

THE PRIEST WHO BROKE HIS NECK AND HIS HEART

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And the messenger answered and said, Israel is fled before the Philistines, and there hath also been a great slaughter among the people, and thy two sons also, Hophni and Phinehas, are dead, and the ark of God is taken. And it came to pass, when he made mention of the ark of God, that he [Eli] fell from off his seat backward by the side of the gate, and his neck brake, and he died: for he was an old man, and heavy And he had judged Israel forty years (1 Sam. 4:17-18).

Eli, the high priest at Shiloh, resembled a very tall tree in a forest. He was destroyed, not by a tempest, but by decay which worked from within. When at the age of ninety-eight he fell from a bench at the city gate, it was the climax of a long process that had threatened him for many years. The unwise old prelate should have resigned his office much earlier, but he was the classic example of a man who expected other people to follow precepts which he ignored. The cancer that he neglected killed him. His heart was broken long before his neck.

Eli's Commitment... Consecration

And the holy garments of Aaron shall be his sons' after him, to be anointed therein, and to be consecrated in them. And that son that is priest in his stead shall put them on seven days, when he cometh into the tabernacle of the congregation to minister in the holy place (Exod. 29:29-30).

To become a servant of the Lord was one of the greatest privileges bestowed upon a man. To be chosen as the high priest of the nation was even more important, for that individual became God's representative upon the earth. There is every reason to believe that when Eli was ordained, he was all the Lord desired. This kind of man is always worthy of applause, but the position carries enormous responsibility. The priest was also the judge of Israel, and such men were not expected

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to have favorites or be biased in making decisions. To stand tall in the service of the Almighty is something to be desired, but when one of God's trusted servants dishonors his calling, it is an occasion for intense regret. As Eli increased in age, his two sons took over his duties and brought dishonor to their profession. The doting father failed to control them, and the situation became deplorable.

Eli's inability to influence his sons made him irritable and hasty. His treatment of Hannah, a woman he saw praying in the sanctuary, left much to be desired. The priest, who should have been cautious, understanding, and kind, embarrassed an innocent lady. That the man changed his opinion did not ease the pain she had already endured. Eli did more damage in moments than he could repair in months. That was not permissible in the conduct of anyone who represented the Lord.

Eli's Conduct... Callous

When Eli died at the age of ninety-eight, he had ruled the nation for forty years. People came to him from all directions to seek a solution to their problems. He usually sat on a bench

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close to the city gate, and therefore it was not difficult for strangers to obtain an audience with the prelate. One day he saw Hannah, the wife of Elkanah, and unfortunately made one of his greatest mistakes. The childless woman was earnestly asking Jehovah to grant her a son. Among her neighbors she was considered accursed, and this, when added to the contempt shown by Elkanah's second wife, produced a burden too heavy to carry. Filled with grief and desire, she prayed in the temple precincts. Her lips moved but her silent petition arose from the depths of a troubled soul. Eli heard no sound and concluded she was one of the drunken prostitutes who frequented the house of God. It is said that "he marked her mouth." Some people might believe the priest struck her, but possibly he only noticed the movement of her lips; her voice was unheard. Eli knew evil women existed, for his own sons fraternized with them. The old priest knew exactly what was happening but was too weak to remove his sons from office. He had tolerated this situation for years and condoned the evil

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practices. The elderly prelate failed to detect the difference between immoral people and a true worshiper. It was an amazing fact that God's grace had permitted his ministry to extend over so many years; he was unfit for duty.

Probably the Almighty was waiting for Samuel to become the new leader of Israel. God, who sees the end from the beginning, is an expert preparing for eventualities. It is sad to relate that when a man tolerates sin, his sensitivity diminishes.

Eli's Child... Called

And when she had weaned him [Samuel] . . . she . . . brought the child to Eli. And she said, Oh my lord, as thy soul liveth, my lord, I am the woman that stood by thee here, praying unto the LORD. For this child I prayed; and the LORD hath given me my petition which I asked of him. Therefore also I have lent him to the LORD; as long as he liveth he shall be lent to the LORD. And he worshiped the LORD there (1 Sam. 1:24-28).

Her sacrificial gift cannot be underestimated; she surrendered her only child and had no assurance of giving birth again. The kindness of God was extended, for the Scriptures say, "the Lord visited Hannah, so that she conceived, and bare three sons and two daughters" (1 Sam. 2:21). God has always known how to pay His debts!

