

Homiletics Analysis: 1 Samuel 2

Content & Intent

This Text — Content

First Samuel 2 divides into two sharply contrasting movements held together by a single theological axis: the LORD reverses human expectations of power, status, and permanence. The chapter opens with Hannah's prayer of praise (vv. 1–10), a sustained theological poem that moves from personal exultation ("my horn is exalted in the LORD") to cosmic declaration ("the pillars of the earth are the LORD's"). Hannah does not merely celebrate her son — she proclaims a God who brings down the proud and raises the lowly, who kills and makes alive, who governs the full arc of human affairs from the womb to the grave to the throne. The prayer is a theological overture for the entire book.

The narrative then interweaves two households: the house of Eli declining in corruption, and the house of Hannah's son Samuel ascending in favor. Eli's sons Hophni and Phinehas are introduced as men who "did not know the LORD" (v. 12) — a devastating covenant phrase — who despise the offering of the LORD, abuse their priestly office, and treat Shiloh as a site of personal exploitation rather than divine service. Eli rebukes them ineffectually (vv. 22–25) but does not remove them. Meanwhile Samuel grows before the LORD (vv. 18, 21, 26), ministered faithfully, clothed in the linen ephod, blessed year by year. The chapter closes with the oracle of the man of God (vv. 27–36): the house of Eli is condemned — God will cut short their priestly line, none of Eli's descendants will reach old age, a faithful priest will rise in their place. The sign of coming judgment: Hophni and Phinehas will die on the same day.

This Text — Intent

God is seeking to produce in the reader a reorientation of where power and security actually reside. Hannah's prayer and the Eli narrative together press the same question from opposite directions: Will you trust in institutional position, inherited status, and human strength — or in the God who governs all of it from outside? The reader who has inherited status, office, or religious position is confronted with the Eli pattern and warned. The reader who is lowly, passed over, or apparently without strength is confronted with Hannah's pattern and invited to exult. The intent is not merely cognitive ("understand God's sovereignty") but worshipful and recalibrating — God is calling His people to locate their security, their identity, and their confidence exclusively in Him, because He alone has demonstrated that He raises the lowly and brings down the proud, and no human arrangement is permanent before Him.

Subject Sentence: The LORD alone governs the rise and fall of every human power — no status is secure before Him.

Primary Claim: God is calling His people to locate all security, confidence, and hope in Him alone — because He, and not institutional position or inherited privilege, determines who stands and who falls. The pattern of Hannah’s exaltation and Eli’s household’s condemnation is not merely historical narrative; it is the shape of how God always works, and it demands a reckoning with where we have placed our trust.

Interpretive Evaluation

Hannah’s Prayer as Mere Personal Testimony vs. Theological Proclamation

A common reading — especially in devotional and evangelical contexts — treats Hannah’s prayer primarily as personal worship arising from personal circumstances: she received a child, she is grateful, she sings. This reading is not wrong but is severely truncated. The prayer quickly moves far beyond Hannah’s circumstances into declarations about the LORD’s universal governance of life, death, strength, poverty, wealth, and royal power (vv. 6–10). The final verse (“He will give strength to his king and exalt the horn of his anointed”) speaks of a king who does not yet exist in Israel — pointing forward canonically to David and ultimately to the anointed King of Kings. This is not personal testimony that happens to have theological flavor; it is a theological *proclamation* that happens to arise from personal experience. The Reformed reading insists: let the prayer do the full work it is doing. It is the theological interpretive key to the entire book of Samuel. Read it as such.

The Eli Narrative as Character Study vs. Covenant Indictment

Dispensational and some Baptist readings may treat the Eli section primarily as a cautionary tale about parenting, leadership failure, or permissiveness — Eli did not discipline his sons, and the consequences were catastrophic. This reading captures something real (vv. 22–25 do implicate Eli’s failure to restrain his sons), but it reduces a covenant indictment to a moralistic lesson about parental discipline. The text goes deeper: Hophni and Phinehas “did not know the LORD” (v. 12) — this is the covenant’s severest language of relational rupture (cf. Hosea 4:6; Jeremiah 22:16). Their sin is not merely behavioral failure but theological: they treated the LORD’s offering with contempt, using sacred office as a vehicle for self-service. Eli’s sin is not primarily inadequate parenting — it is honoring his sons above the LORD (v. 29). The oracle of the man of God is a covenant-lawsuit speech, not a parenting lecture. Acknowledge the parenting application, but do not let it displace the covenant indictment.

