

OLD TESTAMENT SURVEY

Lesson 25

I Samuel – A Study in Contrasts

When I was a child, I can remember thinking how clever my friend was. We were each painting a scene of our choice, but no sooner had the supplies been handed out than Robert's hand shot up:

“Miss Tarkowski, I am already done... I did a polar bear in a snowstorm.”

Looking back, it was not as clever as I thought, but it did give an interesting opportunity for a lesson that Miss Tarkowski, to my memory, did not choose to give us – the lesson of “contrast.”

Contrast sets one thing against another to give definition, meaning, insight, greater understanding, and clarity. In design work, good contrast is key. In electronic equipment, contrast makes the picture.

Even beyond the tangible, however, contrast helps clarify meaning. Sometimes theologians find it easier to say what God is not, rather than simply what God is!

So, we approach our introductory lesson on First Samuel. Our goal is to give some elements of the storyline in Samuel. In the process, we readily see the text teaching by way of contrasts. We highlight these contrasts after moving through the basic elements of the storyline.

THE STORY

First Samuel records a story line familiar to many. The storyline centers on the transition of Israel from the age of the judges to the era of the monarchy. We start our study of Samuel with an overview of the story, paying particular details to those parts relevant to today's study in contrasts.

During the time of the judges, a devout man from the hill country of Ephraim named Elkanah had two wives, Hannah and Peninnah. Hannah, whose name means, “to be gracious” or “charming,”¹ had no children. Peninnah, on the other hand, was a rival wife who produced multiple offspring, and never seemed to miss a chance to point it out to Hannah.

Annually, Elkanah took his family up for sacrifice and worship at Shiloh. Shiloh, Joshua and Judges pointed out, was where the tabernacle had been set up in the

¹ The Hebrew “Hannah” (חַנָּה) stems from *hnn* (חָנַן) meaning, “to be gracious.”

Promised Land (Josh. 18:1-10; Jdg. 18:31). While at Shiloh, Hannah took private time in worship and tearfully poured out her prayer for a child. She vowed,

O LORD of hosts, if you will indeed look on the affliction of your servant and remember me and not forget your servant, but will give to your servant a son, then I will give him to the LORD all the days of his life (1 Sam. 1:11).

Eli was the priest serving at Shiloh. Seeing Hannah weeping bitterly while her mouth was moving but no words were heard, Eli thought Hannah drunk. After chiding her, Eli heard her explanation,

“No, my lord, I am a woman troubled in spirit...I have been pouring out my soul before the LORD. Do not regard your servant as a worthless woman, for all along I have been speaking out of my great anxiety and vexation” (1 Sam. 1:15-16).

Hannah explained she was pouring out her soul, not a bottle of wine! Although Eli did not know the substance of her prayer, he blessed her and her request.

After returning home, Hannah became pregnant and gave birth to a son, naming him Samuel adding,

“I have asked of him from the LORD” (1 Sam. 1:20).

Samuel means, “heard by God.”² Hannah missed the annual visits to Shiloh until she had weaned Samuel.³ After weaning Samuel, Hannah took him to Eli at the next sacrifice and explained that Samuel was her answered prayer. She left Samuel proclaiming,

“For this child I prayed, and the Lord has granted me my petition that I made to him. Therefore I have lent him to the Lord. As long as he lives, he is lent to the Lord” (1 Sam. 1:27-28).

After a song of prayer, Hannah returns home with her husband, leaving Samuel behind to minister to the Lord before Eli the priest.

² The Hebrew word for “to hear” or “listen” is *šmʿ* (שמע). This seems the root for Samuel. However, there is another word play involved as discussed later in the lesson.

³ We are not told how long before Samuel was weaned, but in the apocrypha, we read of a mother telling her son,

My son, have pity on me. I carried you nine months in my womb, and nursed you for three years (2 Macc. 7:27).

So, it could have been several years that Hannah stayed away from the trip.

Every year, Hannah would visit Samuel when she came for the annual family sacrifice. She always brought him a new robe she had made especially for him. God continued to bless Hannah, giving her three more sons and two daughters.

Now, Eli had two sons of his own, Hophni (“The Fighter”⁴) and Phinehas (“Brass Mouth”⁵). Both sons were “worthless men” who “did not know the LORD” (1 Sam. 2:12). They were abusive in the choice of meat they took from the worshippers, denying both God his proper share of the sacrifice as well as the worshippers theirs.

