

1 Samuel - Commentaries by Henri L. Rossier

Meditations on Ruth and 1 Samuel, 1 Samuel 2:1-11 (2:1-11)

Consciousness of her irremediable condition, brokenness, and humiliation had prepared Hannah to receive the grace that God was granting her in giving her Samuel. But hardly was she holding him in her motherly arms, than she must part with him in order to consecrate him to God. Her life was to be more solitary than ever, and this at a time when the people's condition was increasing the ruin all around her. Nevertheless Hannah is full of a joy which overflows in a song of triumph: "My heart exulteth in Jehovah... for I rejoice in Thy salvation" (1 Sam. 2:1). This is because God had revealed Himself to her in grace; because He had revealed Himself again to his faithful servant who, having received everything from Him, had kept back nothing for herself and had returned everything to Him. Having deprived herself of her son, she better understands all that God is in Himself; she appreciates all the more all that He is for her. Abraham, having sacrificed Isaac at the Lord's command, had made a similar experience. It was then that God had revealed to him the full extent of the promises that he had received and that God was confirming to his seed (Gen. 22:15-18; Gal. 3:15-16).

Along with joy, Hannah found strength: "My horn is lifted up in Jehovah" (1 Sam. 2:1). This power "is perfected in weakness" (2 Cor. 12:9); after she has repudiated all that is elevated, everything of renown in Israel, God shares this strength with a weak woman, humiliated and despised. Hannah's beautiful song therefore begins with her painful personal experiences, although it goes much further. In the course of this book we shall see the same thing produced in David. The inspired psalms are the fruit of his experiences, but the bearing that the Spirit gives them goes far beyond that, concentrating prophetically on the sufferings and the glories of Christ, on the person of Him who is the fulfillment of all the promises, of all the ways, and of all the counsels of God.

This is how we must interpret Hannah's song. Her personal circumstances serve as an introduction to things still unrevealed, reserved till then in God's counsels.

The main theme of Hannah's song, the great principle presented in it, is the sovereign grace and power of God, who abases the proud and the one who puts his confidence in the flesh, and who lifts up the weak and powerless, "for the pillars of the earth are Jehovah's, and He hath set the world upon them." On His grace and power He has established the entire order of created things. Israel, miserable and fallen, and a faithful remnant that was poor and weak, needed to know these things and to learn that everything depended on Him alone, that He alone could keep the feet of His saints, silence the wicked, bring all man's strength to nothing, break all His adversaries and, lastly, give strength to His King and raise up the horn of His Anointed, for He intervenes in Israel's favor by giving strength to His Christ. He does not give strength to His people, but to His Anointed. He raises up the King on whom everything depends, the pivot of all things, the only means of sustaining a relationship between Himself and His people.

Let us take up again one or two details of this song. 1 Samuel 2:1 celebrates the salvation of the Lord. All is pure grace on His part, for it is "grace... which carries with it salvation." 1 Samuel 2:2 celebrates

Jehovah's holiness. The believer cannot separate these two traits one from the other; one who has found God as Savior understands that He is "holy... for there is none beside [Him]." But it is necessary to be holy in order to belong to Him; this is why He has sanctified us for Himself. All our conduct should henceforth display this characteristic.

This great truth was brought to light at the Passover. The Israelites had been sheltered by the blood of the Lamb, which had been delivered up to judgment instead of themselves. The people appropriated this sacrifice by eating the lamb together with unleavened bread which typically represents Christ's holy humanity. From this moment on, they were enjoined to celebrate the Feast of Unleavened Bread for seven days. As He who had called them was holy, they also were to be holy in all their manner of behavior (1 Peter 1:15-16).

1 Samuel 2:3 is a warning to the wicked, typified by Peninnah. They are placed in the presence of God who knows all and who weighs men's actions.

