

GOD WITH US
Part 3: A King in place of THE KING.
1st and 2nd Samuel

Message 2 - Eli's fall and the Ark Captured
1Samuel 2:12-4:22

Introduction

As the book of 1Samuel opens, Eli was the current high priest in Israel. This would be the equivalent of a pope or an archbishop. Going back to the days of Aaron, the brother of Moses, we recall that the high priest was *the* spiritual leader in Israel, responsible for maintaining the purity of the worship life in the nation. The nation's well-being: their security, strength, prosperity and privilege to live in the Promised Land God had given them, was tied directly to the closeness of their relationship with Yahweh, their God. This meant Levite priests needed to model a love and devotion for God, and carefully obey and enforce the covenant requirements given to them by God, through Moses, at Mt. Sinai. It was *more* imperative for the high priest and his sons (heirs to the role), to maintain the purity of Israel's spiritual and worship life at the sacred Tabernacle by modeling, teaching and requiring the people to do the same. Eli led Israel as high priest for 40 years (4:18); but failed to honor God in his role. Even Hannah had experienced an insensitive and rude reaction from Eli when praying (1:13, 14). Sadly, this high priest brought judgment, not blessing, to his own household and to the nation as a whole.

The Sin of Eli's sons: 2:12-17

The root of Eli's failure as a high priest was not so much in his *own* wickedness; rather, in his negligence. As a father, *he reprov*ed but failed to *restrain* his wicked sons Hophni and Phinehas. They showed contempt for the worship rituals at the sacred Tabernacle in Shiloh, as they recklessly violated the prescribed routines for the purpose of their own selfish gain.

“Now the sons of Eli were worthless men; they did not know the Lord and the custom of the priests with the people . . . The sin of the young men was very great before the Lord, for the men despised the offering of the Lord” (2:12 and 17).

The book of Leviticus was essentially a manual giving very specific instructions as to how each kind of offering was to be made by the priests, in order to worship and honor God. Hophni and Phinehas trashed the God-given instruction book and made up their own, in order to suit their personal preferences and satisfy their own sinful appetites. This was *completely* dishonoring to the Lord, for whom these sacrifices were intended. The first and last lines really get at the heart of the matter: *They did not KNOW the Lord (v.12) . . . they despised (treated with contempt) the offering of the Lord (v.17)*. Hophni and Phinehas remind us of the 2 self-willed sons of Aaron- Nadab and Abihu, who recklessly offered up strange fire before the Lord in the sight of all Israel and were destroyed by an outburst of divine wrath (see Leviticus 10). This pattern of having ungodly priests would continue throughout the Old Testament. About 500 years after Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, God spoke through the prophet Jeremiah of Eli's day: *"The priests did not ask, 'Where is the Lord?' Those who deal with the law did not know Me" (Jeremiah 2:8).*

Additional blessings for Hannah: 2:18-21

The narrative continues in contrast with the young boy Samuel. It emphasizes the continuing close relationship Samuel had with his devoted mother Hannah, and the blessing of the Lord upon Hannah in giving her 5 more children!

"Now Samuel was ministering before the Lord, as a boy wearing a linen ephod. And his mother would make him a little robe and bring it to him from year to year when she would come up with her husband to offer the yearly sacrifice. Then Eli would bless Elkanah and his wife and say, "May the Lord give you children from this woman in place of the one she dedicated to the Lord." And they went to their own home. The Lord visited Hannah; and she conceived and gave birth to three sons and two daughters. And the boy Samuel grew before the Lord" (2:18-21).

Hannah remained active in Samuel's life no doubt through prayer, concerned for his wellbeing and personal development in light of the unhealthy environment. She also blessed him each year with a larger robe when she visited him at the annual feast. It was Eli the priest who initiated a blessing over Hannah, that God would grant her more children in place of her son she had dedicated fully to the Lord. In turn, *the Lord delighted* in giving back to Hannah 3 sons and 2 daughters!

