

Signs of Slavery

1 Samuel 2:12-17,22-30

It seems strange. After all, Eli was a direct descendant of Moses' brother, Aaron. And since the Dead Sea was split open like a crystal canyon, Eli's forefathers had served in the tabernacle.

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;" Verses 27_28

Nevertheless, as strange as it may seem, the old priest gave his two sons Egyptian names: Hophni and Phinehas. Those names echo back to the slave shacks of Goshen when God's people served Egyptian slave masters.

Generations had passed since Moses led Jacob's descendants out of Egypt. But it is always easier to take a person out of slavery than to take slavery out of a person. And God recorded the names of Eli's sons to remind us of that.

Now the sons of Eli were worthless men. They did not know the Lord. Verse 12 (ESV)

Hophni and Phinehas had not so much as a nodding acquaintance with God. But I doubt they realized they had no personal relationship with the Lord their fathers served.

Had anyone asked them, they would have been incensed and insulted. After all, they served in the holy tabernacle, the one place on earth where God had promised He would dwell.

Jesus once pulled back the curtain of time and gave us a glimpse of judgement day. He did so to warn us that not everyone who professes to know Him actually does.

Many will say to Me on that day, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?" And then I will declare to them, "I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness." Matthew 7:22_23

There is shock and surprise in those voices. They assumed they really did have a personal relationship with Christ. But like Hophni and Phinehas, they did not. And like those two priests, they learned too late that their faith was false.

But Eli's reprobate sons should have known their faith was false. Their behavior reeks of it. And if we are like them, our faith is every bit as false as theirs was.

Slavery and Relationships

To God, the tent temple pitched at Shiloh was to be a source of spiritual blessings to His people. But to Eli's sons, it was nothing but a business. And business was good. Business was very good.

Moses commanded all of God's people to bring live animals to the tabernacle as sacrifices for their sin. And the ritual for sacrificing those animals was rigid, to say the least.

Ancient requirements regulated every facet and phase of the sacrifices. When a worshiper presented a little lamb, the priest would cut the animal's throat. And the blood would be poured out at the base of the great altar outside the temple sanctuary.

Then the fat of the lamb's carcass would be burned on the altar as an offering to God. The rest would be butchered.

The priest would get the breast and the right leg. What was left would be boiled and served at a celebration supper, so the worshiper could rejoice at the favor and forgiveness God had given him.

But Eli's sons were not satisfied with the two parts the sacrificial animal the Law allotted them. They wanted more.

...before they burned the fat, the priest's servant would come and say to the man who was sacrificing, "Give the priest meat for roasting, as he will not take boiled meat from you, only raw." If the man said to him, "They must surely burn the fat first, and then take as much as you desire," then he would say, "No, but you shall give it to me now; and if not, I will take it by force." Verses 15-16

Of course, Hophni and Phinehas had no right to demand extra, uncooked meat from sacrificial animals. Worse yet, they demanded an extra portion even before God got His.

And they would not take no for an answer. If anyone protested, the priest's henchmen would take what they wanted by force.

But even that was not enough for Eli's sons. Later, when the mutton was just beginning to boil, the priest's men would return.

The custom of the priests with the people was that when any man offered sacrifice, the priest's servant would come, while the meat was boiling, with a three-pronged fork in his hand, and he would thrust it into the pan or kettle or cauldron or pot. All that the fork brought up the priest would take for himself. This is what they did at Shiloh to all the Israelites who came there. 1 Samuel 2:13-14 (ESV)

Hophni and Phinehas wanted fresh, raw meat for a good reason. Thousands of people offered sacrifices at the tabernacle. So the priests could not possibly have eaten even a small part of it.

But fresh meat could be resold. That is why God charged that the high priest's family coffers had grown rich and fat from their theft.

Why do you honor your sons more than me by fattening yourselves on the choice parts of every offering made by my people Israel? Verse 29 (NIV)

But theft and threats were only part of the priests' problem. Their sin was fed and fueled by the way they looked upon other people. The people who came were simple shepherds and shopkeepers. And they came with a genuine desire to find forgiveness and please the God they loved.

