

Wicked While They Work

1 Samuel 2:12-21 May 31, 2026

Some of you know how hard it is to navigate a toxic work environment. I'll tell you where you *didn't* want to work, and that was for the UK Post Office system between 1999 and 2015. In 1999 the post office switched from a paper-based accounting system to a computer-based one. One centralized computer program could now see the records for 14,000 post office branches.¹ And guess what it found? Corrupt records. Missing money all over the place. Thousands of pounds gone. Clearly, the employees, the "sub-postmasters" had sticky hands in the till and would now be held accountable.

Over 900 were prosecuted.² Year after year more were caught. Except they *weren't* stealing. It was the new software that was the problem. The bosses *knew* it was full of bugs. But they silenced *anyone* who criticized the system. They lied to journalists and politicians who asked questions. Employees went into their own pockets to cover the shortfalls that did not actually exist. Thousands were impacted, imprisoned, or financially ruined.³ The scandal led to at least 13 suicides. It was 16 years of a toxic work environment, labeled as the "widest miscarriage of justice in UK history."

In 1100BC, the Tabernacle was an *extremely* hostile work environment for little Samuel. For everyone else, it was a hostile *worship* environment. You see, the top brass - Eli's two sons - not only had sticky fingers, they also vigorously attacked anyone who questioned them.

What are we supposed to do in a situation like that? When our leaders have become corrupt? When our institutions have broken down? When everyone does what is right in their own eyes?

Sadly, these situations are only limited to the wider society or even the work environment. It can even happen in the worship environment. Perhaps a friend or someone you know - maybe even a member of your own family has said, "I'm a Christian, but I won't go to church. The Church is full of hypocrites. I got hurt at a church, so I'm done with the whole thing."

How does faith work in a bad environment? Should we cut and run? Should we stand and fight? Let's look at this text and see what Samuel and his parents did. Because, in this book, they are specifically, purposefully presented as faithful examples for us. In fact, throughout this chapter, our author keeps ping-ponging back and forth showing the faithfulness of Samuel, then the *unfaithfulness* of Eli and his sons.⁴ Every few verses it pans from one to the other to drive home the contrast *and* to show that a believer can not only be *faithful* in dark spiritual days, but we can serve God effectively and grow substantially as we walk by faith - *in any environment* we're called into.

1 Samuel 2:12 - 12 Eli's sons were wicked men; they did not respect the LORD

¹ <https://www.computerweekly.com/feature/Post-Office-Horizon-scandal-explained-everything-you-need-to-know>

² <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c1wpp4w14pqq>

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/British_Post_Office_scandal

⁴ Dale Ralph Davis *1 Samuel: Looking On The Heart*

As priests, Eli and his sons were the top of the authority chain. Other than God, there was no one higher to appeal to. This is *one* of the reasons why Israel would eventually demand a king, because the priesthood had become degraded and corrupted.⁵

Eli's sons are described as *wicked* men. They were "utterly destructive"⁶ good-for-nothings.⁷ Two interesting things here. First, the term used is, "Sons of Belial." It means sons of worthlessness.⁸ And this is the exact same term *Hannah* had used when Eli accused her of being drunk. "No, my lord, don't think of me as a *wicked* woman." Eli assumed righteous Hannah is a daughter of Belial, which was the furthest thing from the truth. Meanwhile, *his* sons were openly, actively wicked. But Eli won't deal with it. But it was his *duty* to do so. And so, God considers Eli complicit in their sins.⁹

The other interesting thing is that second phrase: They did not *respect* the LORD. Literally it says they did not *know* Yahweh.¹⁰ Accomplishment, position, pedigree, power, talent - none of it matters in the long run if you do not *know* Yahweh.

God said in Jeremiah 9: "The wise person should not boast in his wisdom; the strong should not boast in his strength; the wealthy should not boast in his wealth. But the one who boasts should boast in this: that he understands and knows Me."¹¹ That is the great goal of life: To *know* God. Meanwhile, here's *some* of what Eli's sons were up to:

1 Samuel 2:13-16 - ¹³ or the priests' share of the sacrifices from the people. When anyone offered a sacrifice, the priest's servant would come with a three-pronged meat fork while the meat was boiling ¹⁴ and plunge it into the container, kettle, cauldron, or cooking pot. The priest would claim for himself whatever the meat fork brought up. This is the way they treated all the Israelites who came there to Shiloh. ¹⁵ Even before the fat was burned, the priest's servant would come and say to the one who was sacrificing, "Give the priest some meat to roast, because he won't accept boiled meat from you—only raw." ¹⁶ If that person said to him, "The fat must be burned first; then you can take whatever you want for yourself," the servant would reply, "No, I insist that you hand it over right now. If you don't, I'll take it by force!"

