

Introduction

In football, what the referee does not see he will not call, and no one can do anything about it, however much a tantrum they may throw. So New Orleans learned the hard way in the NFC championship. There is no one to mediate between the referees and the coach or player. Our passage takes that thought to a more serious level. Who will mediate for our sins before God?

Text

Our text presents for us three parties of the good, the bad, and the impotent. The author arranges their stories skillfully to allow us to see the contrasts. Verse 11 introduces the good.

Then Elkanah went home to Ramah. And the boy was ministering to the LORD in the presence of Eli the priest.

The boy is Samuel, who was given up by his parents to serve in the tabernacle as the priest Eli's servant. So, from his time as a toddler, he is dedicated to tabernacle service, faithfully "ministering to the LORD."

Now comes the first contrast of the good with the bad.

Now the sons of Eli were worthless men. They did not know the LORD. ¹³ The custom of the priests with the people was that when any man offered sacrifice, the priest's servant would come, while the meat was boiling, with a three-pronged fork in his hand, ¹⁴ and he would thrust it into the pan or kettle or cauldron or pot. All that the fork brought up the priest would take for himself. This is what they did at Shiloh to all the Israelites who came there. ¹⁵ Moreover, before the fat was burned, the priest's servant would come and say to the man who was sacrificing, "Give meat for the priest to roast, for he will not accept boiled meat from you but only raw." ¹⁶ And if the man said to him, "Let them burn the fat first, and then take as much as you wish," he would say, "No, you must give it now, and if not, I will take it by force." 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.

There are two scenarios connected with tabernacle offerings presented here. Verses 13–14 present a scenario after an offering of meat is made in which the two wicked priests, Hophni and Phinehas, sinned against their fellow men. Once an offering was made on the altar, the offerer with his family were to eat the meat, which they boiled. A portion, namely the breast and right thigh, was reserved for the priest assisting with the offering. These priests were sending their servants, or rather, henchmen, to dig around in the pot and pull out the choicest pieces, thus depriving the offerers their due food, even what the offerers were bound to eat by law.

The second scenario of verses 15–16 is worse and takes place before the offering is made. There is one constant in all offerings of an animal. The fat of that animal is to be burned. As stated more than once in the Law: “It is a food offering with a pleasing aroma to the LORD” (Lev. 3:5). What is happening is that after the animal is killed and its fat being cut out to place on the altar of the Lord for burning, the priests’ henchmen were butting in and demanding fresh raw meat. Perhaps their demand included the fat, but regardless, they are arrogantly interrupting a service of offering to the Lord, committing sacrilege, even threatening violence to get their end. This is a sin directing against the Lord God. Truly, these two priests were as described—worthless and who did not know the Lord, who clearly did not fear God.

Now back to the author’s contrast, to Samuel and his family.

¹⁸ Samuel was ministering before the LORD, a boy clothed with a linen ephod. ¹⁹ And his mother used to make for him a little robe and take it to him each year when she went up with her husband to offer the yearly sacrifice. ²⁰ Then Eli would bless Elkanah and his wife, and say, “May the LORD give you children by this woman for the petition she asked of the LORD.” So then they would return to their home.

²¹ Indeed the LORD visited Hannah, and she conceived and bore three sons and two daughters. And the boy Samuel grew in the presence of the LORD.

As the years went by, Samuel continued to faithful minister in the tabernacle before the Lord, and that phrase “grew in the presence of the Lord” indicates that he is not merely growing up on the tabernacle grounds but speaks of his godly character. We furthermore are given a picture of a family that is blessed by God and characterized by love.

Back to the family devoid of blessing and love.

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. ²⁴ No, my sons; it is no good report that I hear the people of the LORD spreading abroad. ²⁵ If someone sins against a man, God will mediate for him, but if someone sins against the LORD, who can intercede for him?” But they would not listen to the voice of their father, for it was the will of the LORD to put them to death.