Hannah fulfilled her promise to give Samuel back to the Lord as a priest and a hopeful future leader in Israel (with no expectations that God would give her more children in his place). Perhaps she was inspired by Jochabed the mother of Moses, who also weaned her son and then took him to be the son of Pharaoh's daughter in Egypt (Ex 2:9,10). Both women invested into their sons while they had the time with them. Then they had to ENTRUST their sons to a faithful God without knowing their future outcomes. Mothers (and fathers) have limited time to invest in the formative development of their children. This is a solemn responsibility. The time is SHORT so use it wisely!

Eli's failed attempts to discipline his sons: 2:22-26

As Israel's high priest, Eli should have removed his disobedient sons from their duties at the Tabernacle. Instead, he feebly reproved them; yet allowed them to continue in their roles. These sons had the practice of hearing and then dismissing the voice of their father without guilt.

“Now Eli was very old; and he heard all that his sons were doing to all Israel, and how they lay with the women who served at the doorway of the tent of meeting. He said to them, “Why do you do such things, the evil things that I hear from all these people? No, my sons; for the report is not good which I hear the Lord's people circulating. If one man sins against another, God will mediate for him; but if a man sins against the Lord, who can intercede for him?” But they would not listen to the voice of their father, for the Lord desired to put them to death” (2:22-25).

Correction begins with gentle verbal words. “A wise son heeds his father's instructions” (Prov. 13:1). Sometimes repeated verbal corrections go unheeded. “A fool despises his father's instructions” (Prov.15:5). Then, with continuing ignoring, there must be increasing consequences so the person feels the weight of their actions: loss of opportunity, restriction of privileges, lowering of responsibility, limiting of resources, loss of pay, etc. Finally, if the person still refuses to ‘get the message,’ there comes an end to the correction process: “A man who hardens his neck after much reproof will suddenly be broken beyond remedy” (Prov.29:1). Eli failed to follow through in this process of disciplining his sons. If you are the one in authority, follow God's wisdom for dealing with the continued consequences of unheeded correction. If you are the one being corrected, take to heart what is being said FOR YOUR GOOD. God uses others to show you your blind spots and areas of needed change and development.

In stark contrast to Hophni and Phinehas, a short note is given about Samuel's continued growth. *"Now the boy Samuel was growing in stature and in favor both with the Lord and with men"* (2:26). This EXACT summary was given of JESUS during his silent years (Luke 2:52).

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Judgment pronounced on Eli's house: 2:27-36

The high priesthood was a hereditary office, passing from father to son, remaining in the same lineage. Here, God sends an unnamed prophet to announce the removal of the high priestly office from Eli's family line and the transfer over to another family line.

Then a man of God came to Eli and said to him, "Thus says the Lord, 'Did I not indeed reveal Myself to the house of your father when they were in Egypt in bondage to Pharaoh's house? Did I not choose them from all the tribes of Israel to be My priests, to go up to My altar, to burn incense, to carry an ephod before Me; and did I not give to the house of your father all the fire offerings of the sons of Israel? Why do you kick at My sacrifice and at My offering which I have commanded in My dwelling, and honor your sons above Me, by making yourselves fat with the choicest of every offering of My people Israel?'" (2:27-29).

(How Eli's high-priestly dynasty came to an end: 2:30-33)

The prophet forecasted the end of Hophni and Phinehas, but more specifically, the complete end of Eli's priestly lineage (2:30-33).

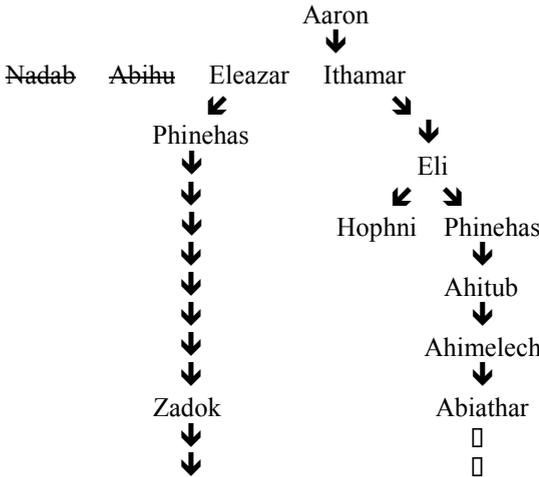
"This will be the sign to you which will come concerning your two sons, Hophni and Phinehas: on the same day both of them will die. But I will raise up for Myself a faithful priest who will do according to what is in My heart and in My soul; and I will build him an enduring house, and he will walk before My anointed always" (2:34,35).