As Eli aged, he knew of his sons’ contempt for the things of the LORD, yet his words of rebuke to them changed nothing. While Samuel grew in stature and favor before the LORD and man, Eli’s sons just seemed to get worse. Finally, a man of God came to Eli and prophesied over the situation. The man condemned the actions of Eli for letting his sons continue to abuse the worship. He promised to end the leadership role of Eli’s house. He also promised that both The Fighter and Brass Mouth would die on the same day.

The word of the LORD also came to Samuel one night while he was sleeping. At first, Samuel was thinking that Eli was calling him, but after the third time, Eli told Samuel that the Lord was calling. The LORD instructed Samuel of his plans for Eli and sons. The next morning, Eli insisted on hearing what the LORD told Samuel. With integrity, Samuel related the information fully, even though it was not favorable news! Unsurprisingly, it was not long before Samuel was known throughout Israel as a special prophet of the LORD. This was a time when God did not speak to many people.

A day came when Israel was preparing to fight the Philistines. As a part of the battle, Israel brought the Ark of the Covenant from Shiloh, along with the worthless and abusive priests Fighter and Brass Mouth. When the battle ended, Israel was defeated, the prophecy about Eli and his sons fulfilled (the three died that day), and the Philistines captured the Ark of the Covenant.

First Samuel narrates the ascendancy of Samuel as a prophet, but then quickly turns to the rise of the monarchy in Israel. The people were concerned over their inability to conquer the Philistines, so they sought from Samuel (and through him from the LORD) a king.

⁴ “Hophni” comes from the Hebrew for “fists” (*hpn* - הַפָּה).

⁵ “Phinehas” in Hebrew is *pynhs*, which Davidson (using Gesenius) gives as “mouth of brass.” See, Davidson, Benjamin, *The Analytical Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon*, (Hendrickson Printing 2000) at 620. This is likely figured from the Hebrew *ph* (פֶּה) meaning “mouth” and *nhwš* (שׁוֹהַב) meaning “brass.”

Samuel gave the people fair warning about the problems that came with a king, but they insisted on one anyway. The LORD heard the people's refusal to obey Samuel and told him to go ahead and give them their choice for leader -- a king.

Saul is made king, much to his surprise and that of the people. Saul was a notably tall and handsome young man from the tribe of Benjamin. The key to Saul's support from the people came when he decided to fight and defend the people of Jabesh-Gilead against the army of Nahash the Ammonite. Saul took the Israelites and thoroughly defeated the Ammonites, and all of Israel rejoiced.

By now, Samuel was an old man. He called Israel together and reminded them that they had sought an earthly king, even while the LORD God was their king. The LORD responded and set a king over them, but not without a warning:

And now behold the king whom you have chosen, for whom you have asked; behold the LORD has set a king over you. If you will fear the LORD and serve him and obey his voice and not rebel against the commandment of the LORD, and if both you and the king who reigns over you will follow the LORD your God, it will be well. But if you will not obey the voice of the LORD, but rebel against the commandment of the Lord, then the hand of the LORD will be against you and your king (1 Sam. 12:13-15).

This speech put some level of fear in the people's hearts. They realized the sin in persisting for an earthy king. Samuel admonished them as the key now was their response to God. If they lived faithfully, then they had no worries. If they rebelled against God, then the difficulties would follow.

Saul continued his wars against the Philistines. There came a point where Saul was instructed by Samuel to wait seven days for Samuel's arrival at Gilgal before offering a sacrifice. After a week, the people got tired of waiting to sacrifice and began to disburse. Saul opted to step up and be not only king, but also prophet and priest. Saul offered the sacrifice, just finishing when Samuel arrived.

Saul gave some excuses for his disobedience to Samuel, but Samuel noted Saul's foolishness. Samuel declared that the LORD would not honor Saul's kingship, but that someone whose heart modeled the LORD's would be the next king.

Over time, Saul and his son Jonathan continued to battle the Philistines. Samuel grieved over Saul's continual misdeeds and poor leadership that brought the LORD's rejection of his kingship. Unknown to Saul, God sent Samuel to find another to anoint as king. God led Samuel to David, anointing him as a shepherd boy, even though it would take a long time before David ascended the throne. The interactions between David and Saul (along with multiple confrontations with the Philistines) consume most of the remainder of First Samuel.