Eli has words of blessing for Elkanah and Hannah. He has but words of rebuke for his own sons, and rightly so. Eli speaks of added wickedness and sacrilege. His two sons were laying with (probably by force) the women who served at the tabernacle’s entrance. Their evil reputation is “spreading abroad,” no doubt using whatever social media was available in their day.

Then back again to the good, where the author is explicit now about Samuel’s good character before both God and his fellow men.

²⁶ Now the boy Samuel continued to grow both in stature and in favor with the LORD and also with man.

Again, then, the contrast of the good and bad. Samuel grows only better; Eli's sons only worse. And Eli—this is where the impotent third party comes in—is unable to do anything about his sons other than a verbal rebuke. This wickedness in the house of the Lord cannot continue.

²⁷ And there came a man of God to Eli and said to him, "Thus says the LORD, 'Did I indeed reveal myself to the house of your father when they were in Egypt subject to the house of Pharaoh?' ²⁸ Did I choose him out of all the tribes of Israel to be my priest, to go up to my altar, to burn incense, to wear an ephod before me? I gave to the house of your father all my offerings by fire from the people of Israel. ²⁹ Why then do you scorn my sacrifices and my offerings that I commanded for my dwelling, and honor your sons above me by fattening yourselves on the choicest parts of every offering of my people Israel?' 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. ³¹ Behold, the days are coming when I will cut off your strength and the strength of your father's house, so that there will not be an old man in your house. ³² Then in distress you will look with envious eye on all the prosperity that shall be bestowed on Israel, and there shall not be an old man in your house forever. ³³ The only one of you whom I shall not cut off from my altar shall be spared to weep his eyes out to grieve his heart, and all the descendants of your house shall die by the sword of men. ³⁴ And this that shall come upon your two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, shall be the sign to you: both of them shall die on the same day. ³⁵ And I will raise up for myself a faithful priest, who shall do according to what is in my heart and in my mind. And I will build him a sure house, and he shall go in and out before my anointed forever. ³⁶ And everyone who is left in your house shall come to implore him for a piece of silver or a loaf of bread and shall say, "Please put me in one of the priests' places, that I may eat a morsel of bread." ' ' "

In brief, the Lord will put an end to Eli's family serving as priests of the tabernacle. Eli was not committing the evil crimes, and he understandably could not control his adult sons. Even so, he, as High Priest, could have removed them from service as priests and placed others in their place. Thus, the Lord will place another priest from Aaron's line to carry out that priestly role. In the next chapter the author takes us back to Samuel faithfully serving before the Lord.

Lessons

There are three lessons to take away from our passage.

1. The sovereign God will provide and preserve a righteous, faithful remnant, as well as visit judgment on the wicked.

That seems to be the message of the author in juxtaposing Samuel and the wicked sons. God is quietly preserving and developing his righteous servant, while letting the wicked priests, in a sense, hang themselves for the day of judgment. After Eli rebukes his sons in verse 25, we are told, "But they would not listen to the voice of their father, for it was the will of the LORD to put them to death."

The point is that it was the will of the Lord to punish their guilt and not to provide the needed repentance to be delivered. God does not give them hard hearts; he simply refuses to soften those hearts. He does what is described in Romans 1 as God giving sinners up to their debased ways.

Those days of Israel were dark, and it seemed that matters would only deteriorate into chaos. Even so, God was at work in bringing about judgment and restoration for Israel to be God's true nation.

In like manner, we should understand that God remains the sovereign Lord who is working out his purposes for his kingdom. As the times are changing, we understandably worry about the state of the church, as attacks increase against our values and faith. I received an email from a person a few weeks ago, who came across my message on common grace. He quotes a sentence about how God uses government to restrain sin, and then laments how our government is removing those restraints, which will lead to chaos. But he misses the point. Government only do what God allows them to do, which always leads to his purposes. God will use ungodly nations and governments to discipline his people, but for their good, for the purifying of their faith.

He, furthermore, will preserve a faithful remnant to see that the light of the gospel is not extinguished and that the work of his kingdom will carry on. It is God, and God alone, who determines when and where that light and that work flourishes and is dimmed. He will bring judgment against the wicked at the time of his choosing, just as he will bring discipline of his people at his timing. Like the spiritual says, "He's got the whole world in his hands."

