

## Lesson 10    1 April 2012

### Eli's Failure

**Lesson Scope:** 1 Samuel 2-4

#### Lesson Focus

This lesson overlaps the previous lesson, but it presents quite a contrast to it.

For the first time, one person, Eli, functioned as both high priest (1 Samuel 2:28) and judge (1 Samuel 4:18). In some ways, Eli filled his dual role well. After learning of Hannah's true desire, he readily bestowed a priestly blessing upon her. When God called Samuel, he told the lad how to respond. Eli seemed eager to hear what God's message was.

Yet Eli's character proved sadly lacking in consistency. He seemed hasty and severe in reproofing Hannah for what he misinterpreted as public drunkenness, but he was slow and mild in dealing with his sons for their blatant sins. Although eager to hear God's message, Eli failed to benefit from it, even taking a complacent attitude toward it (1 Samuel 3:18).

Parents and others in authority who neglect Scriptural principles jeopardize their own souls and those of their people. Leadership failure influences God's people to transgress and brings reproach to the Name of the Lord.

The purpose of this lesson is not to point fingers of scorn at Eli or his family, but to take humble warning. There is enough of Eli's nature in us to scare us all. If we are properly frightened, however, we can avoid the calamities that befell him.

**Lesson Aim:** To identify failures that produce spiritual loss.

**Theme Verse:** Proverbs 29:15. The rod and reproof give wisdom: but a child left to himself bringeth his mother to shame.

#### Lesson Text:

##### Iniquity

1 Samuel 2:12-17 <sup>12</sup> Now the sons of Eli were sons of Belial; they knew not the LORD. <sup>13</sup> And the priests' custom with the people was, that, when

any man offered sacrifice, the priest's servant came, while the flesh was in seething, with a fleshhook of three teeth in his hand; <sup>14</sup> And he struck *it* into the pan, or kettle, or caldron, or pot; all that the fleshhook brought up the priest took for himself. So they did in Shiloh unto all the Israelites that came thither. <sup>15</sup> Also before they burnt the fat, the priest's servant came, and said to the man that sacrificed, Give flesh to roast for the priest; for he will not have sodden flesh of thee, but raw. <sup>16</sup> And *if* any man said unto him, Let them not fail to burn the fat presently, and *then* take *as much* as thy soul desireth; then he would answer him, *Nay*; but thou shalt give *it me* now: and if not, I will take *it* by force. <sup>17</sup> Wherefore the sin of the young men was very great before the LORD: for men abhorred the offering of the LORD.

## Apathy

1 Samuel 2:22-31 <sup>22</sup> Now Eli was very old, and heard all that his sons did unto all Israel; and how they lay with the women that assembled *at* the door of the tabernacle of the congregation. <sup>23</sup> And he said unto them, Why do ye such things? for I hear of your evil dealings by all this people. <sup>24</sup> Nay, my sons; for *it is* no good report that I hear: ye make the LORD'S people to transgress. <sup>25</sup> If one man sin against another, the judge shall judge him: but if a man sin against the LORD, who shall intreat for him? Notwithstanding they hearkened not unto the voice of their father, because the LORD would slay them. <sup>26</sup> And the child Samuel grew on, and was in favour both with the LORD, and also with men. <sup>27</sup> And there came a man of God unto Eli, and said unto him, Thus saith the LORD, Did I plainly appear unto the house of thy father, when they were in Egypt in Pharaoh's house? <sup>28</sup> And did I choose him out of all the tribes of Israel *to be* my priest, to offer upon mine altar, to burn incense, to wear an ephod before me? and did I give unto the house of thy father all the offerings made by fire of the children of Israel? <sup>29</sup> Wherefore kick ye at my sacrifice and at mine offering, which I have commanded *in my* habitation; and honourest thy sons above me, to make yourselves fat with the chiefest of all the offerings of Israel my people? <sup>30</sup> Wherefore the LORD God of Israel saith, I said indeed *that* thy house, and the house of thy father, should walk before me for ever: but now the LORD saith, Be it far from me; for them that honour me I will honour, and they that despise me shall be lightly esteemed. <sup>31</sup> Behold, the days come, that I will cut off thine arm, and the

arm of thy father's house, that there shall not be an old man in thine house. **1 Samuel 3:13** <sup>13</sup> For I have told him that I will judge his house for ever for the iniquity which he knoweth; because his sons made themselves vile, and he restrained them not.

### **Calamity**

**1 Samuel 4:16-18** <sup>16</sup> And the man said unto Eli, I *am* he that came out of the army, and I fled to day out of the army. And he said, What is there done, my son? <sup>17</sup> 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 and Phinehas, are dead, and the ark of God is taken. <sup>18</sup> And it came to pass, when he made mention of the ark of God, that he 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. And he had judged Israel forty years.

