

Dr. Ted Hildebrandt, Old Testament Literature, Session 22, 1 Samuel: Eli, Ark, Samuel, Saul's inaugurations

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Hey everyone, welcome back for another Deep Dive. Today we're going to be looking at a really fascinating period in ancient Israel. It's the transition from the time of judges to the establishment of kings.

And we're going to be focusing on some key figures from this era: Eli, Samuel, and Saul. Our main source material for this Deep Dive is a lecture by Dr. Ted Hildebrandt on the book of 1 Samuel. All right.

And I think what's really great about this lecture is that it goes beyond just the stories themselves. We're going to unpack a lot of really interesting insights about leadership, family dynamics, and even the nature of God's interaction with humans. I like it.

So it should be a really interesting conversation, I think. Yeah, it's a period full of twists and turns for sure. Okay, so let's just imagine for a second you're living in ancient Israel.

You've had these judges, right? Kind of like these superhero leaders who pop up when things get tough, and then all of a sudden, bam, you get the king. How does that even happen? Well, it wasn't like a certain switch. The judges weren't just court officials.

They were also military commanders, spiritual figures all rolled into one. But as time passed, the system wasn't always working out so well. Take Eli, for instance, right? The high priest at Shiloh.

Right. He kind of represents that old way of doing things. But his sons, Hophni and Phineas, were not exactly role models.

Not at all. They were basically abusing their power as priests, taking advantage of people, and even engaging in immoral behavior at the tabernacle in Shiloh. And Shiloh was a big deal.

That's where the Ark of the Covenant was kept. So they're messing up big time in the most important religious center. That's right.

Okay. So I can see why people might start thinking we need to change. But before we jump to the kings, let's talk about Samuel.

His story kind of starts with his mother, Hannah. Right. Hannah's story is so powerful.

I mean, she's barren, desperate for a child, and she pours out her heart to God, vowing that if he gives her a son, she'll dedicate him to God's service. It's what's known as a Nazirite vow, like the one Samson took. Right.

Samuel wasn't exactly a warrior like Samson. What strikes me is how Eli, with these totally out-of-control sons, totally misjudges Hannah while she's praying. It's like he can't see what's right in front of him.

It's a reminder that we can be blind to our own flaws while being quick to judge others. That's a good point. And then you have young Samuel being called by God.

And it's this very relatable moment. Who hasn't thought a parent was calling them in the middle of the night? But in this case, it's God. And Samuel's name actually means God heard.

Oh, that's so cool. I didn't know that. So it's like this really cool detail, and you see this contrast emerging.

Samuel grows in favor with God and with men, while Eli's sons, well, they're headed for trouble. It reminds me of how the Bible describes Jesus's childhood, growing in wisdom and in favor. So it's laying this groundwork for Samuel becoming this really significant leader.

But things are about to get really intense for the Israelites. Yeah, they're facing this threat from the Philistines, right? That's right. And these guys controlled key trade routes.

They had a powerful military. Yeah. And the Israelites, well, they decided to bring out the big guns, literally.

They bring the Ark of the Covenant into battle, figuring it will guarantee victory. Yeah, like it's some kind of magic charm. Right.

It's a bit like they're trying to force God's hand, you know? And remember, they had that precedent with the Battle of Jericho in the Book of Joshua, where the Ark played a key role. But it's not like God is a genie in a bottle, right? Right, exactly. You can't just manipulate him.

Yeah, they seem to think they can manipulate God by outward actions. But as we'll see, it doesn't work out that way. No.

They get crushed by the Philistines on the coastal plain. Right. They lose the Ark.

Wow. And Eli's sons are killed. And then Eli dies too, right? Eli Guy.

When he hears that the Ark's been captured? That's right. He's more devastated by the loss of the Ark than the death of his sons. Wow.

That's so sad. It's just heartbreaking. Yeah.

And then his grandson is born, Ichabod. Ichabod. What a name.

