

2 Samuel 2:11-36

'Hope of the Hopeless'

Hope for the future

I want to begin today's talk by letting you into my mind and feelings a bit.

I'm going to do that because I presume that you are like me.

In other words, I assume that some of the things that go on inside me also go on inside you too.

Now the point is that I often find myself thinking about the future.

This happens at all sorts of levels.

When I was younger I had hopes for the future.

I hoped to be successful in my chosen field of endeavour.

I hoped to find a good woman that I could spend my life with.

And as time went on my hopes changed shape.

With the coming of marriage and children I hoped for children that were healthy, that loved Jesus, and that would grow up to be good human beings.

I hoped that the world they grew up in would be in better shape than it looked like it might be.

And now I hope that they will continue in the faith, that they will find work, that they will meet good women and be good Christian men, husbands, and fathers.

And I hope that as we get older we might enjoy good health, good friendships, and good opportunities to continue in ministry.

I hope that this church that we have founded and you its people might grow in faith and knowledge and that we might more effectively reach people for Christ.

These are the very tangible hopes.

They are generally affected by the stages of life that I have been through.

However, there have been other hopes that have remained constant.

And these hopes have to do with my own spiritual state.

You see, I think that at every stage of my life as God's person I have found myself looking at the promises of God and then back to the reality of life and I have found myself desperately hoping for something better.

Let me explain what I mean.

You see, when I read the Bible I find within its pages a picture of the godly person.

I find that such a person is someone who always has the best interests of others in mind.

Who loves others as they love themselves.

Who has nothing to do with sexual immorality, impurity, debauchery, idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of anger, selfish ambition, dissensions, envy, greed, drunkenness and the like.

Who is characterised by love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self control.

Who doesn't let any unwholesome word come out of their mouths, but only those things which are helpful for building others up, according to their needs

The godly person is someone who has got rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice.

Instead of these, such a person is kind and compassionate, forgiving others just as they have been forgiven in Christ.

They treat each other with respect and as equals in Christ.

Their minds dwell on the things that are true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent and praiseworthy.

They are keen to learn from God and practice what they learn.

They live in prayerful dependence upon God.

They are faithful and obedient.

It is this sort of person that I want and hope to be.

But let me tell you about reality.

You see, in the real world in which I live, I am not like this ideal godly person.

I do not always have the best interests of others in mind.

Although I don't have difficulty with all of the 'lusts of the flesh' I listed above, I do have problems with some.

The fruit of the Spirit are not always the things that characterise my relationship with God and others.

The words that issue from my mouth are certainly not always gracious, seasoned as it were with salt.

I have spoken words that have destroyed rather than built up.

I get angry with my wife and children, with my workmates, and with other members of church.

Forgiveness and compassion are not always high on my agenda.

Oh, I do have moments when I do the sorts of things that I should do as a Christian, but they are far from as often as I would like

I am not at all as consistent as I would like to be.

I know the ideal.

I hope to be like the ideal.

But it doesn't always work out that way.

More often than not sin dominates me and seems to overtake me.

And I cry out to God

What can I do?

What hope have I got?

Can reality ever meet the ideal?

Can life ever be as it should be?

Can I ever be rescued from the bind that I find myself in?

Will sin, failure and human frailty always be my master?

Will the good purposes of God for me ever win out over the reality that is sinful me?

And alongside this, will the good and greater purposes of God for his world every win out over the reality that we find in our world?

Well, let me say that if you have my hopes for yourself and for the world then I think that the books of 1 and 2 Samuel come to our rescue.

You see, they deal with people like you and me and they ask these sorts of questions.

And they particularly do it in these first few chapters and also in the last few chapters of 2 Samuel.

So let's see what we can find today.

Let's turn to 1 Samuel 2:11-36.

An overview of the story

Remembering 1 Samuel 1:1-2:10

First, let's get an overview of the story.

You will remember the background.

We started the book of 1 Samuel by hearing the story of Hannah.

She was barren and persecuted.

One day she decided that she would take a stand and called out to God to help her and to give her a child.

She told God that if he did this, she would dedicate the child to him for a lifetime of service.

Then we heard how God heard her prayer and granted her the son, Samuel.

Last week we looked at the song she sang when she brought Samuel up to the temple to give him over to God's service under Eli the priest.

We listened to her theological reflections on God and what he had done.

Well, this week we hear two parallel stories.

Samuel: The son of Hannah

On the one hand, we hear interspersed references to Samuel's growth.

In verse 11 we are told that Samuel was left behind at Shiloh and ministered before the Lord under Eli.

In verses 18 to 21 we start with Samuel ministering before the Lord.

We are then told of some of the ongoing family life between Hannah, Elkanah, and Samuel and of their ongoing relationship with God and his representative – Eli.

Verse 21 concludes by telling us that Samuel grew up in the presence of the Lord.

Then, in verse 26 we are told that Samuel grew in stature and favour with the Lord and with people.

Finally, in 1 Samuel 3:1 we are again told that Samuel ministered before the Lord under Eli.

Throughout the story, we therefore have references to Samuel.

The references to him or his family are always positive.

