

The Sorrows of Samuel

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On August 20th we remember the great prophet Samuel. His mother treasured him because she had been barren for many years before his birth. When her prayers for a son were answered, she kept her promise to dedicate him to God, and gave him into the care of the aged high priest and judge, Eli.

Living with Eli, Samuel "continued to grow both in stature and in favor with the Lord and with men" (1 Samuel/ 1 Kingdoms 2:26). His loving mother visited each year, bringing a little robe she had made for him. And even though the "word of the Lord was rare in those days; there was no frequent vision" (3:1), Samuel was called by the Lord's own voice to be a prophet. The first news God gave him was grim—it was that He planned to punish Eli and his house for their sin—but the old priest took it calmly, knowing that he had not disciplined his worthless sons, who had no regard for God and stole from the people's offerings. Meanwhile, Samuel continued to grow up and to become known as a prophet of the Lord in "all Israel from Dan to Beersheba" (3:20).

God's plan was fulfilled when the Philistines routed the Israelites in battle and captured the Ark of the Covenant. Eli's sons died in the battle, Eli dropped dead of shock and grief, and his daughter-in-law said, "The glory has departed from Israel, for the Ark of God has been captured" (4:22).

This great sorrow was not permanent. The Philistines returned the Ark, and Samuel led the people in a burnt offering of repentance to God for having turned away from Him to worship foreign gods. "So the Philistines were subdued and did not again enter the territory of Israel. And the hand of the Lord was against the Philistines all the days of Samuel" (7:13).

But more sorrows were in store. Reaching old age, and tired, Samuel appointed his sons Joel and Abijah to be judges over Israel. But somewhat like the sons of Eli, Samuel's boys were unworthy; they were greedy and took bribes. The elders demanded that Samuel appoint a king for them, since he himself was old and his sons "did not walk in his ways" (8:6).

So to the shame of having greedy sons was added the sorrow of the people wanting to be like the other nations, having a monarch. Samuel was displeased and worried. He prayed, and the Lord told him to give the people what they wanted, "for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected Me from being king over them" (8:7b). The people wouldn't listen when Samuel tried to warn them that kings often take more than they give.

Troparion - Tone 2

You were given as a precious gift to a barren womb,
And offered as a fragrant sacrifice to your Lord.
You served Him in truth and righteousness;
Wherefore we honor you, O Samuel prophet of God,
As an intercessor for our souls.

Samuel saw good things happen for the people of Israel during his very long life. But his sorrows were real, and only because of his deep faith was he able to serve God as well, and as humbly, as he did.