

A Wake-Up Call

Fatherhood – Where Have All the Shepherd’s Gone – Part II

I Samuel 4

Alexis de Tocqueville, the French statesman and author, often visited America in the nineteenth century. He once wrote, regarding our country:

I sought for the greatness and genius of America in her commodious harbors and her ample rivers, and it was not there. In the fertile fields and boundless prairies, and it was not there. In her rich mines and her vast world commerce, and it was not there. Not until I went into the churches of America and heard her pulpits, aflame with righteousness, did I understand the secret of her greatness and power. America is great because she is good; and if America ceases to be good, America will cease to be great.

I would like to paraphrase his quote: “If America’s homes cease to be godly, America will cease to be great.”

More than ever before, fathers need to wake up to the fact that the home is a miniature church, and every Christian father has been appointed a pastor of his own home. He is a shepherd – the primary nurturer, teacher, and guide.

This is a wake-up call. It’s high time for righteous men to be found in the home. Perhaps your apathy and lack of involvement have blinded you to the reality of impending disaster.

A Texas father said he spent the first ten years of his marriage devoted to the love of his life – work. Although success came early and he tasted the trappings of material wealth, Elliot felt empty inside.

*I was working in the insurance business, and my life was totally **work**. That’s all I did, and I was averaging sixty hours a week. I know now that God looks at the heart, and my heart wasn’t right.*

One March evening, Elliot and his wife, Jerri, returned home from a church function around 11:00 p.m. in a driving thunderstorm. About midnight, lightning hit a utility pole outside their home. Like a powder fuse winding its way to the dynamite keg, the charge followed the electric lines into the house and

snaked into the family TV. In microseconds the television set exploded into flames.

Elliot, not quite asleep, smelled smoke coming from the other end of the house. He tells the story:

I hurried to the den, where I discovered one of the walls was on fire. In the thirty seconds it took to call the fire department, my path to the front door was cut off by flames. I couldn’t go out front to where Jerri had taken the kids – the house was almost fully engulfed. I didn’t realize it, though; I was in a state of shock. I escaped out the back, but I severely burned my feet from the smoldering carpet. I never felt the burns until I left the house.

By the time Elliot ran to the front of the house to join his anxious wife – frantic that her husband was still inside the burning home – all they could do was hold each other and watch their house and all their earthly possessions go up in flames. Elliot continues:

That’s when I heard [the Spirit of God], “I’m trying to get your attention. This is Me intervening, and you need to turn to Me and make a change in the direction you’re heading.”

Regardless of the devastation around him, Elliot saw this as a wake-up call from the Lord. In the weeks following the loss of his house, he made major changes in his life. He renewed his relationship with the Lord, began working fewer hours, and came to the realization that true wealth is in the family. He says,

My advice to other fathers is not to wait until the Lord hits you over the head with a baseball bat.¹

In the book entitled *Daddy’s Home*, the author reported that the national average of the number of work hours for middle class employees is 56 hours a week. Elliot’s average was much higher – 60 to 70 hours a week.

Steve Farrar put it so well when he said, “We need some men who have a passion to be better fathers than accountants. We need some men who have a passion to be better dads than attorneys and salesmen. We need

some men who have a passion to be better fathers than foremen, pastors, mechanics, or doctors.”

What’s your passion? Is this your wake-up call?

Eli’s Failure – A National *Disgrace*

In our last discussion, the alarm sounded the wake-up call for a father by the name of Eli. His failure in his home had become a national disgrace!

Remember – Eli consistently failed to discipline his two sons. Frankly, there is nothing more hassling or more tiring than the battle of the wills – and it starts at a very young age. As toddlers, children begin asking one primary question when they wake up in the morning, “Who’s in charge around here?”

If parents aren’t quick enough to respond, “We are,” the children mutiny, take over the ship, and make the parents walk the plank!

Children start this so early in life. The youngster who goes to the shelf and reaches out with his pudgy little hand for some interesting object hears, “No, no.”

But the child looks his parents right in the eyes, and grabs that prize anyway! He has already decided his parents aren’t tough enough to take him on!

