

CHAPTER 10, STANDING TALL, FALLING HARD**TIMELESS TRUTH: OBEDIENCE MATTERS.**

Blessing. This was meant to be the distinguishing mark of the people of God. God's covenant with Israel required obedience and promised ultimate blessing. Yet, the period of the judges is anything but a time of obedience and blessing in Israel. More fitting descriptions are: Barrenness. Blindness. Battles. Bereavement. Blessing was hard to come by in those days. God's people had abandoned God Himself, and "*everyone did as he saw fit*" (Judges 21:25). Few remembered God's commands. Even fewer obeyed.

But God always has a few. One was a woman named Hannah. She had long endured the grief of childlessness accompanied by the taunts of her husband's other wife. On one of her visits to worship at God's house in Shiloh, Eli, the priest, mistook her devotion for drunkenness. She had poured out her heart first in desperate prayer and then to Eli and vowed that she would dedicate her son to the LORD. Eli assured her that her prayer would be heard. God did give Hannah a son and she kept her word. She named the boy Samuel and took him to serve in the tabernacle under the High Priest, Eli.

God spoke to Samuel one night when he was still a boy. God told Samuel that Eli and his sons would be judged and his priestly line would soon end. And as it always does, God's word came true, this time through the Philistines. Israel lost their first battle with the Philistines at Aphek and blamed their loss on the absence of the ark of covenant. Their own absence of obedience went unnoticed. They faced the Philistine army again, this time with the ark as their good luck charm and lost both the battle and the ark. Eli had grown old and blind, and the devastating news of Israel's defeat, the death of his sons and the loss of the ark of covenant left Eli dead on the spot.

Samuel took Eli's place, but Israel was dissatisfied and asked for a king. Samuel knew better and expressed his opposition. God knew He'd been rejected. Israel knew only that they wanted to be like their pagan neighbors, the very people they were *not* to emulate. God warned that their demand for a king would be costly; that he would exploit them to the point of slavery. The people ignored God's warnings and still insisted on having an earthly king to fight their battles. Saul was anointed by Samuel and began well. He was affirmed by miraculous signs from God. He fought the Ammonites and gave God credit for their victory. Samuel reminded the people that God had not rejected them, even though they had turned away from Him. He encouraged them again to follow God and serve him from the heart and God affirmed Samuel's words with unheard of thunder and rain during harvest.

Saul's honeymoon as king was short-lived. During another battle with the Philistines, Saul got nervous; Samuel was late. So Saul took his authority too far and took matters—and offerings—into his own hands, violating the role God had reserved for the priests. Samuel confronted Saul; he backpedaled, made excuses, and tried to justify his sin, but wound up losing a dynasty. Saul's path of half-hearted obedience and fear-based leadership grew longer by the year and more twisted with every step.

God rejected Saul as king. Saul's reign was Israel's opportunity to see that monarchy is no better than anarchy when a man after God's own heart is not on the throne. God had already chosen such a man, an unlikely shepherd boy who would one day become Saul's successor. His throne would endure and would point God's people again to the Shepherd King who was yet to come.

1. What can we learn about prayer from Hannah and Samuel?
2. Compare the three fathers in the story: Elkanah, Eli and Samuel. What were their best and worst traits? Which of these traits do you wish you had more of?
3. Samuel was probably about 12 years old when God called him to be a prophet to Eli and all of Israel. He was required to speak the truth in love to his mentor and friend. Have you ever been in this position?
4. The Israelites and the Philistines both treated the Ark of the Covenant more like a good-luck charm than the sacred presence of the LORD. How might people today try to manipulate God for similar gain?
5. Samuel is hurt when he sees that the Israelites want a king like other nations, instead of recognizing God as their king. Do you ever struggle with a desire to be like the culture around you, instead of letting God rule your life?
6. How do you think Samuel would have described the “state of the union” at the end of his time as judge? Where do you see God’s grace in his statement after the battle with the Ammonites?
7. Imagine you have a friend like Saul, who keeps taking matters into his own hands and ignoring what God’s word teaches him. What advice would you give him?
8. Chapter 10 opens with the beautiful story of Elkanah’s love and leadership of his family. The chapter closes with the story of Saul’s poor leadership of Israel and his self-love. Compare and contrast the leadership styles of these two men. In what ways is your leadership style similar to either one? In what areas can you improve?

