

# First Sunday of Christmas, Old Testament, Year C

IT'S ALL ABOUT THE GRAMMAR

1 Samuel 2:18-20, 26

First Sunday of Christmas

Analysis by Timothy Hoyer

<sup>18</sup>Samuel was ministering before the Lord, a boy wearing a linen ephod. <sup>19</sup>His mother used to make for him a little robe and take it to him each year, when she went up with her husband to offer the yearly sacrifice. <sup>20</sup>Then Eli would bless Elkanah and his wife, and say, "May the Lord repay you with children by this woman for the gift that she made to the Lord"; and then they would return to their home. <sup>26</sup>Now the boy Samuel continued to grow both in stature and in favor with the Lord and with the people.

*Author's Note: This reading is obviously chosen to echo the Gospel reading for the day: <sup>52</sup>"And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor" (Luke 2.58).*

**DIAGNOSIS: The Law Makes Demands, Threats, and Kills**

## **Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): The Way the Law Says It**

There is a lot of Law grammar in the story of Hannah and her son Samuel. First, Hannah prayed that if God gave her a son, she would set him before God as a Nazirite until the day of his death (1 Samuel 1:11). The Law grammar is in the form of “if...then.” Hannah said she would give to God, but only if God gave her a son. So we often pray, “God, if you do this for me, I will do things for you.” Eli uses the same Law grammar, “If Hannah has given a gift to the Lord, then may God repay you with children.” The world lives by Law grammar, “If you behave, then you get this.” If you work, then you get paid. If you do your homework, then you can play. If you do this for me, I owe you one. Even church stewardship advertizing uses Law language, “If God has blessed you, then you should give more to the church.” To grow in favor with God and with the people is also Law grammar, as in, “If you grow and are strong and behave, then we will approve of you.”

## **Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): The Way the Heart Trusts**

All that Law grammar is used because we trust it. It works. It makes sense. It's fair. We trust it for our relationship with God, as in, “If I have been a good person, and I have, then I should go to heaven.” This is how the world thinks, and its thinking is a fruit of its tree—the tree of trusting what we do.

## **Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): The Way the Law Kills**

When we trust Law grammar—that is, to trust what we do—then we are not trusting God to be our creator. We are not trusting God to be a God of promise, but a God of judgment, calculating our worth, measuring what we have done to determine how much we get back, and then condemning us as worthy of death. “If you do not trust God, then you die.” Such was the fate of Eli and his two sons, Phinehas and Hophni. That is the grammar of the Law.

## **PROGNOSIS: The Gospel Offers Comfort and Life**

### **Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): The Way the Gospel Gives Life**

Gospel grammar must be revealed to us, for we do not know, it nor could we learn it on our own. Gospel grammar is: “Because Jesus died for us, therefore we are given forgiveness.” “Because God is a God of grace, therefore God will be graceful to us for his own sake.” Thus, the grace in our story of Samuel is that because God gave his favor to Samuel, therefore he grew up under God’s favor. Because God favored Samuel, therefore people also favored him. Gospel grammar is God acting first for us, and therefore we benefit from it. God acted in Jesus, therefore we benefit from it.

### **Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (External Solution): The Heart Is Given Faith in God’s Favor**

Because Samuel was given God’s favor, he was also given faith that God is a God of grace and promise and mercy. That is what enabled him to be a judge over God’s people and to tell them to trust God instead of wealth. Though Samuel had to deal with

Philistines and the people of Israel wanting a king, he even more had to deal with the people's disbelief and that "they have rejected me from being king over them," as the Lord said to Samuel (1 Samuel 8:7). The people preferred a king of power, of armies, of someone they could see, instead of trusting God to rule them. The only cure is to be given God's favor after one experiences fearing God (be it through an enemy like the Philistines or a Goliath).

### **Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): The Way the Gospel Says It**

Elkanah and Hannah were given many more children, which they got to see as gifts, not as a reward for giving Samuel to the Lord. If they regarded their children as a reward, then their faith would be in their works, namely, their work of giving Samuel to the Lord. But if they regarded their children as gifts, then their faith would be in God, which is where our faith gets to be. We can look at events in our lives as things we deserved, thus putting our faith in our works, or, with God's favor given to us in Jesus, we can see events as God's gifts, and trust God for life instead of ourselves. After all, who is more dependable—us and our human weaknesses, getting sick, being revengeful, forgetful, or God who looks on us with favor through Jesus? Surely God is more dependable, for he raised Jesus from death.