Samuel died before Saul, but as First Samuel draws to a close, we read of Saul committing suicide after severe wounds in a battle where several of his sons had lost their lives.

There is much more to the story as we will discuss in coming lessons on David, Saul and other things. However, this abbreviated recap suffices for us to consider the two points of contrast as focus for this lesson.

CONTRAST 1: SAMUEL AND FAMILY/ELI AND FAMILY

There is a noticeable difference in the way the story of Samuel's birth and childhood is told in the book of First Samuel and the way it is told in this lesson. In this lesson, we recap the story following the storyline of Samuel and then the storyline of Eli and his sons. In the text, the two storylines are interwoven. The text goes from Samuel and family to Eli and family, back and forth, over and over.

The story is presenting a contrast between these two families. The family of Hannah, Elkanah, and Samuel is contrasted with that of Eli and his two sons, The Fighter and Brass Mouth.

Hannah had no children, and desperately wanted a son. Eli had two sons. Hannah offered her son in service to the LORD. Eli had sons who were allowed to serve the LORD, but used their religious position instead for personal gain. Eli thought the pious and gracious Hannah a "worthless woman" (1 Sam. 1:16), when in fact; his own sons were "worthless men" (1 Sam. 2:12).⁶ Elkanah and his family "worshipped" before the LORD (1 Sam. 1:19), while the family of Eli treated the worship of the Lord "with contempt" (2 Sam. 2:17).

After Hannah and Elkanah left Samuel with Eli in service to the LORD, the text weaves back and forth between Samuel and the sons of Eli in contrast. Eli's sons "did not know the LORD," yet were allowed to serve as if they did. They took advantage, stealing from God and the people (1 Sam. 2:12-17). Samuel, however, ministered before the LORD, always carefully clothed in respectful and holy clothes which befitted not only his body but also his character and that of his family (1 Sam. 2:18-20).

Eli's sons had earned a very rough reputation among the people for their evil abuses of their religious positions (1 Sam. 2:22-25). Samuel, however, "continued to grow both in stature and in favor with the LORD and also with man" (1 Sam. 2:26-27).

⁶ The literal phrase used of Hannah is a "*bt bly'l*" (תב-לעילב), which literally means a "daughter of uselessness." The precise phrase is used with slight modification referencing the sons of Eli in 1 Sam. 2:12. They are termed "*bny bly'l*" (ינב-לעילב) or "sons of uselessness."

The LORD sent a messenger with words of rejection and destruction to Eli about his sons, which went unheeded (1 Sam. 2:27-36). The LORD himself spoke to Samuel who responded, “Speak, for your servant listens” (1 Sam. 3:10). Then, even when quizzed about it by Eli, with integrity, Samuel did not lie or hide the truth of what was said by the LORD.

The layout of the storylines, the choice repeated phrases, and the comparable issues, all contribute to setting up the stark contrasts between these two families. One family was setting its worship and hopes on the LORD. The other family was a father who seemed ineffectual as a parent, and two adult sons who lived for themselves, with no knowledge of or regard to the Lord. One family is lifted up; the other is brought down. It is the same storyline over and over: walking with a right heart seeking the LORD brings his blessings. Walking in rebellion leaves one without the blessings.

CONTRAST 2: SAMUEL AND SAUL

This contrast is a bit harder to find when reading our English Bibles; it is clearest when reading the Hebrew. In First Samuel 9:2, we are introduced to Saul. Saul’s name in Hebrew is pronounced “*Sha-ul*,” and it is a form of the root verb “to ask.”⁷ The name is appropriate for Saul as king, because his anointing came out of the people asking Samuel over and over for a king.

Samuel, on the other hand, is not born simply out of fortune or luck. We are told over and over in the early part of the text that Samuel was a *saul* in the Hebrew sense of the word. Five times in Chapter One alone, we have this verb used of Samuel. It is in bold face type in the verses reproduced below:

- “Then Eli answered, ‘Go in peace, and the God of Israel grant your petition that **you have made [asked]** to him’ (1 Sam. 1:17).
- “And in due time Hannah conceived and bore a son, and she called his name Samuel, for she said, ‘**I have asked** for him from the LORD’ (1 Sam. 1:20).
- “For this child I prayed, and the LORD has granted me my petition that **I made [asked]** to him’ (1 Sam. 1:27).
- “Therefore I have **lent** him to the Lord. As long as he lives, he is **lent** to the Lord” (1 Sam. 1:28).

