

## Failures and Faithfulness

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

March 19, 2023 AM Sermon

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1 Samuel 4:12-22

I won't get to our Bible reading till half way through the sermon, that's because before I get to it, I want to make sure you all know Eli. Today's failure is Eli and while some of you know his story, most of you don't know it very well. So I want to introduce you fully so you have a full sense of this man, and his fall.

I really like Eli. His story covers the first four chapters of First Samuel and I like the person I meet on those pages. He's a pretty good dude. I like Eli a lot better than Samson, last week's failure study. If I knew Samson in real life, I'm pretty sure I wouldn't like him. He was selfish and vengeful. Eli I like. He wasn't perfect, more on that later, but when you go through the stories about him, it really seems like his heart is in the right place.

Eli was the high priest of Israel at the end of the age of the Judges. He served in the Tabernacle, the tent of meeting in Shiloh. When we first meet him in chapter 1, he is sitting on his chair at the doorpost of the Lord's house watching the worshippers come in and out of the tabernacle. One of the worshippers is Hannah. She's a young woman who's struggled to have a baby, and so she is on her knees fervently praying for God to give her a child. Hannah's prayer is so animated Eli thinks she's drunk. He scolds her. But as soon as Hannah explains what's really going on, Eli admits his mistake. "Oh I'm sorry! I misunderstood!" Then, instead of scolding her, he blesses her. "May the God of Israel grant you what you have asked of him!" Basically Eli is kind at that first meeting.

Hannah does have a child, a boy. Hannah's baby is Samuel, the one for whom this book is named, and as an act of gratitude for answering her prayer, she dedicates her child to the service of the Lord. Little Samuel goes to live with Eli in the tabernacle as his helper. He learns the ways of the Lord. This is Eli's second kindness, he takes the boy in and mentors him. He gives his time to this child. And you get a sense of how close the relationship is in that famous story where Samuel hears God's voice in the middle of the night and he can't figure out who it is. Who does Samuel run to when he's confused? Eli. And Eli is the one who teaches him what to do. Next time you hear the voice, say "speak Lord for your servant listens." The picture of that text is a kindly old man patiently helping a young boy in a moment of confusion.

And then there's this. Every year Hannah comes to the temple to see Samuel, to see her boy. When she comes, Eli meets with her and prays with her: "May the Lord give you more children after Samuel! May he grow your family!" And that's what God does. Hannah has 5 more kids after Samuel. Again, a picture of warmth and kindness. He's a pastor to this family. So Eli is a decent guy. A nice guy. A sincere man who shows real kindness.

Eli's sons are a different story. They are neither nice nor kind. Eli is the High priest of the temple and his two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, work under him. They are priests in the temple, only they turn their jobs into a racket. Everyday people would bring offerings to the temple. These included meat offerings. Hophni and Phinehas would take the best of the meat for themselves. The fat from the offerings was supposed to be burnt on the altar as an offering to God. But Eli's sons wanted their steaks with nice marbling, with lots of fat because that's what makes steak yummy. So they would take the nice fatty steak offerings for their portion, and if people objected they would have their servants threaten them. They also used their high position to seduce women. They were bad news, and everyone knew they were bad news.

Eli knew what his sons were doing, and he didn't like it. He confronted them. "Why do you do such things!? You are sinning against the people and you are sinning against God!? This is really serious!" Hophni and Phinehas ignore their Father. They keep right on stealing the meat and seducing the women. And here's where Eli shows weakness. He doesn't stop them. He's their boss. He could fire them. He could kick them out of the priesthood. But he doesn't. Instead he looks the other way. He's soft on them. He's lenient

God is not lenient. In chapter 2, he sends a prophet to Eli who pronounces a terrible judgment over his family. God will take the priesthood from his descendants. Both his sons will die, and the house of Eli will come to ruin. It will wither. Which brings us to our chapter. Hophni and Phinehas have once again pushed the

boundaries. They've taken the ark into battle against the Philistines; treating the ark like it is a weapon of war, a magic wand that can force God to act on your behalf against your enemies. It backfires. The holy ark falls into Philistine hands and they take it as a spoil of war.