But to Eli's sons, they were nothing than a means to an end. They were there to be used, not served. And lack of love is always a sign the Spirit of Jesus Christ neither reigns nor resides within our lives.

If someone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from Him, that the one who loves God should love his brother also. 1 John 4:20-21

Selfishly using other people to get what we want is the farthest thing from loving them. And love is always the acid test of real faith.

Slavery and Reverence

In God's eyes, Hophni and Phinehas were also guilty of a much darker and deeper sin. God treasured each of the humble worshipers who came to His house to seek His forgiveness.

And the sacrificial sheep they brought to His house were something special to Him. In a sense, those little lambs were holy; they were set aside to be used as sin offerings. Yes, God did command that two parts of each lamb should be given to the priests. But that was out of His goodness and grace. In actuality, all of the animal anyone brought to the tabernacle belonged to God. And to God alone.

But to Eli's sons, those lambs were not holy at all. They were merely a way to make money. And God considered that treating His offerings with contempt.

...the sin of the young men was very great before the Lord, for the men despised the offering of the Lord. Verse 17

The same principle applies to churches and Christian ministries which go to great lengths to milk money from sincere saints. Every nickle and dime a person brings to God's house is holy in our Lord's eyes. And looking upon offerings with greed is despising and having open contempt for that which belongs to God.

At Shiloh, the priests' greed and disregard for God's property had a profound effect. People simply stopped coming to the tabernacle to worship and offer sacrifices. And if people see those sins in Christian churches, they will do the same thing.

Worse yet, when we fail to honor God, we forfeit His blessings. And He looks upon us just as Eli's sons did His offerings. With contempt!

Those who honor me I will honor, but those who despise me will be disdained. Verse 30 (NIV)

So if we are to serve our Savior as He would have us to, we must never lose our sense of reverence for Him. After all, each time God's people gather in Christ's name, His Spirit is personally among them.

...where two or three have gathered together in My name, I am there in their midst. Matthew 18:20

Christian worship is to be a time of celebration and singing, of joy and freedom. But we who love Jesus as Lord and Savior must never forget we are meeting in the personal presence of His Spirit.

When we worship, we are in the presence of the high and holy God of eternity. And everything we do should reflect that knowledge. It should affect what we say and what we do. It should color how we treat one other. It should even influence how we dress.

There was a reason why Hophni and Phinehas had neither regard nor reverence for the things of God. They had no time to think about treasuring God's presence or property. They were too busy feeding their own appetites. And that too is a sign we have not been delivered from spiritual slavery.

...such men are slaves, not of our Lord Christ but of their own appetites; Romans 16:18

That was at the heart of the sins that condemned Eli's sons. They were ruled by

their own passions. So it is not surprising that their sin was not limited to stealing that which belonged to God.

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. Verse 22

Since Moses' time, godly women had dedicated their lives to serving the Lord they loved. At great personal sacrifice, they spent their days washing, sewing and cleaning.

But Hophni and Phinehas had neither respect nor regard for those women's service and sacrifice. To the priests, those women were a lot like the lambs people brought. They were nothing more and nothing less than a way to satisfy their own desires.

When anyone offers their lives to the Lord of eternity, God takes that person under His wing. And as He does all who serve Him, the Lord treasured the faithful women who served at the tabernacle.

So when Eli's sons used those women as concubines, it was merely another instance of sinful passion overshadowing spiritual piety. And it proved once again they were slaves, not of God, but of own appetites and iniquity.

Much as changed since Eli's day. But one thing has not. We cannot be slaves to our own passions and appetites yet still be servants of Jesus Christ. If we are, our profession of faith is little more than a lie.

Slavery and Reproof

Eli had grown old and feeble. So he was no longer able to walk around the tabernacle grounds to oversee the activities there. But people kept coming to him with complaints about his sons. So the old man confronted his boys.

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. Verses 23-24

The complaints were so voluminous, He could not dismiss them. So Eli sat Hophni and Phinehas down and reprimanded them.