In 1 Samuel 2:4-8, we find the reason for the discipline which had come upon the faithful. This was so that the character of grace might be brought to light by lifting them up to glory, and so that the character of righteousness might be brought to light in granting them vengeance on the wicked. This grace goes so far as to give seven children to the barren woman—the perfect number, which Hannah never reached (1 Sam. 2:21), for she had only six children. The promised blessings will not reach their fullness until the glory that is in store for the restored remnant of Israel.

1 Samuel 2:10 predicts, as we have seen, the coming of Messiah, the true King. God will exalt the horn of His Anointed. Direct association with Him is the power granted to Hannah in 1 Samuel 2:1: "My horn is lifted up in Jehovah."

Meditations on Ruth and 1 Samuel, 1 Samuel 2:12-36 (2:12-36)

The continuation of this chapter shows us the ruined state into which the priesthood had fallen. "Now the sons of Eli were sons of Belial: a terrible pronouncement, when it concerned those in Israel who were the closest to God! The sin of these men had two characteristics: they disregarded the rights of those who came to worship the Lord by confiscating their portions (1 Sam. 2:13-14); they disregarded the rights of

the Lord, laying profane hands on the Lord's portion, seeing to it that they themselves were served before He was, thus taking precedence over God Himself (1 Sam. 2:15-16). They made themselves fat with the Lord's offerings and caused men to abhor them.

Are not these the principles of any clerical system, whether pagan, Jewish, or Christian—no doubt, more or less coarse and despicable according to the case—but, in the final account, the principles of every class of men who appropriate to themselves authority or privileges over other men in religious matters? (Matt. 24:48-49). They pretend to have rights over simple believers, they see that they themselves are served at the expense of these same believers, and in their opinion even the priest's servant has more authority than the worshippers themselves. They usurp, in a measure, God's prerogatives and, in sum, cause Him to be despised, in order that they themselves may be honored instead of Him.¹ They did not know the Lord (1 Sam. 2:12); "There [was] no fear of God before their eyes" (Rom. 3:18). Without this fear, there is no hatred of evil. Is it surprising that they displayed the most shocking corruption? (1 Sam. 2:22).

In the midst of all this ruin, was the high priest's function at least being maintained? Alas no! Eli, godly Eli, lacked spiritual discernment. Nevertheless he showed himself to be capable of teaching God's mind and ways to young Samuel. Furthermore, he formed a righteous judgment of the evil, and his heart bled at the sight of the dissolute life of his sons. He did not hide it from them. Doubtless no one had expressed his disapproval as plainly as their father had: "Why do ye such things? for I hear of your evil deeds from all this people. No, my sons; for it is no good report that I hear: ye make Jehovah's people transgress. If one man sin against another, God will judge him; but if a man sin against Jehovah, who shall intreat for him?" (1 Sam. 2:23-25).

You ask, What was this man of God lacking? Just this: He judged the evil, but he did not separate himself from it. It is a sad and humiliating thing to state: this is the situation of the majority of God's children in Christendom. Their bonds, their relationships, their affections, and their customs to which they are more attached than to the Lord's glory prevent them from recognizing that one is liable for an evil which one judges but from which one does not separate oneself.

