

1 SAMUEL

THE COMING KING

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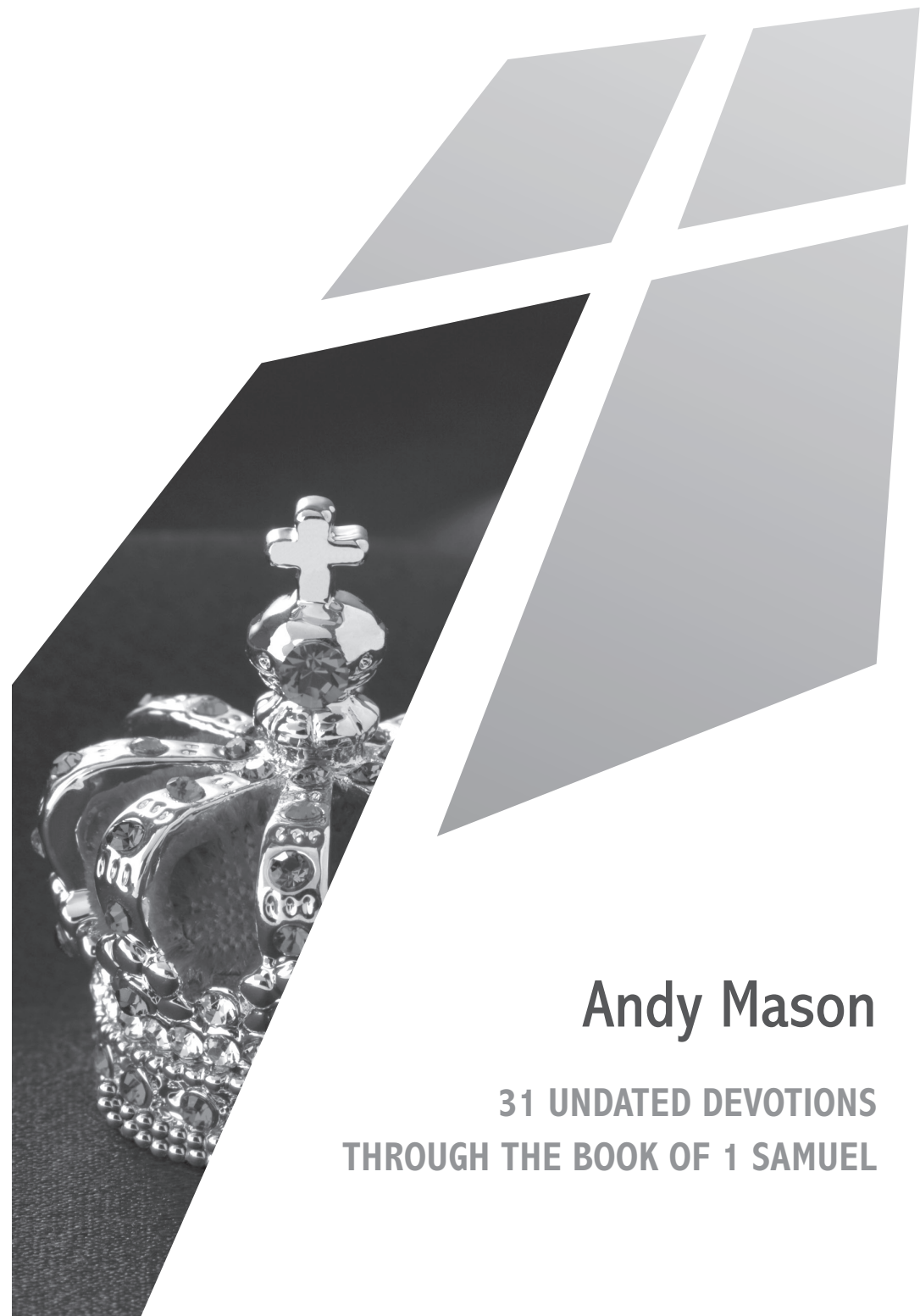
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31 UNDATED DEVOTIONS THROUGH THE BOOK OF 1 SAMUEL

There have always been seasons when the people of God have seemed to be on their last legs – and have needed significant spiritual revival to keep going. 1 Samuel 1 takes place at such a time in Israel. This is a time of spiritual decay. Even worse, there don't seem to be any good spiritual leaders who are able to bring about change. There's no king (Judg. 21:25) to rally the people, and the priests aren't living as godly role models (1 Sam. 2:12).