And he is always linked with God.

And it is clear that he is looked upon with favour by God.

But it is also clear that he is looked upon with favour by people as well.

The sons of Eli

This is one side of the story.

The other side is not so happy.

For the other side tells the story of other young men and another family.

And the introduction to them sums up their story.

Take a look at it in verse 12.

Now I should tell you that a literal translation would read something like this:

The sons of Eli were sons of Belial; they did not know the Lord.

Let me repeat that:

The sons of Eli were sons of Belial; they did not know the Lord.

Do you see what the writers is trying to tell you right at the beginning.

The term 'sons of Belial' is another way of saying 'worthless' or 'wicked' or 'good for nothing'.

However, it is probably best to translate it literally here because it tells us an important thing about these boys.

What it is saying is that they are physically the sons of Eli.

However, they are psychologically and morally the sons of Belial.

Their affections and disposition lies more with wickedness and worthlessness than with their father, Eli.

And the second half of the verse tells us that they did not know the Lord.

In other words, they were priests by inheritance.

They exercised priesthood in Israel.

But they did not know the Lord.

They had no regard for God or his ways.

They were sons of Belial, not sons of God.

Just as they had no regard for Eli's paternal authority so also they had not regard for the Lord's authority.

So, there is the introduction to them.

It's not a good start and things don't get any better as the story progresses.

Their degradation grows before God and the people as the writer tells us that Samuel grows in stature and favour with God and the people.

Verses 13 to 17 tell us that they were gluttons and bullies.

And by their actions, they defrauded the people of God and they treated the Lord's offering with contempt.

Our next introduction to these men comes in verses 22-25.

Again, the first verse holds the clue to understanding what is going on.

We are told that Eli was old.

The implication is that his sons are now in the position where they are increasingly dominating the temple life and where they will inherit Eli's mantle.

And we are told that Eli hears what is going on.

And what he hears is an additional item.

Not only are the boys guilty of gluttony and bullying and treating the Lord's offering with contempt.

They now have another sin to add – they are sleeping with women who have given themselves to service of God at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting.

And so, in verse 23, Eli confronts them.

The narrator of the story has told us how Eli has heard.

But there is no reference to the sons hearing.

There is no reference to a response.

In fact, verse 25 is clear that they did not listen to their father's rebuke.

There is nothing like a mumbled apology.

They don't attempt to concoct an excuse.

They don't even offer to amend their ways.

They really are sons of Belial.

And Eli's warning is clear – such high handed sin against God will leave his sons high and dry and without hope.

The third incident involving Eli's family comes in verses 27 to 36.

We are told of a man of God coming to Eli.

The speech here is very similar in thrust and length to the speech in 2 Samuel 12 where Nathan the prophet comes to David after his adultery with Bathsheba.

It is potent and full of judgment.

The charges are clear.

In verses 27 and 28 God makes clear that there has been a long history of grace and kindness toward Eli and his family.

In verse 29 God delivers his accusation.

Eli is responsible for what has happened.

The plural 'yourselves' indicates that he had participated in the gluttony of his sons.

But he had done worse things.

He had scorned God's sacrifices and offerings as prescribed.

The word for 'scorned' that is used here literally means 'kicked at'.

It is an act of contempt or defiance.

And in doing such things, Eli had honoured his sons more than he had honoured God.

Then, in verses 30ff, God announces the judgment.

In effect, he promises the decimation of Eli's family and the end of their effective ministry.

He also gives a sign that Eli can see that will testify how serious and resolute God is about his judgment.

Finally, there is a deep irony.

As Eli and his sons had scorned the priesthood they had been given, it will be taken away from them and given to someone more fitting.

Their gluttony and brutality over food will end up with them begging for food and sustenance.

Now as it turned out, these prophecies took place in the history of Israel.

Within a few chapters Hophni and Phinehas are dead.

And in 1 Kings 2:26ff the last of Eli's line is replaced by Zadok and his line.

And finally, the true High Priest, Jesus Christ replaced all other human priests as God's faithful priest who does what is in accord with God's heart and mind.

Two levels of activity

Well, there is an overview of the story.

Now let's turn and observe some larger themes and see what we can make of them.

Human

The first thing I want to do is to reflect on the human activity that we have seen in the whole of the first two chapters.

First, we have Elkanah's family.

There is Elkanah himself, obviously a deeply religious man and one who wants to do the best by his family.

Then there is Peninnah, who is a persecutor of the disadvantaged Hannah.

And Hannah herself is the heroine of the story.

The story tells us that she stands and chooses to depend upon God.

She then fulfils her vows and acts as a godly mother toward her dedicated son.

And lastly there is Samuel.

We are not told much about his actions.

All that we are told is that God is at work through him and that he ministers with God's favour and the people's favour.

The second family we are told about is Eli's family.

The sons are a bunch of rogues, sons of Belial, worthless fellows.

They sin with a high hand and give no place to God or any other authority figure.

Eli appears as a somewhat directionless man.

He is mostly led by others rather than leading himself, whether it be Hannah or his sons.

He comes across as a bad father and an unworthy priest.

