



The Story Of Salvation

NCTM Tuesday Night Studies 2010

Andrew Klynsmith and Hank Schoemaker

11. Samuel

1. Ruth

Between the book of Judges and the books of Samuel lies the little book of Ruth. This book's story takes place during the time of the judges (1:1) and tells the events that happen to the family of a man called Elimelech (=my God is king), a Bethlehemite who flees to Moab during a time of famine with his wife, Naomi, and their two sons. Elimelech dies while there, and Naomi's two sons marry Moabite women, before they also die. Naomi now decides to return home, and a faithful daughter-in-law, Ruth, who is a Gentile and not an Israelite (although quite closely related), insists on going to Israel with her. Her words are covenant words, and she comes to live with the God of Naomi as her god:

Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the LORD deal with me, be it ever so severely, if anything but death separates you and me. (Ruth 1:16-17)

Finally, through the twists and turns of this romance story—again as is often the case in the unfolding story of God's salvation, it seems at times that everything hangs on a hair's breadth's chance—Ruth ends up married to Boaz and bearing a son. It seemed at the start of the story that the LORD's hand was against Naomi (1:13), but now it is clear that God has blessed her (4:14f). This son, Obed, is the father of a man called Jesse, and Jesse will have several sons, the youngest of whom will be called David (4:17). Tracing through this story we are struck by the domesticity of it all: gathering food for the day, the strange mystery of a man and a woman being attracted, social customs, marriage, birth—all the day-to-day stuff of existence. All this happens in the midst of the social upheaval and disorder that marked the end of the years of the judges. But consider that without these events and all the "chance" of it, there is no continuance of the line that traces its way through David to David's greater son, Jesus. God's sovereign providence and action should leave us a little gobsmacked!

2. The Birth of Samuel

At key points through the story of salvation, God works through particular people who are known as "righteous" (e.g. Noah) or who display piety and faith in their lives. We meet another such person at this juncture of the story (1Sam. 1), the faithful woman Hannah, one of two wives of Elkanah. Hannah is barren, and the object of ridicule for Elkanah's other wife. She suffers great sadness, even though her husband shows her special favour and kindness (for he loved her and was tender towards her situation). In her sorrow Hannah sought the LORD's help and asked for a son, vowing that she would give him back to the LORD for life-long service (1:11). Eli the priest brings God's word of blessing to her, and she believes that word and is comforted (1:17). The son is born and named Samuel, which means "God has heard" (1:20). Elkanah assents to her dedicating of the boy to holy service (1:21-23), and when he is weaned, she took him to the house of the LORD and consecrated him, giving him to serve the LORD (1:24ff). Her prayer at that point (1Sam. 2:1-10) is significant and

worth deep reading. We find that she knows the God of Israel, the LORD, to be the God who looks on the lowly, overturning all normal expectations. At the end of her song she speaks prophetically, saying of God that “He will give strength to his king and exalt the horn of his anointed” (2:10b): how she knew that a king was coming is mysterious.

3. Samuel’s Boyhood

The story of Samuel is set in the wider picture of the failure of Eli’s family to properly give spiritual leadership in Israel. Not only is the nation apostate, but so also those who were charged with the teaching of the word of God. 2:12, 17—“Eli’s sons were wicked men; they had no regard for the LORD.... The sin of the young men was very great in the LORD’s sight...” Israel has been called, through Abraham, and then in the events of the Exodus and the giving of the Law at Sinai, to be a holy people for the LORD among the nations of the world, a priest-nation to Him. Israel’s apostasy is then more reprehensible than the idolatry and debauchery of the pagan nations around her. Eli challenged his sons (2:22-25) but they refused to listen to the rebuke and continued stubbornly in their way. Samuel stands as a contrast in the midst of all this (2:18,26).

Given the slide of Israel into sin, the LORD faithfully continued to send His word to the nation, even though the refusal to hear it meant that the word of God was rare. (God’s word dries up in the face of the refusal to hear and live in it.) A prophet is sent to Eli to speak about the sin of his sons, and confronts Eli with his failure to deal with the matter more decisively (2:27ff). A promise given to Eli’s family by the LORD is now rescinded (2:30ff). A new priestly family is to be raised up; Eli’s family will suffer disgrace and futility.

Samuel, as one who honours the LORD, is given to hear the word of the LORD (3:2ff). This word will require Samuel to speak to Eli of the coming judgment of his sons, and to have courage in doing so. Samuel is then the first of *the line* of prophets (3:20, cf. Acts 3:24). Whilst there had been prophets before now, from Abel onwards, but Samuel is the start of the great prophetic line by which the LORD was going to make clear His saving purposes through the coming Messiah.

Indeed, all the prophets from Samuel on, as many as have spoken, have foretold these days.” (Acts 3:24)

Cf. 1Peter 1:10-11—Concerning this salvation, the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of the Christ and the glories that would follow.

4. The Capture of the Ark

The capture of the ark of the covenant by the Philistines is a final sign of the wrath of the LORD on His people, coinciding also with death of Eli and his two sons. The wife of Phinehas went into premature birth at the time, and died in labour, but ended her life naming her son Ichabod, with these prophetic words:

“The glory has departed from Israel for the ark of God has been captured.” (4:22)

Whilst the capture of the ark is devastating for Israel, it is not defeat for the LORD. Through salvation history we see constantly that God Himself as well as His faithful servants are taken into the power of the enemies and the mockers. This is no defeat but rather the arena for His sovereign power to be displayed. So, the ark’s presence in the temple of Dagon, the god of the Philistines, results in Dagon’s humiliation and the LORD’s exaltation (1Sam. 5).

In all this the Abrahamic covenant is being worked out: those who bless you I will bless; those who curse you, I will curse.

Through these events, and some others, it seems that Samuel assumes the role of both priest and something like judge. He delivers Israel from the Philistines (7:2ff)—not through warfare but through sacrificial worship. As we will see next week, he was the last of the judges, and this gave way to the new order of rule in Israel, that of the kingship.

Discussion Questions:

1. Ruth, Hannah, Samuel—all were faithful to the Lord in their various ways. How does faithfulness to the Lord show in each case? How does faithfulness to the Lord qualify us to be used by Him in His purposes?
2. Eli's sons debasing of the priesthood, and Eli's weakness in dealing with the matter led to the annulment of the promise concerning the place of the family in the service of God. How do you relate that with the grace of God? What does the Lord's dealing with the family teach us about the relationship of grace and justice?
3. "Through salvation history we see constantly that God Himself as well as His faithful servants are taken into the power of the enemies and the mockers. This is no defeat but rather the arena for His sovereign power to be displayed." Can you think of other occasions where this is true? What will this mean for us as the people of God today?

Pray for one another about the things that you have been sharing.