
A failure to lead – Eli

I Samuel chapters 1 to 4

Whenever I find myself alone in a strange town I often look for a church which is open at lunchtime. It is a delight to spend some time reading my bible and praying quietly. However, you can't always be sure you will be left alone; I am often approached by anxious clergymen who, faces filled with earnest concern, ask "Are you alright? Do you need any help at all?" It is nice of them, but why can't a man praying in a church be regarded as... normal?

There is a curious incident at the beginning of the twin-volume history of Israel – the books of Samuel. A woman called Hannah went to the tabernacle at Shiloh to pray fervently about a crisis in her life. Eli the priest watched her for a while and, jumping to the conclusion that she was drunk, firmly rebuked her. The sad old dullard had not realised that the woman was not bladdered; her intensity was born of great anguish and grief. Hannah lived in a world where to pray in a temple was regarded as weird, the sort of thing that drunks do. We will soon see that her world and ours are not so different from each other.

This is how Eli, the man responsible for the spiritual well-being of Israel, is introduced and you immediately get the feeling that something is wrong. Your suspicions are confirmed when you meet Eli's sons¹. Hophni and Phineas were two bullies taking advantage of their status to intimidate Israelite temple-goers and enjoy the sexual favours of the women of the community. Reading I Samuel we eavesdrop as the old priest feebly rebukes them but fails to use his power to prevent their crimes.

Soon Israel's army is smashed up by a powerful force of Philistines. Hoping to stop them in their tracks, Hophni and Phineas march off to battle in procession with the Ark of the Covenant, hoping that this religious talisman will save their skins. The Lord himself was said to sit enthroned above the Ark, with Him on board they could not loose.

They lost. Eli's sons were killed and the Ark was captured and taken to a Philistine city. As far as the Israelites were concerned, God had left the building; the glory had departed. It could not get worse than this².

Re-writing the future

Japan is re-writing its past. Unable to face the terrible truth about its conduct in World War II, text books are being re-written without the Rape of Nanking, the forced suicides of Okinawa and the enslavement of women for the use of their soldiers. The books now teach that Japan behaved with moderation and honour throughout the war years. This is not harmless tinkering with history - suppressing the past more-or-less guarantees that you will repeat its mistakes – it is facing up to our mistakes that enables us to re-write the future.

¹ I Samuel 2:22-25

² I Samuel 4:21-22

These personalities in the history of Israel offer us sharp insights into the pathology of leadership; what happens when things go wrong; we can then re-shape our leadership of the company, the church, or the family in the light of lessons learned. If you want a strap-line, a subtitle, for the books of I and II Samuel a good one would be; “Who should lead God’s people?” The answer to that question turns out to be more to do with character than technique or pizzazz; in the world of the Bible leadership without character leads to catastrophe. Fast-forward to the modern world and trace the stories of Enron, Scooter Libby or Robert Maxwell and you might arrive at the same conclusion; the world has changed but people haven’t; that’s why the Bible is so valuable.

Judging from the way Hophni and Phineas had turned out, Eli had not succeeded as a parent. When we meet him in I Samuel he is old and cynical and his half-hearted rebukes fall on deaf ears³ – the boys had heard it all before and knew that dad would not follow through with real discipline – the old man was a pushover. But lest we judge Eli too harshly we need to see what he was up against.

At this time in Israel’s history there was no monarchy or national administration. Apart from the portable temple at Shiloh there was no centre of national life. When the need arose, charismatic leaders emerged to galvanise Israel into action against an enemy. When the crisis subsided the leader returned to the obscurity of his (or her) tribal life. The book of Judges describes this period and, in its last sentence, makes this valuable observation, “In those days Israel had no king, everyone did as he saw fit”⁴.

So by the time we see Eli eavesdropping on Hannah it was so rare to see a woman in fervent prayer that the old boy assumed she was drunk. It must have been a pleasant surprise for him to discover that the lady actually believed God could help her – nobody else did!

So this was not a great society in which to bring up children. Whatever Hophni and Phineas learned at home, there were plenty of other role models to follow on the streets of Shiloh. The scum of the nation would come to the tabernacle to bribe God with an offering or two and the two young priests must have been susceptible to their influence. To children brought up with the moral clarity of a godly home, the freewheeling morality of the world can be irresistibly attractive.

