

THE HIGH COST OF BACKSLIDING

1 Samuel 4

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The Israelites camped at Ebenezer and the Philistines at Aphek. The Philistines, by the way, were people who had migrated from the Greek islands about a century and a half earlier. And they had been able to establish a base in the plain of Palestine. They were a small and energetic people who had superior weapons of war compared to the Israelites. They even had iron chariots. The Israelites did not know yet how to do ironwork. They didn't have chariots at this time. The Philistines had conquered this area and were ready to push up into the hills where the Israelites lived. The Philistines were going to dislodge the Israelites. We have the beginning of this military advance.

“Now the Israelites went out to fight against the Philistines. The Israelites camped at Ebenezer, and the Philistines at Aphek. The Philistines deployed their forces to meet Israel, and as the battle spread, Israel was defeated by the Philistines, who killed about four thousand of them on the battlefield. When the soldiers returned to camp, the elders of Israel asked, ‘Why did the LORD bring defeat upon us today before the Philistines? Let us bring the ark of the LORD'S covenant from Shiloh, so that it may go with us and save us from the hand of our enemies’” (1 Samuel 4:1–3, NIV). Shiloh was in the Samaritan mountain range up at the top of the country—about eighteen miles from where the battle had been fought.

“So the people sent men to Shiloh, and they brought back the ark of the covenant of the LORD Almighty, who is enthroned between the cherubim. And Eli's two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, were there with the ark of the covenant of God.

HIGH COST OF BACKSLIDING

1 Samuel 4

When the ark of the LORD'S covenant came into the camp, all Israel raised such a great shout that the ground shook. Hearing the uproar, the Philistines asked, 'What's all this shouting in the Hebrew camp?'

When they learned that the ark of the LORD had come into the camp, the Philistines were afraid. 'A god has come into the camp,' they said. 'We're in trouble! Nothing like this has happened before. Woe to us! Who will deliver us from the hand of these mighty gods? They are the gods who struck the Egyptians with all kinds of plagues in the desert. Be strong, Philistines! Be men, or you will be subject to the Hebrews, as they have been to you. Be men, and fight!'

So the Philistines fought, and the Israelites were defeated and every man fled to his tent. The slaughter was very great; Israel lost thirty thousand foot soldiers. The ark of God was captured, and Eli's two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, died.

That same day a Benjamite ran from the battle line and went to Shiloh, his clothes torn and dust on his head. [Years later, another Benjamite would proclaim good news—Saul of Tarsus. But this was a messenger of ill news.] When he arrived, there was Eli sitting on his chair by the side of the road, watching, because his heart feared for the ark of God. When the man entered the town and told what had happened, the whole town sent up a cry.

Eli heard the outcry and asked, 'What is the meaning of this uproar?'

The man hurried over to Eli, who was ninety-eight years old and whose eyes were set so that he could not see. He told Eli, 'I have just come from the battle line; I fled from it this very day.'

Eli asked, 'What happened, my son?'

The man who brought the news replied, 'Israel fled before the Philistines, and the army has suffered heavy losses. Also your two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, are dead, and the ark of God has been captured.'

HIGH COST OF BACKSLIDING

1 Samuel 4

When he mentioned the ark of God, Eli fell backward off his chair by the side of the gate. His neck was broken and he died, for he was an old man and heavy. He had led Israel forty years. His daughter-in-law, the wife of Phinehas, was pregnant and near the time of delivery. When she heard the news that the ark of God had been captured and that her father-in-law and her husband were dead, she went into labor and gave birth, but was overcome by her labor pains. As she was dying, the women attending her said, ‘Don't despair; you have given birth to a son.’ But she did not respond or pay any attention.

She named the boy Ichabod, saying, ‘The glory has departed from Israel’—because of the capture of the ark of God and the deaths of her father-in-law and her husband. She said, ‘The glory has departed from Israel, for the ark of God has been captured’” (1 Samuel 4:4–22, NIV).

Kind of depressing, huh? There are parts of the Bible that are depressing. I even have a depressing title to go with it, “The High Cost of Backsliding.”

I like to say encouraging things. You come to church expecting the pastor to give you some encouragement. I try to do that. I want to tell you that God loves you, that He is always ready to put His arms around you, and that He wants to encourage, affirm, and console you. But the Bible not only has positive encouragements—it has negative warnings too. This is one such passage. In fact, chapters 4–6 are kind of all that way. Chapters 1–3 have a wonderful, positive message—God is getting ready to do a new thing—a baby is being born, dedicated, and raised. But chapters 4–6, where Samuel is absent, shows us the capture of the ark of the covenant which contained the tablets of the Law given to Moses at Sinai. With that came a defect to a whole generation of Israelites. It's a sad passage. It speaks to us in our own life. We are either the kind of person, like Samuel, who is growing in the Lord—twice, in the first three chapters, that element of growth is mentioned. Or we are like the picture found in chapters 4–6, we are growing away from the

HIGH COST OF BACKSLIDING

1 Samuel 4

Lord—our relationship with God is being diminished. This has especially been on my mind as of late—I have prayed and been concerned for past members of this congregation. There is a high cost to backsliding. As we look at this text today, I want us to note four aspects to backsliding that are here for us to see.

