

Ichabod - The Fall of the House of Eli. 1 Samuel 2:12-17, 22-25

Disclaimer: Material from this message was adapted in part from messages found on the Sermon Central website.

During a service at an old synagogue, when a particular prayer was said, half the congregants stood up and half remained sitting. The half that was seated started yelling at those standing to sit down, and the ones standing yelled at the ones sitting to stand up. The new rabbi didn't know what to do. So he decided to consult the oldest member of the synagogue. Hoping that the 98-year-old elderly man would be able to tell him what the actual tradition was, the rabbi went to the nursing home to talk with him.

"Is it the tradition to stand during this prayer?"

The old man answered, "No, that's not the tradition."

"So the tradition is to sit down for the prayer?"

The old man answered, "No, that's not the tradition."

The rabbi was confused. "But the people argue all the time, yelling at each other about whether they should sit or stand."

And "THAT," the old man interrupted, "is the tradition!"

Over time, people can get so lost in the habits of faith that they forget about the real reason why they are doing what they are doing. Focusing on the ritual and forgetting about their relationship with God, they play the role of Christian, but their hearts are far from God. Today's story illustrates just such forgetfulness or fakery... and in response asks us this question:

Is God missing in your life?

Do you look like a Christian, but without having a real relationship with Him?

Remember, **at the heart of it all, Christianity is about our personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ.** If we get our relationship with Jesus right, the rest will fall into place. Get this wrong, and nothing will be right. So, don't lose God in the midst of your religion. Which is what today's story is all about.

With perhaps the exception of young Samuel who is growing up in the presence of the Lord - literally sleeping beside the Ark of the Covenant in the Tabernacle - the people of Israel in the days of Eli the Priest, have traded their faith in God for a religion of tradition and good luck charms. As in the days of the Judges, everyone was still doing what was right in their own eyes. And because of this, ***the word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread*** (3:1).

Thus today's is a cautionary tale about what happens when you forget God and begin worshipping the creature more than the Creator. Let's first summarize the story of the fall of the family of Eli, then we will unpack its lessons for us.

The third chapter of the book of 1st Samuel opens with the story of the boy Samuel serving as an assistant to the priests at the Tabernacle of the Lord in Shiloh. Having been dedicated to the Lord from birth, at the age of three, he was placed under the

tutelage of Eli the current High Priest and Judge of Israel. Living here in a close daily relationship with God, Samuel is destined to grow up to be the greatest Priest and Judge since the days of Moses and Aaron; the person who will be able to restore Israel back to its faith.



But being very old, Eli is currently letting his two sons Hophni and Phinehas serve as the attending priests of the tabernacle. Which is a real problem because they are wolves in priests clothing. Not believing in God, they use their priestly office to bully and rob worshipers who come to the

Tabernacle while sleeping with the women who are serving at the Tabernacle. Because the people have complained to him, Eli knows all this but the best he can do is scold his sons about their danger inherent in sinning against God.

Not surprisingly a prophet soon arrives to inform Eli that because he has allowed his sons to abuse their priestly roles and to rob God of His sacrifices, that not only will his days as a priest soon be ended but also his entire future family line will be removed from that position forever. The truth of this prophecy would be signaled by the simultaneous death of his two sons on the same day.

Later, knowing that Samuel has had his first nighttime conversation with God, Eli commands him to repeat God's message. As Samuel fearfully relays the same prophecy of condemnation on Eli's family, all the aged priest can reply is, *"It is the Lord; let Him do what seems good to Him."*

Soon after that the prophecy is fulfilled. Their arch enemies, the Philistines, have declared war on Israel. After the first day's battle went poorly for them, the Elders of Israel decide that their future victory would be assured if they brought God along to the fight.



so Hophni and Phinehas fetch the Ark of the Covenant down into the Israeli Army camp. While the presence of the Ark encourages the Israelis, it has the opposite effect of further emboldening the Philistines so that in the next battle, Israel's defeat would be decisive and tragic. That next day, along with the death of

Hophni and Phinehas, 30,000 of Israel's soldiers were slaughtered, and the Ark of the Covenant was captured and carried back to the Philistine capital of Ashdod. The surprising story of the Ark of the Covenant's seven month residence in Ashdod's Temple of Dagon will have to wait for another day as we come to the sad conclusion of Eli's tale.

