

LifeWay Bible Studies for Life Series for June 6: When leaders fail

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For many years, Americans have watched religious leader after religious leader fall from personal sins and indiscretions. By virtue of the volume of such instances, public trust in religious leaders may be at an all-time low. However, the failure of public figures has not been limited to religious leaders. Countless politicians and business leaders also have been caught up in behavior unbecoming a public figure. But, what really happens when a leader fails?

A sacred trust violated (1 Samuel 2:22-25)

Eli was an aging priest who faithfully served the Lord. As often is the case, his sons were set apart to follow in their father's footsteps.

Eli's sons were not the righteous men their father had been. In fact, they received one of the poorest recommendations found in the pages of Scripture. They were described as "worthless men" (v. 12). The sons of Eli were guilty of two heinous sins, they misused meat brought to the temple for sacrifice (vv. 13-17) and they engaged in sexual activity with women who served the temple (v. 22).

In both instances, these evil men were guilty of more than the apparent sin. They also were guilty of violating a sacred trust they received as servants of the Lord and defiling things set apart for God's holy purposes.

In an attempt to rehabilitate his sons, Eli confronted them with their sins (vv. 22-25). The sons, perhaps relying on the authority given them as

priests, refused to listen to the admonishments of their father. It was after the warning of Eli that the anger of God and the fate of Eli's wicked sons was revealed (v. 25).

One does not have to be a priest to hold a sacred trust and be found holding holy things. God's word instructs rulers of their responsibilities because they serve under the authority of God (Romans 13:1-2). This concept of sacred trust permeates every level of leadership, even down to husbands who are considered the spiritual leaders of their own households. Whenever God's sacred trust is broken the wrath of God always follows.

The Lord does what he thinks is good (1 Samuel 3:11-18)

Before God poured out his wrath for the sins of Eli's sons, he revealed to Samuel his intentions (1 Samuel 3:11-14). It is worth noting God's judgment was not just on Eli's sons. It extended to the entire "house of Eli (vv. 12-14). Just as the sons had broken trust with God, so had Eli, for it was his responsibility as the father to bring proper training to the sons, as it was his responsibility to provide them proper instruction concerning the service of God's people in the temple.

From the very beginning of 1 Samuel, the respect Samuel has for Eli readily is apparent. When God revealed his judgment to Samuel, he did not want to share the information with Eli (v. 15). Either God had informed Eli of his impending wrath, or Eli was gifted in knowing when God spoke to others, for he inquires of Samuel, "What is the word he spoke to you?" (v. 17). After Samuel's revelation, Eli acknowledges his acceptance of the judgment of God.

At this point, it is unclear as to what the wrath of God will mean to Eli's house. Only a hint is given. God's judgment will be such that it, "shall not be atoned for by sacrifice or offering forever (v. 14). God's judgment does not always follow a pattern. There is no prescribed punishment for a

particular sin. Even without benefit of knowing what God was going to do, Eli gave assent to God's will; "He will do what seems good to him" (v. 18).

God still speaks his word (1 Samuel 3:19-21)

Regardless of the actions and failures of leaders, God always has a means of presenting his righteous truth. Even when kings fail, God always has his prophet (2 Samuel 12) and the power of his word. Believers need not worry about a vacuum of leadership in the house of God. God's truth always will be revealed. It was after the fall of Eli and his sons that God confirmed Samuel as his prophet (v. 20). Unlike those who preceded him, Samuel was upright and righteous.

There is an interesting juxtaposition between Samuel and the sons of Eli presented in 1 Samuel 3:19. The actions of Eli's sons discredited them and caused their words to be ineffective. Yet, because Samuel followed the way of the Lord, God, "let none of his words fail" (v. 19).

In the final analysis, Eli and his sons discredited themselves, not God or the work of God. From the day of their judgment forward, God and his truth remained as strong and as necessary. No leader is too big to fail, but God and his truth will never fail or disappoint.

Conclusion

In every era, leaders—secular or sacred—have fallen as a result of their sin. Yet, God has remained faithful. God's people should learn from the fall of leaders, but they should not despair. Neither should they use the example of a fallen leader as an excuse for their own shortcomings. They always should remember that God will not leave his people alone and the truth of his word always will remain.