Ichabod means the glory has departed, which perfectly captures the state of Israel at this point. Yeah. Not just the Ark is gone, but so is the leadership of Eli's family.

Wow. Talk about being born under a bad omen. Right.

But speaking of the Philistines, their stronghold, the Philistine Pentapolis, was strategically located along the Via Maris, which was a major trade route connecting Egypt to Mesopotamia. Right. It was like controlling the ancient superhighway.

That's right. So they weren't just strong militarily, but also wealthy and influential because of this control. But then they get the Ark, and all of a sudden, weird things start happening.

Yeah. Plagues their god Dagon falling down before the Ark twice. What? They eventually send it back along with these golden tumors and rats.

Golden tumors and rats? What's that about? It's thought to be this ancient form of sympathetic magic. Okay. They believe that if you made a model of what was harming you, and you got rid of it, the harm would go away too.

Right. Kind of like a voodoo doll. Oh, wow.

That's fascinating. Yeah. So the Ark is back.

Eli and his sons are gone. And Samuel steps up as leader. That's right.

His first act as leader: he leads Israel to victory against those same Philistines at a place called Ebenezer. Yes. And sets up a stone there to commemorate God's help.

And that word, Ebenezer, actually connects back to Eve being Adam's helper in Genesis. Oh, wow. It shows this theme of divine assistance that runs throughout the Bible.

That's cool. And Samuel's role, praying and interceding during the battle, reminds me of Moses. Yeah.

But Dr. Hildebrandt points out something interesting. The name Ebenezer is used earlier in the text before Samuel supposedly named it. Oh, so is that a contradiction? Not really.

It's likely a later writer using a name that was familiar to his audience. Even if it wasn't the actual name at that time. So kind of like how we might say Xerox.

Exactly. Even if we're using a different brand of copy. Right.

But even with this victory, Samuel faces a new challenge. His own sons. Not again.

Like Hophni and Phineas. Oh, no. They're corrupt.

Taking bribes and perverting justice. So now the Israelites are fed up. They want a king like all the other nations.

Yeah. Even though Samuel isn't happy about it. Right.

But God's response to their request is really powerful. Yeah. He tells Samuel, it is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king.

Wow. So it raises this profound question: does God have feelings? That's a good question. I've never really thought about it like that before.

Right. And if so, how should that impact our relationship with him? But wanting a king wasn't wrong in itself. Right.

Moses even predicted it in Deuteronomy. Yeah. It was more about who they were choosing to follow.

Okay. They wanted a human king instead of acknowledging God as their ultimate king. So that's how Saul, the first king of Israel, enters the picture.

That's right. He was this tall, impressive guy who seemed humble at first. Yeah.

But Dr. Hildebrandt suggests that what looked like humility might have actually been insecurity. Hmm. Interesting.

And how someone handles power, you know, really reveals their true nature. That's a good point. And there are these fascinating details about how Saul was made king, not just once, but three times.

Oh, wow. First, privately anointed by Samuel, then publicly chosen at Mizpah. Right.

And finally, there's this covenant renewal ceremony at Gilgal. Those covenant renewals were super important during transitions of power. Right.

Like from Moses to Joshua, from Joshua to the judges. Exactly. It was a way of reaffirming the relationship between God and the Israelites and recommitting to their shared purpose.

You know, that makes me think about how organizations or even individuals could benefit from something similar during times of big change. Right. Like hitting the reset button and starting fresh.

Absolutely. This shift to kingship was a huge change for Israel. Right.

And renewing that covenant emphasized the continuity amidst that change. Okay. So before we get into Saul's reign.

Yeah. I have to ask about this recurring father-son theme. Right.

Eli, a seemingly good man with terrible sons. Samuel, another righteous leader whose sons go astray. Right.

What's going on there? It's like somebody in Dr. Hildebrandt's lecture said, God has kids, but he has no grandkids. Oh. It challenges this idea that a good person will automatically have good kids and vice versa.