I. The Prism of the Law: Deuteronomy 28.

God's chosen people were given the Law at Mount Sinai, commonly known as the Ten Commandments, after coming out of Egypt. Forty years later, Moses stood on the East side of the Jordan River and summarized all the things he had been teaching them in the wilderness. They were about to enter into the Promised Land without their godly leader. This generation needed to understand God's expectations of them as His holy people. *Ownership* of Canaan had been promised to Abraham unconditionally, but *occupancy* in the Land would require obedience to the covenant. Israel's many ups and downs during their conquest of the land under Joshua and the Canaanization of their community during the period of the judges all hinged upon the blessings and cursings that Moses warned of in Deuteronomy 28. Our *Story* this week opens at the end of the period of the judges. In spite of the dreadful disobedience of Israel as a whole, a few sparks of faith shine through. The prism of Deuteronomy 28 helps us to see them more clearly.

- A. **Blessings**—God promised Israel many blessings for obedience. These blessings are earthly blessings that affirm Israel that she is living in spiritually faithful obedience to the LORD. These earthly blessings are promised to them (not the church) and are directly connected to the Promised Land.
 1. Blessed in the fertility of your body, ground, livestock (Deuteronomy 28:4-5, 11)
 2. Blessed in your battles against your enemies (28:7)
 3. Blessed in your harvest and prosperity in your work (28:8, 12)
 4. Blessed with rain (28:12)
- B. **Cursings**—God promised Israel many consequences for disobedience. These curses are earthly curses that alert Israel that she is failing spiritually, straying from the LORD and should turn back toward a covenant relationship with Him.
 1. Cursed in the fertility of your body, ground and livestock (Deuteronomy 28:17-18)
 2. Cursed in your battles with your enemies, defeat (28:25)
 3. Cursed with madness and blindness and confusion (28:28)
 4. Cursed with loss instead of prosperity (28:30-33, 38)
 5. Cursed with drought (28:24)

II. Conflict #1: Hannah and Peninnah

You would think that by now some of the Israelites could look back at their forefathers and figure out that bigamy is not a good idea. Evidently, Elkanah didn't. Perhaps Hannah's barrenness led Elkanah to take Peninnah as a wife, but we don't know which of the two came first. What we do know is that Peninnah's actions reveal what is in her heart, as did Hannah's.

A. Faithless, disobedient Peninnah

1. She arrogantly provoked and irritated Hannah because of Hannah's empty womb. It is possible that, based on Deuteronomy 28:4-5, Peninnah accused Hannah of sin that resulted in her barrenness.
2. Peninnah had a full house, but an empty heart. Elkanah loved Hannah more than her, and he made that known.
3. None of Peninnah's children were notable.
4. God graciously blessed her with many children. Instead of responding to God with love toward others, she acted hatefully. The LORD humbled her by exalting Hannah and Hannah's son.

B. Faithful, obedient Hannah

1. Innocent Hannah never retaliated against her rival, though she anguished about her condition and her situation.
2. Hannah poured her heart out in prayer to the LORD, trusting in His mercy alone.
3. Hannah vowed she would give her son to serve the LORD if only He would give her a son.
4. God answered her prayer and gave her five more children after Samuel.
5. Hannah is exalted as the mother of Samuel, rich in children, rich in faith. She praised God for delivering her from her enemy Peninnah.
6. God graciously answered Hannah's humble prayer. Hannah responded to God with faith and obedience, making good on her vow, and praising Him for His mercy. She enjoyed the blessings of fertility.

III. Conflict #2: Eli's line and Samuel

Eli was the high priest of Israel, which meant that he should have been serving as God's spokesman to the nation. He should have been the man who turned Israel away from apostasy (remember, we're in the dark ages of the judges), and back to the LORD. Eli's physical blindness was indicative of his spiritual blindness. He would fall from a place of honor to disgrace, while innocent Samuel would rise from humble beginnings to a place of honor.

