

Grace in Transition | The Book of Samuel

The Old Guard

First Samuel 2.12b-3.1

9.6.20

But the boy ministered to the LORD before Eli the priest. Now the sons of Eli were worthless men; they did not know the LORD¹³ and the custom of the priests with the people. When any man was offering a sacrifice, the priest's servant would come while the meat was boiling, with a three-pronged fork in his hand.¹⁴ Then he would thrust it into the pan, or kettle, or caldron, or pot; all that the fork brought up the priest would take for himself. Thus they did in Shiloh to all the Israelites who came there.¹⁵ Also, before they burned the fat, the priest's servant would come and say to the man who was sacrificing, "Give the priest meat for roasting, as he will not take boiled meat from you, only raw."¹⁶ If the man said to him, "They must surely burn the fat first, and then take as much as you desire," then he would say, "No, but you shall give it to me now; and if not, I will take it by force."¹⁷ Thus the sin of the young men was very great before the LORD, for the men despised the offering of the LORD.

¹⁸ Now Samuel was ministering before the LORD, as a boy wearing a linen ephod.¹⁹ And his mother would make him a little robe and bring it to him from year to year when she would come 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 from this woman in place of the one she dedicated to the LORD." And they went to their own home.

²¹ The LORD visited Hannah; and she conceived and gave birth to three sons and two daughters. And the boy Samuel grew before the LORD.

²² Now Eli was very old; and he heard all that his sons were doing to all Israel, and how they lay with the women who served at the doorway of the tent of meeting.²³ He said to them, "Why do you do such things, the evil things that I hear from all these people?"²⁴ "No, my sons; for the report is not good which I hear the LORD'S people circulating.²⁵ "If one man sins against another, God will mediate for him; but if a man sins against the LORD, who can intercede for him?" But they would not listen to the voice of their father, for the LORD desired to put them to death.

²⁶ Now the boy Samuel was growing in stature and in favor both with the LORD and with men.

²⁷ Then a man of God came to Eli and said to him, "Thus says the LORD, 'Did I not indeed reveal Myself to the house of your father when they were in Egypt in bondage to Pharaoh's house?'²⁸ 'Did I not choose them from all the tribes of Israel to be My priests, to go up to My altar, to burn incense, to carry an ephod before Me; and did I not give to the house of your father all the fire offerings of the sons of Israel?'²⁹ 'Why do you kick at My sacrifice and at My offering which I have commanded in My dwelling, and honor your sons above Me, by making yourselves fat with the choicest of every offering of My people Israel?'...³⁴ 'This will be the sign to you which will come concerning your two sons, Hophni and Phinehas: on the same day both of them will die.³⁵ 'But I will raise up for Myself a faithful priest who will do according to what is in My heart and in My soul; and I will build him an enduring house, and he will walk before My anointed always.

^{3.1} Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the LORD before Eli.

Last week we began to look at The Book of Samuel, a two-volume history of events in Israel from about 1000BC. It's a time of sweeping transition – politically, morally, culturally and spiritually.

The Israelites are facing the threat of the Philistines and are basically ruled by them. The nation is disjointed, a group of twelve tribes but no real central authority. There's no headquarters/capital-city. The few who continue to worship do so in the territory of Ephraim (one of the tribes) at a place called Shiloh where the Tent (Tabernacle), the portable worship space that's modeled after the Garden of Eden is, in which the Ark of the Covenant is housed. AND all these factors are IN TRANSITION.

As a young child, the title character, Samuel, is placed there (like an adoption) to be raised by the priest, Eli but it's an "open adoption" in that little Samuel's birthmother, Hannah, comes to visit him at least once a year and brings a new linen robe each year (an ephod – the uniform for a priest).

The biological sons of Eli, Hophni and Phineas (sort of like Samuel's adopted brothers) and they're labeled, "Sons of Belial" – worthless men. They're evil men in a place of spiritual/religious authority.

And so today, we pause to think about this issue that for so many people in our time/place has cause heartbreak and emotional, spiritual harm, i.e. abuse in religious/spiritual communities. How many people in churches, synagogues, mosques, temples here and around the world have turned to religion to find peace and guidance but instead have found broken trust, manipulation, authoritarian control, trauma and ultimately a deep sense of disillusionment and bitter cynicism?

Today we want to ask why this stuff happens in religious/spiritual communities – why is physical, sexual, financial, emotional and spiritual abuse apparently common in spiritual/religious settings? What should we do about it? What do we say to those who have been victimized? AND how does the basic message of Christianity (the Gospel) how does the Gospel define/shape our responses to all these questions?

Let's look at: **1) Abuse in Spiritual/Religious Communities**

2) A Tale of Three Rescuers

3) When the Good News MEETS the Bad News of Spiritual Abuse

The topic of abuse is never an easy one. It's one I would rather NOT address in a sermon because in these few minutes we can hardly scratch the surface and it may, for some, dredge up things they would rather forget.

