

Priests: Eli: 1 Samuel 1-4

Leader's reflection

What the Judges and Priests of this time do have in common is that they are taking the place of leadership in society before the institution of the Monarchy. The Priests role was, however, significantly different to that of the Judge, although there was some crossover. The Priests were to ensure that proper and acceptable worship of God took place, while the Judge was there to remind people that God was there to look after them. In this way the Priest's role was significantly easier while a Judge was ruling than it was during the time of occupation and oppression.

Eli's role in the life of Israel is significant, in that he is the last priest to live before the time of the Kings. Samuel oversaw the beginning of the Monarchy, but Eli was the last priest with no idea that the monarchy would follow. His story is one of paradoxes. It is one of tragedy and hope, one in which the ways of God are laid out before him, and the future is assured at the same time that his own line is destroyed. He is a man of wisdom and foolishness; he is able to discern when God is speaking to Samuel, yet is unable to curb the excesses of his own sons. He is a very human man of God.

Eli emerges near the start of 1 Samuel sitting by the doorpost of the tabernacle. Hannah, a woman who has been unable to conceive comes to the tabernacle and, being deeply upset because of her lack of children, prays in front of the tabernacle. She prays and although she is praying silently, her lips are moving. Eli mistakes her prayers for drunkenness and scolds her, telling her to give up her drink. Hannah replies with surprising honesty that she is not drunk but is praying, 'from the depth of her anguish and resentment.' Her honesty is repaid with blessing, as Eli blesses her and asks that, "may the God of Israel grant the petition you have asked of Him."

And He does, Hannah returns home and is soon pregnant and gives birth to a son who she names Samuel, which means *heard by God*. Hannah is keen to repay God for the blessing she has given him, and so when she is able she returns to the temple and



offers Samuel in service as a Nazirite. He serves in the temple and learns the ways of the Priest.

By contrast Eli's sons are shown to be different altogether. They have no regard for the Lord or for the sacrifices given. They are described as taking meat from the sacrifice while the ceremony is still ongoing. The whole people would have suffered for this, as there was no way for them to make sacrifices for their sins.

Eli is here displayed as an ineffectual father. In Samuel though, Eli raises a boy whose heart and passion is for God, and who lives to ensure that proper worship of Him takes place. Eli's story ends in tragedy, when his sons go out with the army to battle to oversee the Ark. During the battle the Philistines overrun the Ark and capture it, and Eli's sons are killed. When he hears of this, Eli falls in shock and dies.

The capture of the Ark is taken as a sign that the people are entering another time of punishment, that they have abandoned worship of the Lord, and have taken on the gods of their neighbours again. But soon Samuel will emerge to lead them to a time of rightness with God

Aim

To explore how our attitudes and actions have an impact on the way others see God

Main points to cover

1. Eli was able to see what God was doing in the world, but wasn't always able to follow God's commands to him.
2. Eli's sons did not care for anyone but themselves, and because of them others suffered.
3. If Eli's sons had listened to Eli as Samuel did, things could have looked very different for them.

Focus On

The impact the our attitudes and actions can have on the way others see God



Activity ideas

Summarising the story: Eli and his sons are part of one inseparable story, and the way God approaches them is linked together. To cover all four chapters over which this story takes place would be too much, so it will be necessary to summarise the story for the young people during the session. The key points that need covering are: 1. Eli was a priest who had served in the tabernacle faithfully for years. 2. His sons were also priests in the tabernacle. 3. While Eli took his responsibilities seriously his sons were just out to get whatever they could out of being a priest. They were more concerned with their own comfort than they were helping people to make themselves right with God. 4. God was angry with Eli and his sons, because Eli had not taught his sons to be good priests, and the sons were damaging people's view of God.

What did the Priests do? To properly understand why Eli's sons' actions were seen so negatively we need to understand the role of the priests at the time. Play a true or false game with the young people getting them to sort the following statements. All of the following are true, you will need to invent some false ones.

- Priests were responsible for helping the people to make sacrifices, and through doing that make themselves right with God again.
- Priests were allowed to take a portion of the sacrifices as part of their living allowances, but only after the ceremony for giving the sacrifice had taken place.
- The priests were responsible for making sure all the people were worshipping God correctly by setting an example of what should be done.
- Being a priest was a lifelong inherited position.

So what was so bad about what the sons did? The actions of the sons in neglecting their responsibilities would have meant that the whole of the nation suffered in its relationship with God. People weren't able to make their sacrifices, they weren't able to worship properly. But most importantly, people's view of God would have been changed because of the actions of the Priests. They were supposed to show the people how to worship, and were also supposed to be in image of who God was. Through their actions the whole of Israel suffered, and they were held responsible for it. Have the young people chat about the image of God that we show to the world, and whether we can shape people's view of God positively or negatively. Explain that it is with God's help that we can show the world who he truly is, and we need to ask for his help in doing that. Spend some time praying over that with the young people.

