

23. Defining a Reversal of Circumstances (Ruth; 1 Samuel 1–3)

The story of Hannah and her son Samuel forms a classic instance of a reversal of circumstances from a seeming generational covenant curse of childlessness, persecution by a prolific rival, and deep personal agony to a most blessed and joyful condition that included giving birth to one of Israel's greatest prophets. On the other hand, the story of the Levite priest Eli and his family is a classic example of a reversal of circumstances in the opposite direction as they degenerate from being blessed of God to being cursed for permitting carnality and corruption to run rampant without correction. Both reversals of circumstances typify end-time phenomena.

We observe Hannah's plight as she makes a deal with the Lord that if he will give her a son she will pledge him to God as a Nazirite—a person whose life is consecrated to God as described in Numbers 6:1–8: “She was in bitterness of soul, and prayed unto the Lord, and wept sore. And she vowed a vow, and said, O Lord of hosts, if thou wilt indeed look on the affliction of thine handmaid, and remember me, and not forget thine handmaid, but wilt give unto thine handmaid a man child, then I will give him unto the Lord all the days of his life, and there shall no razor come upon his head” (1 Samuel 1:10–11).

After the Lord opened her womb, she brought her son to live with Eli when she had weaned him. There, in Shiloh, where the Ark of the Covenant rested, “Samuel ministered before the Lord, being a child, girded with a linen ephod” (1 Samuel 2:18). Samuel's wearing a linen ephod—a pouch intended to hold a seer stone or Urim and Thummin (cf. Exodus 28:12)—indicates he was destined to become a seer in Israel. Simultaneously, while “the child Samuel grew up, and was in favour both with the Lord, and also with men” (1 Samuel 2:26), Hannah gave birth to additional children: “The Lord visited Hannah, so that she conceived, and bare three sons and two daughters. And the child Samuel grew before the Lord” (1 Samuel 2:21).

After suffering her descent phase of trials, Hannah composed a Song of Salvation to celebrate her ascent phase, giving glory to God for her reversal of circumstances: “And Hannah prayed, and said, My heart rejoiceth in the Lord, mine horn is exalted in the Lord: my mouth is enlarged over mine enemies; because I rejoice in thy salvation. There is none holy as the Lord: for there is none beside thee: neither is there any rock like our God. Talk no more so exceeding proudly; let not arrogancy come out of your mouth: for the Lord is a God of knowledge, and by him actions are weighed. The bows of the mighty men are broken, and they that stumbled are girded with strength. They that were full have hired themselves out for bread; and they that were hungry ceased: so that the barren hath born seven; and she that hath many children is waxed feeble. . . .

“The Lord killeth, and maketh alive: he bringeth down to the grave, and bringeth up. The Lord maketh poor, and maketh rich: he bringeth low, and lifteth up. He raiseth up the poor out of the dust, and lifteth up the beggar from the dunghill, to set them among princes, and to make them inherit the throne of glory: for the pillars of the earth are the Lord's, and he hath set the world upon them. He will keep the feet of his saints, and the wicked shall be silent in darkness; for by strength shall no man prevail. The adversaries of the Lord shall be broken to pieces; out of heaven shall he thunder upon them: the Lord shall judge the ends of the earth; and he shall give strength unto his king, and exalt the horn of his anointed” (1 Samuel 2:1–10).

Now observe the contrasting story of the house of Eli: “The sons of Eli were sons of Belial; they knew not the Lord” (1 Samuel 2:12); “Now Eli was very old, and heard all that his sons did unto all Israel; and how they lay with the women that assembled at the door of the tabernacle of the congregation. And he said unto them, Why do ye such things? for I hear of your evil dealings by all this people. Nay, my sons; for it is no good report that I hear: ye make the Lord’s people to transgress. If one man sin against another, the judge shall judge him: but if a man sin against the Lord, who shall entreat for him? Notwithstanding they hearkened not unto the voice of their father, because the Lord would slay them” (1 Samuel 2:22–25).

As Eli did nothing to stop his sons from violating the worship of God other than speaking to them, God sent a prophet to curse the house of Eli: “There came a man of God unto Eli, and said unto him, Thus saith the Lord, Did I plainly appear unto the house of thy father, when they were in Egypt in Pharaoh’s house? And did I choose him out of all the tribes of Israel to be my priest, to offer upon mine altar, to burn incense, to wear an ephod before me? and did I give unto the house of thy father all the offerings made by fire of the children of Israel? Wherefore kick ye at my sacrifice and at mine offering, which I have commanded in my habitation; and honourest thy sons above me, to make yourselves fat with the chiefest of all the offerings of Israel my people?” (1 Samuel 2:27–29).

After reminding Eli of his inherited priestly duty as a descendant of Aaron, God tells him that the blessings resting on Israel’s priests and Levites will henceforth be confined only to those who minister righteously, not on those who violate their priestly callings as Eli and his sons have done. God’s curse will henceforth come upon the house of Eli and on all who violate their office in the priesthood: “Wherefore the Lord God of Israel saith, I said indeed that thy house, and the house of thy father, should walk before me forever: but now the Lord saith, Be it far from me; for them that honour me I will honour, and they that despise me shall be lightly esteemed” (1 Samuel 2:30).

The prophet then foretells the generational curse that will follow the house of Eli through succeeding generations: “Behold, the days come, that I will cut off thine arm, and the arm of thy father’s house, that there shall not be an old man in thine house. And thou shalt see an enemy in my habitation, in all the wealth which God shall give Israel: and there shall not be an old man in thine house forever. And the man of thine, whom I shall not cut off from mine altar, shall be to consume thine eyes, and to grieve thine heart: and all the increase of thine house shall die in the flower of their age” (1 Samuel 2:31–33). As for Eli’s sons Hophni and Phinehas, they were afterwards slain by the Philistines. Even the Ark of the Covenant, over which he had charge, was taken by them, causing Eli’s grief in death (1 Samuel 4:10–18).

These were God’s words to Eli from the man of God: “This shall be a sign unto thee, that shall come upon thy two sons, on Hophni and Phinehas; in one day they shall die both of them. And I will raise me up a faithful priest, that shall do according to that which is in mine heart and in my mind: and I will build him a sure house; and he shall walk before mine anointed forever. And it shall come to pass, that every one that is left in thine house shall come and crouch to him for a piece of silver and a morsel of bread, and shall say, Put me, I pray thee, into one of the priests’ offices, that I may eat a piece of bread” (1 Samuel 2:34–36).

The “faithful priest” whom the prophet predicted, who was Samuel, went on to become a great prophet who would ultimately anoint David as king over Israel.