Arminian/Wesleyan Reading: Human Responsibility and Conditional Judgment

A Wesleyan reading rightly emphasizes human responsibility in this chapter — Hophni and Phinehas are culpable; Eli chose to honor his sons above God; Samuel chose faithfulness. The text supports this emphasis. However, a Wesleyan reading may resist the Calvinist note in verse 25 — “they would not listen to the voice of their father, for it was the will of the LORD to put them to death” — as though God’s sovereign determination undermines genuine human culpability. The Reformed reading does not flatten this tension but holds it: the text presents both genuine human rebellion and sovereign divine determination without apology. This is not contradiction but the Bible’s characteristic double agency — human actors sin willingly; God governs the outcome. Refute any reading that resolves the tension by diminishing either side. The text insists on both.

The Man of God’s Oracle as Prophetic Curiosity vs. Canonical Pivot

Some readers treat the oracle of the man of God (vv. 27–36) as a narrative bridge to chapters 3–4 — interesting historically but primarily transitional. The Reformed reading insists this oracle is doing heavy theological lifting: it establishes that God is not subject to institutional inertia. The Aaronic priesthood seemed permanent — divinely established, structurally embedded, generationally hereditary. The oracle announces that God will honor it only so long as His own name is honored through it, and will replace it with a faithful priest of His own appointment. This foreshadows not only Samuel and Zadok but ultimately the great High Priest of Hebrews — the One who is appointed not by genealogy but by the power of an indestructible life. The oracle is not a curiosity; it is a covenant statement about the LORD’s utter freedom from institutional captivity.

Key Canonical Support

- **Luke 1:46–55 (The Magnificat)** — Mary’s song echoes Hannah’s prayer in structure, theme, and vocabulary almost verbatim. The Holy Spirit’s inspiration of both texts signals that the same claim is being made across both testaments: God’s way of operating in the world is to exalt the lowly and bring down the mighty; this pattern reaches its definitive fulfillment in the Incarnation. Hannah’s prayer is the hermeneutical key that Mary’s song unlocks.
- **Psalms 75:6–7** — “For not from the east or from the west and not from the wilderness comes lifting up, but it is God who executes judgment, putting down one and lifting up another.” The psalm makes explicit and universalized what Hannah’s prayer enacts personally — the LORD governs all rise and fall of human power, and this truth calls for worship.
- **Hebrews 7:11–17** — The argument that the Levitical priesthood’s inadequacy required replacement by a priest after the order of Melchizedek provides the New Testament fulfillment of the man of God’s oracle in 1 Samuel 2. The Eli household’s condemnation is the first visible crack in a system God always intended to be provisional; Hebrews shows where the trajectory was always heading.

- **1 Peter 5:5–6** — “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.” Peter cites this as a governing principle of God’s ways — the same theological pattern Hannah announces, now declared as an axiom for the church. The passage grounds what Hannah experienced and proclaims as the church’s operating framework.
- **Jeremiah 7:1–15 (Temple Sermon)** — The LORD’s judgment on Shiloh itself (mentioned explicitly in Jeremiah 7:12–14) confirms that the destruction of the sanctuary is a pattern God uses to demonstrate that no institutional location or hereditary office can domesticate His presence. Shiloh is exhibit A. Jeremiah warns Jerusalem not to repeat the error.

