eventually I had to admit to myself that my sons were not worthy to serve the LORD as priests, and with a heavy heart I called my sons before me and confronted them with the evil reports which I had now been hearing for some time.

Eli Confronts His Sons "Why do you do these things?" I said. "I hear from all the people about these wicked deeds of yours. No, my sons, the report I hear spreading among the LORD's people is not good. If anyone sins against another human being, God may mediate for the offender; but if anyone sins against the LORD, who will intercede for them?" But even as I spoke I could see that my words were doing no good. And surely I had no reason to be surprised. If they cared nothing for the holy anger of God himself, of what account was a mere father? After this confrontation my sons continued to behave disgracefully, as before, and Samuel continued to grow up before the LORD as his faithful servant. His goodness was

observed and praised by men and women, and I was sure that it was pleasing to God himself.

A Prophet Speaks Then a man of God, a prophet, came to me with a word from God. He spoke at length and he spoke terrible words. This is what he said. "The LORD says: 'Did I not clearly reveal myself to the family of your ancestor Aaron when they were in Egypt under Pharaoh? I chose your ancestor out of all the tribes of Israel to be my priest, to go up to my altar, to burn incense, and to wear the priestly garments in my presence. I also gave your ancestor's family all the food offerings presented by the Israelites. Why do you scorn my sacrifice and offering that I prescribed for my dwelling? Why do you honour your sons more than me by fattening yourselves on the choice parts of every offering made by my people Israel?'" I shrank back at these terrible words. I wanted to say that I was not guilty. But I knew that I was. I had long refused to face up to the truth about my sons. And I had left it too late to confront them over their sins. I was weeping inwardly, but the prophet continued. He said, "Therefore the LORD, the God of Israel, declares: 'I promised that the members of your family would minister before me forever, but now I say that I have withdrawn my favour from your family. Those who honour me I will honour, but those who despise me will be disdained. The time is coming when I will cut short your strength, and the strength of the members of your family, so that no one in it will reach old age. Although good will be done to Israel, you and your family will have no share in it.'" "And what happens to your two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, will be a sign to you - they will both die on the same day. 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 family line, and he will minister before my anointed one always. Then everyone left in your family line will come and bow down before him for a piece of silver and a loaf of bread." These were terrible words, and at first I was shocked into silence. Then the tears came - I broke down and wept. I wept for my sons; I wept for my descendants; I wept for myself. Then after the tears I began to turn the words of prophecy over in my mind. What did they mean? In particular, who was this faithful priest? Was it Samuel? Or was it both Samuel and another, or others, to come after him? Or was it someone in the future who was unknown to me? I didn't know, but I thought that God did have a special purpose for Samuel, and it was good to be reminded that the failure of my sons didn't mean the failure of God's purpose. And yet I continued to grieve over my sons.

God Speaks Then something unusual happened - something which made it very clear that God had a special purpose for Samuel. One night I was lying quietly in my bed, and so was Samuel. Then, for no apparent reason, Samuel called out, "Here I am." Immediately after this, he came running into my room, and said to me, "Here I am - you called me." But I knew that I hadn't called Samuel, or said anything, so I told him to go and lie

down. Samuel looked puzzled, but he obeyed me, and went back to his bed. But a little while later Samuel came back to me, and said again, "Here I am - you called me." Again I knew that I had said nothing, so I replied, "I did not call - go back and lie down." This time Samuel hesitated - he was obviously sure that he had heard someone calling his name. This made me begin to wonder about what he had heard, but I said nothing, and Samuel again returned obediently to his bed. I lay awake wondering about what was happening, and I was still awake when Samuel came to me a third time. He spoke the same words as before, but more loudly and insistently, as though he thought that I was playing games with him: "Here I am - you called me!" Finally I realised what it must be. So I told Samuel that it must be the Lord GOD who was calling him. I said to him, "Go and lie down, and if God calls you, say, 'Speak, for your servant is listening.'" This time Samuel didn't hesitate, but went quickly back to his bed. I lay awake for some time, wondering what the LORD was going to say to Samuel. But Samuel didn't come back, and eventually I fell asleep. When I woke up in the morning, I could hear that Samuel was moving around, carrying out his early morning duties. I waited a little while, expecting him to come to me, but he didn't come. So I called out, "Samuel, my son." Then Samuel responded, "Here I am," and he came in to me. But he said nothing, and looked very uncomfortable, so I solemnly ordered him to tell me everything that God had said to him. He still looked uncomfortable, but he obeyed me, and told me what God had said. His words were very hard for me to bear, but I had no doubt that he was telling me the truth. He told me that God had said that he was about to act decisively, and carry out the prophecy against my family. He didn't even hold back God's severe words against me, that I was guilty along with my sons, because I had failed to correct my sons. He ended with God's pronouncement, "The guilt of Eli's house will never be atoned for by sacrifice or offering."

Eli's Response I felt like crying out against God's judgment, but I knew that it was just, so I only said, "He is the LORD; let him do what is good in his eyes." This was almost the end of my story, and my sons' story, but I knew that it was only the beginning of the great things which God was going to do through Samuel. My sons had failed, and I had failed, but God would not fail. God is the sovereign LORD, who exercises judgment in righteousness, but always also the gracious God, who does not leave his people without guidance. The prophet had spoken the truth. The LORD honours those who honour him.