Then there is the issue of power. The two priests lived in a primitive and superstitious society, that’s why they paraded the Ark before the Philistines; it was an act of pure superstition uninformed by the teachings of their scriptures. I don’t think that the theology of Exodus and Leviticus would have meant much to the temple-goers in Shiloh. They needed rain, pest-free crops and a decent harvest and they were sacrificing a valuable animal to get God on their side. This put the priests in an unassailable position and when people complained of their abuses they were threatened in return⁵. Eli’s sons were the only route to get to God; people could take

³ I Samuel 2:22-25

⁴ Judges 21:25

⁵ I Samuel 2:12-17

it or leave it. They were innovative too; the pagan temples used sexual intercourse to get on the right side of their gods – maybe this would work at Shiloh? Hophni and Phineas were happy to experiment with the idea.

Take out the theological dimension, and this is a worryingly familiar picture to the twenty-first century parent of teenaged kids. Ours is not a great society in which to bring up children, the pressures on them are huge; the world is both scintillating and intimidating. It offers delights our kids fear they will never experience if they remain within the boundaries God sets for them, and it threatens them with all kinds of subtle punishments if they do not conform.

And so we learn the first thing we need to know about leadership – or parenthood - challenges are normal, let's not complain about them. A leader does not lead in ideal circumstances; he or she will always have to deal with a culture which makes the work of parenting or leading very difficult indeed. Old Eli knew this, he had been fighting it all his life and he had grown cynical enough to assume that a woman deep in prayer was stone drunk; but not effective enough to contain the excesses of his sons.

We need to reflect on how things could have been different. How can a modern parent avoid sleep-walking into the same failures as Eli?

Loosing to win

Leadership involves risk; if you are to lead you must run the risk of loosing something you value very greatly. Eli must have suspected that he was going to loose his sons - this contempt of the Lord could not continue – and he was right, they both died in the battle following the arrival of the Ark before the battle with the Philistines. What might have happened if Eli had been prepared to loose his sons sooner?

Children need to be set boundaries of acceptable behaviour from their earliest years and parents need to enforce those boundaries. Those who are afraid to challenge their children will always be weak and the kids will exploit their weakness. The behaviour of Hophni and Phineas was shaped in their early years and it looks as though Eli was never a serious threat to their crossing the boundaries. Enforcing the boundaries of acceptable behaviour would have been traumatic. The boys would have screamed, stomped off and used every weapon in their armoury to get Eli to back down. If Eli had been prepared to loose his son's friendship at that point he would almost certainly have won the battle and history would have been different. A tougher Eli would have won his sons, if only he had been prepared to loose them for a while. Sadly, he lacked the nerve.

If you want to gain your children's respect and affection in the long term you have to be prepared to loose it for a while when they are young.

It is the same in church life. Leaders who are afraid to loose people will always be weak. There are church leaders who hand a veto to the minority by always giving in to them when they should be showing them the door. For sure, a Christian leader is a

relational leader – everything we achieve is down to the quality of our relationships with those we lead - Paul wrote, “As far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone”⁶. But we cannot be everyone’s friend. If you lead, be it a family or a church, some people are not going to like you.

Get used to it.

Eli and Samuel

Re-read the story a few times and you make a pleasant discovery; Eli was not a complete washout. Despite his limitations as a father God gave him a key role in shaping the life of Samuel⁷. One small verse gives a humungous clue as to Samuel’s significance in the great scheme of things “As young Samuel grew taller he continued to grow in favour with the Lord and with the People”⁸ When Luke was writing his gospel, casting around for a way to describe the young Jesus growing up in Nazareth, he used this verse⁹. This young boy, on which the future of Israel depends, is entrusted to Eli.

Never say that God won’t give you another chance! If Eli failed with his own sons he succeeded with Samuel – the significant moment arrived one night when they were both on duty in the temple. Outside all was dark, inside a single lamp burned where they were sleeping. The imagery conveys the feeling that Eli was shielding Samuel, within the sanctuary of the temple, from the dark deeds taking place outside. As they sleep, Samuel is woken by a voice, thinking that Eli is calling for him he goes and wakes the old man up. But Eli is not calling and he tells Samuel to go back to bed.

This happens three times before Eli understands what is happening¹⁰. God was speaking and Eli told Samuel how to listen, “... if someone calls again say, ‘Yes Lord, your servant is listening’”. Samuel may well have picked this up for himself, but God gave Eli a hand in it. I find that rather moving.

