

STUDY 1

1 Samuel 1 - 4

The Blind Leading the Blind

Kings, Queens, Presidents, Prime Ministers, Generals, Priests, Team Captains, Coaches, CEO's, Teachers... the list goes on and on. *Leaders* come in all sorts of shapes and sizes, and history has given us an array of good and bad ones. The old saying "power corrupts" rings all too true. We expect so much from our leaders and we become disappointed, disillusioned, even angry when they fail us or abuse their position. That's why we are often surprised when good leaders come along. We sometimes harbour a suspicion that they are hiding their true colours from us. We all have a vested interest in leaders for we are all directly affected by those in power over us. When a leader excels we prosper and flourish. When a leader fails to fulfil their duty we all suffer.

For Starters

Name some well known leaders, both good and bad. How have you been affected by people you identify as leaders?

So far...

The book of 1 Samuel is all about the leaders of God's chosen people, Israel. The story begins some 1100 years before Christ, but the grander story of God's dealings with humanity goes back even further to Israel's ancestor, Abram.

Investigate

1. Read Genesis 17.1-8. What are God's intentions with Abram and his offspring?

The Book of Judges

Out of Abram's offspring God made the nation of Israel. He brought the nation out of slavery in Egypt, renewed his promises to them and gave them the Law at Mount Sinai. God then led them to the promised land of Canaan. The Book of Judges describes the life of Israel in the land. However, they failed to rout the people of the land as God had commanded them (Jdg 2.1-4). As a result, the tribes of Israel were constantly enticed into idolatry by these (and other) peoples. God consistently showed his commitment to Israel, though, by rescuing them from their oppressors whenever they cried out to him. God did this through military rulers called judges. However, the situation of Israel deteriorated. Rather than fighting their enemies, the end of the Book of Judges sees the tribes of Israel fighting among themselves.

Investigate

2. What is particularly noteworthy of Israel's leadership at the end of the Book of Judges? (Jdg 21.25)

This last verse of the Book of Judges describes the perilous circumstances which Israel finds itself in at the beginning of 1 Samuel. Yet 1 Samuel opens not with Israel's leaders but with an ordinary family in a peculiar situation.

Hannah

Investigate

Read 1 Samuel 1-3.

3. What is Hannah's predicament? (1.2, 6-8)
4. What is Hannah's response? (1.9-16)
5. How does God answer Hannah's prayer? (1.19-20)
6. How does Hannah honour her vow? (1.24-28; 2.11)
7. Browse through Hannah's prayer (2.1-10). How does God use his power? Can you see a pattern here?

Looking forward

Considering that Israel has no human king at this time, it is surprising to hear Hannah saying that God will give strength to his king (2.10). Hannah seems to be looking forward to a time when God would rectify Israel's leadership woes with a king. Yet what does this mean for Israel's current leadership?

The House of Eli

Investigate

8. Who is Eli? (1.3, 9)

9. How is Eli's leadership reflected in:

- a. his sons' behaviour (2.12-17, 22-25, 29; 3.13)?
- b. his obedience to the commandments in Deuteronomy 6.4-12?
- c. the spiritual condition of the nation (3.1)?

10. How does Samuel compare to Eli and his sons (2.26; 3.19-21)?

11. How does God intend to deal with the poor leadership of his people?

- a. 2.25
- b. 2.30-36
- c. 3.12-14
- d. 3.19-21

The blind leading the blind

You may have heard the saying 'Justice is blind'. This popular saying points to the fact that true justice does not discriminate. In that instance, blindness is a good thing. However, in Eli's case, his blindness is disastrous. As the leader of God's people, Eli needs to be discriminating and discerning, but he simply is not. He is unable to restrain his immoral sons, and he cannot properly perceive God's interaction with his people. Ironically, he could perceive noble Hannah's lips moving while she prayed to God, but he mistakenly condemned her as a drunk (1.12-14). He is blind both physically and spiritually.

As a priest, Eli's role was to be the mediator in the relationship between God and humanity. He was to represent God in all his holiness to the people, and he was to represent the people to God by offering their sacrifices to God. If a priest failed in his role, then the relationship between God and his people would break down. Here at the beginning of 1 Samuel we see Eli and his sons failing dismally in their leadership. Eli is a blind man leading the blind.

God, though, is not satisfied with the breakdown in relationship with his people. It is for this reason that he acts upon the blind leadership of Eli's house.

Investigate

Read 1 Samuel 4.

12. Does God follow through with his threats? How does he do this?

Think it through

13. How do you see the theme of Hannah's prayer at work in chapter 4?

14. What is the mood at the end of chapter 4? (Think in terms of the promises to Abraham.)

Reversal of fortunes

Hannah's prayer sets the pattern for things to come. Hannah describes the LORD as a God who reverses fortunes: bringing the mighty low and exalting the humble. However, he does not do this randomly. He does it to preserve his relationship with his people. In the rest of 1 Samuel, keep an eye out to see whether the LORD follows this pattern.

Think it through

15. Is God vindictive? Read Romans 8.29 and think about how this verse affects the way you view God's actions.

16. The thoughts of Hannah's prayer were still being echoed 1100 years later in Mary's day. Read Luke 1.39-55. What was God going to do for Israel in her day?