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1 Samuel 2:12-36

Fourth Message

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# BLOOM WHERE YOU'RE PLANTED

*SERIES: THE CROSSING FATES*

Last week, I read in a news magazine an article entitled “The Suffering of Somalia.” I was horrified to read of the carnage and cruelty that exist in that war torn nation. Lacking a formal government since 1991, the country suffers from constant battles amongst warlords, militia, and terrorists. Hundreds of thousands of people have died; millions more are desperately in need of help. For decades, there was no leader, and “everyone did what was right in his own eyes.” One episode gripped my heart. A 13 year-old girl reported to authorities that she was gang raped. Rather than helping her, the leaders “convicted” her of adultery and brought her to a sports stadium where she was stoned to death in front of 1,000 jeering spectators. This is chillingly similar to the gruesome story at the end of Judges in which a Levite’s concubine was raped and dismembered, setting off a killing spree that nearly annihilated the tribe of Benjamin. That incident from Judges took place 3,000 years ago, but the rape and stoning of this young girl in Somalia happened on October 27, less than a month ago.

When I read of such darkness, evil, and cruelty, I cannot help but cry out to God. “Why do you allow such evil to persist for so long?” There is, of course, no easy answer.

The tension of this age-old question presses upon us today as we continue our study in 1 Samuel. Recall the context for our series thus far: for four hundred years during Judges, evil and chaos ruled in Israel. In today’s passage, we find that corruption permeated to the very sanctuary of God at Shiloh. How could God let this happen to his temple? This is the question we come to this morning in 1 Sam 2:12-36.

Today’s passage consists of two acts. The first act (vv 12-26) depicts the evil deeds of the corrupt priesthood contrasted with Samuel’s ministry in early childhood in the midst of corruption. In the second act (vv 27-36), a prophet of the Lord proclaims an oracle against Eli’s line. The oracle pronounces punishment for Eli’s descendants, while offering a hope of restoration of the priestly line in the future.

We have in this passage a contrast between darkness and light, between disobedience and faithful ministry, between judgment and promise of restoration. Through the interplay of these opposites, we see a partial answer to why God allows evil to persist. We see God’s hand that brings about change to a dark world and the role we can play in this change.

## Act I: Eli’s sons and Samuel

The first act of the passage has a distinctive chiasmic structure. We begin and then end with two evaluations, first of the sons of Eli, then of the son of Hannah. In the body, we find a description of the sins of Eli’s sons, followed by his reprimand of his sons. In the center of the text, we see the growth and maturing of Samuel, God’s light in this dark place. Let’s first examine Eli’s sons.

**Eli’s sons were wicked men; they had no regard for the LORD. Now it was the practice of the priests with the people that whenever anyone offered a sacrifice and while the meat was being boiled, the young priest would come with a three-pronged fork in his hand. He would plunge it into the pan or kettle or caldron or pot, and the priest would take for himself whatever the fork brought up. This is how they treated all the Israelites who came to Shiloh. But even before the fat was burned, the young priest would come and say to the man who was sacrificing, “Give the priest some meat to roast; he won’t accept boiled meat from you, but only raw.” If the man said to him, “Let the fat be burned up first, and then take whatever you want,” he would then answer, “No, hand it over now; if you don’t, I’ll take it by force.” This sin of the young men was very great in the LORD’s sight, for the men were treating the LORD’s offering with contempt. (1 Sam 2:12-17)**

Eli’s sons were “wicked men,” a Hebrew term meaning “son of the devil.” It is a serious charge that Eli mistakenly applied to Hannah in chapter 1. Now it is applied to his own sons. But there is no mistake; their sins were outrageous.

Two incidents describe how the young priests despised the Lord’s offering. God had given very detailed instructions in Leviticus of how the offering was to be a joint ceremony amongst the worshippers, the priests, and the Lord. The fat is first separated by boiling, then burned and offered up to God. What remains is to be divided amongst the worshippers and the priests. Although priests were allowed to receive a portion of the sacrifice, Eli’s sons went overboard. They took and ate everything they could get their hands on! They not only stole from the people, but stole the fat as well. Fat, the best part of meat, belonged to the Lord. These priests stole what belonged to the Lord and fattened themselves with it. Eli himself was probably guilty of gluttony; he was described as being extremely fat or “heavy,” in 1 Sam 4:18.