There is more, God’s word to Samuel is bad news indeed for Eli – it concerned the destruction of his family. Suspecting the worst Eli insisted that Samuel told it to him straight. In so doing Eli taught Samuel how to speak Gods word – truthfully and fearlessly – “Samuel told Eli everything, he didn’t hold anything back”. In the same day this old failure had helped to teach Samuel the skills of listening and speaking; the tools for a lifetime of ministry. Suddenly something new is happening¹¹

As we will see in this masterpiece we call I and II Samuel, no leader of God’s people is a complete dud. Many years after Eli’s death the men of Jabesh Gilead, would risk life and limb to rescue the body of King Saul from its gibbet on the walls of Beth Shan. Saul had been a disaster for Israel but the citizens of Jabesh owed him; he had

⁶ This is from Romans 12, essential reading for everyone.

⁷ I Samuel 1:26-28, 2:11 & 3:1

⁸ I Samuel 2:26

⁹ Luke 2:52

¹⁰ I Samuel 3 – read the whole chapter, it is worth it.

¹¹ I Samuel 3:19-21

rescued their fathers from a terrible fate a generation before¹². However great the sin, however heavy the fall, God will graciously use the most unpromising material to achieve his ends – he is overwhelmingly gracious.

One more thing; if you look closely at the life of any leader and you will find that they are less impressive than you would think on first meeting. That pastor who cares so much is inclined to snap at his kids and neglect his wife, the youth leader seems like a nice guy but his workmates think he's a bit lazy – he just isn't pulling his weight. This is important; the leaders you most respect will probably disappoint you if you knew them better. This is Warren Wiersbe on the subject:

*Leaders are human beings, made of dust, subject to the same forces that destroy the men and women who sit in the pews. For some reason, many church members have the idea that their leaders are exempt from personal pressures and problems - or that they have a secret system for overcoming the difficulties of life and ministry. They do not.*¹³

Be careful with your leaders, your Pastor or a parent, they are only human.

The if... then...covenant

Aside from this small glimmer of light, the fact is that Eli had not failed once or twice, but over a lifetime he had consistently failed to lead Israel and his own family. In the end the nation was as corrupt as his children. Long-term failure of leadership – that was Israel's problem.

It is our problem too. There are uncomfortable similarities between our world and Israel under the judges and I can't help but feel that the verdict of Judges 21:25 applies to us ("In those days Israel had no king; everyone did what was right in their own eyes"). Our situation is the result of a long-term failure to lead on behalf of our nations spiritual leaders. The big denominations have consistently chosen the wrong kind of people to lead; they have passed over gifted leaders in favour of anemic individuals who cannot face unpopularity or explain themselves clearly. The secular world is not fooled by people like this and have no time for them. Generation after generation of Brits has been completely unimpressed by the church's performance. The state we are in is due in large measure to our being led by people like Eli – a long term absence of spiritual leadership that really cuts it with people.

At times like this some Christians go into what I would call 'perfectionist mode' – we slip into believing that if only every Christian came up to a certain standard we would receive God's blessing and everything would be OK. "If my people who are called by my name will humble themselves and pray then I will pardon their sin and heal their land", is a good example of this thinking; if we do the right things then God will work.

¹² I Samuel chapters 11 & 31

¹³ Warren Wiersbe - quoted in Christianity and Renewal, January 2003

But this is straight out of the Old Covenant, which was what I call an “**If... then...** covenant”. God’s deal with Moses and the people of Israel was simple, “**If** you obey me **then** I will bless you, **if** you disobey **then** I will curse you”. Blessing was linked to performance.

This is not the covenant that you and I have with the Lord. Jesus invites us into a new covenant relationship with him. This is not an “if/then” covenant but a “Trust me and I will give you what you don’t deserve” covenant. Everything that must be done to earn God’s blessing has already been done in the life and death of Jesus – all this is yours in the instant that you trust him – from then on God gives you the blessing that you have not earned. God’s blessing on our lives is linked to Jesus’ performance, not ours.

This is called grace. You see, even in the days of the “if/then covenant” God was inclined to break his own rules; still willing to bless Eli with a role in the mentoring of Samuel, then in Samuel to give Israel the leader they did not deserve. Under the terms of the new covenant, the “Trust me and I will give you what you don’t deserve” covenant, God is infinitely more generous. So it may come as a shock to you to learn that we do not have to wait for perfection until God moves in blessing, we simply trust that he will, and carry on doing the right things until he does. I don’t know how God is going to rescue us from the state we are in, but I do know that it will be very wonderful when he does.