Read 1 Samuel 4.12-22. Ugh. What a terrible ending. One moment, Eli hears that his life's work has come to nothing. His boys are dead. Israel is defeated and the ark is lost. The next moment he falls from his chair and dies; his heavy body splayed in the dust, his neck twisted at a horrible angle. And then, as if that weren't enough, his daughter-in-law goes into labor, she dies as she gives birth and with her last breath names the baby Ichabod, which means the glory has departed from Israel. So endeth the house of Eli. It's a hard ending. Eli seems like a better person than Samson, but Samson went out with a great victory over God's enemies. Samson's life ends with a glorious bang; Eli's life ends with a whimper. Samson, the vengeful womanizer, gets a plaque in the faith hall of fame; kindly old Eli lies dead in the dust, empty and humiliated.

What is Eli's failure? How does he end up in this terrible place? I've been thinking about that a lot this week and I think that there are a couple of answers to that question. One of Eli's failures has to be complacency. Samson's failures are failures of appetite. Samson lurches after pleasures and passions. Eli's sins are sins of omission, rather than commissions. Eli's sins are not the things he has done; they are the things he has left undone. Things he lets slide. Eli's sins are sins of neglect.

He doesn't really deal with his sons. Sure he chastises them. He tells them that they are wrong, but he doesn't remove them from their posts. He's complacent. It's not that he doesn't take the priesthood seriously; he does. But he doesn't want to rock the boat. If he fired his boys, what would his wife say? The Tabernacle trustees would be OK with it; they were sick of the boy's antics. But His family would be all over him. So he tries to have it both ways. When people complain about Hophni and Phinehas he nods his head and promises to deal with it, but he puts it off. Eventually he talks to them, but by now the boys have pretty much figured out that if they just sit through dad's speeches, they'll be fine, because dad's not actually going to do anything. And besides, truth be told, Eli kind of likes getting invited to his son's backyard barbecues. Those boys make the best steaks and Eli likes a good steak. Though he's got to be careful because he's putting on weight. His wife says he's getting heavy.

That's complacency right? When you are complacent it's not that you don't love God, and you don't love his people, but you know, there's a lot of cool stuff in this world and life's too short not to enjoy yourself and have a little fun. And so you go through life with great intentions but weak habits, weak discipleship. "We have got to get more intentional about family devotions they are so important and our schedules are so inconsistent we hardly ever do them; maybe when volleyball season is done." "I really should do some volunteer work at the shelter, but you know my week's really busy what with my golf league and the grandkids' baseball games." "I've really got to get back to church, we've missed a whole bunch of weeks in a row. Next week! Next week we'll be there. Oh wait, we have those tickets to that thing in Chicago... shoot. Well maybe the week after then." Now I think I know why I like Eli so much. He's like me. He's like a lot of people I know good people with good intentions but people who are also spiritually distracted. People who are maybe a little complacent.

The second of Eli's failures isn't just a failure of Eli, it's a failure of Eli and all the rest of the people together. When you do a deep reading of the first 4 chapters of Samuel, it's clear that God is doing something that's much bigger than Eli; God is rebooting his people. When your computer gets hung up and the little processing circle keeps going round and round and round without making any progress what do you do? You restart. You reboot. God is doing that with his people. Eli's life comes at the end of the age of the Judges, and as you know when it came to following God the people of Israel were stuck in an endless loop. The progress bar wasn't moving forward. The little circle was just going round and round and round. The people sinned, they got themselves in trouble. God sent a judge to save them, and it was OK for a minute and then they went back to their sin. The wheel of faithlessness kept spinning round and round.