Upon hearing that both his sons are dead and that the Ark has been captured, Eli falls over backward, breaks his neck and dies. Next, hearing that her husband has died, along with the capturing of the Ark, the wife of Phinehas goes into premature labor and

with her dying breath names her orphaned son "**Ichabod**;" which means, "*The Glory Has Departed from Israel.*"

Now you know why, even though it sounds pleasant to our non-Hebrew ears, this is one Biblical name you should never bestow upon your child. And you also know why Washington Irving named his vain schoolteacher, who was chased out of Sleepy Hollow by the Headless Horseman, Ichabod Crane; because he too, quickly departed. So let's move along to what lessons we can learn from, The Fall of the House of Eli.

Limping back from their first day's defeat, the leaders of Israel ask, "*Why has the Lord put us to rout today before the Philistines?*" The question was right but it wasn't addressed to God. They were just venting their frustrations without the intention of really seeking God. How do we know? In the very next line, we find them answering their own question. "*Let us bring the ark of the covenant of the Lord here from Shiloh, so that He may come among us and save us from the power of our enemies.*" (4:3)



That will solve the problem, just bring along the Ark of God and we will win the war. Our Bible uses the phrase "**so that He [God] may come among us,**" but the King James and other versions say "**so that IT may go with us,**" which is a better translation, because in a reflection of their current spiritual malaise, the people of Israel were trusting in IT – the physical presence of the ARK! Rather than trusting in and appealing to God, Israel was treating the ARK as their "good luck charm" that would insure their success.

The Ark is a chest made of acacia wood and covered with gold. Placed within it are two tablets of the Ten Commandments, a jar of manna, and Aaron's rod that budded (Heb 9:4-5). Over the gold plated lid or 'mercy-seat' were two cherubs with outspread wings. This is where the Lord would make His presence known when He spoke with Moses.

As a symbol of God's presence the Ark led the people into the Promised Land. Now Israel wants the Ark to lead them into victory in their war. But the Ark was only the symbol, never a guarantee of God's presence. This day, Israel had no desire to seek God or to understand His will, they just wanted the presence of the Ark to fulfill their goal and achieve their purpose. Does this sound familiar? Many do NOT seek God truly for God's sake.

- They don't seek God to do God's will; they seek God to do their will.
- They seek God to gratify their needs. So God is only as good as He is of use.

We lose God when we emphasize a ritual or object over and above our RELATIONSHIP with God. When we focus only the forms, what we get is a RELIGION not FAITH. This is superstition at best and idolatry at worst. We have lost God!

It's like hanging a cross at our front door and believing that everything will be fine in the house. *"Bring out the cross and Dracula will run."*

It's like putting the ICTHUS fish on your bumper to let everyone know that you are a good Christian, so they will forgive your bad driving. (and that's the reason why I don't put a fish on my bumper).

Two cars were waiting at a stoplight. The light turned green, but the elderly man didn't notice it. A woman in the car behind him begins pounding on her horn yelling at the man to move. The man doesn't move. Screaming in frustration at possibly missing her chance to get through the intersection, suddenly she hears a tap on her window and looks up into the barrel of a gun held by a very serious looking policeman.

Telling her to shut off her car while keeping both hands in sight, the policeman quickly cuffs and hustles her into the patrol car. Too bewildered by the chain of events to ask any questions, she is driven to the police station where she is fingerprinted, photographed, searched, booked and placed in a cell.

After a couple of hours the cell door is opened. She is escorted back to the booking desk where the original officer is waiting with her personal effects. He hands her the bag containing her things, and says, *"I'm really sorry for this mistake. But when I pulled up behind your car while you were blowing your horn, and screaming a blue streak at the car in front of you, I noticed the **"Choose Life"** license plate holder, the **"What Would Jesus Do"** and **"Follow Me to Sunday School"** bumper stickers, along with the chrome plated Christian fish emblem on the trunk ... so naturally I assumed you had stolen the car."*

It's your relationship with God, not any paraphernalia, crosses, or bumper stickers you wear that proves your Christianity. Christianity is not a religion of rites, rituals, or symbols. It is all about your relationship with God, or its nothing.