The sons were greedy as well, taking more than what they deserved, or could use. They thrust the fork into every kitchen implement used for sacrifice, saying that the priests did this to all of Israel. Material wealth fed their voracious appetite for more and more. This was greed, plain and simple.

We see further in verse 22, “Now Eli, who was very old, heard about everything his sons were doing to all Israel and how they slept with the women who served at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting.” The sons committed sexual sin by sleeping with the women who worked at the temple. This is “sexual harassment at the workplace,” in 1000 B.C.!

All of these sins can be summarized in the most fundamental sin of all – the blatant, unremorseful, lifelong contempt for the Lord. The very leaders who were supposed to bring people to God instead despised God. Furthermore, their example led people astray. All the

men now treated God's offering with contempt. All of Israel was deprived of proper worship.

These verses serve as a warning to us, especially those of us in a position of leadership in church, at work, or in the home. We must never be driven by greed and lust, or steal or lead people astray with our indiscretions. Scriptures warn us to flee such evil deeds and exhorts us to always live in a manner worthy of our calling. The apostle Paul says in Ephesians 5:3, "But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God's holy people." Paul's exhortation is for every Christian, not only the leaders or priests, as we are all the new priesthood in the New Covenant.

Let's examine Eli's response, in verses 23-25.

**So he said to them, "Why do you do such things? I hear from all the people about these wicked deeds of yours. No, my sons; it is not a good report that I hear spreading among the LORD's people. If a man sins against another man, God may mediate for him; but if a man sins against the LORD's, who will intercede for him?" His sons, however, did not listen to their father's rebuke, for it was the LORD's will to put them to death. (2:23-25)**

These verses are an indictment against Eli's own lifestyle. He did not take ownership of God's sanctuary. He did not exhibit leadership or demonstrate godly living to his own sons. Eli's mild reprimand is an example of "too little, too late." He should have taken action and removed his sons from the priesthood. But he didn't, and all Israel was led astray as a result. This can be seen as a warning to parents today who may refuse to take spiritual leadership of their homes and children or fail to impose consequences to their children's sins.

The narrator continues in verse 25, "His sons, however, did not listen to their father's rebuke, for it was the LORD's will to put them to death." The sons' arrogant disobedience sealed their doom. The statement does not imply that the sons had no "choice" for it was "God's will." Rather, it means that they had sinned for so long and with no remorse that God's judgment was inevitable. God gave them over to their own sin as a last resort, for it led inevitably to their own death.

However, God brings about redemption in the midst of death. As Eli's sons are doomed to destruction, God brings Samuel into life out of the darkness of Eli's household. Let's now examine the contrast of Samuel's growth.

**"But Samuel was ministering before the LORD – a boy wearing a linen ephod. Each year his mother made him a little robe and took it to him when she went up with her husband to offer the annual sacrifice. Eli would bless Elkanah and his wife, saying, "May the LORD give you children by this woman to take the place of the one she prayed for and gave to the LORD." Then they would go home. And the LORD was gracious to Hannah; she conceived and gave birth to three sons and two daughters. Meanwhile, the boy Samuel grew up in the presence of the LORD." (2:18-21)**

We see in vv 18-20, from within the corruption of the priesthood at Shiloh, there is Samuel, growing and "ministering" before the Lord. The word means attending as a personal servant. Rather than following Eli's example of food, power, and greed, we see Samuel, day in and day out as he grows, walking as a personal servant before God. This is a picture we need to have in our minds as we begin our days. We need to say, "Lord, as we go into a fallen world, strengthen

us each day. Teach us to be your personal servant and to walk in your presence. Allow us to bloom wherever you plant us today, even amongst the thorns."

How was Samuel able to remain steadfast even as a child? Firstly, it was because God chose him to be a faithful servant, to be an instrument of change. It was God's doing in keeping him pure.

