

Part 5

• *Passivity in the things of God leads to disaster*

Passivity in the things of God leads to disaster. This is one of the themes of this chapter and its surrounding narrative. It was Eli's passivity with regard to his sons that led the nation of Israel into chaos in the first place. When given warning by a prophet¹, he does not seem to have responded at all. When a further warning came through Samuel he said only 'He is the LORD; let him do what is good in his eyes'². What a contrast Eli is with Joshua when something similar happened earlier in the story of the nation. When Israel was defeated in connection with the sin of Achan, Joshua 'tore his clothes and fell face down to the ground before the ark of the LORD'³. The elders at the time of Joshua did the same and sprinkled dust on their heads as a mark of their intense distress. Joshua went to God with agonizing prayer⁴. But there is nothing like that in the story of Eli. 'Ah well', he says, 'He is the LORD; let him do what he likes!' His faith in the sovereignty of God leads him into complacency.

1 2:27-35

2 3:18

3 Joshua 7:6

4 Joshua 7:7-9

Philistines – more sensible!

1. *What to know the facts*

We notice too how different is the reaction of the Philistines compared to that of Israel. The Philistines are much more sensible!

1. **They want to know the facts.** When they learn about the ark, they say 'What's all this shouting?'¹. They want to know what is happening and take the trouble to find out.

1 4:6

2. *Right assessment*

2. **They rightly assess the seriousness of the situation.** 'We're in trouble', they say¹.

1 4:7

3. *Recognise a new situation*

3. **They are able to recognize a new situation.** They say 'Nothing like this has ever happened before'¹.

1 4:7

4. *Response – concern and resolution*

4. **They respond with concern and resolution.** 'Woe unto us!' they say. 'Who will deliver us...?' And they go on to weigh up their danger, 'These are the gods who struck the Egyptians with all kinds of plagues.'¹ It is precisely this note that is so lacking in the Israelites. The Israelites, led by the elderly Eli, seem so complacent, so lacking in concern, when considered alongside these Philistines.

1 4:8

5. *Call for strong action*

5. **The Philistines call the people to take strong action.** 'Be strong, Philistines! Be men, or you will be subject to the Hebrews, as they have been to you. Be men, and fight!'¹ It is a call to energy and zeal. It is mixed with a certain amount of warning. It faces the fact that valiant and violent conflict will be needed.

1 4:9

• *Philistine victory*

So the Philistines won a victory. They responded sensibly to the situation they found themselves in. But this was precisely what the people of God should have done. If they had got hold of the realities of the situation they would have recognized how seriously God regarded the sin taking place in his sanctuary at Shiloh. If they had been thinking straight they would have said 'We are in trouble! God is angry with us'. They would have recognized that something had developed in Israel which required action. They would have called on God for mercy.

• *Wiser than the people of God!*

The people of God did not respond in this way but the Philistines did. It often happens that the people of the world are wiser in their generation than the people of the light¹. Worldly Philistines can be very practical! They look the situation straight in the eye and face the realities of what is happening around them. In their own way they can be wiser than the people of God.

1 Luke 16:8

The Israelites – religious and passive

• Arousing no alarm

• The ark was lost

• The prophets' terrible predictions fulfilled

• Judgement – slow in coming had come

• God would start afresh elsewhere

• Recovery to begin with someone who could hear God's voice

The people of God, on the other hand, can be so religious that their religious ideas make them forget to face plain and straightforward facts. They have a high view of the sovereignty of God. 'He is the LORD; let him do what he likes,' they say. It is very sound theology! But it is not what the situation requires. The sins of Hophni and Phineas were arousing no alarm.

So when the Israelites marched into battle with the ark there was calamity in every way. The ark was lost¹. Hophni and Phineas received their long-delayed judgement². The terrible predictions and warnings that had been given by various prophets and servants of God began to be fulfilled. A messenger arrived³. Eli was waiting for news of the battle. But he was still combining concern for the things of God with refusal to do what was needed. Did he think the ark would do any good? Apparently he was filled with foreboding; his heart was trembling⁴. When the messenger arrived the hopes of Shiloh were shattered and their worst fears conformed⁵. Eli, now aged and blind, found out what was happening⁶. When he got the news he knew it was the sign he had been told about⁷. He himself died the same day⁸. Other prophecies concerning his family also began to be fulfilled. His daughter-in-law died⁹. Her son was named 'Ichabod', which means 'No glory'¹⁰. Associated with the ark was the radiating presence of God with Israel. Now it was lost¹¹.

The judgement of God had been slow in coming. Warnings had been given along the way. Repentance might have averted the judgement. But Eli and the elders of the nation were not thinking spiritually. They felt that the presence of the ark would deliver them but they did not have the spiritual insight to draw attention to the wickedness at Shiloh. They did not have the kind of relationship with God that kept their eyes open to the real need of the hour. When the people of God are in such spiritual blindness, God may leave aside an entire generation and start somewhere else. So Eli and his family were abandoned. The sanctuary at Shiloh would never be used by God again. God started again with his people, beginning with Samuel. Possibilities of recovery were to be found in someone who could hear God's voice.

10:11a

4:11b

4:12

4:13a

4:13b

4:14-17

2:34

4:18

4:19-20

4:21

4:22



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Dr Michael Eaton is highly respected internationally as a theologian, author, preacher and teacher. He lives in Kenya where he is one of the leaders of the Chrisco Fellowship. His *Preaching Through The Bible (PTTB)* books are highly popular worldwide. Michael Eaton puts the theological and practical meaning of the Bible in a clear and down-to-earth way so that what is written can be easily understood by the reader.



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