So now God is sweeping aside the age of the judges and beginning something new. The clues are everywhere. 1 Samuel 1-4 is full of clues to the bankruptcy of the old days. Chapter 3 opens up with these words: "In those days the word of the Lord was rare, and there were not many visions." And when it describes the temple it suggests that the lamp of God in the temple, which was always supposed to stay lit, was about to go out. Then there are these details: how is Eli described in our passage? He's almost completely blind. He's

lost his vision, which is clearly a commentary on his physical vision as well as his spiritual vision. He's also described as overweight. Both here and in chapter one, Eli is described as having to sit which suggests passivity and exhaustion. And finally when Eli's daughter-in-law dies and with her dying breath names her child Ichabod the message is clear. The age of the Judges is bankrupt. After generations of complacency and unfaithfulness, God's glory has departed. When Eli topples off his chair and dies he's not just paying for his own complacency; his death is a consequence of a long era of unfaithfulness. It's not just the death of man; it's the death of an age.

But even as God shuts down the age of Eli and the Judges with one hand, with the other hand he's starting something new and fresh. He does that using one of his favorite signs. When God restarts a people, he loves to start with a miraculous birth. He did it with Abraham and Sarah. He did it with Mary and Joseph, and he does that here with the birth of Samuel to Hannah. The birth of Samuel is the first shoot of a new beginning that God is starting. In those days there were not many words from the Lord, says chapter 3, but what happens to little boy Samuel in the temple? God speaks directly to him. Where Eli's words are ineffective in changing his boys, 3:19 says that the Lord will not let one word from Samuel fall to the ground. Where Eli's family is withering and dying, Chapters 2 and 3 describe him growing in wisdom and stature. Can you see how the birth of Samuel and the birth of Ichabod represent two different eras? Samuel's birth announces the new era of hope where God is starting something new and strong. The birth of Ichabod is literally the dying gasp of an age of failure; "The Glory has departed."

So When Eli lies there dead in the dust, he's not just bearing the judgment for his own failure, his death is part of God's judgment on a whole failed faithless age. God will fulfill his purposes. God will accomplish his goals. Sometimes God will do that through great acts of deliverance that warm our hearts. Sometimes he does it through fearful acts of judgment. Either way, as Abraham Lincoln said in his second inaugural address when he suspected that the carnage of the Civil War might be God's verdict on slavery, "it must be said, "The judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.""

But I still can't help feeling sorry for Eli. I still like him. I still think he's decent and well-intentioned, and I'm sad to see him so crushed by this judgment. As I worked with this passage this week, I found myself asking, "Where is the gospel hope in this text? Is there light?" I definitely hear the warning of this text. I feel it challenging my complacency. This text definitely puts the fear of God in me. But I am a minister of the gospel! Where is the gospel hope here?

And as I thought about that, I began to hear the gospel in those dying words of Eli's daughter-in-law. "Ichabod. The glory has departed! Where is the glory?" she cries as she dies. Where is the gospel in those words? Well, where else have we heard a dying person cry out about the absence of God at the moment of his death? Jesus did that. Jesus did that in the moment of his death, his humiliation. "My God My God, why have you forsaken me." Jesus shares the fate of Eli. Jesus goes to the place of Eli's judgement, Eli's pain and Eli's loss. Jesus shares his humiliation and abandonment. The anguished words of Eli's daughter in law point to Jesus. The two stories are more parallel than you think. Jesus' too cries out under the weight of judgment and wrath, only this time it wasn't just the failure of the age of the judges; it was all the human failure that had ever been or that would ever be. "The glory is gone!" cried Eli's daughter-in-law as the wrath of God's judgment fell on her family. "My God my God, why have you forsaken me!?" cried Jesus as the wrath for all the sin of the world crashed down upon him.

But Jesus' death doesn't just represent the death of an old age, through his resurrection, it represents the start of a new age, an age where our hope doesn't depend on fickle human beings like Hophni and Phinehas, or Eli, our you and me; instead it's a hope grounded in God himself. God himself becomes a human being and does what we complacent people have always failed to do and will always fail to do. He is perfectly faithful. Now we complacent people can come to the end of our life not fearing a judgment that we know we deserve, but confident of a forgiveness and a new life that we don't deserve, but that is poured out on us anyway because God is more merciful and good than we can understand. Is there any hope for my old friend Eli, old complacent, half-hearted Eli? Well, if there is, it's the same hope that all of us half-hearted, complacent creatures have. It's in the cross and the full-hearted love of Jesus Christ our Lord.

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