

Pictures of Despair

- Christianity appears to be dying - ready to breathe its last breath
 - its a sadly, familiar theme, often spoken of at the introduction to sermons!
 - we know we should expect opposition from the world at large...
 - but worse is the creeping death that seeps from within the church
 - that's what kills the church!
 - what could be worse than having human church leaders who are indifferent in faith and unholy in life?
 - a bleak time when the light in the world turns dark
- **The regime of Hophni and Phinehas was such a time**
 - yet even in such times God did not abandon his people
 - he was there - in both **judgement** and **grace**
 - and at this time judgement began at the house of God
- Shiloh was a mess!
 - Hannah's prayer refers to the fall of the arrogant, the mighty and the wicked - to those who contend with the Lord
 - not here the Philistines or the Canaanites, but, shockingly, the **priests of Israel**
 - worship is a farce at Shiloh: a worshipper is cooking his peace-offering when along comes a servant of the priests with his infamous three-pronged barbecue fork, which he dips in the pot and takes whatever it brings out...
 - the priests already had their allotted breast and right leg (Leviticus 7:28-36)
 - but before the fat is burned in honour of the Lord, the priests' lackey appears demanding fresh uncooked cuts from the worshipper
 - if the worshipper resisted it would be taken by force
- All that Hophni and Phinehas had was contempt for the Lord's worship and his offerings
- If that were not enough in itself there was even more rottenness in Shiloh:
 - the priests had sex with the women who looked after the worship centre....
 - everyone in Israel knew about it
 - it was worse than merely moral degradation - they were introducing pagan practices into Shiloh
 - **Eli rebuked them... but they ignored him completely**
- It was too late for that:
 - the problem stemmed from lack of loving discipline from an early age
 - the seed of rebellion was not nipped in the bud
 - they had gone unchecked too long
- Here were the spiritual leaders of Israel who cared nothing for the Lord
 - they did not even know the Lord - **how tragic!**

Glimpses of Hope

- But right in the midst of this spiritual and moral morass at Shiloh the narrative gives glimpses of hope - **little Samuel**
 - the Lord was at work providing a new order for godly leadership of his people
 - fan of "**West Wing**" - current series centres round the race to be the next President... part of this was Congressman Santos vying to become the Democratic candidate for the Presidency... all the razz-ma-tazz, hype, balloons, colours, bands, shouting, stadium full of people!!!
 - that's one kind of preparation for leadership
 - in contrast to how God is acting here - it was all very quiet - but **'Don't forget Samuel.'** (v.18)
- Verses 19-21 are not just an interlude about Hannah - they also parallel and contrast with verses 22-26:
 - God generously gave Hannah three sons and two daughters - 'in place of the asking which was asked of the Lord'

- that's the way the Lord is
- no sacrifice we make for him will ever impoverish us
- he sees to it that we are never ultimately the losers
- Contrast is between **Hannah's thriving family** and **Eli's failing family**:
 - Samuel was **growing**, but Eli was very **old**
 - Eli heard bad news - all Israel was talking about it
 - his sons had turned the tabernacle into a place of immorality and scandal - a place of sin, which should have been a place of holiness
- This passage reverberates with a painful truth:
 - there is no guarantee with God's covenant that all our children will grow up to be committed believers
 - baptism does not guarantee to every child that they will walk in faith when they are older
 - there is nothing automatic about the grace of God
 - yet whoever comes to the Lord he will never drive away
- Why does God **announce** their judgement here?
 - he doesn't enact that judgement until 4:17...
 - **because they have a chance of repenting!**
- Part of the trouble is that people lie about knowing the Lord:
 - they lie to God, to the church, and sometimes even to themselves
 - we, the church are not always able to discern it
 - but God looks on the heart

Prophecies of Judgement

- Hophni and Phinehas did not honour their father, nor take on his faith
 - it placed them in danger
 - because of their sin, God had determined to cut them off
 - and he would use their judgement as a **sign**, as a pointer to himself - to his own holiness and justice and faithfulness
 - what a sobering situation - judgement is announced incredibly clearly, yet Hophni and Phinehas are so firm in staying in that rebellion that judgement will fall upon them - they don't see or won't heed the warnings that are given
 - these men were leaders, so they had to be dealt with
 - who else could deal with them but the Lord himself?
- God's kingdom and people may suffer from arrogant, immoral, unrepentant leaders, but the Lord will have a faithful leader - he insists on it
 - the Lord will save those who are his
 - the gospel will not be silenced because of wicked leaders
 - but watch out if you are the one hindering his gospel in wilful rebellion against it and against the Lord
- Those who honour the Lord, he will honour
 - but his promises are not blank cheques
 - don't presume on the Lord's favour
 - salvation is not automatic
 - we must come in faith
 - we must know the Lord in our heart
- **Lord, cleanse your church**
- **Lord, have mercy on your people**