However, despite this pervasive negative spiritual atmosphere, God is still at work to bring change. The change doesn't come, though, through the spiritual hierarchy of Eli the priest and his family, but through the simple and desperate prayer of a bullied and barren woman, Hannah. This is God's surprise in the story. Her 'bitterness of soul' (v. 10) in childlessness leads her not to unbelief but to prayer (v. 11). For Hannah, anxiety and disappointment don't serve as barriers to prayer but, on the contrary, they become her spiritual rocket fuel!

This prayer has a greater significance, though. It will, remarkably, be the means by which God raises up a new leader, Samuel (v. 20), who will bring the much-needed spiritual change to Israel. We should be encouraged by this

to see our prayers in light of God's big global plans and purposes. Forgotten, harassed and unimportant people on their knees in prayer are more powerful than princes and priests.

As she promised (v. 11), Hannah, with supreme faith, dedicates the precious answer to her prayer, her only son, to the Lord (vv. 24–28). She teaches us that we really can dare to give over the most valuable things in our lives to the Lord, even when they've been given to us miraculously! We have even better reasons to do so than Hannah because we've experienced our God giving up and dedicating his own precious Son for us. Hannah gave her son up to temple service, but the Father gave up his Son to the cross for our sake.

REFLECTION

1. Why is prayer so powerful?

2. Is there anything in your life that you're refusing to give away to the Lord for his use? How does the Father's offering up of his Son change your heart on this?

Things don't always go as you expect. Whether it's national elections, or the mundane details of our lives, we're constantly caught off guard and humbled by the events of life. 1 Samuel comes back to this idea a lot, as we see again and again that fortunes are reversed by the Lord's plans. The powerful lose their power. The arrogant are exposed. The underdog becomes top dog. The weak overcome the strong. 1 Samuel is full of the rise of the humble and the fall of the proud, all guided by the sovereign hand of a God who does the unexpected.

Hannah's prayer of praise in these verses is a reminder and insight into how fortunes are reversed. She knows that it is only through the Lord that her own barrenness had been overcome (v. 1). She had been harassed and bullied, but has now been raised up by the Lord through the birth of Samuel (v. 5). This is our wonderful God. As Hannah says in verse 2, 'there is no-one besides you'. Here we have solid ground in the middle of shifting fortunes: 'there is no Rock like our God'.

Even more striking, Hannah's mini experience of salvation becomes, in the prayer, a picture of a much bigger salvation for God's people. The birth of Samuel will indeed bring big changes.

Whole armies will be overcome (v. 4) and hungry multitudes will be fed (v. 5). A new justice will come as rich oppressors lose their power and the oppressed are saved (vv. 6–8, 10). In other words, Hannah's answered prayer isn't just for her, but for the people. The prayer is even for us, because it looks forward to the birth of a greater baby who will reverse the fortunes of many (Luke 1:46–55). A strong and exalted king is coming (v. 10) to save the people.

REFLECTION

- 1. Why do you think the Lord has a habit of reversing the fortunes of the proud and the weak? What's his purpose in that?*
- 2. What in this prayer encourages you to trust the Lord more when you pray to him?*

The religious and spiritual labels that spiritual leaders use can be very misleading. Whether it's 'Reverend', 'Pastor' or 'Bishop', labels don't, in and of themselves, tell you about the faith or righteousness of those leaders.

However, no-one could be deceived about the spiritual leaders in this chapter. Here we find a description of the elite spiritual leadership in Israel, who ministered at the well-known spiritual centre of Shiloh. First of all, we meet the 'sons of Eli', who prove to be greedy hypocrites, stealing food from the Lord's sacrifices (vv. 13–16) and sleeping around with their co-workers (v. 22). Their behaviour was a scandal even to the common people (vv. 16, 23). As a result, they stood condemned before the Lord (vv. 17, 25, 34). The Lord doesn't look at labels, but the reality of our lives.