God predicted through the prophet that the high priestly office would be given to *"a faithful priest who would obey God fully"* and, in turn, be given *"an enduring house lineage"*. The immediate reference might seem be to Samuel, who did serve as a faithful Levite priest after Eli. But Samuel was actually not in the official 'high priest' lineage of Aaron, nor did his sons continue as priests after him. Who, then, is this future "faithful priest?"

If we go back to the original high priest, Aaron, we find that he had 4 sons. The first 2, Nadab and Abihu, died when they offered strange fire before the Lord. The younger 2 sons, Eleazar and Ithamar, went on to serve as high priests, *and they both* provided family lines for future high priests. Eli was a descendant of Ithamar, as the chart below shows. In Eli's day, the high priesthood was exclusively from the line of Ithamar.

After the judgment upon Eli's house, however, *the line of high priests gradually shifted over to the line of Aaron's other son, Eleazar*. During the time of king David, there were actually 2 high priests serving concurrently, one from the line of Eleazer and the other from the line of Ithamar. But it was Solomon, David's son, who finally dismissed Eli's descendant, Abiathar, as high priest. After that time, the line of high priests followed Eleazer's descendants and specically Zadok. Thus the importance of Eli's line vanished forever as had been prophesied.

“So Solomon removed Abiathar from the priesthood of the LORD, fulfilling the word the LORD had spoken at Shiloh about the house of Eli” (1Kings 2:27).



The way we walk with the Lord (or fail to) has high stakes, not only for our own lives, but also for the lives of those who follow after us. We need to learn the skill of long-range thinking because the Bible teaches that "we reap what we sow" (Gal 6:7). Take some time to think long-range about your own life. How are your present actions (or inactions) going to impact not only your life and relationships, but also the future generations who will follow you? What kind of legacy are you building? What will grandchildren and great grandchildren say when they examine the pages of your story? "May all who come behind us find us faithful. May the fire of our devotion light their way. May the footsteps that we leave, lead them to believe; and the lives we live inspire them to obey . . . May all who come behind us find us faithful." Song by Steve Green: "Find Us Faithful"

The Lord begins to speak to Samuel: 3:1-21

Chapter 3 focuses on how the Lord began to speak to young Samuel as a prophet. While Samuel slept in the Tabernacle by the ark of the Lord, the Lord spoke to him on 3 consecutive nights. Samuel, however, was not accustomed to hearing the voice of the Lord and he thought it was Eli the priest calling for him. Finally, on the 4th night, Samuel was able to recognize and receive God's direct communication to him. While this was the beginning of great prophetic blessings for Samuel, this first message from God was not positive or comforting! Rather God predicted again the complete judgment and end of Eli's lineage forever due to his sins.

The Lord said to Samuel, "Behold, I am about to do a thing in Israel at which both ears of everyone who hears it will tingle. In that day I will carry out against Eli all that I have spoken concerning his house, from beginning to end. For I have told him that I am about to judge his house forever for the iniquity which he knew, because his sons brought a curse on themselves and he did not rebuke them. Therefore I have sworn to the house of Eli that the iniquity of Eli's house shall not be atoned for by sacrifice or offering forever" (3:11-14).

On the next day, young Samuel reluctantly reported this sad message to Eli who, in turn, accepted the news as "from the Lord."

And he said, "It is the Lord; let Him do what seems good to Him" (3:18).

The chapter closes with a summary of Samuel's primarily SILENT YEARS (3:19-21), noting how the Lord continued to speak to him, and how the entire nation recognized that God had raised him up to be His prophet (mouthpiece) through the on-going revelation of HIS WORD.

“Thus Samuel grew and the Lord was with him and let none of his words fail. All Israel from Dan even to Beersheba knew that Samuel was confirmed as a prophet of the Lord. And the Lord appeared again at Shiloh, because the Lord revealed Himself to Samuel at Shiloh by the word of the Lord (3:19-21).