During the UK Post Office scandal, the leaders of the post office used criminal and civil action to shut up any underlings who said the system was corrupt. When one sub-postmaster was accused for taking £35,000, he denied it and tried to prove the problems were in the software. So the post office spent £300,000 crushing him in court, leaving him bankrupt and his family devastated.

⁵ 1 Samuel 8:4-5

⁶ David Toshio Tsumura *The New International Commentary On The Old Testament: The First Book of Samuel*

⁷ Ralph Klein *Word Biblical Commentary, Volume 10: 1 Samuel*

⁸ *The NET Bible First Edition Notes*

⁹ 1 Samuel 2:29

¹⁰ Davis

¹¹ Jeremiah 9:23-24

Under the Law of Moses, the priests and their families *were* given a specific share of the meat. The breast and the thigh were for them.¹² But Eli's sons wanted more. What they did was at quadruple wrong: They were taking parts that didn't belong to them, they were taking *raw* meat, they were eating the fat, *and* they were threatening people if they didn't go along with their wickedness.

This is so *brazenly* wrong. As an example, Leviticus 7 clearly, emphatically states: You can use the fat of an animal in any way but you *must not eat it*. And if you *do* eat any fat from an animal offered to the Lord, that person will be *cut off* from God's people.¹³

Notice, this wasn't just something they did once or twice. Verse 14 says that this is the way they treated *all* the people who came to the Tabernacle - which would include Elkanah's family.

This was extremely serious. They're messing with worship. They're messing with people's atonement. God would not let this go on indefinitely. We'll see that next time. But in the *meantime*, their hypocrisy was giving true faith a bad name in Israel.¹⁴

When Christian leaders fall into sin, it makes a terrible impact not just on those immediately involved, but on just about everyone who hears about it. The dishonor it brings on Christ. The discouragement and doubt that it brings on others. Christian leaders need to take this seriously.

And so does every Christian. You and I may not have a wide audience, but we're *all* priests. If you're a Christian, the Bible says you are part a royal priesthood.¹⁵ We all must consider how our conduct is influencing the people around us. Your faithfulness or your wickedness will make an impact.

1 Samuel 2:17 - ¹⁷ So the servants' sin was very severe in the presence of the LORD, because the men treated the LORD's offering with contempt.

The Lord saw all that was happening. Remember what Hannah said in her song: God is a God of knowledge Who weighs our actions. Ultimately, He fiercely judges these fellows because they would not repent. It didn't matter that they were important priests. If you deny the Lord, He will deny you and you will bear the penalty for your sin.

Now here's an interesting comparison: In the middle of *Second Samuel*, David commits a terrible sin. And God will say to him, "David, you have treated Me with *contempt*." It's the same word that describes Eli's sons. So why wasn't David judged like Hophni and Phinehas? *Repentance*. David turned from his sin toward God in confession and repentance. He would still face consequences for what he did - serious and lasting consequences - but God forgave him and *cleansed* him.

1 Samuel 2:18 - ¹⁸ Samuel served in the LORD's presence—this mere boy was dressed in the linen ephod.

¹² Leviticus 10:14-15

¹³ Leviticus 7:24-25

¹⁴ Robert Bergen *The New American Commentary, Volume 7: 1, 2 Samuel*

¹⁵ 1 Peter 2:9

Suddenly the camera pans from this toxic scene to remind us that little Sammy is there, too! We see what's going on and think, "We gotta get this kid out of there!" What hope does he have to grow in the Lord and become a man of integrity if *this* is who he's apprenticing under?

But then we remember the promise of Hannah's song, that God will guard the steps of His faithful ones. This *was* a terribly, toxic work environment. And yet, *this is* where God called Samuel. And though he was surrounded by sin, we see *him* serving. He's described *not* as being influenced by the sons of Eli, but as being in the Lord's presence.

Maybe you're in a life situation that has a lot of bad elements. Bad job, bad boss, problematic coworkers, something like that. You don't always have to stay in that situation. But the thing we need to remember as Christians is that the *circumstances* are not the deciding factor for us. God's *calling* on our lives is the decider. If you feel like Samuel in Shiloh or Daniel in Babylon or Joseph in Egypt, that's ok - you're allowed to feel that way. But before you make a change you need to know if God has *called* you to stay or go. Because you can be Samuel or Daniel or Joseph, who were in *terrible* life/work situations, and were used for *incredible* purposes and great spiritual growth.