There is no magical power inherent in any object or method. The power lies with God. Though their hearts were far from Him, Israel's leaders tried to manipulate God into giving them victory with the presence of the Ark. God is not our servant. We cannot use Him for our purposes. We don't bargain with God; we submit to Him.

Here's a modern example of treating the symbols of faith as good luck charms. The book of Acts records that, *God did extraordinary miracles through Paul, so that when*

the handkerchiefs or aprons that had touched his skin were brought to the sick, their diseases left them, and the evil spirits came out of them." (Acts 19:11-12)

But it is God who did the healing, it was faith in God that brought about the healing, not the handkerchiefs and aprons that had touched Paul. Our faith is in God, period. Not in the objects He uses - the forms, the rites, the rituals, the methods.

And when we begin to pooh pooh Catholics for venerating saintly relics, remember that it is supposedly "evangelical" television preachers who will gladly send you a blessed handkerchief for what ails you, or a bottle of water from the Jordan River to pour into your baptismal font.

Our first lesson from all this is quite clear. It is not the method, rituals, or tokens that make us Christian, it is only our personal and living relationship with God. It's all about Him! You focus on the ARK minus the RELATIONSHIP, you get nothing!

Our second lesson then flows from the first. We cannot expect God's blessing without repentance. As the story in 1st Samuel tells us, *the people sent to Shiloh, and brought from there the ark of the covenant of the Lord of hosts, and the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas came along with it.* (4:4)

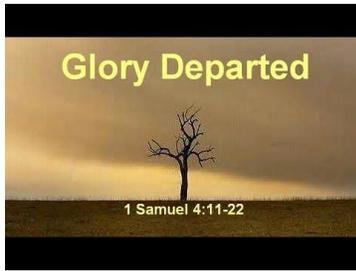
The people come to take the Ark and the priests go along. The two sons who were abusing their priestly role, stealing from the offerings and sleeping with the women at the temple come along with the Ark as God's official representatives. Do you see how exactly opposite this is from what should have happened. Instead of the priests seeking God and giving direction to the people, it was the other way around; the people called the shots and the priests followed.

When the Ark arrived in Camp, Israel was so assured of victory by just its presence that they raised such a shout of celebration, it shook the ground and could even be heard by the Philistines from afar. But shouting, no matter how loud, won't bring God near, only repentance does.

As King David told God in his prayer of confession,

For you have no delight in sacrifice; if I were to give a burnt-offering, you would not be pleased.
The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

Psalm 51:16-17



Of course Israel's dependence on the Ark, backfired. The next day 30,000 soldiers died, the rest fled back home. Hophni and Phinehas as predicted also died. Upon hearing the news, their father Eli died as did Phinehas' wife in childbirth leaving her new born son Ichabod orphaned, never to be heard of again. **The glory – God's presence - truly had departed from Israel, but He had done so long before the Ark was captured by the Philistines.**

We lose God, when we focus our eyes on any objects, forms, rites, rituals or methods, above our relationship with God. If our relationship with God is not right, nothing else works. If our relationship with God is right, everything else will fall into place.

We also lose God when we leave sin un-repented, un-confessed. As the Lord, through told Eli concerning the unrepentant sins of his two sons ...

*"Those who honor me I will honor,
but those who despise me shall be
treated with contempt."*

1 Sam 2:30

Dear friends, God created us to KNOW Him. We broke that relationship when we sinned. God sent His Son Jesus to restore that relationship when Jesus offered Himself on the cross as punishment on our behalf. Repentance of our sin and Faith in Jesus is what reconciles us with God.

To know God's presence is to deal with our sin squarely; confess and repent. When we call on Jesus, He will forgive us and renew us. Then, only then, can we experience God's presence and victory in our life... and we won't need any bumper stickers to let others know of our living faith.

Let's pray about this.