Right. Each generation has to find their own relationship with God. That's so powerful.

It's not about inheriting faith. Right. It's about forging your own connection.

Exactly. Okay. So with that in mind, let's explore what happens when Saul takes the throne.

That'll be next time on our deep dive into 1 Samuel. I can't wait. It's a reminder that we're all, you know, responsible for our own choices.

Yeah. No matter how righteous our parents may have been. Right.

And Saul's choices, well, they don't exactly paint him in the best light. No, they don't. Dr. Hildebrandt points out that one of the first things Saul does after a big victory is to renew that covenant with God at Gilgal.

Right. So it's like he's starting off strong, but then things go downhill pretty fast. Yes.

Saul makes some major mistakes that ultimately lead to his downfall. Okay. So what happens? What's the turning point? Well, one of the biggest issues is when he disobeys God's direct command about the Amalekites.

God had ordered Saul to completely wipe them out, including all their livestock. But Saul keeps the Amalekite king alive and holds on to some of the best animals. So it sounds like pride and maybe greed are starting to creep in.

Exactly. Saul tries to justify his actions by saying that he wanted to offer the animals as sacrifices to God. But Samuel calls him out, saying that obedience is better than sacrifice.

That's powerful. It makes me think about how sometimes we can get so caught up in the outward show of religion, going through the motions, but maybe missing the point of truly listening to and obeying God. What do you think? I think that's a really insightful connection.

It's easy to focus on the rituals and the traditions, but true obedience goes deeper than that. It's about aligning our hearts and our actions with God's will. And in Saul's case, his disobedience has some pretty serious consequences.

What happens to him? Well, Samuel tells him that God has rejected him as king. And the spirit of the Lord leaves him. That's a huge fall from grace.

It is. Wow. I can't even imagine what that must have felt like.

And on top of that, he starts being tormented by what the text described as an evil spirit. And some scholars believe that this could have been a form of mental illness or psychological distress. That adds a whole other layer to his story.

It makes you realize that even powerful leaders are human, wrestling with their own internal struggle. Absolutely. And it's right around this time that we're introduced to David.

David, the shepherd boy who takes down Goliath and eventually becomes one of the most famous kings of Israel. Yes. And David is anointed by Samuel as Saul's successor.

He gains fame for his musical talent and his military skill. But Saul, consumed by jealousy and paranoia, sees David as a threat. So you have this tragic situation unfolding.

Yeah. The once-chosen king is now spiraling downwards, trying to eliminate the person who's meant to replace him. It's almost Shakespearean.

Yeah, it really is. But even while he's being hunted by Saul, David's character just shines through. It does.

He's portrayed as loyal, courageous, and deeply devoted to God. He doesn't try to take revenge. No.

Even when he has the chance. No, he refuses. David recognizes that God had appointed Saul, and it wasn't his place to usurp that authority.

It's a reminder that sometimes the most difficult thing is to choose the higher path. Yeah. To trust God's timing.

Right. And not take matters into our own hands. I think that's a great point.

We see this stark contrast between Saul, who lets power corrupt him, and David, who, despite facing incredibly difficult circumstances, remains faithful and ultimately uses his power to serve others and fulfill God's purposes. It makes you think about what true leadership really looks like. Right.

Is it about grabbing power for yourself? Mm-hmm. Or is it about using it to lift others up? That's the question, isn't it? Yeah. And it's a question that resonates not just in ancient Israel, but in every society and every generation.

Absolutely. What's fascinating, though, is that while we see Saul's decline and David's rise, Samuel kind of fades into the background. He does.

In the second half of 1 Samuel, what happens to him? Well, he doesn't disappear completely. Okay. Remember, he was the one who anointed both Saul and David.

Right. And even after Saul's rejection, Samuel keeps serving in a prophetic role, speaking God's word and guiding the nation through this really turbulent time. Mm-hmm.