Secondly, it was his mother's influence and care that cultivated Samuel's spiritual life. Verses 18-21 paint a picture of a loving mother who faithfully protects Samuel with a little robe or coat each year. This ephod is a literal as well as a symbolic covering of protection against the evil that surrounds Samuel. This tender motherly care reminds me of the faithfulness of mothers throughout the world who offer a hedge of protection around children through the ministry of prayer. These are the mothers of Moms In Touch International, a network of moms who blanket our schools every week by praying for their children, their classmates, and their teachers. I've seen miracles in the lives of my own children through the faithful prayers of moms, and I personally thank all of you who are involved. This blanket of prayer is protecting and nurturing the children as they become God's light in the world of our schools, just as Samuel was a light in the darkness at Shiloh. Just like Hannah, we need to be in constant prayer for our children.

The description of Samuel concludes at the end of Act I with the short verse 26:

**And the boy Samuel continued to grow in stature and in favor with the Lord and with people.**

I love this verse. It is our desire and prayer for our children: that they will grow in favor with the Lord and with men. This verse is quoted almost verbatim in the New Testament by Luke to describe Jesus. Luke 2:52 says, "And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men." What an amazing foreshadow of the ultimate righteous man of God! The word of God in the Old Testament again points to the fulfillment in the New Testament in our Lord and Savior Jesus!

At the end of the first act, we see how Samuel shone as a light in the dark world. He was God's instrument of change in the midst of corruption. This leads me to the first answer to our question this morning: "Why does God allow evil to persist?" God is preparing redemption behind the scenes, bringing about change in the midst of darkness. Sometimes it takes dark times to awaken in us a desire for God. It is during the dark times that light shines brightest. As we face injustice and evil, we need eyes of faith to see beyond the pain and suffering and to trust in God's sovereignty that he is preparing good even in the midst of evil.

## Act II: Oracle against Eli's line

We now come to the second act of today's story, a prophecy from a man of God given to Eli. This is the first time we hear God's own words in 1 Samuel. God speaks, and boy is he mad!

**Now a man of God came to Eli and said to him, "This is what the LORD says: 'Did I not clearly reveal myself to your father's house when they were in Egypt under Pharaoh? I chose your father out of all the tribes of Israel to be my priest, to go up to my altar, to burn incense, and to wear an ephod in my presence. I also gave your father's house all the offerings made with fire by the Israelites. (2:27-28)**

God sets the stage by clearly describing his promise in the past. God revealed himself. He chose his special priests. He provided for their livelihood. In return for God's providence, the priests were to perform the sacrificial rites on behalf of the people. They were to go up to the altar, burn incense, and to wear the ephod, representing a special divine communication to God. In summary, they were to have the most privileged occupation: to cultivate the spiritual life of God's people. Did these priests perform their duties accordingly?

**Why do you scorn my sacrifice and offering that I prescribed for my dwelling? Why do you honor your sons more than me by fattening yourselves on the choice parts of every offering made by my people Israel?' (2:29)**

We hear the thunderous accusation from God: Eli and his family have not performed their duty faithfully. Instead, they have scorned God's sacrifice; Eli has honored his sons more than God; the gluttonous priests have gotten fat off the best part of the offerings that belonged to God. In short, they have despised God.

**"Therefore the LORD, the God of Israel, declares: 'I promised that your house and your father's house would minister before me forever.' But now the LORD declares: 'Far be it from me! Those who honor me I will honor, but those who despise me will be disdained. (2:30)**

God gives the guilty verdict in verse 30. God declares that his promise to Israel's priesthood is revoked; it is pronounced null and void for Eli's family. How can that be? Can an unchanging God "go back" on his own promise? Yes, he can. It's a mistake to believe that God's promise carries no conditions, no responsibility on man's part. Indeed, the working out of God's promise is conditional upon obedience to God and honoring him. We see the priests persisted in dishonoring him, so God nullifies his promises and punishes them.

**The time is coming when I will cut short your strength and the strength of your father's house, so that there will not be an old man in your family line and you will see distress in my dwelling. Although good will be done to Israel, in your family line there will never be an old man. Every one of you that I do not cut off from my altar will be spared only to blind your eyes with tears and to grieve your heart, and all your descendants will die in the prime of life. And what happens to your two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, will be a sign to you—they will both die on the same day. (2:31-34)**

God's first punishment is that he will cut short the life of Eli's descendents: they will die in the prime of their life. As a sign that this curse will be carried out, God warned that both of Eli's evil sons will die on the same day.