Samuel Clemens, under the pen name of Mark Twain, wrote his formula for bringing children under control. He gave this tongue-in-cheek advice to those in the demanding role of parents: “When your child turns two, put him in a barrel and feed him through a hole. When he becomes a teenager, plug up the hole.”

No, I’m not advocating child abuse! But perhaps you can understand the dilemma. Kids are tough . . . and they know their parents well.

Eli’s problem was two grown sons. They were well past their teenage years. It’s important to remember that Eli was held accountable by God, not for the sins of his grown sons, but for the fact that he did not *confront* their sins.

Frankly, I personally believe that if Eli finally had come down with a big stick, it still would not have made any difference. Why? Because *rules* without a *relationship* most often lead to more *rebellion*.

A model father is a man committed not only to determining the rules but developing a relationship with his children.

Modeling requires an investment of *time*. I have a small cross-stitch hanging in my office that seems to sum up the relationship aspect of fathering. It says,

“Any man can be a father, but it takes someone special to be a daddy.”

Modeling requires expressions of *affirmation*.

On both counts – disciplining *and* modeling – Eli, the spiritual leader of Israel, failed. The sad truth is, the sons of the High Priest of Israel grew up without a shepherd.

God repeatedly warned Eli, sending more than one wake-up call. But Eli always had a busy signal – *the* Caller never connected.

Eli’s Family – A National *Disaster*

The tragic conclusion of this story is found in I Samuel 4. This is a dark picture, for God is going to do the things He said He would do to the house of Eli, and the result will be a national disaster!

- **First, Israel fails in battle.**

I Samuel 4:1-3.

Thus the word of Samuel came to all Israel. Now Israel went out to meet the Philistines in battle and camped beside Ebenezer while the Philistines camped in Aphek.

The Philistines drew up in battle array to meet Israel. When the battle spread, Israel was defeated before the Philistines who killed about four thousand men on the battlefield.

When the people came into the camp, the elders of Israel said, “Why has the Lord defeated us today before the Philistines? Let us take to ourselves from Shiloh the ark of the covenant of the Lord, that it may come among us and deliver us from the power of our enemies.”

It seemed like a brilliant idea to go Shiloh and get the ark of the covenant – and it caught like wildfire.

Only after defeat did the Israelites realize they were not defeated because of military inexperience or inadequate equipment. They recognized their failure was spiritual – it had something to do with lacking the power of God. So they thought, “Let’s get the ark and take it with us into battle. Let’s get the *Force* on our side!”

How mistaken was their solution. It was partly right but mostly wrong. The people identified a *spiritual* problem but arrived at a *superstitious* solution.

This is happening today. Many people confuse superstition with spiritual reality. They add Jesus to their lives like a lucky rabbit's foot on their rear view mirror, but miss the reality of a true, genuine spiritual relationship.

So the Israelites, led by their elders, derive this unspiritual solution that circumvents repentance and submission to God. They attempt to treat the ark of the covenant like a "lucky rabbit's foot."

- **Secondly, Eli's sons fail in leadership.**

The Israelites have one problem with their idea to bring the ark of the covenant into battle: they need undiscerning priests to lead this spiritual charade. And guess who they found?

I Samuel 4:4 relates the tale.

So the people sent to Shiloh, and from there they carried the ark of the covenant of the Lord of hosts who sits above the cherubim; and the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were there with the ark of the covenant of God.

How can these two men fall for this superstitious treatment of the holy ark? Quite easily, it seems. You see, for years they had watched their own father act out a religion without reality. They had seen his spiritual activity lacking genuine spiritual substance.

What about our own nation . . . our own shepherds? The truth is, our nation and our churches have failed to hand down living demonstrations of genuine spiritual life.

The proof is in these statistics:

- Enough teenagers to fill four Super Bowl stadiums are practicing prostitution in order to support their drug addictions.
- This year, one million teenage girls will become pregnant out of wedlock. Of these girls, half a million will have abortions.
- Sixty percent of all church-attending teenagers polled are sexually involved.
- Every 78 seconds, a teenager in America attempts suicide.