He never stops praying for the people. Even for Saul, who turned against him. That shows how powerful and important it is to pray for our leaders.

Yeah. Even when we disagree with them, or they're no longer in power, it's easy to criticize and complain. Mm-hmm.

But Samuel models something different. Yeah. A commitment to prayer and intercession.

I think that's a great takeaway for all of us. Yeah. You know, we may not be in positions of national leadership, but we all have people in our lives who are in authority.

Yeah. Parents, teachers, bosses, government officials. And choosing to pray for them, especially when it's hard, can be a powerful act of faith and love.

Yeah. It really can shift your whole perspective when you pray for someone. It's harder to hold on to that anger or resentment or whatever.

That's so true. Prayer has this way of softening our hearts and helping us to see things from a different angle. As we kind of wrap up our deep dive into this transition period in ancient Israel, I'm really struck by how human all these biblical figures are.

They weren't perfect. Right. They made mistakes.

Mm-hmm. They struggled with things like jealousy and pride. Right.

We even see hints of what might have been mental illness. And it's really relatable in a way. It is.

You know? But through it all, God was working. Yeah. Using their stories to fulfill his purposes.

It's encouraging in a way. It is. It means that God can use anyone, even those of us who mess up or feel broken.

What really stands out to me is this idea that the Israelites wanted a king like all the other nations. Right. If I were in their shoes, I wonder if I would have made the same choice.

It's hard to say, isn't it? Yeah. What do you think was having a king a good thing or a bad thing? That's a great question. You know, it's one that people have been debating for centuries.

You know, different forms of government each have their pros and cons. Right. The Israelites were looking for stability, a visible leader.

Right. But they ended up with Saul, who abused his power. It makes you think about the trade-offs involved, right? Yeah.

Sometimes what seems like a good solution might have unintended consequences. Exactly. And that's why it's so important to look beyond the surface, to think critically about different systems and leaders.

Right. And to consider, you know, the potential pitfalls. I think we can learn a lot from studying history, examining the successes and failures of those who came before us.

It's like that saying: those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it. Precisely. And I think this deep dive into 1 Samuel has given us a lot to think about, not just in terms of ancient history, but also in how we approach leadership, faith, and the choices we make in our own lives.

For sure. I'm definitely going to reread 1 Samuel with fresh eyes now. Me too.

There's so much depth to those stories that I think I missed before. That's the beauty of taking a deep dive. Yeah.

It's not about, you know, reaching definitive conclusions. It's about sparking curiosity, expanding our understanding, and leaving us with maybe even more questions than answers. And hopefully it inspires us to keep digging.

Yeah. Good learning keeps seeking the truth that lies beneath the surface. Absolutely.

This conversation doesn't end here. Right. We encourage you to, you know, share your own thoughts.

What resonated with you? What questions did this deep dive raise for you? Right. Maybe you connected with the parallels between, you know, the transition from judges to kings and changes you've experienced in your own life or in organizations you're a part of. Right.

Or perhaps it was the father-son dynamics that really stood out to you. Yeah. The challenges of leadership or even this idea of, you know, God having feelings.

Whatever it is, we hope this deep dive has given you a fresh perspective. Yes. On this pivotal period in ancient Israel and sparked a desire to engage with these stories on a deeper level.

I think so. For me, the biggest takeaway is that God can use anyone, even flawed individuals like me, to accomplish his purposes. Yeah.

It's both humbling and inspiring at the same time. It is. So, as you go about your day, we'll leave you with this thought.

Okay. If you were in ancient Israel, would you have chosen a king? Ooh, that's a tough one. And what are the advantages and disadvantages of different forms of government? Yeah.

Both then and now. Right. And maybe even more importantly, how might those choices impact our relationship with God and with each other? Those are great questions.

Thanks for joining us on this deep dive. Until next time, keep exploring, keep questioning, and keep seeking the truth that lies beneath the surface.