Aim

This analysis aims to confront the reader’s misplaced confidence in institutional status, inherited privilege, or religious position — and to redirect that confidence toward the God who governs all of it, who raises the lowly and brings down the proud, and who has demonstrated this most completely in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
2:1	Hannah’s personal exultation — “my horn is exalted in the LORD”	“Horn” = strength, status; the personal becomes the theological
2:2	The LORD alone is holy; no rock like Him	Theological ground for everything that follows
2:3–5	Warning against proud speech; the LORD is a God of knowledge who weighs actions; reversals enumerated (strong/weak, full/hungry, barren/fruitful)	This is not sentiment — it is a declaration of divine justice in action
2:6–8	The LORD kills and makes alive; raises the poor from dust to seat with princes	Sovereignty over life, death, wealth, poverty, status — all of it
2:9–10	The LORD guards the faithful; the wicked perish in darkness; He judges the earth; He gives strength to His king and exalts His	Final verses look beyond Hannah’s personal situation to the coming king — a messianic horizon

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	anointed	
2:11	Samuel ministers before the LORD; Eli's household introduced	Structural hinge between prayer and narrative
2:12–17	Hophni and Phinehas: "worthless men who did not know the LORD" — their abuse of the priestly office detailed (demanding raw meat, treating the offering with contempt)	"Did not know the LORD" = covenant rupture, not mere ignorance
2:18–21	Samuel ministers faithfully in linen ephod; Hannah's annual visits; Eli blesses Elkanah and Hannah; she conceives five more children	Samuel's growth in faithfulness contrasted with Eli's sons
2:22–25	Eli hears of his sons' sins (including sexual immorality with women serving at the tent); his rebuke is ineffectual; v. 25: "they would not listen, for it was the will of the LORD to put them to death"	Sovereign determination and human rebellion held together without resolution
2:26	"Now the boy Samuel continued to grow both in stature and in favor with the LORD and also with man"	Parallels Luke 2:52 — Samuel as a type of Christ; intentional echo
2:27–29	The man of God delivers the covenant-lawsuit oracle: the LORD recounts His faithfulness to the house of Eli; indicts Eli for honoring sons above God	Covenant faithfulness recounted before the indictment — grace precedes judgment
2:30	"Those who honor me I will honor, and those who despise me shall be lightly esteemed"	The governing principle of the entire oracle — and of the chapter
2:31–33	Judgment declared: the priestly line of Eli will be cut off; none will reach old age;	The institutional permanence of the priesthood is not immune to

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
2:34	grief will fill the house Sign of confirmation: Hophni and Phinehas will die on the same day	covenant faithfulness Fulfilled in 1 Samuel 4 — credibility of the oracle confirmed by precision
2:35–36	Promise of a faithful priest to be raised up — who will do according to God’s heart and mind; surviving members of Eli’s house will beg for bread	Foreshadows Samuel, then Zadok, ultimately Christ as High Priest

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	2:1–10	Hannah’s Theological Proclamation: The God Who Reverses All Things
2	2:11–17	The House of Eli, Part 1: Corruption Without and Within
3	2:18–21	Samuel’s Faithful Ministry — and the LORD’s Renewed Blessing on Hannah
4	2:22–26	The House of Eli, Part 2: Eli’s Failure to Honor God Above His Sons
5	2:27–36	The Covenant Oracle: Judgment on Eli’s House, Promise of a Faithful Priest

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: The LORD alone governs the rise and fall of every human power — no status is secure before Him.

Primary Claim: God is calling His people to locate all security, confidence, and hope in Him alone — because He, and not institutional position or inherited privilege, determines who stands and who falls. The pattern of Hannah’s exaltation and Eli’s household’s condemnation is not merely historical narrative; it is the shape of how God always works, and it demands a reckoning with where we have placed our trust.

Applications (Five)

1. Reframe what “strength” means in your life by submitting it to Hannah’s theology. (*Mind/Belief*)

Hannah announces that strength, status, and security are not inherent to the one who holds them — they are gifts administered by a God who kills and makes alive, raises up and brings low. If you believe your position is secure because you have earned it, maintained it, or inherited it, you are living in the Eli delusion. The passage calls you to think differently — to hold every form of strength, influence, and security as received from the LORD and dependent on Him, not as a possession you control. This is not false humility; it is accurate theology about how reality works.