⁷ In Hebrew the name Saul is *š’wl* (שׁוּל). It is a singular masculine passive participle from the root *s’l* meaning “to ask.”

In this last verse, the contrast is most clear. The form of the Hebrew verb translated in the English Standard Version as “lent” (“he is lent to the LORD”) is actually the precise form of the word as the name Saul. The Hebrew carries the idea, “He is *saul* to the LORD.”

Now, this does not mean that Samuel was king, was meant to be king, or was even kingly! What it does set up is a contrast between these two: S amuel and Saul.⁸

Both men are leaders of Israel. Samuel’s mother sought him in piety and worship, while the people sought Saul as an earthly substitute for the LORD himself. Samuel is God’s “saul,” while Saul is the people’s “saul.” Samuel hears the word of the LORD and obeys. Saul hears the word of the LORD and takes matters into his own hands. God anointed Samuel as leader at the calling of God. Samuel anoints Saul leader at the calling of the people. Samuel is faithful to God until his death, while Saul’s faithlessness brings about his death.

Old Testament scholar Ralph Klein commented on this comparison noting,

Perhaps the reader is to see, in the series of puns on the word Saul, a suggestion that the real leader of Israel is not Saul, the anointed king, but rather the prophet-anointer, who had been asked (“Sauled”) of God (v. 20) and who had been dedicated (“Sauled”) back to God (v 28). Saul was indeed important for Israel, but the *real* Saul was the Saul after God’s own heart, whose name was Samuel.⁹

The contrast becomes especially apparent as Samuel is recounting the sin of the people in 1 Samuel 12. In verse 13, Samuel points out that Saul was the people’s choice:

And now behold the king whom you have chosen, for whom **you have asked**; behold the LORD has set a king over you.

Saul was the people’s *saul*, while Samuel was the Saul of the Lord.

POINTS FOR HOME

1. “*Samuel continued to grow both in stature and in favor with the LORD and also with man*” (1 Sam. 2:26).

I like the order of that verse—growing in stature and favor first with the LORD and then with man. As I type this, I stop to pray for each of my five

⁸ We might note that even in name, there is a pun-ish similarity between the two. Samuel’s name is basically Saul’s name with a Hebrew “m” in the middle.

⁹ Klein, Ralph, *Word Biblical Commentary - I Samuel*, (Word 1983) at 9.

children, and as you read, I ask you to pray for your own children, or if you have none, for those you are close to. Add to the prayer by name, others important to you. “Lord may each of these...listed by name...grow before you in stature and favor. May they seek your will in their lives. May they be seen in the eyes of the world, genuine in their faithfulness to you. Never using your kingdom to advance their own agenda or value, but always seeking first your kingdom and its righteousness.”

2. *Eli’s sons “did not know the LORD.”* (1 Sam. 2:12).

This is the verse that calls Eli’s sons “worthless.” It is a fair assessment. What is the value of someone claiming religion when they do not even know the LORD? They are, in the literal Hebrew, good for nothing! The value of a human comes from being made in God’s image. In that sense, no one is worthless. Furthermore, all of the best human deeds done apart from the Spirit of God are worthless. Those are not the “theological points” of the text. The point of the text is blunt: outside of knowing God, a life is wasted. Find someone this week that might not be living in relationship with God and invite him or her to church and class. You may not be in a position to tell them all they need to hear, but invite them with kindness and then see if God speaks to them!

3. *“Samuel...Saul... saul”* (1 Sam).

Samuel, a *saul* of God, and Saul, a *saul* of the people. What do we make of this in our lives? It is a question of origin and focus. Samuel was a gift dedicated before conception to lead the people. Saul was an insistence from a disobedient people who could never consistently follow the LORD as King. Do our desires proceed from our own agendas, our own unfaithfulness or our own dissatisfaction? It is a tough question, not easily asked, and certainly not easily answered, but it is a real question. I suggest, as hard as it might be, we sincerely pray, “Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth” – not as part of a tradition or memorized prayer that glosses our lips. May we truly seek what is his will, not simply what we want his will to be! Ask those you eat lunch with today to pray that very line together!

WANT MORE?

David struggled to get from shepherd boy, anointed privately as king, to the position of king. Read the story and email us your thoughts at wantmore@Biblical-Literacy.com.