**Then everyone left in your family line will come and bow down before him for a piece of silver and a crust of bread and plead, "Appoint me to some priestly office so I can have food to eat." (2:36)**

The second punishment is that Eli's descendants will be removed from the prestigious ministry of priesthood. They will be cut off from God's altar. They will be reduced to beggars in God's temple and despised forever.

As we trace through the narratives in 1 Samuel and 1 Kings, we find that both of these punishments were fulfilled historically. We read of the death of Eli, Hophni, and Phinehas in 1 Samuel 4. Then in 1 Samuel 22, the massacre of Ahimelech and the priests of Nob is a fulfillment of the first punishment. In 1 Kings 2, we see the ful-

fillment of the second punishment. Eli's last descendant, Abiathar, finally is removed from the priesthood and replaced by Zadok, a faithful line of priests for eight generations.

This oracle of judgment and punishment gives a second answer to our question, "Why does God allow evil to persist for so long?" God will punish evil; judgment will come at his time and in his way. God may have delayed judgment for some time according to his purposes but, when the time is right, he will avenge his name with a punishment that fits the crime. We can be assured that justice will prevail.

In the midst of punishment, God offers a hope of restoration.

**I will raise up for myself a faithful priest, who will do according to what is in my heart and mind. I will firmly establish his house, and he will minister before my anointed one always. (2:35)**

The oracle of judgment is balanced by an oracle of restoration and of hope. God declares that he will raise up a faithful priest, one who understands, hears, and obeys God's heart and mind. This faithful one will be established forever and will minister before God's anointed one (Hebrew: the *mesiah* – Messiah).

This brings us to the end of today's passage, which concludes, remarkably, on the announcement of the Anointed One, the Messiah. You may recall that Hannah's song earlier in this chapter also ends on the announcement of the Messiah (1 Sam 2:10): "He will give strength to his king and exalt the horn of his anointed." Both Hannah and this oracle prophetically anticipate the Messianic age which began with King David but finds complete fulfillment in Christ. Jesus not only fulfills the role of the Anointed King, but also the role of the faithful priest who understands and obeys God's heart and mind. Once again, we launch from the Old Testament and land in the reality of Christ.

We started this morning with the tension, Why does God allow evil to persist for so long? Our passage suggests two answers. Act I shows us that God on occasion allows dark times so that he can cultivate his servant in the midst of darkness. In the second act, the oracle of judgment assures us that God is sovereign and he will punish in his way, in his time.

### **Bloom where you're planted**

How do we apply this to ourselves? When we are placed into an environment that is corrupt, in a society that despises God, what are we to do? We can bloom where we're planted, even if it's amongst thorns and weeds. All of us can attest to how difficult it is to "bloom" in this fast-paced, materialistic culture. We live in a society devoid of absolute standards, where greed characterizes the workplace, where God is despised in our schools. How are we to take the Lord with us throughout our day and remain spiritually pure when our environment is oppressive and corrupt?

Last month, I received an email from a young man requesting to meet with me. I knew him: a high school senior, president of the student body, Christian, a nice guy. At our meeting, he nervously asked for my permission to ask my daughter to the Homecoming dance. "Wow!" I thought to myself. In this day and age, where many teenagers take dating and "going out" so casually, here was a guy who asked for my permission before asking my daughter out! He did this of his own volition; my daughter didn't even know about it. This young man shared that he was convicted by a sermon that a daughter was under the authority of her father. The right thing to do, therefore, was to ask for the father's permission first. Here is a young man surrounded by today's culture, the Internet, and peer pressure

in a secular high school. He stood firm in his faith and wanted to do what was right in God's eyes. What an example of "blooming where you're planted"!

Unfortunately, such examples are somewhat rare nowadays. At times we want to pack up and leave, to quit the job or move away to somewhere idyllic and start everything afresh. As ideal as this sounds, it is not biblical. God does not want us to abandon society around us. God brought new life into the corrupt priesthood through little Samuel, and he wants to bring new life into our schools and neighborhoods through you and me. So stay put. Become his personal servant right where you are.