Priests: Samuel: 1 Samuel 3

Leader's reflection

Note: During the next set of teaching on the OT Samuel will appear prominently. This is simply an introduction to him to set him in his place at the end of the time of chaos associated with the Judges.

Samuel has already featured somewhat in the story of Eli, and through Samuel God gives hope to the line of Priests which has been severed because of the lack of care, attention, respect and reverence that Eli's sons gave to their position of responsibility.

After being left at the tabernacle to learn the trade of a priest, Samuel is described in glowing terms as, '[growing] in stature and in favour with the Lord and with men.' (1 Samuel 2:21). This line will be echoed later in the Bible to describe the way that Jesus grew, giving us some idea of the impact those words should have.

In 1 Samuel 3 we see Samuel's first experience of hearing the word of God. The first verse gives us an idea for the reason Samuel would have been confused by this, 'In those days the word of the Lord was rare, and prophetic visions were not widespread.' This is not a simple statement, and is a reminder of the fact that the people are not searching for or listening to God, and that the people have largely turned their backs on God. They are not who they should have been.

Samuel is lying in one of the holiest places in the world, near the Ark of the Covenant in the Tabernacle. The call to Samuel at first causes confusion, with him twice mistaking the call as the call of Eli for assistance from another room. Even Eli, who has served the Lord faithfully all his life, takes time to realise that it is God calling to Samuel. But he realises eventually and gives Samuel the words to say.



In this there is an important lesson. Samuel, who will become great, who will lead the people back to God and will preach and teach Kings the way of God, still needs guidance.

He needs to be taught to recognise where and when God is at work, so that he can join in with God’s work on earth.

And so it is that he returns to his place for the third time, and waits. And when God calls, his response is, ‘Speak, for your servant is listening’. God speaks to him again, giving him a vision of what is going to take place. Eli’s family are going to be punished because they have stamped with scorn on the privilege that was given to them. They have treated their calling with contempt and taken advantage of those who have come to make themselves right with God through sacrifices.

Samuel is understandably scared to tell Eli what God has told him. He doesn’t want to hurt the man who has taken him in, who has given him the opportunity to serve the Lord and people, who has treated him with kindness. But Eli wants to know what God has said to Samuel, and instructs him tell him everything, withholding nothing, and so Samuel does. Eli’s response is a lesson for all of us in accepting the wisdom of God, and understanding that God sees more clearly than we do. Instead of raging against what God has said, he accepts it.

1 Samuel 3 ends with Samuel being recognised across Israel as a prophet of God, whom God spoke through and brought His word to the people.

Aim To explore how God calls each of us, but it isn’t always clear it is God

Main points to cover

1. God calls but sometimes it takes us time to recognise His voice.
2. God calls young and old, we all have a part to play in His work.
3. We need help sometimes to know that it is God speaking to us.

Focus On Samuel needed help to understand that God was calling him



Activity ideas

Does God still speak today? Start by asking the young people if they think that God speaks to people today. Why or why not do they think that? Have them read through the story of Samuel's calling and ask them if they think that God still calls people like that. Remind them of the story of Deborah from a couple of weeks ago and remind them that Deborah was called by God, but in a very different way. Which of these do they think is more like how God calls people today? Try and find examples of both of these ways that God has called people in the modern world.

How do we know if it is God? Split the young people into groups and ask them if they can work out how we can try and think about whether what we are hearing or feeling is from God. Are there any foolproof ways we can know it is God calling to us rather than what we want to think? Explain that there are some ways we can start to think about it. If God is calling to us it will: always be for our good, always be for the good of others; always be in line with what the Bible tells us about God. It will never be; to harm ourselves or others and will never break us down. God loves us and wants us to more and more become the people He called us to be, and when He calls us it will be to do that.

Listening to God. Choose a chilled out worship song to play. Tell the young people to find a space in the room where they won't be distracted by others, and where they can get comfortable. Give them each a piece of paper and a pen or pencil and tell them that you are going to spend a bit of time listening to God. We spend a lot of time when we pray asking God for things and talking to Him, but we also need to spend time listening to Him. Play the song and tell the young people that if they want they can write down what they are thinking or feeling, or to draw something that comes to mind while they are listening. Once the song finishes spend some time talking about what the young people felt or heard. Explain that sometimes God can be difficult to hear, sometimes we don't hear, and sometimes He just wants to remind us of things we already know. Whether the young people have anything to share or not, remind them that God knows them and loves them, and encourage them to find some time to listen to God in the week ahead.