### **Questions for Study**

#### **Iniquity**

1. How had Eli failed?
2. What mistakes might we make that would lead our children wrong?
3. What early signs may indicate that our children are going wrong?

#### **Apathy**

4. What did the Lord expect of Eli in relation to his sons?
5. What broader concerns belonged to Eli besides the welfare of his sons?
6. What personal and family practices will help our children go right?
7. How can we help children and young people among us who lack positive parental influence?

#### **Calamity**

8. How far-reaching was God's judgment on Eli's house?
9. How can we help our children develop a balanced view of God's judgment and long-suffering?

### **Analyzing the Passage**

"Sons of Belial" (1 Samuel 2:12) means "worthless ones" or "wicked ones." "Knew not the LORD" indicates their utter spiritual emptiness. No doubt they knew many things about Jehovah, but they had no personal heart knowledge of Him (as David, for example, displayed in the Psalms).

Verses 1 Samuel 2:13-17 detail Hophni and Phinehas' utter disregard for God and His Law. The breast and right shoulder of the sacrifices were reserved for the priests, but only after the fat had been burned (Leviticus 7:29-34). They were robbing both God and the people. As a result, the people abhorred (despised) the offerings.

Note the progression: Eli's vile sons despised the Lord's sacrifices, causing the people to despise the sacrifices (1 Samuel 2:17). Eventually Eli himself, by his leadership failure, became guilty of irreverence toward God. Verse 29 suggests that Eli shared in partaking of the forbidden parts of the offering.

The promised judgment on Eli's family (1 Samuel 2:30-34) was confirmed when his two sons died in one day (1 Samuel 4:17). It continued when the priests of Nob were massacred (1 Samuel 22:11-19), and it was concluded when the priesthood was transferred to the family of Zadok in the time of Solomon (compare 1 Samuel 22:20 with 1 Kings 2:26, 27, 35).

"He restrained them not" (3:13) indicates that, as father, Eli should have disciplined his sons during their earlier years with a vigor he never showed. As high priest and as judge, he certainly should have removed them from office and prosecuted them according to the Law for their crimes.

## **Principles and Applications**

### **Iniquity**

1. Failing to deal decisively with reckless, lawless behavior produces a generation who do not know the Lord (1 Samuel 2:12). No doubt Eli was surprised to see his boys turn out as they did. Surprises are in store for us too—big ones soon and even bigger ones later—if we assume that our children will turn out right without the help of firm, consistent guidance. Do we have any idea what our children are doing while we rest on Sunday afternoon? Do we know what our children read? Do we know what kind of phone calls they make and receive? Taking a friendly interest and giving direction while the children are young will spare us from having to make harder decisions later. If indeed we end up having to make hard decisions, however, let us not fail to make them.

2. Failure in the lives of those in influential positions has especially serious implications (1 Samuel 2:15-17). The more influential a person is, the more serious will be his failures. This is why the Bible says that if we are

in authority, we are liable to "receive the greater condemnation" (James 3:1).

Most of us find ourselves on both sides of the fence. On one hand, we have more influence than we might think—influence for which we are accountable. Neighbors, friends, and wide-eyed children are watching. "A careful [man] I want to be; / A little [fellow] follows me."

On the other hand, we have a responsibility to not lay a snare for those who direct us. The choices of Eli's sons helped to bring their father down. "Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you" (Hebrews 13:17).

### **Apathy**

3. The lack of alert leadership causes sin to become entrenched in the lives of the immature and the carnal (1 Samuel 2:22, 23). "The price of liberty is eternal vigilance." All we must do to fail is become a little tired and lazy. That choice may be easy now, but very costly later. Always a few people are testing the limits to see if we as leaders, parents, or older friends take issue with their deeds. If nothing is said, they (and others, and still others) conclude, "It must be all right." And so the standard is lowered.

If we fail to deal with small issues because we consider them tiresome or petty, sooner or later we will be confronted with big issues. At that point, we ourselves might still be able to take a stand for the right, but we will hardly persuade our people to take the same stand. It is easier to hold a wagon at the top of a hill than to stop it after it is rolling.

4. Much talk with little action contributes to spiritual hardness (1 Samuel 2:23–25). The key here is not to stop talking but to start acting. What Eli told his sons was good. But by stopping with words, he gave the impression of not quite believing them himself. Like people today, his sons understood what he said by what he administrated.

So did God. By this time, He Himself was no longer interested in salvaging the situation (1 Samuel 2:25). One wonders how many people whom God "gave ... over to a reprobate mind" (Romans 1:28) were first of all cheated by leaders who failed to lead.