Someone says, "Well, if we have to remain here, then let's rip out all the thorns and kill the weeds with weed killer!" That may be a tempting second approach. However, this approach may translate into ugly confrontations where God's love is totally absent. In the recent elections, we have seen the shouting matches, mud slinging emails, and venomous accusations on both sides of a divisive proposal. Using the world's tactics and weapons to fight the world is not the intent of "blooming where you're planted."

So we are not to abandon ship and leave. And we are not to use the world's tactics to influence the world. What are we to do? This brings us to our second application: honoring God.

### Honor God

Rather than focusing on eradicating the thorns around us, I believe we are to focus on the Lord, honor him and walk in a manner worthy of our calling.

**"Those who honor me I will honor, but those who despise me will be disdained." (2:30)**

1 Samuel 2 certainly painted for us one picture of the negative aspects of the statement. The sons of Eli clearly showed what it meant to despise God. In turn, God doomed them to die prematurely and removed their descendants from the priesthood forever.

What does it mean to "honor God" and to "be honored" by God?<sup>1</sup> The Hebrew word for "honor" has the connotation of making heavy, to put weight or emphasis. When applied to the relationship to God, "honor" means to give every ounce of weight to God's value and standard in every aspect of life. Samuel and Hannah honored God. They took his commands seriously and sought his face in their prayer and daily walk. They honored God by being his personal servant, by trusting him, and by not being soiled by the corrupt surroundings. In turn, God honored them. Hannah was honored by having five more children. God honored Samuel by calling him out to be a prophet and to anoint the first two kings of Israel.

What do these concepts look like in the New Covenant? Jesus is the ultimate picture of honoring the Father, and the Father honoring him. We look to him and emulate him as we seek to honor God. We've all heard of "WWJD" – "What Would Jesus Do?" Making decisions every day in light of what Jesus would do is one way of honoring God. I quote from Stuart Holden:<sup>2</sup>

"To honor God does not mean doing great things for Him. It is rather the consistently maintained attitude of heart which refers every choice to His judgment, measures every value by His standard, and endeavors to make every incident of life contribute towards glorifying of His name."

I like this description of honoring God because it focuses on our attitude and daily living, placing weight on God's standard, looking to Christ as we make our daily choices. We impact our world for him, and it begins with the little steps, not with grandiose things.

For me, one encouraging example of "honoring God" was Marie Chaney, who was a dear sister known by many of us. Marie was a children's director at PBCC for years. Despite fighting cancer for seven years, she brought light and life every day to our little ones. The spiritual impact she had on our future generation brought honor to God. And he honored her by being her strength and comfort through each day to the very end, finally bringing her into his presence with open arms, saying, "Well done, my good and faithful servant."

In the age of the New Covenant, the greatest honor that God can bestow upon us is taking us into his presence by the blood of Christ. To come before him and to sense his pleasure, to know that we are dearly loved by him, this is the greatest honor. And this is how Marie Chaney was honored in her life and in her death.

My friends, I believe that doing great things for God is wonderful, but it is more important to honor God in your little daily choices. Choose wisely how you use your time, how you speak, in what and in whom you invest your efforts. Take a minute to listen to a co-worker. Help your neighborhood kid fix his bike. Bring a meal to the woman down the street. Be like the young man I mentioned earlier: stand up for what God has convicted you to do.

In all things, be a fragrant aroma and bring glory to God. Honor him and he will honor you.

I want to close with a saying from Mother Teresa, one who honored God her whole life and bloomed beautifully wherever God planted her. She said, "In this life we cannot do great things. We can only do small things with great love... Be faithful in small things because it is in them that your strength lies."

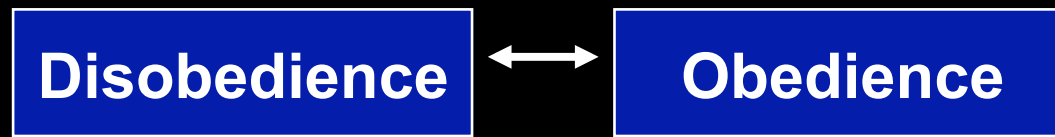
*Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you. Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. Peace be to you, and love with faith, from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. (Eph 4:32, 5:1, 6:23)*

<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to Bernard Bell for a discussion of this topic, Oct 24, 2008.