2. Examine the specific areas where you are “honoring your sons above God” — the places where you have arranged your life to protect your investment rather than honor the LORD. (*Will/Behavior*)

Eli did not stop loving God when he failed to remove his sons — he simply found a way to accommodate both. The text does not describe him as an apostate; it describes him as a man who, when forced to choose between honoring God and protecting his household’s position, consistently chose the household. The question for every reader is precise: Where have you arranged a similar accommodation? What person, institution, investment, or identity are you protecting at the cost of full obedience? Eli’s failure was not sudden — it was accumulated tolerance. Name what you are tolerating.

3. Let the pattern of Hannah and Eli produce genuine, worshipful confidence in God rather than anxiety about your own vulnerability. (*Affections/Worship*)

The same God who brought down Eli’s house is the God who gave Hannah five more children and raised her son to national prominence. This is not two different Gods — it is one God acting consistently with His own character. If you are in a season of lowliness, waiting, or apparent powerlessness, Hannah’s prayer is addressed to you directly. The call is not to grit your teeth and endure — it is to exult: “My heart exults in the LORD; my strength is exalted in the LORD.” Worship is the appropriate response to accurately understanding who this God is. Let the theology produce the affection, not just the analysis.

4. Resist the assumption that religious office, institutional position, or generational heritage in the faith guarantees God’s favor. (*Mind/Belief*)

Eli’s sons were not outsiders — they were the sons of the high priest, themselves ordained to the priestly office, operating in the most sacred institution in Israel. Their position was hereditary, divinely established, and structurally protected. None of it shielded them. The man of God’s oracle makes this explicit: God had said He would honor the house of Eli forever, but that “forever” was always conditional on their honoring Him (v. 30). The reader who derives confidence from being a lifelong church member, from a Reformed heritage,

from family faith, from theological education — all of these are gifts and means, not guarantees. “Those who honor me I will honor” has not been suspended.

5. Pray and speak Hannah’s theology into situations where the strong seem permanently entrenched and the lowly seem permanently forgotten.
(Affections/Worship)

Hannah was not merely grateful — she was theologically defiant. Her prayer announces, in a world where Peninnah’s taunting seemed permanently justified, that the LORD’s governance makes the apparently permanent arrangement permanently unstable. There are situations in your life and in the world where injustice seems entrenched, where the powerful seem untouchable, and where the lowly seem structurally forgotten. Hannah’s prayer is not naive optimism — it is covenant realism. Pray it. Mean it. Speak it into those situations as an act of theological confidence in the God who governs the pillars of the earth.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: First Samuel 2 delivers one of Scripture’s most comprehensive declarations of divine sovereignty over human affairs, concentrated into a single chapter. Hannah’s prayer (vv. 1–10) establishes that the LORD governs the full arc of human existence — life and death, poverty and wealth, status and obscurity — not as a general principle but as an active, governing reality. This is not deism but covenant sovereignty: the LORD is involved in the specific arrangements of specific human lives toward specific ends. The Eli narrative then demonstrates this theology in motion: no institutional arrangement — not even one divinely established — is permanent when it becomes a vehicle for self-service rather than the LORD’s glory. The governing principle of verse 30 (“those who honor me I will honor, and those who despise me shall be lightly esteemed”) is not merely a warning to priests; it is a disclosure of the LORD’s own character and the moral logic by which He governs history.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: This chapter provides canonical foundation for the Reformed insistence that God’s sovereign grace is never captured by institutional form, and that the means of grace — including the priesthood, the temple, and all their New Covenant analogues — remain instruments, never repositories, of divine favor. The house of Eli’s condemnation demonstrates what Reformed theology calls God’s aseity and freedom: He is not bound to any system, office, or lineage, but works through them as long as and insofar as they serve His own name and purpose. The promise of a “faithful priest” who will “do according to what is in my heart and in my mind” (v. 35) points forward to the Reformed understanding of Christ as the only truly faithful High Priest — appointed not by

genealogical succession but by divine appointment, who fulfills all that Eli's house failed to be. Hannah's prayer, with its explicit mention of "his anointed" (v. 10), grounds the entire Davidic-Messianic trajectory in the same sovereignty she has personally experienced: the God who exalted Hannah will exalt His Anointed One. This is grace operative at both the personal and redemptive-historical level simultaneously.

