

The Heartbreak of Wayward Children

From the Theology of Work Bible Commentary on 1 Samuel

As Samuel ages, he repeats Eli's error and appoints his own sons to succeed him. Like Eli's sons, they turn out to be greedy and corrupt. Disappointing sons of great leaders is a recurrent theme in Samuel and Kings. It reminds us that the work of parenting is as challenging as every other occupation but far more emotionally intense. No solution is given in the text, but we can observe that Eli, Samuel, and David seem to have given their troubled children many privileges but little paternal involvement. Yet we also know that even the most dedicated parents may face the heartbreak of wayward children. Rather than laying blame or stereotyping causes, let us simply note that parenting children is an occupation requiring as much prayer, skill, community support, good fortune, and love as any other, if not more. Ultimately to be a parent—whether our children bring delight, disappointment, or some of both—is to depend on God's grace and mercy and to hope for a redemption beyond what we see during our lifetimes. Perhaps our deepest comfort is to remember that God also experienced a parent's heartbreak for his condemned Son, yet overcame all through the power of love.

Seeing the unsuitability of Samuel's sons, the Israelites ask him to appoint for them a king. This request displeases Samuel, and he warns the people that kings lay heavy burdens on a nation.

God agrees that asking for a king is a bad idea because it amounts to a rejection of God himself, as king. Nonetheless, the Lord decides to allow the people to choose their form of government. Much like a father dealing with a wayward child, God permits his people to start where they are. They cannot live up to God's highest ideal, so he allows them a lower one.

There are many institutional and workplace situations where leadership must admit to people's poor choices, yet at the same time try to provide opportunities for growth and grace. In our fallen world, our aspiration is to love God and treat other people as God commands.