So, there we have it, a bunch of humans, much like any bunch of humans anywhere in the world.

There are the good among them and there are the bad.

But all in all, they are very human and act with all the normal human motives.

Divine

Now let's turn to God's activity.

It is clear that he is active in this story.

We see it in 1 Samuel 1:5 where we are told that it was God who had closed the womb of Hannah.

We 1 Samuel 2:25 where we are told that the sons of Eli did not listen to their father's rebuke 'for it was the Lord's will to put them to death'.

We are told of Samuel's growth with no human responsible but he is constantly linked with the Lord and so we assume that it is at God's institution.

And lastly, we see God taking decisive action in sending a man of God to Eli and his household.

Now, as you take a look at these three incidents, what do you see in common?

What is it that God is about in these actions?

It is clear, isn't it, that God has a program and a purpose.

He clearly wants Samuel in place – the barrenness of Hannah and the hardheartedness of Eli's sons has this object in mind.

Hannah's poem says that he is clearly heading towards a place where a godly king will be in place.

But it is clear from the prophecy of the man of God that God also wants a godly priest in place.

And this same godly priest will also be a godly prophet.

So, here is the balance of these two chapters.

Here is God, active in history, pushing towards his larger purposes for his people and in his world.

And he works towards those purposes through ordinary people in ordinary families.

They are people who make choices and are clearly responsible for their actions.

It might be a Hannah who decides that she will stand up and go and pray.

Or it might be an Eli who fails to be a good parent.

Or it might be Eli's good for nothing sons who culpably shake their fists at God and his authority over them.

Not matter which it is, God is at work.

He is accomplishing his purposes.

Slowly, subtly, through humans frailty and sin, he will push on towards his goal.

And at the end he will have arrive where he is heading, despite humans and through humans.

Implications

For the books of Samuel

You can see the implications, can't you?

First, there are implications for the books of Samuel.

You see, my own view is that these stories are deliberately placed here to make a fundamental theological point.

The book of Judges is a book where on the outside things looked out of control.

In reality, they were not out of control – God was solidly at work, ruling his people.

The books of 1 and 2 Samuel will describe how the people of God attempt to force some control on their political situation.

They will assert themselves by requesting a king.

This will be a very high-handed act.

It will amount to a rejection of the kingship of God.

Nevertheless, God will overrule.

Despite the machinations of his people, he will establish a king.

In other words, he will do what he is doing here.

He will work in and through and over human action to accomplish his purposes.

And because of this, humans can have hope.

The clear, purposive, concrete action of God is a place to hang our hats.

It is where the people of God can find security.

It doesn't matter whether it is as they wait for a king of God's choice in 1 and 2 Samuel.

Or whether they wait for the ultimate faithful high priest, prophet, and king who is Jesus Christ.

Or whether they wait for God to fulfil his great purposes in his world and bring in a new heaven and a new earth.

He is the sovereign God of all history.

He will do it.

What can we say?

- If we rely on humans then we can expect...

So, let's go back to where we started.

What does this passage have to say to me on a personal level as I long for God's hope for me – sanctification?

What can I learn from this?

Well, this passage instructs me that if we rely on humans then there are a number of things we can expect.

We can expect the occasional good and godly act.

But the Bible is clear that generally, human nature is sinful.

And the general expectation that we should have is that humans left on their own will find expertise in sinfulness.

And if I am left on my own, I will follow suit.

So, if we rely on humans...

If we rely on me...

Then we will be faced with overwhelming hopelessness.

We will be in desperate straights.

The world will be a worse place.

And I will certainly not grow in godliness.

- If we rely on God then we can expect...

But what about the alternative?

What can we expect if we rely on God?

Well, again, we will see the sorts of things that happen in this passage.

We will sometimes see God act decisively and in a palpably evident way.

But we will also sometimes not see him act.

He will be at work, moving towards his great purposes.

And his activity will often result in things we don't understand.

But we will know that he is working towards his good purposes.

We know that they are good because we have seen his work in Christ.

We know that they are good because we know he loves us.

And so we will be filled with hope.

Though we don't understand everything that occurs, we will know that God has everything under his control.

The world will be as he has ordained it to be.

There will be a new heaven and a new earth where righteousness dwells.

There will be a sanctified Andrew and Heather and all who have hoped in his appearance.

And hope will overtake the reality I often feel now.

Hope will become reality.

This is the God of 1 and 2 Samuel.

This is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

This is our God and Father – the hope of the world.

What can we do?

So, what can we do as we live in this fallen world?

Well, the first tangible thing we can do is to be people of faith who look towards Jesus in whom all the promises of God have their 'Yes' and 'Amen'.

In other words, we can live like all the great saints of old – believing and trusting that God is at work and that he will fulfil his purposes through Christ.

But we can also act on our faith.

We can take the sort of small actions that Hannah does.

We can choose to stand and act in prayerful dependence upon our God who has our best interests in mind.

We can choose to say not to acts and ways of life that have no place among God's people.

We can choose to do what Eli and his sons did not do.

We can choose to repent of wrong and be aggressively opposed to sin.

And we can encourage each other day by day to be people of hope and people of action.