I was told recently of a situation in a Georgia town where it was discovered that the wealthy layman who dictated and dominated a church for nearly thirty years had lived a secret life. Half the people in the church took what this man said as the "gospel." He confided to my friend that he had been lying to the government for years and had not paid any taxes. This man leads

the worship service; this man prays – this man has religion without reality. His name ought to be changed to Eli.

How do your children perceive you? Do they say, "Yeah, my dad prays before meals, but he swears at the referees during an NFL game." Or, "Yeah, my dad drives us to church, brings his Bible in, and on the way home sticks it under the front seat where it stays until next week."

I believe the Scriptures made it very clear that Eli presented to his boys a religion that had no fruit in the day-to-day experience.

These boys grew up to adopt his attitude and take it to sinful depths that caused even Eli to blush.

And this will have gigantic, national consequences. We're not talking about a little church in Georgia that is being destroyed – we are talking about an entire nation on the brink of disaster!

Their sacrilege continues in I Samuel 4:5-7.

As the ark of the covenant of the Lord came into the camp, all Israel shouted with a great shout, so that the earth resounded.

Let me interject that just because everyone is jumping up and down and shouting, "Hallelujah! Praise God!" does not necessarily mean that God is present . . . or even slightly pleased.

When the Philistines heard the noise of the shout, they said, "What does the noise of this great shout in the camp of the Hebrews mean?" Then they understood that the ark of the Lord had come into the camp.

The Philistines were afraid, for they said, "God has come into the camp." And they said, "Woe to us! For nothing like this has happened before."

It is interesting that the Israelites and the Philistines have, at this point, the same view of God. The Philistines were accustomed to boxing up their gods and taking them from place to place. Wherever they set up the stump or the statue – there was god! So the Israelites brought the ark into the camp and announced, "Look, we've got the box!" They mistook the *symbol* of God's presence for the *reality* of God's presence.

The distorted view is that God can now be manipulated – just get the box and everything will be okay!

In the wake of a national tragedy – troops going to war, the aftermath of terrorism or a natural disaster – the response of our leaders in America has been disturbing . . . and enlightening. I have seen leaders from all levels of the political spectrum say on national television, “Our country needs to pray,” and “May God bring our troops home.” I’ve heard liberal newscasters say, “God bless you,” and “Our prayers are with you.” These are the same people who had stood by and allowed special interest groups and civil libertarians to drag God’s name through the muck of rejection. These are the same leaders who consistently dissociate themselves from the name of God, references to the Bible or any religious association.

But let war come, a national crisis or disaster occur, and the call is, “Somebody just get the box – quick! Let’s bring God’s name back into our public discussion . . . somebody pray!”

God’s arm is too strong to be twisted. He is too wise to be manipulated. The ark was only a symbol, not a magic wand for the rebellious to wave in the face of their enemies.

What will you as a father do when facing a crisis in your home? When your son begins taking drugs or comes home drunk; when your daughter has a child out of wedlock; when your wife announces she is leaving – will you run get the box?

While you might believe that dusting off your Bible will provide a quick fix to the problem, it won’t. In fact, God desires repentance for your lack of spiritual leadership and the refusal to model godly behavior before your children.

The good news is that if you are willing to have a relationship with the Lord, He in turn, will help you restore your relationship with your children.

It may not come quickly . . . it may not be easy.

Some children will choose to rebel against God no matter what you attempt to model. To a large degree that becomes the testimony of Hophni and Phinehas.

- **Thirdly, the nation experiences tragic loss.**

Let’s witness the outcome in I Samuel 4:10-13.

So the Philistines fought and Israel was defeated, and every man fled to his tent; and the slaughter was very great, for there fell of Israel thirty thousand foot soldiers.

And the ark of God was taken; and the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, died.

Now a man of Benjamin ran from the battle line and came to Shiloh the same day with his clothes torn and dust on his head.

When he came, behold, Eli was sitting on his seat by the road eagerly watching, because his heart was trembling for the ark of God. So the man came to tell it in the city, and all the city cried out.