The ‘silent years’ until 30 years of age are common in the lives of many biblical figures. Always there was much training and formation in the lives of these people. There is little mentioned of the roughly 26 years that Samuel was growing and serving in the presence of the Lord at Shiloh, but God was developing him as he continued to mature, to become the next powerful judge after Samson. Initially 'Samuel served the Lord' by doing basic daily routine tasks that were age-appropriate; lighting the 7 candles each night (3:2; Lev 24:1-4), and aiding Eli. As he grew, he was learning the 1st five books (scrolls) of Moses from Eli and other older priests and common skills from the men and women serving in the tabernacle. HE WAS FAITHFUL IN THE LITTLE THINGS (Luke 16:10) desiring to please God and Eli. God was pleased to continue a mutually satisfying and intimate relationship with Samuel that blessed and ministered to all Israel.

Regardless of what age or stage of life you are in, God wants you to be growing to know Him and love Him. Learn those lessons that He has for you in whatever particular stage of your spiritual journey you are with Him. Samuel was taking his relationship with God seriously. Hophni and Phinehas were not. As a follower of Christ, your spiritual growth and ability to enjoy Him and serve Him will be in proportion to how much you prioritize time with Christ and others who share your hunger to grow and serve. You might feel like you are still in the ‘silent years’. If so, you are in good company! Don't waste any experience or opportunity to learn. Like Samuel, your faithfulness to learn and grow will result in more and more opportunities with your growing maturity. Pray that you will continue to learn and be more prepared for God's present and future purposes that will bring you enjoyment and ultimately God's glory.

The Philistines Capture the Ark of God: 4:1-11

The Philistines were tormenting Israel for decades. Now they attack Israel once again. The Israelites were soundly defeated on the first day of battle, causing them to question why God was not fighting for them. At this point, they made the fateful decision to carry the sacred ark of the Covenant into battle with them:

When the people came into the camp, the elders of Israel said, “Why has the Lord defeated us today before the Philistines? Let us take to ourselves from Shiloh the ark of the covenant of the Lord, that it may come among us and deliver us from the power of our enemies.” So the people sent to Shiloh, and from there they carried the ark of the covenant of the Lord of hosts who sits above the cherubim; and the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were there with the ark of the covenant of God (4:3,4).

The elders of Israel probably discussed how the ark had gone before Israel in parting the waters of the Jordan River, and bringing down the strong walls of Jericho. Surely the ark could rout the Philistine army for now. *“They did not realize that God’s very present help depended not on the presence of a material symbol (the Ark) but on moral and spiritual conditions which they should have set themselves to understand and fulfill.” F.B. Meyer*

Ironically, the Philistines had more reverence for the power and holiness of God than the Israelites did. When they realized that the ark had been brought to the battle lines, they trembled.

The Philistines were afraid, for they said, “God has come into the camp.” And they said, “Woe to us! For nothing like this has happened before. Woe to us! Who shall deliver us from the hand of these mighty gods? These are the gods who smote the Egyptians with all kinds of plagues in the wilderness” (4:7,8).

Sadly, the presence of God did *not* go with Israel into battle. Instead, they were severely defeated *and the ark was captured!*

“So the Philistines fought and Israel was defeated, and every man fled to his tent; and the slaughter was very great, for there fell of Israel thirty thousand foot soldiers. And the ark of God was taken; and the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, died” (4:10,11).

Ponder the gravity of this moment in Israel's history. Recall that the sacred ark contained the tablets with the Laws of God given to Moses on Mt. Sinai. It also contained the staff of Aaron, which had been used to deliver Israel from Egypt, and some manna, commemorating the 40 years during which God faithfully fed Israel in the wilderness. This ark was kept in the Most Holy Place within the Tabernacle at Shiloh. It was not even *seen* by most Israelites, as only the High Priest entered the Most Holy Place, one time each year, to make atonement for the sins of the nation. The very *glory of God* rested upon this sacred box! And now . . . the ark is lost . . . taken into the hands of idol-worshipping Philistines. The very glory of God departed from Israel on that day!