I. The first is—a long period of time goes by where no evidence of backsliding, no effect of the backsliding, is seen.

Things go on as normal. There's no big defects—no big cataclysm. No big catastrophes. Eli's sons, who were clearly away from the Lord—that situation goes on day after day. God doesn't intervene in judgment. Israel isn't defeated in battle. Things go on. Hophni and Phinehas, the two sons, are well taken care of. They have work to do—they get paid for it. They have all the satisfaction they could possibly want. God's not jerking any cords—not intervening in any kind of a fashion. That is often the way it is with backsliding. A period of time goes by—a person is already moving away from the Lord, but there is no evident or manifest displeasure of God. That person's conduct is just not in accord with His Word. God is not interposing any kind of judgment or warning. With that first aspect of backsliding, there comes another issue.

II. The substitution of external religious observance is in the place of internal spiritual relationship.

The institution of religion was still going on with Hophni and Phinehas. They were still offering the sacrifices everyday—lighting the incense, burning the candles, and doing the kinds of things they were supposed to do. The people had gotten used to it. They had gotten used to measuring their relationship with God by the performance of certain external religious observances. We are specifically told in Scripture not to forsake the assembling of ourselves together. We are to gather together. But the external gathering—or any religious external act—can so easily be

HIGH COST OF BACKSLIDING

1 Samuel 4

substituted for a vital personal relationship. That's what happens. Not only to Eli's sons who are going through the motions of religion, but it happens to the whole nation. We see this graphically in verse 3 when the elders of Israel asked, "Why did the LORD bring defeat upon us today before the Philistines?" Excellent question! The answer is they had neglected their relationship with the Lord. But notice—that is not the answer they come up with. They say, "We didn't do something externally we were supposed to do! We didn't say 'Praise the Lord!' seventeen times—we only said it fifteen times. We only tithed. We didn't give tithes and offerings. We only went to church two times, but we should have gone three." That's the kind of answer they come up with, "We forgot to have the box, the wooden chest that contains the tablets of the law. We were supposed to have that with us. Whenever that is with us, we're not supposed to lose." It's like saying, "If I've got the cross around my neck—whenever I'm in a spiritual encounter of any kind—then I'm ok." But what if I forgot the cross necklace today?

It's not the religious external thing that saves us. It is the internal understanding of what the cross is and what the cross requires—the inner character of God, what the inner character of God is all about, and how we're to be shaped and formed as a result of that. Their answer is more externals, "Go through the motions. Keep all the prescriptions." Their heart was far from God. That's where backsliding really begins—where we're simply tripping along through the hymnal, through the Bible, through the sermon, through the Christian act—keeping up the appearance of religion. But we don't have a relationship with God.

III. That leads to a third aspect of backsliding—experiencing a great loss.

Sooner or later it comes. There is a great loss. Here the great loss is seen in causalities—the deaths, the ark of the Lord is taken, and the family of Eli is wiped out. Great loss—it's always the case. Whenever a person leaves the Lord, there is great loss. First of all, the loss is to them

HIGH COST OF BACKSLIDING

1 Samuel 4

personally. The relationship with God they could have had has been cast off. But then there is loss to others—others who are caught in the wake of the effect of their actions. Sometime, before you backslide, I think you would be well-advised to file a spiritual “environmental impact” report. But that’s why we have the Scripture—so we can look at the course of a family in the Bible and avoid that in our own life. That’s why it’s there. It’s written for our encouragement and correction—so we don’t have to fall into that same thing.

In fact, because Eli’s sons backslid, the whole country was in captivity for a period of twenty years. When spiritual leadership falls away, people tend to follow. Twenty years is a long time. Great loss. Backsliding—first of all, a period of time goes by and no evident judgment by God is seen. Then, secondly, we see a substitution of religious externals for a personal relationship with God. Thirdly, the backsliding becomes manifest in some way, and there is a great loss.

IV. Lastly, the results—a shattered family.

The church of Jesus Christ is being littered today with discarded husbands, wives, and children—by backslidden adults. Someone has to pay the piper. Eli’s problem started with him. He did not restrain his children. As a parent, someday we will all have to give an account to the Lord for our children. Some choices you don’t give kids. Eli did not restrain his children. And the result—a shattered family because his sons walked away from the Lord. What a tremendous loss! There’s an awesome responsibility that goes with being a Christian!