Why was Eli trembling? Because he knew the ark was being manipulated. He knew his sons were wrong! But was there any mention of Eli trying to stop them? *No!*

As Eli anxiously waited for news of the battle, he knew by the roar of voices from the city that the messenger had finally arrived. And to Eli a tragic message of despair and death was delivered.

Then the one who brought the news replied, “Israel has fled before the Philistines [Israel has lost the battle] and there has also been a great slaughter among the people [many people have lost their lives], and your two sons also, Hophni and Phinehas, are dead [Eli has lost his two sons – they died like they lived; that is, dishonoring God], and the ark of God has been taken [the nation has lost the ark of the covenant]” (I Samuel 4:17).

Year after year Eli had gone into the holy of holies with a basin of blood to sprinkle on top of the ark and on its lid, the mercy seat, for the atonement of the sins of the nation. Now, it is as if God is saying, “You lost the *reality* of My presence for years, so I am going to take away the *symbol* of My presence.”

Every ritual, every sacrifice, and every activity of the tabernacle was now meaningless!!!

As I read the words of the messenger, I put myself in Eli’s chair and listened with his ears. The word that rang in my own ears was the word *lost!* There was a four-fold loss:

- Israel lost the battle.
- Men lost their lives.
- Eli lost his sons.
- Israel lost its ark of the covenant.

How could this happen?

If you think God is being too hard on Eli, read these verses from I Samuel 3:11-13.

The Lord says to Samuel, “Behold, I am about to do a thing in Israel at which both ears of everyone who hears it will tingle.

In that day I will carry out against Eli all that I have spoken concerning his house, from beginning to end.

For I have told him that I am about to judge his house forever for the iniquity which he knew, because his sons brought a curse on themselves and he did not rebuke them.

Another blow comes in I Samuel 4:18.

When he [the messenger] mentioned the ark of God, Eli fell off the seat backward beside the gate, and his neck was broken and he died, for he was old and heavy. . . .

There it was – another loss – Israel’s high priest was dead.

- **Fourthly, a name summarizes the problem.**

The tragedy is not over yet. It is compounded in I Samuel 4:19.

Now his daughter-in-law, Phinehas’ wife, was pregnant and about to give birth; and when she heard the news that the ark of God was taken and that her father-in-law and her husband had died, she kneeled down and gave birth, for her pains came upon her.

Poor, dear woman. She had lived with the whispering behind her back for years. She and all of Israel knew that her husband was unfaithful to her, but she had chosen to remain with him and bear his child.

The text indicates this woman’s godly character by her concern over the loss of the ark of God. More importantly, it is displayed in the name she gives her son. Near the time of her death, the women who helped her said, probably, in tears, “Look, you’ve given birth to a son! Isn’t that wonderful?”

. . . But she did not answer or pay attention.

And she called the boy Ichabod, saying, “The glory has departed from Israel . . .” (I Samuel 4:20b-21a).

With her last breath this woman summed up the entire situation facing Israel, and her son would grow up to remind everyone of this disastrous day – “The glory of God is gone!”

The glory of God is gone!

What started this downward progression? What led to the defeat of a nation and the death of so many? A father/son relationship.

The scriptures are graphic. In fact, few passages are more graphic than these. This text revealing the failure of a father must mean that God wants us to get the picture!

The One-Two Punch

How does the abject failure of Eli apply to your life?

- **First, physical provision is not the ultimate essential – physical involvement is.**

Somehow men have bought into the lie that our children need what we can *provide* for them more than what we can *do* with them. The truth is they do not need more *from* us – they need *us!*

Shepherds must realize the necessity of their being present *in the home*. When the commute and work time is deducted from our waking hours, we have only two or three hours, at best, that can be used for being “with” one another. That time *must* be used wisely if we are going to influence our children.

One man came to this simple truth too late. He tells his story:

I remember talking to my friend a number of years ago about our children. Mine were 5 and 7 then – just the ages when their daddy means everything to them. I wished that I could have spent more time with my kids, but I was too busy working. After all, I wanted to give them all the things I never had when I was growing up.