This is what the man of God is charged to declare to Eli. In no way was Eli personally following the ungodly and disorderly behavior of his sons, but nevertheless these solemn words are addressed to him: "Wherefore do ye trample upon My sacrifice and upon Mine oblation which I have commanded in My habitation? And thou honorest thy sons above Me, to make yourselves fat with the primest of all the oblations of Israel My people" (1 Sam. 2:29). "Thou honorest thy sons above Me!" Poor Eli! despite all his piety, there were men, his sons—his behavior proved this - whom he was honoring more than the Lord. God had been patient with him, but now he was about to reap the bitter fruit of the lack of holiness in his walk, for holiness is nothing other than separation from evil in view of God's service. The house of Eli, the descendant of Ithamar, was about to come to an end; it could not, in the condition in which it was found, "walk before [God] forever" (1 Sam. 2:30). "For them that honor Me I will honor, and they that despise Me shall be lightly esteemed" (1 Sam. 2:30). Did this righteous man, Eli, then despise the Lord? Yes, for "no servant can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and will love the other, or he will cleave to the one and despise the other" (Luke 16:13). And so a terrible judgment is pronounced on the house of Eli (1 Sam. 2:31-34). But God, the God of grace, takes no pleasure in judgment; He uses it in order to establish before Himself a priesthood once for all. He entrusts the priesthood to Eleazar's descendants: "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 walk before Mine Anointed continually" (1 Sam. 2:35). Simultaneously with the establishment of a priesthood according to His heart, the Lord makes known the change of dispensation which is to follow, but prophetically, this reaches far beyond the priesthood of the sons of Eleazar under David and under Solomon. The Anointed is Christ, and when He shall be on high as king and high priest according to the order of Melchizedek, on earth there will be, during the Millennium, a faithful priesthood of the family of Zadok whose functions will all tend to glorify the chosen king, the Man at God's right hand (Ezek. 44:13-15).

May we profit from Eli's example. We are living in times characterized by a certain activity in service. This activity often presses itself upon ourselves and others, for it has the appearance of great zeal for the Lord and for His work. It may even be accompanied by eminent gifts, but the gifts and activity are of little significance, if there is not the corresponding moral character. This moral character was grievously flawed in Eli's case; and without this character there can be no true service according to God.

Samuel offers a striking contrast to this state of things in every detail. In his case, we may trace the uninterrupted development of a life of holiness, despite more than one weakness, for perfection is found only in Christ.

When he was still only a small child, it is said of him, in chapter 1:28: "And he worshipped Jehovah there."² Just so, a "newborn babe" in Christ must immediately take his place as a worshipper before Him. In 1 Samuel 2:11 his second act is: "And the boy ministered to Jehovah in the presence of Eli the priest."

This attitude will characterize Samuel's entire life, but here he serves under Eli's direction, for being still very young, he needed to learn before becoming capable of teaching others.

In his third act (1 Sam. 2:18), Samuel does not serve before Eli, but rather more directly, "before Jehovah, a boy girded with a linen ephod," that is to say, in a priestly character, for the linen ephod was the special clothing of the priesthood (1 Sam. 2:18). Now that the priesthood had fallen, the Lord clothes this young Levite with it, provisionally, so to speak. The scene is the same later on in the case of David, who wore the ephod before the ark (2 Sam. 6:14). However, the Christians' situation is different: they are perpetually kings and priests before God the Father.

In his fourth act (1 Sam. 2:21), "the boy Samuel grew before Jehovah." The point here is his intimacy with God, without which service cannot be effective.

In his fifth act (1 Sam. 2:26), "the boy Samuel grew on, and was in favor both with Jehovah and also with men." I call this the intimacy of favor. The relationship of affection between Samuel and the Lord caused his walk to draw the attention of men, who took note of it as a walk pleasing to the Lord. Intimacy with God was reflected in the face of this young boy. This is what is told us of John the Baptist (Luke 1:80), and for how much greater reason, of Jesus: "Jesus advanced in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man" (Luke 2:52). All the power of our Christian testimony depends on a secret life spent in the Lord's presence.

May God grant us to resemble young Samuel in our conduct more than Eli, instructed as he was in the knowledge of the Lord's mind through his age and his public functions!

Meditations on Ruth and 1 Samuel, 1 Samuel 5-6:13 (6:1-13)

On this account the ark, "the glory of God," is now captive in His people's enemies' hands; but they cannot boast themselves in this. God is about to prove to them that nothing is more glorious than His glory humbled and captive. In this way, the humiliation of the cross glorified the Son of Man and God in Him (John 13:31).

In the hands of Gentiles God is about to lay claim to His holiness in judgment. This judgment will be complete, falling on false gods, on men, and on the land of the Philistines.

