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The Death of ‘Eli
First Samuel 4: 12-18

The death of ‘Eli DIG: What words from God are fulfilled “that same day?” What seems to be ‘Eli’s first concern here? What new insight does that give into his character? What do you tremble with anxiety over? Why do ‘Eli and the whole city react so strongly to the news of the Ark? Do you suppose they remembered the prophecy of what was to come?

REFLECT: What low points and high points have marked your spiritual pilgrimage? Where are you just now on the “bad-to-good-news” spectrum? When was the last time that you felt deserted by ADONAI? What was the cause? The solution? Is the LORD currently in your camp? In the Philistines’ camp? Somewhere on the road in between the two?

‘Eli never imagined how God’s judgment of his own sins could endanger the whole nation.

The prophet **Isaiah** exclaimed: **How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news (Isaiah 52:7).** Perhaps the most famous example is that of Philippides, who sped the 26.2 miles from Marathon to Athens with news of the Greek victory over the Persians in 490 BC. Arriving in Athens, Philippides cried out, *Nenike’kamen!* (which means *we have won*), and then immediately fell over dead. Athletes today remember his feat by running races of the same distance, known at the Marathon.

No doubt **‘Eli, Isra’el’s high priest**, would have rejoiced for similar good news as **he** waited in **Shiloh** for a report from the battle with **the Philistines** (**to see link click Bb – The Philistines Capture the Ark: Defeat**). It is said that anxious watchers could guess the news simply by watching the posture of the approaching messenger, in which case **‘Eli** and **his** fellow **Israelites** would likely have been uneasy. **The same day** that the battle was lost**, one of the Israelite soldiers, a Benjamite, ran and came to Shiloh with his clothes torn and dust on his head [as a sign of mourning] (4:12).** To run twenty miles over rough terrain was

a remarkable athletic feat, though perhaps not as epic as the of Philippides. Yet, however great **his** strength and valor, **his** arrival would never be remembered with joy, since **his** very appearance bore testimony of bad news.

As **‘Eli** waited, we see **him** as we first met **him (1:9), sitting on his seat**, near the entrance to **the Tabernacle**, **watching, because his heart was trembling with anxiety over the Ark of God.** Despite **his blindness (3:2), ‘Eli** is described as **“watching,”** straining every nerve. Why was **he trembling with fear** as **he** waited for news? There are **two reasons** for **his** response. **The first reason** was that **‘Eli** had received a prophecy from an unnamed **man of God (2:27).** Because **‘Eli** had allowed **his sons** to **sin**, **he** was told that **all your descendants will die in the prime of life. This will be the sign to you which will come concerning your two sons, Hophni and Phinehas: both will die on the same day (2:33-34).** This prophecy was later confirmed in **God’s** first prophecy through **Samuel**, when **he** said: **I am about to judge the house of ‘Eli forever for the sins that he knew about, because his sons brought a curse on themselves and he did not rebuke them (3:13).**

With those two prophecies ringing in **his** ears, we can understand why **‘Eli’s heart trembled with anxiety on the day his** two **sons** had taken **the Ark** into battle. **The high priest** wondered, “Could this be the day when **God’s** judgment would fall?” The hearts of **sinful** men are always uneasy in times of danger because their consciences testify to their guilt before **God**. But, we can rest assured that nobody is getting away with anything (see the commentary on **Revelation Fo – The Great White Throne Judgment**). Because **Ha’Shem** pronounces judgment on all **sin**, only those whose **sins** have been cleansed by **the blood of Messiah** can face the storms of life with peace in their **hearts**.

The second reason why **‘Eli trembled with anxiety**, is that **he** was surely aware that **the Ark** could go into battle only at **the LORD’s command (Deuteronomy 12:5** and **11)**. In all of **Isra’el’s** great victories, **God** sent **His people** into battle, promising **His** mighty help: **the people** did not rush into battle on **their** own, commanding **God** to bring **His** power. Even godly men and women will lose their peace if they act in ways contrary to **God’s Word**. The only safe way for us to face the troubles of life is, first, to be justified with **ADONAI** through faith in **Yeshua Messiah**, and second, to act in obedience to **God’s Word**.[120]

