



Eli

The Careless

Priest

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Overview

ELI RESPONDED TO SITUATIONS RATHER THAN SOLVING THEM

His story is told in 1 Samuel 1-4. He is also mentioned in 1 Kings 2:26-27. Eli was one Old Testament person with a very modern problem.

The recognition and respect he earned in public did not extend to his handling of his private affairs.

He may have been an excellent priest, but he was a poor parent. His sons brought him grief and ruin. He lacked two important qualities needed for effective parental discipline: firm resolve and corrective action.

Eli responded to situations rather than solving them. But even his responses tended to be weak. God pointed out his sons' errors, but Eli did little to correct them.

The contrast between God's dealing with Eli and Eli's dealing with his sons is clear—God gave warning, spelled out the consequences of disobedience, and then acted.

Eli only warned. Children need to learn that their parents' words and actions go together. Both love and discipline must be spoken as well as acted out. But Eli had another problem.

He was more concerned with the symbols of his religion than with the God they represented. For Eli, the Ark of the Covenant had become a relic to be protected rather than a reminder of the Protector.

His faith shifted from the Creator to the created. It may be easier to worship things we can see, whether buildings, people, or Scripture itself, but such tangible things have no power in themselves.

Eli's benediction upon Hannah

1 Samuel 1:17-18

"In that case," Eli said, "cheer up! May the God of Israel grant the request you have asked of him."

"Oh, thank you, sir!" she exclaimed. Then she went back and began to eat again, and she was no longer sad.

Earlier Hannah had been discouraged to the point of being physically sick and unable to eat. At this point, she returned home well and happy.

The change in her attitude may be attributed to three factors:

- (1) She honestly prayed to God (1 Samuel 1:11);
- (2) She received encouragement from Eli (1 Samuel 1:17);
- (3) She resolved to leave the problem with God (1 Samuel 1:18).

This is the antidote for discouragement: tell God how you really feel and leave your problems with him. Then rely upon the support of good friends and counselors.

Samuel taken to the High priest

1 Samuel 1:25

After sacrificing the bull, they took the child to Eli.

To do what she promised (1 Samuel 1:11), Hannah gave up what she wanted most—her son—and presented him to Eli to serve in the house of the Lord.

In dedicating her only son to God, Hannah was dedicating her entire life and future to God. Because Samuel's life was from God, Hannah was not really giving him up.

Rather, she was returning him to God who had given Samuel to Hannah in the first place. These verses illustrate the kind of gifts we should give to God. Do your gifts cost you little (Sunday mornings, a comfortable tithe), or are they gifts of sacrifice? Are you presenting God with tokens, or are you presenting him with your entire life?

Samuel was probably three years old—the customary age for weaning—when his mother left him at the tabernacle. By saying, “I give him to the LORD,” Hannah meant that she was dedicating Samuel to God for lifetime service.

She did not, of course, forget her much-wanted son. She visited him regularly. And each year she brought him a robe just like Eli's (1 Samuel 2:19). In later years, Samuel lived in Ramah (1 Samuel 7:17), his parents' hometown (1 Samuel 1:19-20).

Samuel becomes the Lord's helper.

1 Samuel 2:11

Then Elkanah and Hannah returned home to Ramah without Samuel. And the boy became the Lord's helper, for he assisted Eli the priest.

Samuel “ministered before the LORD under Eli the priest.” In other words, Samuel was Eli's helper or assistant. In this role, Samuel's responsibilities would have included opening the tabernacle doors each morning (1 Samuel 3:15), cleaning the furniture, and sweeping the floors. As he grew older, Samuel would have assisted Eli in offering sacrifices.

The fact that he was wearing a linen ephod (a garment worn only by priests) shows that he was a priest-in-training (1 Samuel 2:18). Because Samuel was Eli's helper, he was God's helper too. When you serve others—even in carrying out ordinary tasks—you are serving God. Because ultimately we serve God, every job has dignity.

Blessing pronounced by Eli

1 Samuel 2:20

Before they returned home, Eli would bless Elkanah and his wife and say, "May the Lord give you other children to take the place of this one she gave to the Lord."