Remember: We're the Lord's servants. Samuel served. He even looks the part. The ephod here was most likely an apron he would wear.¹⁶ It reminds us of how Jesus, on the night before His death, took a towel and tied it around Himself like an apron and washed His disciples feet. And afterward He said He did this as an example for us that we might go and do likewise.¹⁷

The Christian life is a life of service, not convenience. And one of the things that Samuel's life shows is that *any* of us can serve. That doesn't mean all of us have the strength or health or opportunity to do every *kind* of service. But all of us are called to serve in the Lord's presence, before His face, as He sets our lives aside for particular purposes. This term serving "suggests ongoing activity - something ingrained in Samuel's lifestyle."¹⁸ And it was ingrained in Hannah's, too.

1 Samuel 2:19 - ¹⁹ Each year his mother made him a little robe and took it to him when she went with her husband to offer the annual sacrifice.

It would've been hard to leave your boy year after year. But think of much harder it would've been knowing that he was being raised by Eli with Hophni and Phinehas around! But Elkanah and Hannah knew the Lord is trustworthy. They knew He would not fail Samuel.

And notice: they kept coming, even though they'd have to deal with the things Eli's sons were doing. They didn't say, "Ok, we're not going to Tabernacle anymore." They had Joshua's mentality: "This is what's going on, it's not right, but as for me and my house, *we're* going to serve the Lord."

¹⁶ Klein

¹⁷ John 13:1-15

¹⁸ Bergen

And when they came each year, Hannah brought a new robe for Samuel. A cloak he would wear over the ephod.¹⁹ It probably felt like a small thing. They couldn't do all the things they *wished* they could do for their son. But she could bring a robe. But you know - *robes* become very significant in Samuel's story. There are going to be a couple of very pivotal moments which reference the robe he was wearing. I think it's a nod of grace from the Lord to Hannah. Him using this small, tangible labor for a greater spiritual purpose. The Lord is generous like that. He's good and kind like that.

1 Samuel 2:20 - ²⁰ Eli would bless Elkanah and his wife: "May the LORD give you children by this woman in place of the one she has given to the LORD." Then they would go home.

Some part of Eli *wants* to honor God. Some part of him *wants* to be used by God. And clearly, God was *willing* to use him. But, he's totally compromised. He won't honor God in his parenting. He won't do the hard parts of his duty. And so, his story is going to end tragically. It didn't *have* to. But spiritual health doesn't happen on accident. Finishing well doesn't happen on its own. Christian growth requires obedience. It requires repentance. It requires submission.

1 Samuel 2:21 - ²¹ The LORD paid attention to Hannah's need, and she conceived and gave birth to three sons and two daughters. Meanwhile, the boy Samuel grew up in the presence of the LORD.

It's been said you can't out-give the Lord. He will never be in debt to anyone. They gave Him a son, He gave them five children back. Notice the words used here: He *paid attention* to them. He sees your needs. He cares about them. He's a God of grace and affection.

Not only was the Lord mindful and caring toward Hannah, but toward to Samuel, too. Both are before His face. Both are watched by Him, loved by Him, provided for by Him.

Our goal is to live in the presence of the Lord our God. To commune day-by-day with Him. Whether we're in a good tent, like Elkanah's, or a bad tent like in Shiloh. Why? Psalm 130 tells us:

Psalm 130:7 - For there is faithful love with the LORD, and with Him is redemption in abundance.

That is true whether you're Samuel in Shiloh or David in Jerusalem or Daniel in Babylon or Paul in Philippi or Peter on the Mount of Transfiguration or Noah in the ark or Jonah in the whale.

So what do we do if we find ourselves in a toxic environment? Well, there may be a bunch of things you can and should do on the *physical* level. What about on the spiritual level? That's what this text examples for us. In a very bad spiritual situation, Samuel was right where he was called to be.

We need to figure out where we're called. And if we're called to a place where we have to rub elbows with toxic or wicked good-for-nothings, we can remember what we're told in Romans 12:

¹⁹ Bill Arnold *The NIV Application Commentary: 1 & 2 Samuel*

Romans 12:21 - 21 Do not be conquered by evil, but conquer evil with good.

The good of the Gospel. The good of a life lived in the power of Jesus Christ. The good of faithfulness in action, knowing God can be trusted to do what needs doing. Maybe *through* us, maybe through someone else. But living as servants of His good, answering His call. They may be wicked while they work, we worship while we work. And if we're following God's leading and answer His call, we can rely on the fact that He will guard our steps and we can grow in Him *even if* the circumstances are bad. Then He can use us for *His* good.