Their sin was not merely against other people, he insisted. They were sinning against God Himself. So there was no sacrificial remedy for remission.

If one man sins against another, God will mediate for him; but if a man sins against the Lord, who can intercede for him?" Verse 25

There was both pity and passion in the old priest's words. As the high priest, one of his responsibilities was to sit as God's judge when people had disputes.

If he did find a person guilty of a sin, the priest could then present a blood sacrifice. And the person would be forgiven.

But as much as he wanted to, Eli could not mediate the sin of his sons. They had not sinned against some other person; they had repeatedly sinned against God Himself. And there was no mediator between God and men.

In a very real sense, David was right about sin. After He slept with Uriah's wife and had her husband killed, the shepherd king prayed and confessed his sin to God.

Against You, You only, I have sinned and done what is evil in Your sight, Psalm 51:4

David knew he had not merely sinned against Uriah and his wife. He had also

sinned against God. And what was true of him is also true of us. Every time we disobey God, we are sinning against the Lord who loves us and laid down His life for us.

But one wonderful thing has changed since Eli's time. Now we do have a Mediator between God and men.

...there is one God, and one mediator also between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself as a ransom for all, 1 Timothy 2:5_6

Surely, that is the glory of the Gospel of Christ. Our Savior now sits as the great high priest in Heaven. And He not only pleads our cause before His father. He also gave His life as the blood sacrifice for our sin.

So we never need to stagger beneath a terrible load of guilt. We can come to God confidently when we have sinned. We can confess our sins and be fully and forever cleansed of them.

If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. 1 John 1:9

The warning in Eli's words was stern and stark. His sons were in danger of being judged and condemned by God.

That alone should have shaken Hophni and Phinehas. And if that was not enough, their father's grief should have touched their hearts with guilt. But it did not.

But they would not listen to the voice of their father, Verse 25

Neither the tears of their earthly father nor the terror of their heavenly father had any effect upon the two priests. They paid no attention to the old man. They simply returned to the tabernacle and continued stealing from worshipers and treating godly women as pagan concubines.

One of the clearest gauges of a person's spiritual condition is how he or she reacts to reproof. Tragically, Eli's sons had no sense of guilt about what they did at all.

And for a Christian that is a dark and dangerous sign. After all, if God's Holy Spirit does live within us, He will unfailingly point out our sin. He will reprove us when we stray from full faith and commitment to Christ and urge us to return to God with remorse and repentance.

So if we feel no pangs of conscience when we sin, it is likely God's Spirit does not live within us at all. And Paul wrote that if Christ's Spirit does not live within us, we cannot and do not belong to Him.

The Bible adds a terrifying conclusion about Hophni and Phinehas.

...they would not listen to the voice of their father, for the Lord desired to put them to death. Verse 25

The word *for* in that verse can also be translated *therefore*. God desired to put Eli's sons to death because they would not respond with repentance to their father's reproof.

Judgement upon sin is always God's perfect will. His holiness, justice, and righteousness demand that sin be punished with death. That is why He sent His one and only Son into this world.

Jesus came to pay the terrible price of blood and death that is the penalty for our sin. Remembering that ought to make us take sin seriously.

But that is precisely what Eli did not do. Sure, he scolded his sons. But that was all he did. And that was not enough.

Jesus told a parable of a man who served as a business manager yet indulged in

theft and graft. And when the man's lord heard about it, he did not mince words.

...he called him and said to him, "What is this I hear about you? Give an accounting of your management, for you can no longer be manager." Luke 16:2

That is what Eli should have done. He should have stripped his sons of all their responsibilities. Hophni and Phinehas should have been dismissed. Instead, they were allowed to return to all their sins.

We dare not duplicate Eli's error. When we find sin in our own lives, we must forever banish it. We must not only confess it to God and ask Him to forgive us. We must also turn away from it and never again return to such selfishness and sin.

If we do not do that, it is doubtful that we know Jesus as our Savior and Lord at all. Like Eli's sons, we do not know God. And we must pay the same the penalty.

Death!