I loved the idea of coming home and having them sit on my lap and tell me about their day. Unfortunately, most days I came home so late that they had gone to sleep.

It is amazing how fast kids grow. Before I knew it, they were 9 and 11. I missed seeing them in school plays. Everyone said they were terrific, but the plays always seemed to go on when I was traveling or tied up.

I kept promising that I would have more time “next year”. But the higher up the corporate ladder I climbed, the less time there seemed to be.

Suddenly they were no longer 9 and 11. They were 14 and 16 – teenagers. I didn’t see my son’s championship basketball game or my

daughter the night she went out on her first date. Mom made excuses and I managed to telephone and talk to them before they left the house. I could hear the disappointment in their voices, but I explained the best I could.

*Don't ask where the years have gone. Those little kids are 19 and 21 now, and in college. I can't believe it. My job is less demanding and I finally have time for them. But they have no time for me.*²

Don't miss this, Dad; *provision* will never be nearly as important as *involvement*. The price tag on your car or home will never explain away your absence from their lives.

- **Secondly, good fathers are not born – they are made.**

A man does not enter fatherhood ready-made – he is shaped as he submits to the Spirit of God and the standard of Scripture. A man does not become a good father in the delivery room as he hears the first wail of his newborn!

When our twins were born in Dallas, I was just beginning my last semester in seminary. The delivery room was in a hubbub. Two doctors – a father and son team – were there, and because of the doctors' advice, no C-section would be performed unless absolutely necessary. Many of the staff who had never seen a normal delivery of twins were in attendance. I was standing there feeling fairly helpless, dressed in clothing I'd never want to wear in public. When the boys were born, their cries filled the room. The activity increased – one person weighing, another measuring, yet another cleaning – and my wife was teary-eyed. Me? . . . the predominant thought in my mind was something like, "What in the world do I do now?!"

Was I proud to be a father? Absolutely! Was I proud of my wife? Unbelievably! Was I unprepared? Totally!

Every father is! In fact, the New Testament book of Titus informs us that mothers also must learn, along with the fathers, the art of parenting.

Think about it; how did you become skilled at your occupation? Through years of dedication; *years* of devoted attention.

Do you want to be good shepherd-father? Do you want to shoulder the responsibility as the spiritual leader, protector, and nurturer of your children? It will demand years of dedication and devotion.

But keep in mind, you will never *perfect* shepherding . . . but you will be able to make *progress*. Here are some simple steps to start making progress as a father/shepherd.

Steps toward shepherding:

- **First, *admit you have not been shepherding.***

If you set this aside and say, "that wasn't for me . . . I've got good reasons for 70-hour work weeks and absence from my children's lives and activities," then you won't be able to take even the first step. But if you can first admit your failure, you're ready to take the next step.

- **Secondly, *confess your failure to the Lord.***

When you move past making excuses, the wonderful news is that you can be forgiven. The blood of Jesus Christ never cleansed an *excuse* – it cleanses sin. So, make a clean and open confession to Him – He happens to be your Shepherd and He will delight in restoring your soul (Psalm 23:3).

- **Thirdly, *express to your wife and children that you have not been following God's direction, but with His help, you want to become the shepherd in the home.***

The good news here is that your wife and children already know you're not perfect. And they will more than likely appreciate your humility and honesty and be encouraged by your heartfelt admission.

In fact, this will give you a good opportunity to model how to genuinely confess to Christ and apologize to others.

- **Finally, *ask your wife to sit down with you, map out a plan, rearrange your schedule – whatever it takes – to communicate that you are more than a father . . . you are becoming a shepherd!***

Be encouraged; having a shepherd in the home happens to be a God-given desire for your wife; she's more ready for this than you can imagine.

After pastoring for more than 20 years, I've never heard a wife become upset because her husband wanted to be a godly example and leader in their home!

This wake-up call is for you, Dad. Your Shepherd is calling all *would-be* shepherds to pick up their shepherd's staff and learn to lead.

It's time to act – don't wait 'til you get a day off from work!

¹ “Exploding Television,” Men and Change.

² “Save the Boys,” Point Man.