God honored the desires of faithful Hannah. We never hear about Peninnah or her children again, but Samuel was used mightily by God. God also gave Hannah five children in addition to Samuel.

God often blesses us in ways we do not expect. Hannah never expected to have a child at her age, much less six children! Don't resent God's timing. His blessings might not be immediate, but they will come if we are faithful to do what he says in his Word.

Officiates when Samuel is presented at the tabernacle

1 Samuel 1:24-28

When the child was weaned, Hannah took him to the Tabernacle in Shiloh. They brought along a three-year-old bull for the sacrifice and half a bushel of flour and some wine.

After sacrificing the bull, they took the child to Eli. "Sir, do you remember me?" Hannah asked. "I am the woman who stood here several years ago praying to the Lord.

I asked the Lord to give me this child, and he has given me my request. Now I am giving him to the Lord, and he will belong to the Lord his whole life." And they worshiped the Lord there.

Eli's sons knew better, but they continued to disobey God deliberately by cheating, seducing, and robbing the people. Therefore, God planned to kill them. Any sin is wrong, but sin carried out deliberately and deceitfully is the worst kind.

When we sin out of ignorance, we deserve punishment. But when we sin intentionally, the consequences will be more severe. Don't ignore God's warnings about sin. Abandon sin before it becomes a way of life.

Does a loving God really will or want to put people to death? Consider the situation in the tabernacle. A person made an offering in order to have his sins forgiven, and Eli's sons stole the offering and made a sham of the person's repentant attitude.

God, in his love for Israel, could not permit this situation to continue. He allowed Eli's sons to die as a result of their own boastful presumption.

They took the ark into battle, thinking it would protect them. But God withdrew his protection, and the wicked sons of Eli were killed (1 Samuel 4:10-11).

Indulgent to his corrupt sons

1 Samuel 2:22-29

Now Eli was very old, but he was aware of what his sons were doing to the people of Israel. He knew, for instance, that his sons were seducing the young women who assisted at the entrance of the Tabernacle.

Eli said to them, "I have been hearing reports from the people about the wicked things you are doing. Why do you keep sinning?"

You must stop, my sons! The reports I hear among the Lord's people are not good. If someone sins against another person, God can mediate for the guilty party. But if someone sins against the Lord, who can intercede?" But Eli's sons wouldn't listen to their father, for the Lord was already planning to put them to death.

Meanwhile, as young Samuel grew taller, he also continued to gain favor with the Lord and with the people.

One day a prophet came to Eli and gave him this message from the Lord: "Didn't I reveal myself to your ancestors when the people of Israel were slaves in Egypt?"

I chose your ancestor Aaron from among all his relatives to be my priest, to offer sacrifices on my altar, to burn incense, and to wear the priestly garments as he served me. And I assigned the sacrificial offerings to you priests. So why do you scorn my sacrifices and offerings? Why do you honor your sons more than me—for you and they have become fat from the best offerings of my people!

Eli had a difficult time rearing his sons. He apparently did not take any strong disciplinary action with them when he became aware of their wrongdoing. But Eli was not just a father trying to handle his rebellious sons; he was the high priest ignoring the sins of priests under his jurisdiction. As a result, the Lord took the necessary disciplinary action that Eli would not.

Eli was guilty of honoring his sons above God by letting them continue in their sinful ways. Is there a situation in your life, family, or work that you allow to continue even though you know it is wrong? If so, you may become as guilty as those engaged in the wrong act.

God was to do a shocking thing in Israel.

1 Samuel 3:11-14

Then the Lord said to Samuel, "I am about to do a shocking thing in Israel. I am going to carry out all my threats against Eli and his family.

I have warned him continually that judgment is coming for his family, because his sons are blaspheming God and he hasn't disciplined them. So I have vowed that the sins of Eli and his sons will never be forgiven by sacrifices or offerings."

Eli had spent his entire life in service to God. His responsibility was to oversee all the worship in Israel. But in pursuing this great mission he neglected the responsibilities in his own home. Don't let your desire to do God's work cause you to neglect your family. If you do, your mission may degenerate into a quest for personal importance, and your family will suffer the consequences of your neglect.