Main Takeaway

The God you serve is not impressed by your position, your heritage, or your institutional credentials — and He is not indifferent to your lowliness, your obscurity, or your apparently permanent disadvantage. He raises the poor from the dust and seats them with princes. He cuts off the line of the high priest when that line despises His name. He does this not unpredictably but consistently, because "those who honor me I will honor" has never stopped being true. Stop placing your security in the arrangement you can see and start locating it entirely in the God who governs every arrangement from outside. Hannah was right. Eli's sons were wrong. The question is which pattern you are living in — and whether you are willing to let this chapter change your answer.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Treating Hannah's prayer as biographical background rather than theological proclamation.** The most common error with this chapter is spending significant time on Hannah's personal story (established in chapter 1) and treating verses 1–10 as her emotional response to receiving Samuel — and then moving quickly into the Eli narrative. This misses the prayer's function entirely. Hannah's prayer is the theological key to the book of Samuel, not a biographical footnote. It should receive sustained exegetical attention as the interpretive framework for everything that follows. Preachers who shortchange the prayer shortchange the chapter.
- **Reducing the Eli narrative to a parenting lesson.** Eli's failure to discipline his sons is real and textually present (vv. 22–25), and application to parenting is legitimate. But if the sermon's primary takeaway from the Eli section is "discipline your children," the preacher has preached past the text. The indictment is theological: Eli honored his sons above the LORD (v. 29), and his sons "did not know the LORD" (v. 12) — covenant rupture language. The parenting application must be secondary to the covenant indictment.
- **Softening or resolving the tension in verse 25.** "They would not listen to the voice of their father, for it was the will of the LORD to put them to death" is one of Scripture's most explicit double-agency statements. Preachers tempted to protect human freedom may minimize the divine determination; preachers tempted to protect divine sovereignty may minimize the genuine culpability of Hophni and

Phinehas. The text holds both without apology. Do not resolve what the text refuses to resolve — but do not leave the congregation without a framework for holding both simultaneously. This is an opportunity, not an embarrassment.

- **Treating verse 30 as a bare merit-reward transaction.** “Those who honor me I will honor” is not a works-based covenant operating principle — it is a covenant faithfulness statement within a relationship already established by grace. God had already chosen the house of Eli, already established them in priestly office, already committed to their blessing. The condition of verse 30 operates within that framework of prior grace, not as the basis for earning it. Preaching verse 30 as a merit transaction produces moralism; preaching it as a covenant faithfulness principle within prior grace produces gospel-grounded motivation.
- **Missing the messianic horizon of Hannah’s prayer and the man of God’s oracle.** Hannah’s closing reference to “his anointed” (v. 10) has no immediate referent — there is no king yet. The promise of a “faithful priest” in verse 35 points beyond Samuel and Zadok to an eschatological fulfillment. A sermon that does not trace this trajectory toward Christ has treated 1 Samuel 2 as an interesting historical account rather than as part of the unfolding covenant of grace. The chapter demands at minimum a signpost toward the One who is the great Reverser (incarnation as ultimate exaltation of the lowly), the faithful High Priest, and the LORD’s Anointed.
- **Preaching the reversals of Hannah’s prayer as a social-justice program rather than as a theological declaration about the LORD’s character.** The reversals Hannah announces (hungry fed, barren fruitful, poor exalted, proud brought down) are real, and they have real social implications. But the prayer’s primary function is doxological and theological — it declares who God is and how He operates, not primarily what social order He is instituting. Collapsing the prayer into a political or economic manifesto (whether from the left or right) replaces the theological claim with an ideological one. The prayer calls for worship before it calls for action.