The ark, God's testimony, which cannot be associated with the people's unfaithfulness, can no more be submitted to idols. In fact, it can rest only where it is pleased to dwell in grace. God leaves Israel in judgment, but only in order to return to Israel on the entirely new footing of grace, as we shall see in what follows. This is not yet rest, for "the ark of [His] strength" would not enter into this rest until the reign of Solomon, type of the reign of Christ.

We have said that the glory of God cannot be submitted to idols. Indeed, set this humiliated glory beside Dagon, as the men of Ashdod did, and the world's idol will be overturned and broken. But this changes nothing about the worship that the world offers to its idol. It prefers its mutilated false gods, objects of disdain and derision, to the glory of God that makes it uncomfortable. "Therefore neither the priests of Dagon nor any that come into Dagon's house tread on the threshold of Dagon in Ashdod to this day" (1 Sam. 5:5). Their superstitious practice itself remains as a permanent testimony to the degradation of their idol, and also proves that its judgment could bring them to God.

The presence of the ark also draws judgment down on the men who had thought to prevail over God, as we have said. For the Philistines there is misery and death. Anguish, secret pain, a shameful sore, the result of divine wrath (cf. Deut. 28:27) fall on them—"the cry of the city went up to heaven." It went up to a heaven which was empty for them, while God was in their midst without their realizing it, judging them on earth. The result is, not that they turn to God, but that they send Him away, hoping to rid themselves of Him. At the same time we see here the egoism that characterizes the world. As long as Ashdod is undisturbed, what does it matter that Gath be tormented? As long as Gath is undisturbed, what does it matter that Ekron be tormented? They do not want to die, but that does not prevent death, accompanied by deadly dismay, from coming (1 Sam. 5:11-12).

The counsel of the princes of the Philistines to the people's question "What shall we do?" (1 Sam. 5:8) is therefore without result. The people then question the priests and the diviners "What shall we do with the ark of Jehovah?" (1 Sam. 6:2). They do not know what to do with the throne of God, the mercy-seat, the vessel of the mind of God! Animated by the same spirit, the Gadarenes prayed the Lord to withdraw from their borders. It makes them uncomfortable because it judges them. For them the question is how they shall send this disturbing guest away, not whether they ought to send it away. It does not occur to them to address themselves to Him, but their clergy must surely know the way of being rid of God. This clergy, at least, despite their extreme ignorance is candid. Acknowledging God's hand in these plagues, they try to determine how to "give glory to the God of Israel." They tell the people not to harden their hearts against Him; they recall His exploits in Egypt; and, finally, they suggest a means of knowing whether it is really He who has caused this great evil or whether the thing was only accidental. All this denotes conscience in the absence of the light brought by revealed truth. God always takes account of conscience, even of an obscured conscience, and gives a clear answer.

The men had been stricken with hemorrhoids, and the land itself devastated by mice (1 Sam. 6:5). Judgment was complete, as we have seen. At the counsel of the priests and diviners, they offer up golden hemorrhoids and golden mice as a trespass offering. A trespass offering—when they had made war against the people of God! when they had esteemed Dagon to be the master over the Sovereign God, the Creator of heaven and earth! An offering without the shedding of blood when atonement for sin was necessary!—But God takes account of the very least cry of conscience. He gives a clear answer, we have said, "The kine went straight forward on the way to Beth-shemesh; they went by the one high way, lowing as they went; and they turned not aside to the right hand or to the left" (1 Sam. 6:12). Such are the Lord's ways, always right! (Hos. 14:9).

God, the Judge, now in grace returns to His people. Only He is expecting them to acknowledge Him with humiliation.

Meditations on Ruth and 1 Samuel, 1 Samuel 6:13-7:1 (7:1)

God's public ways may be in judgment, as we have just seen, but His secret ways always bring Him back into the midst of His people in grace. The ark returned to Beth-shemesh without Israel feeling the need of it, or expressing any desire for it.