2. Whom our hope rests in.

In verse 35 we hear of the righteous priest God will raise up: "he shall go in and out before my anointed forever." The Hebrew word for anointed is *messiah*. When used by itself in the Old Testament, it most always refers to the king and will eventually be applied to *the* Messiah. We will develop this concept more as we go along in the series, but note that it is in this chapter we receive the first intimation of rule by king. And yet, this is not the first verse that does so. That verse is at the end of Hannah's prayer:

The LORD will judge the ends of the earth;
he will give strength to his king
and exalt the horn of his anointed." 2:10

The era of the judges is coming to an end. Samuel will be the last judge of Israel, and he will anoint the first king and the second. He will anoint the "anointed." Hannah first turns thoughts and hopes in a king who will be God's anointed and exercise his judgment and bring about his deliverance. The righteous priest whom the Lord will raise up will serve before such a king. The hope of Israel from now on lies in the "anointed," the king to come.

And so it is for us, the church, and the spiritual descendants of Abraham. Our hope lies in the Anointed, the King Jesus Christ. They looked forward to the King who was to come and deliver them from oppression and establish them in a righteous kingdom. We look back to the King who came and won deliverance from the oppression of sin and who brought us into the kingdom of

God. We both look to the future for this same King to return, who will then consummate his kingdom so that together we will live with him forever. Their story and their hope is our story and hope centering around whom we know as the Lord Jesus Christ.

3. There is one who will mediate for us.

The key verse in our text is found in verse 25, where Eli is rebuking his wayward sons. He tells them, “If someone sins against a man, God will mediate for him, but if someone sins against the LORD, who can intercede for him?” It is the same Hebrew word translated for “mediate” and for “intercede.”

Eli is saying that when there is a dispute between persons, there is, nevertheless, God, who can determine who is in the right and then come to one’s aid. but if the dispute is with God, who can judge between those two? Who then can be a mediate to resolve conflict? That makes sense. God is God. He has no equal, much less anyone over him or even anyone to counsel him. and so, when we have sinned against him, what hope do we have to avoid our sentence and judgment?

But if Eli had remembered his history, if Eli had remembered what his own role was supposed to be, he would have realized that there can be a mediator. Abraham, after all, mediated for Sodom. Moses mediated for his own people when they rebelled in the wilderness. And the essential role of a priest was to be a mediator between God and his people. That is why the people went to the priests to offer their sacrifices. Indeed, every day priests were making sin offerings in the tabernacle on behalf of God’s covenant people. On the Day of Atonement, the High Priest, which Eli appeared to be, entered the Holy of Holies as mediator to make atonement for the sins of the nation.

One cannot judge between God and man, but one can intercede, can speak on behalf of another. The Hebrew word translated “to mediate” and “to intercede” is more often translated “to pray.” One who mediates between God and man is praying to God for mercy, for forgiveness on behalf of the offender. A priest is not only praying, he is making atonement through the sacrifices offered up.

Can you see where we are going? Who is our great Mediator? Who is both Priest and King? Who has entered into the heavenly Holy of Holies with the blood of the one sufficient sacrifice for our sins? Who continues to intercede for us even now at the right hand of God the Father?

By the way, there are not wrongs reserved only for neighbor against neighbor. All acts against our fellow man are sins against God. All offenses, all failures, all transgressions bring us under God’s judgment. We have no hope for mercy without our Advocate, our Lord Jesus Christ who has mediated a new covenant for us through his sacrifice upon the cross. He claims us for his own—all who believe in him and come to him. Without him is no hope; with him is all assurance that when we appear before the throne of God, we will find mercy and grace. Will you not believe and put your trust in him?

However dark the times may appear to you, however chaotic the world may seem around you, God is in control. He has sent his Anointed to win victory for you. If you claim him as your Lord

and Savior, know that he is your Mediator, your Intercessor, your Surety before the throne of God.