ON THE OTHER HAND, this may be a step toward healing for some (usually it's a path/journey – not an instantaneous remedy) but this may be a step for some. For others, it may stir up empathy and even a desire to help in a more sustained/ongoing effort. AND still for others who have been abusive or domineering in relationships, this sermon will offer a way of forgiveness and change.

I have friends who just visited the Grand Canyon. I've never been there but I'm sure the first time you see it your mouth drops open and you're in awe/speechless. But imagine meeting someone who'd seen the Grand Canyon many times, hundreds or even thousands of times; suppose you met a park ranger whose back yard was on the rim of the Canyon and he referred to it as "The Big Ditch"... you know...as a pet-name, a joke. "I was drinking my morning coffee this morning ...lookin' out over the big ditch..."

Well, sometimes people can become so accustomed to grandeur and majesty and privilege that they no longer see it – it stops taking their breath away. THIS was the case with the sons of Eli. Their real problems began when they grew accustomed... or even bored with God and with the tremendous privileges God had given them.

"The sons of Eli were worthless men – they did not know the LORD nor the customs of the priests with the people" It's not that they didn't know ABOUT God or know ABOUT the work of the priesthood; it's that they had no intimacy with God. They'd lost AWE for Him and for the worship and work to which God had called them and then, it was easy to lose touch with people. Overfamiliarity with God ("the big ditch"... "the man upstairs") leads to disregard for God and His ways/callings and eventually DISDAIN for people.

And so they turned to MONEY, POWER and SEX. These are good things but can also masquerade as ultimate things and as substitutes for God. So, we should also say they're dangerous things.

Each of these pursuits (sex, money and power) have the ability to exhilarate and can give a false sense of transcendence or otherworldliness... And this MAY be one reason why they seem to accumulate around spirituality and religion – the pursuit of transcendent intimacy.

Hophni and Phineas took food (money) and they wielded power (forcibly took from people and lorded their position over people – used God's calling to dominate people) and they (v. 22) were immoral and sexually exploitive. The young women were virgins and their presence symbolized innocence and purity. One scholar wrote that to violate these women was equivalent to tearing down the curtains/veil around the Ark of the Covenant.

These clergymen were evil shepherds. They were sheering the sheep and had done it for so long... it was as if they were pushing with all their might against the doors of hell... and eventually, God would not only open the door but push them in the direction they insisted to go. V. 25 "the LORD desired to put them to death."

I know people in our own congregation who have been exploited by religious communities or religious practitioners/clergy. Spiritual abuse can manifest in loud and notorious ways like the clergy sex scandals (which we may associate with Roman Catholic Church but it's happened in virtually every denomination and religion). OR it can happen in much more subtle ways. Members may realize at some point that they're being controlled in their finances. There can be inordinate demands on time and work that are expressed by subtle messages and "thinly veiled threats" ("Do this or God won't bless you...or God will get you!"). It can come across in heavy-handed controlling leadership... Could be invasive forays into your private life. It can come by using LAW (sometimes it's God's Law... more often it's man's laws) – multiplied demands and prohibitions and expectations and ways of thinking, speaking and behaving that arise NOT from true conviction in the heart of the worshiper but from PRESSURE!

And predictably... when (and IF) people wake up to it they often leave organized religion and paint all religious communities with a "broad brush"... and the trauma of the manipulation they've suffered leads a lot of people into spiritual isolation – "I'll never go back!"

Now, in and around this painful passage are some important contrasts. The wicked biological sons of Eli (who are growing in their bold/shameless evil and growing in their waistline!) they're juxtaposed with the adopted son who is growing taller and growing in his love for and favor with people and in his walk with God. Sprinkled through the passage are five progress-reports on Samuel's growth – v. 26, "Now the boy Samuel was growing in stature and in favor both with the LORD and with men."

He's growing like a tender shoot out of parched ground (Isa 53.2)... This is NOT a good environment for growth but God overrules environment! His mother's tender care with him in these yearly linen robes (a sign of purity – Rev. 15.6) shows Samuel growing by love, by grace NOT BY COERCION.

And not only is Samuel growing in contrast to his wicked brothers... but there's another contrast with a second rescuer. Samuel is the last Judge/Rescuer but he's a contemporary of another Judge, SAMSON. They (along with John the Baptist) are the only life-long NAZARITES in the Bible.

Our man Samuel seems to have succeeded in keeping his NAZARITE VOW (no wine, no contact with dead things and no cutting his hair) but the other rescuer Samson was careless in breaking it repeatedly: eats honey from the dead lion, walks through vineyards and gets that infamous haircut!).

But in Samson's death he defeats the enemy pulling down the Temple of Dagon – "So the dead whom he killed at his death were more than those whom he killed in his life..." (Jdg 16.30)

And yet ...Samson didn't lead the Israelites... that falls to this little boy SAMUEL... the tender shoot living in this spiritually abusive parched environment.