5. To honor the erring above God is to spurn God's blessing (1 Samuel 2:29-31). Eli never openly defied God. But his preferences showed his real attitude, and God read it correctly. God's concept of worship and loyalty is

simple—He will not take second place.

Unlike Eli, God meant what He said, and later history proved it. Eli's family lost all the blessings that God had once given them as a priestly family.

6. Failing to restrain evil incurs divine wrath (1 Samuel 3:13). God is patient, but He is no man's fool. He evaluated the situation with stark clarity. "Which he knoweth" took away Eli's last excuse. "I will judge his house" struck what Eli treasured most. "For ever" offered no further mercy. God expects us to restrain evils that arise among those accountable to us. First, however, we must restrain evils that arise in our own heart. We are all accountable to God.

### **Calamity**

7. Death and destruction are the ultimate results of failure and sin (4:16-18). God holds this fact before us by letting us observe the calamities of others, by letting us reap the results of our own failures and sins, and by giving us outright warnings through His Word and His people. The partial justice that we observe now will culminate in complete justice. Our days of health and sunny weather should not obscure these sober facts.

The horror of a sinner's eternal destruction should prompt us to raise our children diligently and to encourage each other heavenward "lest any man fail of the grace of God."

### **Important Teachings**

1. Failing to deal decisively with reckless, lawless behavior produces a generation who do not know the Lord (1 Samuel 2:12).

2. Failure in the lives of those in influential positions has especially serious implications (1 Samuel 2:15-17).

3. The lack of alert leadership causes sin to become entrenched in the lives of the immature and the carnal (1 Samuel 2:22-23).

4. Much talk with little action contributes to spiritual hardness (1 Samuel 2:23-25).

5. To honor the erring above God is to spurn God's blessing (1 Samuel 2:29-31).

6. Failing to restrain evil incurs divine wrath (1 Samuel 3:13).

7. Death and destruction are the ultimate results of failure and sin (1 Samuel 4:16-18).

## Answers to Questions

1. How had Eli failed?

Eli did not take his responsibility as father and administrator seriously enough. Evidently he had not started soon enough to discipline his sons.

2. What mistakes might we make that would lead our children wrong?

We might become too busy to take time for them. We might think that our spouse will make up for our own neglect. While the children are little, we might assume that all is well with them just because they are cute. When children become teenagers, we might forget that they sometimes lack common sense. We might fail to keep track of where they are and what they are doing.

3. What early signs may indicate that our children are going wrong?

We should pay attention when they first begin to contest the words, no, stop, and come. Irreverence during family worship or obeying with a pout are signals that we have disciplinary work to do.

4. What did the Lord expect of Eli in relation to his sons?

Eli should have refused to partake of the things wrongfully taken from the people. He should have dismissed his sons from office and dealt with their sin according to the Law.

5. What broader concerns belonged to Eli besides the welfare of his sons?

Because of his sons' immoral and sacrilegious behavior, people were learning to abhor the offering of the Lord. God's Name was being dishonored.

6. What personal and family practices will help our children go right? We will help them by having regular and meaningful worship times, both personally and as a family. Show interest in where the children are going and in what they are doing. Teach them courtesy and reverence.

7. How can we help children and young people among us who lack positive parental influence?

We cannot solve all their problems, and it would be a mistake to try. Still, we can be friends, offering them time, attention, a good example, and perhaps advice.

8. How far-reaching was God's judgment on Eli's house?

God destroyed Hophni and Phinehas. He allowed Saul to kill the priests of Nob (1 Samuel 22:11-19) and transferred the priestly line from Eli's family to Zadok early in Solomon's reign (1 Kings 2:26, 27, 35).

9. How can we help our children develop a balanced view of God's

judgment and long-suffering?

We need to discipline firmly and consistently without being overly severe. We should watch over our children without giving the impression of mistrust. We should not only correct our children but also forgive them.

### **Summarizing the Lesson**

Sins of omission in one generation lead to sins of commission in the next. It is not enough to stay out of trouble ourselves. We must actively foresee and forestall trouble among young people whom we are accountable for.

We dare never assume that it is too early or too late. Now is the time for the young to follow us. Years down the road, we may be following them.

God gave Abraham a high compliment when He said, "I know him, that he will command his children and his household after him" (Genesis 18:19).

May He say the same of us.

### **Research Guide**

To see how thoroughly God dealt with Eli's family, read 1 Samuel 22:11-20, where the descendants of Eli were killed, and 1 Kings 2:26-27, 35, where Abiathar, the last priest descended from Eli, lost his position.