Then we meet, Eli, their father. He knew their behaviour was a scandal, and knew that they were on a collision course with the Lord (vv. 23–25). Yet, Eli hadn't dismissed his sons, and his action to stop them proved to be weak and ineffective. The corruption of these leaders, then, isn't just about blatant immorality, but also about the failure of others to discipline and properly correct the immorality (v. 29; 3:13). It's

not just the sons who are at fault, but also Eli, who doesn't deal with their behaviour (see the prophecy of coming judgment in verses 27–36). Failure on the part of spiritual leaders to deal with blatant sin makes them, in part, guilty for that sin.

Amidst the evil, though, the Lord is at work (see verses 18–19, 26). He's raising Samuel up as a true priest and deliverer for the people (v. 35). There are fierce warnings and judgments in this chapter, but God's grace is also at work to revive his messed-up people. Where sin had increased, grace increased all the more.

REFLECTION

- 1. Why does spiritual leadership become corrupt? What can we do to stop it?*
- 2. How can we be certain that God's people will never be overwhelmed by the sins of any leaders?*

We've already seen the spiritual mess of God's people in these opening chapters of 1 Samuel. There's a need for revival and good spiritual leadership to resolve the mess. But, above all, what God's people really need is to recover the word of the Lord. In verse 1 we read that 'the word of the LORD was rare' at the time. It wasn't quite a famine of the word (cf. Amos 8:11), but it was a lack of the word. The people were getting by with the bare minimum of spiritual sustenance. The good news now, though, is that the word is about to come afresh.

The surprise in this story, though, is the one to whom the word comes. It isn't the experienced priest, Eli, who receives the word, but the boy apprentice, Samuel. Again, we see God's way of reversing fortunes. Eli has high status, but is an unfaithful priest. He is now brought down, while Samuel, inexperienced and with no special lineage, is raised up. God our Father is an impartial Judge (1 Pet. 1:17) and no respecter of human privilege or background. Samuel has become God's prophet bringing God's word (v. 8). The word is spoken through Samuel first to Eli (vv. 15–18), and then to the people (3:20 – 4:1). A new era has dawned as God's word becomes available again.

We can be thankful today that we don't have to wait for a prophet to come to bring us God's word, but we have the incredible privilege of having God's complete written word completely available to us. Further, we don't, through the Bible, have access to only one great prophet, but we can listen to many prophets and apostles. In fact, we have access to the Son of God himself, who has brought us God's final word (Heb. 1:1–2). Let's value that word today!

REFLECTION

- 1. What's so bad about not having access to God's word? What happens as a result?*
- 2. How can you take advantage of the privileged access to God's word that you have today?*

The Bible's message is fundamentally good news, but there's no hiding the fact that this passage, from start to finish, is full of shocking bad news. This is one very dark day in the history of God's people, as the earlier prophecy of judgment given to Eli is now fulfilled (2:27–34).

The first shock is national (vv. 1–11): Israel experiences a shocking defeat at the hands of the Philistines. In desperate straits, they had turned to the power of the ark of God to save them, but God will not be used as a lucky charm. They receive precious little help from the ark as God gives them over to judgment for their sins. The Philistines overwhelm them (v. 10) and they're utterly humiliated as the ark, the throne of God, is itself captured (v. 11).

The second shock is personal (vv. 12–18): Eli receives a terrible emotional blow as he hears of the death of his two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, in battle (vv. 16–17). The tragedy continues as Eli, upon also hearing of the loss of the ark, literally falls over with shock and breaks his neck. The corrupt spiritual leaders of Israel are finally wiped out in judgment.

The last shock has to do with the spiritual legacy of this terrible day (vv. 19–22). The wife of Phinehas sadly dies in child birth. Though her son survives, he becomes the spiritual epitaph for this day: as Phineas's wife is dying, she names him 'Ichabod', meaning 'no glory'. In other words, God's powerful glory and presence, symbolised by the ark of God, has now left his people. The judgment is complete.

The bad news in this story is a warning for us. God isn't fooled by spirituality, church activity or the use of religious rituals. Without true faith and repentance in our lives, we're walking on thin ice. False religion, whatever its position and influence, is under judgment. Let's not follow others into that judgment.

REFLECTION

- 1. Why do we need to hear the shocking bad news in this story?*
- 2. What kind of 'arks' might we trust in today to get us out of difficult situations? Where will that lead us?*