What a marvelous thing is this ark of the Lord! First of all, the ark is God's throne, His governmental presence in the midst of His people. Next, it is characterized by the mercy seat, symbol of Christ's work, the place of approach for a sinner received in grace and justified. Lastly, considered as a whole and considered in detail, it is the image of the person of Christ Himself. As the ark contained the tables of the law, so Christ said: "Thy law is within My heart." Like the ark of testimony, the Lord here on earth was the witness and the expression of all God's thoughts. As in the golden pot that contained the manna, in Him we find the union of perfect humanity—the bread come down from heaven in the wilderness—with divine glory. He was the mercy seat toward which the faces of the cherubim of glory were turned so that they might contemplate it, overshadowing it with their wings. Thus the ark was, above all, the image of Christ Himself, the Son of God and the Son of Man in a single person.

The people of Beth-shemesh “rejoiced to see [the ark]” (1 Sam. 6:13). How could there fail to be joy, when, after having lost sight of His perfections, one is once again found in the presence of Him whose presence brings security, salvation, the feeling of God’s presence, a moral beauty before which angels bow in worship? Thus, hardly had the ark come, but burnt offerings are offered once again and the Levites resume their service anew. The princes of the Philistines see this scene and return; a spectacle of this sort is interesting to them, but does not touch their heart and their conscience.

But the joy elicited by the contemplation of grace is not everything. It is combined with respect and fear, if one is aware of being in God’s presence. The God of grace judges according to the work of each one; the God of grace is holy. This is what the people of Beth-shemesh had forgotten. “They had looked into the ark of Jehovah” (1 Sam. 6:19). They abused the intimacy in which God desired, in grace, to present Himself to them. This is important to note. Because Jesus came down to us, our fleshly spirit is tempted to treat Him as a companion with whom we may do as we wish. Today people boast of familiarity with Jesus, and write books to show that spirituality consists in this. We do not have the right to call Him our Brother, but “He is not ashamed to call [us] brethren.” This shows the difference clearly. What will my feelings be if a person of high degree condescends to associate me, an insignificant person, with Himself and is not ashamed of me in public when he would have every right to despise me? If I understand this condescension, my feelings will be deep and humble thankfulness, attachment, limitless devotion, and infinite respect for Him who does not fear to compromise His dignity by lifting me up to His level.

This absence of respect and fear led the people of Beth-shemesh to look into the ark. There is little that better characterizes the spirit of the present time than this profane spirit. Men think themselves capable of distinguishing that which is proper to the human nature and that which is proper to the divine nature of the Savior and to fathom this mystery. This amounts to the same thing as looking into the ark which contained a secret known to God alone, for, “no one knows the Son but the Father.” This attitude inevitably leads to lowering His humanity to the level of our sinful humanity. Men discuss the child Jesus’s education, the schools available to Him for learning the Scriptures, His scientific education and opinions, more or less conformed to those of His time, the reality of His temptation and His capacity to sin, and so forth. Remember, you profane Christians, that the Lord struck the people of Bethshemesh. If you are not concerned about the Lord’s glory, God will show His concern for it and will not allow anyone to touch His ark with impunity. Soon, instead of the blessings of His presence, you will have to learn under His blows of judgment that He cannot tolerate anyone who fails to remove his shoes in order to approach Him.

The men of Beth-shemesh said: “Who is able to stand before Jehovah, this holy God?” (1 Sam. 6:20). To their own detriment they knew this holiness which they had despised. Alas! instead of humbling themselves, they had only the thought, previously formulated by the Philistines, of removing this disturbing guest far from themselves: “To whom shall He go up from us?” “Come down,” they say to the inhabitants of Kirjath-jearim, “fetch it up to you” (1 Sam. 6:21); thus they lose all the blessings connected with the Lord’s presence. Others profit and understand that someone must be sanctified to keep watch over the ark: “The men of Kirjath-jearim... hallowed Eleazar, [Abinadab’s] son, to keep the ark of the Lord” (1 Sam. 7:1). This trust was faithfully kept in the “fields of the wood” (Psa. 132:6). May we be faithful keepers of the ark of our God!

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