Eli's solicitude for the ark

1 Samuel 4:11-18

The Ark of God was captured, and Hophni and Phinehas, the two sons of Eli, were killed.

A man from the tribe of Benjamin ran from the battlefield and arrived at Shiloh later that same day. He had torn his clothes and put dust on his head to show his grief.

Eli was waiting beside the road to hear the news of the battle, for his heart trembled for the safety of the Ark of God. When the messenger arrived and told what had happened, an outcry resounded throughout the town.

"What is all the noise about?" Eli asked.

The messenger rushed over to Eli, who was ninety-eight years old and blind. He said to Eli, "I have just come from the battlefield—I was there this very day."

"What happened?" Eli demanded.

"Israel has been defeated," the messenger replied. "Thousands of Israelite troops are dead on the battlefield. Your two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, were killed, too. And the Ark of God has been captured."

At this time, the city of Shiloh was Israel's religious center (Joshua 18:1; 1 Samuel 4:3). The tabernacle was permanently set up there.

Because Israel did not have a civil capital—a seat of national government—Shiloh was the natural place for a messenger to deliver the sad news from the battle. Many scholars believe that it was during this battle that Shiloh was destroyed (Jeremiah 7:12; Jeremiah 26:2-6; also see the note on 1 Samuel 7:1).

Eli was Israel's judge and high priest. His death marked the end of the dark period of the judges when most of the nation ignored God. Although Samuel was also a judge, his career saw the transition from Israel's rule by judges to the nation's monarchy.

He began the great revival that Israel would experience for the next century. The Bible does not say who became the next high priest (Samuel was not eligible because he was not a direct descendant of Aaron), but Samuel acted as high priest at this time by offering the important sacrifices throughout Israel.

Prophecies of judgments upon his house

1 Samuel 2:27-36

One day a prophet came to Eli and gave him this message from the Lord: "Didn't I reveal myself to your ancestors when the people of Israel were slaves in Egypt?

I chose your ancestor Aaron from among all his relatives to be my priest, to offer sacrifices on my altar, to burn incense, and to wear the priestly garments as he served me. And I assigned the sacrificial offerings to you priests.

So why do you scorn my sacrifices and offerings? Why do you honor your sons more than me—for you and they have become fat from the best offerings of my people!

"Therefore, the Lord, the God of Israel, says: The terrible things you are doing cannot continue! I had promised that your branch of the tribe of Levi would always be my priests. But I will honor only those who honor me, and I will despise those who despise me.

I will put an end to your family, so it will no longer serve as my priests. All the members of your family will die before their time. None will live to a ripe old age. You will watch with envy as I pour out prosperity on the people of Israel. But no members of your family will ever live out their days.

Those who are left alive will live in sadness and grief, and their children will die a violent death. And to prove that what I have said will come true, I will cause your two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, to die on the same day!

"Then I will raise up a faithful priest who will serve me and do what I tell him to do. I will bless his descendants, and his family will be priests to my anointed kings forever.

Then all of your descendants will bow before his descendants, begging for money and food. 'Please,' they will say, 'give us jobs among the priests so we will have enough to eat.' "

Life application”

God’s Word has to be used and obeyed. Which attitude accurately describes your approach to the Word of God?

“And the Lord said to Samuel: ‘See, I am about to do something in Israel that will make the ears of everyone who hears of it tingle.

At that time I will carry out against Eli everything I spoke against his family—from beginning to end.

For I told him that I would judge his family forever because of the sin he knew about; his sons made themselves contemptible, and he failed to restrain them.

Therefore, I swore to the house of Eli, ‘the guilt of Eli’s house will never be atoned for by sacrifice or offering’ ’ ”

Believers are never to be careless in their service to the Lord.

To ask Jesus to come into your heart please pray this Prayer:

Dear Lord Jesus, I believe you are the Christ, the Son of the Living God. I ask you to forgive me of my sins and coming into my heart. I accept you as savior and will follow you as Lord. Amen.

References:

Holy Bible: King James Translation

Holy Bible: Living Bible Translation

Additional comments and charts are taken from: Life Application Study Bible. Illinois: Tyndale House 2007. Print