A. Faithless Eli and his sons

1. We learn that Eli was going blind. Blindness indicates covenant disobedience for Israel. This is not a physical ailment alone. It is a barometer of the condition of Israel who was blind to their own depravity and it was a symptom of Eli's blindness to his own sons' terrible abuses.
2. The word of God was rare in those days. This was another indication that Eli and his priestly-but-evil sons were not in the place of obedience.
3. Eli's arrogant line was judged by God because of the sin that Eli knew about but failed to restrain. The sons were abusing their priestly role by taking the best sacrifices for themselves, and fornicating with women in the tabernacle (1 Samuel 2:17, 22)! These two sons were, as the author of Judges wrote, "doing what was right in his own eyes."
4. Eli's sons wrongfully thought that the Ark would bring them victory against the Philistines. *Rather than look to and inquire of God, they misused the Ark* as more of a good-luck charm than the holy presence of God. Consequently, they were killed in the battle and Israel lost the Ark to the Philistines. *Their attitude toward the Ark was really their attitude toward God.* They failed to honor God as holy.
5. God graciously allowed Eli and his sons to serve as priests. But they failed to respond by faith and obedience to the covenant. Instead, they arrogantly sinned or dismissed the sins of the people. God made low the high priest and his sons. They died.

B. Faithful Samuel

1. Samuel was a child conceived by grace through the faithful prayer of his mother.
2. Hannah made good on her vow to give little Samuel to serve the LORD all the days of his life. She honored the priestly role he would someday have by making him a little ephod (priestly garment) every year.
3. The LORD was with Samuel as he grew up in the presence of the LORD, and He did not let any of Samuel's words fail. He revealed Himself through His word to Samuel while His word was rare to Eli.

4. Samuel worked to turn the people back to the LORD, and he defeated the Philistines. This was another sign of his covenant obedience.
5. God graciously revealed Himself to little Samuel. He responded by faith and obedience. God exalted him to the spiritual leader of Israel.

IV. The Prism of the New Testament Believer.

We can see from these two conflicts, as well as other conflicts throughout this historical period, that we could predict the destiny of a character or the nation based upon their response to God's grace. But we are not under the covenant of the Law. Does God still exalt the humble and bring low the arrogant?

- A. Matthew 18:4 "Whoever humbles himself as this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven."
- B. Matthew 23:12 "Whoever exalts himself shall be humbled; and whoever humbles himself shall be exalted."
- C. Philippians 2:3 "Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind let each of you regard one another as more important than himself."
- D. James 4:10 "Humble yourself in the presence of the LORD, and He will exalt you."
- E. 1 Peter 5:5-6 "...clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, for God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble. Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time."
- F. The promises and exhortations to the New Covenant believer are not earthly like those to Israel. They are spiritual. Ephesians 1 tells the Church that *in Christ* we are
 1. Blessed with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places (1:3)
 2. Chosen before the foundation of the world (1:4)
 3. Predestined to adoption as sons (1:5)
 4. Redeemed and forgiven (1:7)
 5. Rich in grace (1:7)
 6. Promised an inheritance that the Holy Spirit is the down payment for our inheritance (1:13-14)

V. Applications and Implications

- A. People who trust and obey God succeed but people who disregard God fail. I will learn to define success and failure through the prism of God's view.
- B. I should respond to grace with faith and obedience.
- C. God answered Hannah's humble prayer. I can pour out my anguish to God knowing that He can answer my deepest needs.
- D. My actions toward other people reveal my attitude toward God.
- E. God is opposed to the proud who disregard Him. I will humbly seek to obey Him by faith.
- F. The place of blessing is smack dab in the will of God.
- G. God can, has, and will use young people to serve Him. I should not disregard or dismiss the faith and service of a child.
- H. A parent's faith does not guarantee the outcome of a child. But it is an influence. Therefore, I will seek to encourage and grow the faith of my children.
- I. I treasure the spiritual blessings that are guaranteed to me because I have the promise of the Holy Spirit.