It's like the Book of Judges comes in for a crash landing and THEN Samuel who really IS the last Judge, gets his own book. Samuel is like the anti-Samson...so similar in so many ways (both had a miraculous birth, names sound the same both were NAZARITES, both fought the Philistine oppressors, contemporaries) but Samuel re-launches the crashed plane. He's a better rescuer – the better Samson!

But this second, BETTER Judge/Rescuer is still not perfect. His own sons went the way of Eli's sons... not as corrupt but still their crookedness was costly: "His sons, however, did not walk in his ways, but turned aside after dishonest gain, took bribes and perverted justice." (1Sam 8.3) Their failings lead to a major detour in this book... Samuel is a better rescuer than SamSON but still... not the best.

And that brings up a third Rescuer who is seen walking in the periphery of this passage. Like Samson and Samuel, His too was a miraculous birth. He was not a Nazarene but a Nazarene (raised in Nazareth) another bad environment (He too was a Tender Shoot out of parched ground).

He was the Priest/Rescuer we really need. He was both the Priest AND the sacrifice. He did what neither holy Samuel nor rascally Samson could ever do. On behalf of others, He, Jesus Christ, lived in perfect and perpetual congruence and harmony with the heart of God the Father – HE OBEYED IN MY PLACE – He earned the record for which I am rewarded (He did the work and I get the prize).

He lived for me, He died for me; He rescues me from guilt and clothes me with the Linen Robe of His righteousness. He defeated death by resurrecting AND IN DOING SO HE JUSTIFIES everyone who trusts in Him. And this tender and infinitely powerful expression of God's grace has immense ramifications for how we think about and respond to spiritual/religious abuse. Let me try to unpack that a bit: how THE GOSPEL enables believers to respond to religious abuse.

We may THINK the answer is simply to withdraw from organized religion so we can avoid being manipulated. But let me remind us that something doesn't have to be labeled "RELIGION" to be religious. You can face a religious level of abuse in a gym (if you don't measure up – and DO you?) You may think, "I'll LEAVE organized religion where you can be shunned or disfellowshipped or excommunicated and I'll just stay a safe distance from people who can shun/banish me... I'll stick to social media where it's safe!"

And I get it – it IS messy to be in real relationship with people who can threaten or exclude you – but social media is NOT a safe-zone! There's tremendous pressure and coercion there – we call it "cancel culture" (it's the same as virtual excommunication).

A new book by Tara Isabella Burton called *Strange Rites: New Religions for a Godless World* explores how everything is religious today. People have fled organized religion but fan-culture and politics and “hook-up culture” and “well-ness culture” and so much more have taken on a religious fervor where sex, power and money can be used to ABUSE people. So, suffice it to say, WITHDRAWAL is really not an option.

The Gospel offers us unconditional acceptance into the Most Exclusive Club there is. The work of Jesus that we receive passively (we rest on it) – it gives us acceptance with the Holy, Holy, Holy Judge who knows all your secrets. It’s an OCEAN of love and forgiveness and the more we look at it the more it entralls and fascinates and allures us.

As we learn it and celebrate it, as we sing about it and reflect on it – as we help each other sort of massage it into each others shoulders (MAINTAINING SOCIAL DISTANCE OF COURSE!) as we relate and truly approach one another as BIG SINNERS who have been rescued by the Perfect Rescuer, we become tender with one another (like blessed Hannah was with Samuel). It’s “the wisdom of TENDERNESS” (Brennan Manning).

We know that coercion doesn't work – it didn't work for ME (did it work for YOU?) I mean when God's Law told you “DO THIS OR DIE!” did you do it? Do it perfectly? AS FOR ME I RAN THE OTHER WAY! The coercion of the Law killed me – only tenderness saved me. I needed a better rescuer and Jesus Christ came for me. The Holy Spirit took hold of me. And the more I look at that tenderness and swim in it and drink it in – the more I am able to BE tender with you. I can empathize with those who have been traumatized by religious abuse of all kinds (and some of it is horrific like we read about in this passage).

This may sound “sectarian” but our Presbyterian form of church government has a lot of accountability built in and other churches can inquire into our congregational life IF it's made known that anything wacky or in any way abusive is happening. Historic Presbyterianism recognizes that IN Gospel-believing people/churches, sin can still happen... that's the reason for accountability with other believers outside our congregation.

I remember many years ago the elders of our church met to deal with a member who was in a lot of trouble (the man has long since moved away and no one knows whom I have in mind). Should we take a hardline OR turn a blind eye? One elder said... “My dad was treated roughly by a church and never went back...”

It made us all pause and remember how God treated us in Christ – it wasn't to ignore us and just be nice. Nor was it to give us what we deserved. It was bold love... patience... tenderness and sacrifice. And we did – we sacrificially loved and patiently listened... loved and listened...loved and listened. And God worked in that man's life...saved his marriage/family. It's not coercion and not nice-ness – its love enabled by grace received by faith.

And that makes all the difference.