Eli basically lost it on his watch. It was in his generation that he lost it. His grandson was named “Ichabod,” meaning “The glory has departed from Israel.” I don’t want to lose it on my watch. I don’t want you to lose it on your watch. Whether you’re a first-generation, a second-generation, or a tenth-generation Christian, the cost is too high to walk away from the Lord. It’s too high for

HIGH COST OF BACKSLIDING

1 Samuel 4

you. It's too high for the kingdom of God. It's too high for your family. Ichabod, "The glory of God has departed."

Fortunately, another child was born in the Bible that has a different name—"Emmanuel," meaning "God with us." I think each of us has a choice in life—are we going to be an Ichabod or an Emmanuel? In our generation, will it be said of us, "Ichabod—the glory left" or "Emmanuel—God was with us"?

I want this message to speak to your heart today. Where are you with God? Are you moving away from Him? If you're at step three and four, great loss and a shattered family, you're probably not even here. Persons in that state have stopped coming to church. More likely you're in step one or two. Inwardly and quietly, you've moved away—your faith in God is not vital. Could I ask you to humble yourself before the Lord and seek a relationship with Him that's true and vital and real? God wants you in His presence. That is such a great mystery to me. What in the world does the God of all the universe want to do with little, old, poor, insignificant me? It boggles me.

This week I had the experience of spending time with Governor Ashcroft. That's rare. There are five million other people he could have spent time with. But he invited three denominational college presidents, the pastor of a mega church, a Missouri state supreme court justice, and the guy who directed campaigns for the last ten years. I was in heavy company. I'm saying I didn't belong. What did I get invited for? John Ashcroft is very unpretentious. He's so funny—a wonderful Christian lay person serving the Lord. I was only a high school friend. I may not know why I was invited, but I'm sure glad I was. It was a wonderful time.

I think that's how it is with the Lord—He deeply cherishes and wants our presence. The backsliding we do is not simply a hurt to us—it's a hurt to Him. He seeks to have a relationship

HIGH COST OF BACKSLIDING

1 Samuel 4

with us. When we don't respond to His invitation, not only do we lose out, but He misses the joy of our presence as well. If He just gave us a set of rules and insisted that we keep those and there was no advantage of relationship, then we'd probably have an excuse for walking out. But He says, "Come. Come eat with Me. Come live with Me. Come fellowship with Me. I will live in you. You will be in Me." He offers us that kind of relationship with Him. As we grow in Him, we'll find joy and meaning and fulfillment in our life.

It doesn't mean that every moment of our life is going to be optimum—always clicking on all cylinders. Sometimes, we have bumps in the road even when we're walking with the Lord. We still have external crises hit us. But when we begin to move away from the Lord, the end of the story is so tragic. It is that end which I bring you today. I ask you to consider this story's end.

When revival starts, the first people who get saved are the people who knew the Lord but had fallen away from Him. Revival doesn't take a charming personality to begin. It just takes an open responsiveness to the Spirit of God. Then God moves in a great, sweeping arc across communities. Are you inwardly away from the Lord today? Is your spiritual life not where you know it needs to be in Christ? Could I invite you, on this day, to make it right with God?

Closing Prayer

Our Father, as we quiet our hearts before You, we give access to the Holy Spirit. We ask that You will cleanse us from all sin and unrighteousness—that You will forgive us, that You will renew our hearts and our lives, that You will make vibrant our relationship with You, and that You will bring healing and restoration to our lives. I pray especially for those here who may have been the victims of backsliding—by a parent, family member, or someone they really looked up to—and their own lives have been shattered because of that negative example. I pray for them as well because I know You're the one who is able to take the broken pieces of our heart and make

HIGH COST OF BACKSLIDING

1 Samuel 4

us new again. Make us whole again, I pray. I pray for each of us—that we might grow into the full measure and stature of Christ Jesus. That, indeed, we will grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. *I want to give you a moment, congregation, to wrestle with God. The Holy Spirit has spoken to your heart today, and as I've shared the Word, you've realized that the Lord was speaking to you. Just the fact that you realized the Lord was speaking to you means you're doing something about it—even now as I'm talking. I ask, while our heads are bowed, that as a sign between you and the Lord you would raise your hand saying, "Lord, yes. That's for me."* Lord, we present ourselves to You. Just as I am, without one plea, but that Thy blood was shed for me. I come. We're so glad there's room at the cross for us today—so glad that You restore and renew. Bring a spiritual healing in every life that is hungering now after You. Thank You for bringing us to You today. We praise Your name through Christ our Lord. May Your blessing be upon those You have spoken to today. May, like Samuel, they grow up before You with great strength and power—growing in favor with You and their fellow man. Through Christ our Lord we pray. Amen.