So significant was this day that, years later, the psalmist writes about it with these words:

“Then He abandoned His dwelling at Shiloh, the Tabernacle where He had lived among the people. He allowed the ark of His might to be captured; He surrendered His glory into enemy hands. He gave His people over to be butchered by the sword, because He was so angry with His own people - His special possession. Their young men were killed by fire; their young women died before singing their wedding songs. Their priests were slaughtered, and their widows could not mourn their deaths” (Psalm 78:60-64).

How foolish for Israel to imagine that they could somehow manipulate God to work for them by carrying the ark into battle. How foolish of us to imagine that we can move God by going through the external motions of religious performance – placing ourselves in the right building at the set time, wearing the right jewelry, grafting the right symbols on our bodies, touching the right shrines, saying the right words. God is not some impersonal force that can be manipulated to perform magic tricks. He is a PERSON who made us to live in a love relationship with Himself. The ONLY thing that moves the heart and hand of God in our direction is our sincere devotion to Him. Jesus said, “Anyone who loves Me will obey my teaching. My Father will love them, and We will come to them and make our home with them” (John 14:23). It is your HEART, beating in sync with God's HEART, that moves Him to fight your battles with you.

The Death of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas (4:12-22)

Eli the high priest sat on a stool by the road, waiting for good news to come from the battle line. Surely the ark of God would guarantee a great rout of the enemy. Instead, the messenger brought grievous news.

“Israel has fled before the Philistines and there has also been a great slaughter among the people, and your two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, are dead, and the ark of God has been taken.” When he mentioned the ark of God, Eli fell off the seat backward beside the gate, and his neck was broken and he died, for he was old and heavy. Thus he judged Israel forty years (4:17,18).

There was much bad news; but when Eli heard that the ark had been taken, he literally dropped dead. Such was the sad day on which the sins of Eli came crashing down upon him. His failure to faithfully lead the nation and his own family cost him everything, and cost Israel the very presence and glory of the Most High God.

Yet, this was not the end of the trouble for Eli’s house on that day. Phinehas’ wife was pregnant with their second child at the time. When she heard the news about her husband, her father and the ark of God, she, like Eli, went into shock leading to her premature labor. She died giving birth to a boy, but not before giving him a name suitable for the day: “Ichabod” means, “NO GLORY.”

And she called the boy Ichabod, saying, “The glory has departed from Israel,” because the ark of God was taken and because of her father-in-law and her husband. She said, “The glory has departed from Israel, for the ark of God was taken” (4:21,22).

The “glory of the Lord” came upon the Tabernacle in the wilderness of Sinai, on the first day it was set up by Moses, some 400 years before this fateful day:

“Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting because the cloud had settled on it, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle” (Exodus 40:34,35).

The glory of God’s personal presence remained with Israel from that day until this sad day, in spite of periods of Israel’s sin. But this day was different. It was a fork in the road. It was as if God said to His chosen people: *“I’m taking a break from you. I’m leaving. We need a separation.”* God moved out of Israel!

Surely, Israel's loss of the "glory of God" was something unique. The most sacred piece of Israel's religious 'furniture,' the ark of the Covenant, was gone . . . and with it went the visible, tangible presence of God. But in many parallel ways, each of us forfeit "the glory of God" when we fail to enthrone Him in our hearts and walk in a true love-relationship with Him. Every day that we spend outside of living fellowship and union with our God is a day of lost glory. Jesus said that we are branches and He is the Vine. He said: "Apart from Me, you can do nothing" (John 15:5). Every day that we live without connection to God is a day without real fruit ... a day of lost glory. It is hard for us, on this side of eternity, to estimate the cost of these days of lost glory, because we cannot see what could have been had we lived in close fellowship with our Lord. Someday, however, we will know, when God shows us all of "the good works that He had prepared in advance for us to walk in" (Ephesians 2:10). He will show us a storehouse of lost glory: faith mountains that could have been moved; fruit that could have come forth; lives that could have been changed; pain that could have been avoided; healing that could have occurred; victories that could have been won. Friends, do not let the glory of the God slip away from your life. Learn to walk in close harmony and fellowship with the LOVER of your soul. He has much glory to display, through His Spirit Who lives and dwells in you.

"And we all, with unveiled face, beholding THE GLORY OF THE LORD, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of GLORY to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit" (2Corinthians 3:18).