How the elderly priest coped with the varying needs of the small child can only be assumed. Possibly he enlisted the services of one of the dedicated women associated with the sanctuary (compare Luke 2:36-37). As Samuel developed, the impact upon his clerical guardian must have been tremendous. The boy's purity of soul and blessed simplicity reminded Eli of earlier days and at the same time aroused premonitions that his own ministry was terminating. This assurance was increased when Jehovah called the boy in the night, and Eli had to explain the significance of the voice heard in the darkness. To his credit it should be remembered that during these trying experiences, the priest remained faithful to his youthful protegee'.

Many years later when King Herod heard of a Child who

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would become the ruler of Israel, he became infuriated and ordered the execution of every baby within his domain. Eli was more gracious; he taught and protected Samuel who eventually became his successor.

Eli's Children... Criminal

Jehovah made ample provision for the support of his ministers, but the sons of Levi were dissatisfied with that arrangement. They were more concerned with feeding their stomachs than filling their sanctuary. Their threats brought chaos to the temple services and disgust to the nation. The ancient writer described how their behavior aroused anger throughout the nation (see 1 Sam. 2:13-17). When Eli condemned his sons for associating with prostitutes who operated close to the tabernacle precincts, his remonstrance was as ineffective as a gentle tap on the hand. The old man, who might have been as dynamic as Moses, was a reed shaken by the wind. When his sons ignored his advice, they signed their death warrants.

Wherefore the sin of the young men was very great before the LORD; for men abhorred the offering of the LORD (1 Sam. 2:17).

Had Eli done his duty, the people of Israel would have applauded his actions and supported his endeavor. Unfortunately, he had become an object of scorn and completely unfit to be the high priest. This story from antiquity indicates the higher a man climbs, the greater may be his fall. It gives warning to everyone who thinks he stands, to take heed lest he fall. A career that has taken a lifetime to establish can be destroyed in moments.

Eli's Collapse... Complete

And the man said unto Eli, I am he that came out of the army, and I fled today out of the army. And he said, What is there done, my son? And the messenger answered and said, Israel is fled before the Philistines, and there hath been also a great slaughter among the people, and thy two sons also, Hophni

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and Phinehas, are dead, and the ark of God is taken. And it came to pass, when he made mention of the ark of God, that he [Eli] fell from off the seat backward by the side of the gate, and his neck brake, and he died: for he was an old man and heavy (1 Sam. 4:16-18).

"Now Eli was ninety and eight years old; and his eyes were dim, that he could not see" (1 Sam. 4:15). The messenger who informed the priest about the outcome of the battle with the Philistines mentioned three calamities. (1) There had been a great slaughter among the people, (2) Eli's sons were dead, and (3) the sacred ark had been captured by the enemy. It was significant that Israel's defeat and the death of the two sons were unimportant compared with the loss of the ark. When Eli heard of the terrible catastrophe, he lost his composure, overbalanced, and fell from his bench. The weight of his heavy body fell on the neck of the priest, and it snapped. It might be concluded that the cause of death was a broken neck, but in the final analysis, Eli was dead before he died. Eli had lost fellowship with Jehovah, the respect of the nation, and at ninety-eight years of age had nothing for which to live. The old priest had no mourners at his funeral. The people believed

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they were better off without him.

It is always a cause for sorrow when one of God's chosen instruments falls from grace. Such an event invites criticism

from watching unbelievers. Eli had lived in fellowship with God; he should have known better. His piety was undermined by compromise. When he spared his sons, he destroyed himself!

And the child Samuel grew on, and was in favour both with the LORD, and also with men (1 Sam. 2:26).

The forces of evil may appear to win occasional battles, but the final victory belongs to God. When Moses failed, Joshua took his place. When Eli disappointed the Lord, Samuel was already being prepared. When Elijah was scared by Jezebel and lost his influence over Israel, the Lord commissioned a

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young man called Elisha, whose magnificent ministry saved the nation. After the betrayal by Judas, Paul appeared from nowhere to become the greatest evangelist ever known by the church. Often excessive admiration of a man leads to disappointment, but "Whoso putteth his trust in the Lord shall be safe" (Prov. 29:25).

My wife and I have traveled extensively throughout Europe and have admired the magnificent architecture of many ornate Cathedrals. St. Peter's, in Vatican City, is a lofty, historic structure. The Cathedral of Notre Dame is an amazing building, but in my estimation no sanctuary is more attractive than the Cathedral at Milan. I cannot forget gazing at the triple archway of its main entrance. Long ago the stone cutter engraved for posterity a most important truth. He carved over one arch a wreath of roses and placed underneath: "All that pleases is but for a moment." Over the other arch he carved a cross and the words: "All that troubles is but for a moment." Finally, above the main entrance he chiseled: "That only is important which is eternal."

Only one life, 'twill soon be past;
Only what's done for Christ will last.

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