It was a good twenty miles from **Aphek** to **Shiloh**. Considering that the route was predominantly up-hill into mountainous country, **the runner** needed to be in top

shape to cover the ground in one day. **His** disheveled appearance indicated that **he** was mourning. Thus, **he** would have been seen as bringing bad news.[121] **When the runner entered the city and told the news, the whole city began crying out** in defeat and in fear**. On hearing the cries, ‘Eli asked, “What does this uproar mean?” So the runner hurried, came to ‘Eli and told him. ‘Eli was ninety-eight years old, and his gaze was fixed, because he was** completely **blind.** Recognizing that **‘Eli** was **blind**, **the runner** identified **himself** as having come from the battlefield. **He said to ‘Eli, “I’m the soldier that came; I escaped today from the battlefield.” ‘Eli asked, “How did things go, my son” (4:13-16)? The runner answered, “Isra’el fled before the Philistines, and there was a terrible slaughter among the people.”** Furthermore, **your two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, also are dead.”** Even that did not seem to faze **‘Eli**, because **he** probably had already given **them** up as hopeless.[122]



And – as if saving the worst news for last – **the Ark of God** had been **captured** by the **Philistines (4:17).** But **‘Eli** was not prepared for the last piece of news. **He** had accepted **his** own fall from office and even the death of **his sons** – **they** deserved **it**, after all, and **Ha’Shem** had foretold **it** (see **Au – God’s Rejection of ‘Eli’s House**). But **he** never imagined how **God’s** judgment of **his** own **sins** could endanger the whole nation. The shock of that news literally killed **him**. **And as soon as the runner mentioned what had happened to the Ark of God, ‘Eli,** possibly suffering a stroke or heart attack, **fell backward off his seat next to the gate, broke his neck and died, for he was an old man, and heavy (4:18a).** Thus, in the fulfillment of **the Word of the LORD**, **the priestly** line of **‘Eli** was wiped out. It was, in fact, the end of a dark era going back through the entire period of **the judges** (see **Judges At – The Twelve Cycles**). This era had begun with **the**

Israelites forgetting **the LORD** and pursuing **other gods (Judges 2:11-12)**. It ended with the loss of **ADONAI’s** very **Presence**, **His Sh’khinah glory**, having departed from **the people** with the loss of **the Ark**. It was the lowest point in **Isra’el’s** history since the captivity in Egypt.

This was the final testament to a man who **had** ministered in **Isra’el for forty years (4:18b). His** legacy was one of utter failure and despair. How did this happen? One answer is that we really don’t know. The Bible records neither **‘Eli’s** early years as **high priest**, nor any of **his** accomplishments. We do not know whether **he** started poorly or well, or how **he** went astray. Perhaps it resulted from **his** grief over **his** wife, who died before the events recorded in **First Samuel** took place. Perhaps **‘Eli** was like many other men whose devotion to work causes them to neglect the raising of their children, which in **‘Eli’s** case led to utter ruin.

Another answer is that **‘Eli’s** disgrace and fall would have happened the way it always does: one wrong step, one wrong decision, one compromise at a time. **Paul** expressed this idea as a proverb: **Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap. Whoever sows to please their flesh, from the flesh will reap destruction; whoever sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life (Galatians 6:7-8).** First we sow; then we reap. It is said that we sow a thought and reap an action; sow an action and reap a habit; sow a habit and reap a lifestyle; sow a lifestyle and reap a character; sow a character and reap a destiny.

As Richard Phillips relates in his commentary on **First Samuel**, if this accurately explains the fall of **‘Eli** and **his house**, then the key to avoiding **his** fate is to realize that our actions and habits, our character and destiny, ultimately flow from our thoughts and beliefs. The way to be a godly people is to renew our minds with **God’s Word**. This is the counsel given by **Paul** as the key to life as a believer: **Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is – His good, pleasing and perfect will (Romans 12:2).** What kind of positive difference would it have made, we wonder, if **‘Eli** had been more devoted to studying **God’s Torah** and teaching it to **his sons**? We do not know, except that the difference could only have been very great.[123]

*Dear Heavenly Father, praise **Your** almighty power and **Your** steadfast love **(Psalms 63:3). You** so graciously pay the penalty for our sins, live within those who love **You (John 14:23)** and make an eternal home in heaven for **Your***

*children! Yet **You** are not only love **(First John 4:8). You** are also **righteous**, which means that **You** must judge those unbelievers who sin and do not repent.* ***Righteousness and justice are the foundation of Your throne. Lovingkindness and truth go before You (Psalms 89:14).***

*Thank you that the home that **Yeshua** is preparing **(John 14:3)** will be such a wonderful home, with no **crying**, nor dying**. He shall wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more. Nor shall there be mourning or crying or pain any longer, for the former things have passed away (Revelation 21:4).** Eternity will be so long that it is wise to live with our hearts focused on eternity and loving **You**. Trials will be over soon. **For I consider the sufferings of this present time not worthy to be compared with the coming glory to be revealed to us (Romans 8:18).** We love to keep the eyes of our heart focused on blessing **You** through our thoughts and actions. **You** are so worthy to be worshiped! In **Messiah Yeshua’s** holy **Name** and power of **His** resurrection.*