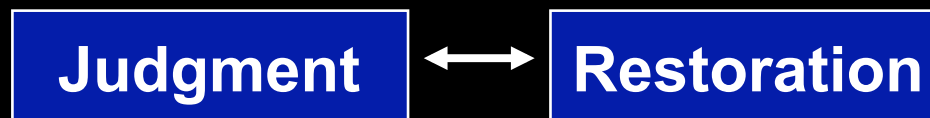
<sup>2</sup> David Payne, *1 & 2 Samuel* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982), 21.

# Outline of Passage

- Act 1: 1 Sam 2:12-26
  - Contrast between Eli's sons and Hannah's son.



- Act 2: 1 Sam 2:27-36
  - Oracle from man of God



# Act 1 Outline

A. Eli's sons had no regard for the LORD

B. Sins of Eli's sons described

X. Samuel "blooms" in Shiloh

B'. Sins of Eli's sons addressed

A'. Samuel grows in favor with the LORD and people

# Sins of Eli's sons

1. Gluttony
2. Greed
3. Sexual sin

Despised the LORD,  
led people astray

# The Past

## God's Actions

- Revealed
- Chose
- Provided

## Priests' jobs

- Go up to altar
- Burn incense
- Wear ephod

God's Promise:  
Eternal line  
of priests



Priest's duty:  
Cultivate spiritual  
life of people



# Present: Charges against Priests

<sup>29</sup> Why do you *scorn* my sacrifice and offering that I prescribed for my dwelling? Why do you *honor your sons more than me by fattening* yourselves on the choice parts of every offering made by my people Israel?'

Priest's actions:  
*despised* the LORD

# Verdict

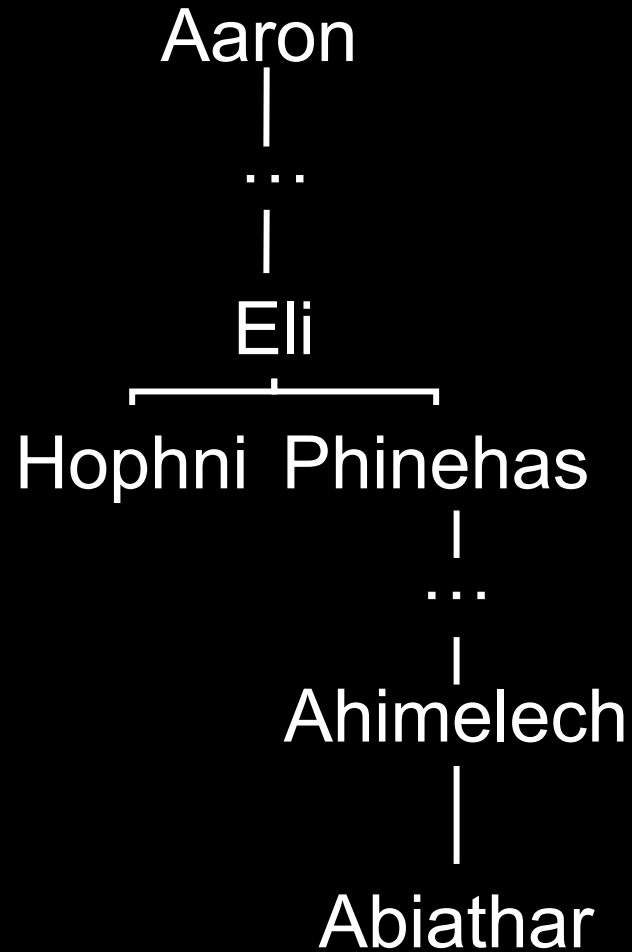
<sup>30</sup> "Therefore the LORD, the God of Israel, declares: 'I promised that your house and your father's house would minister before me forever.' But now the LORD declares: 'Far be it from me! Those who honor me I will honor, but those who despise me will be disdained.'

God's response:  
*nullify* the promise

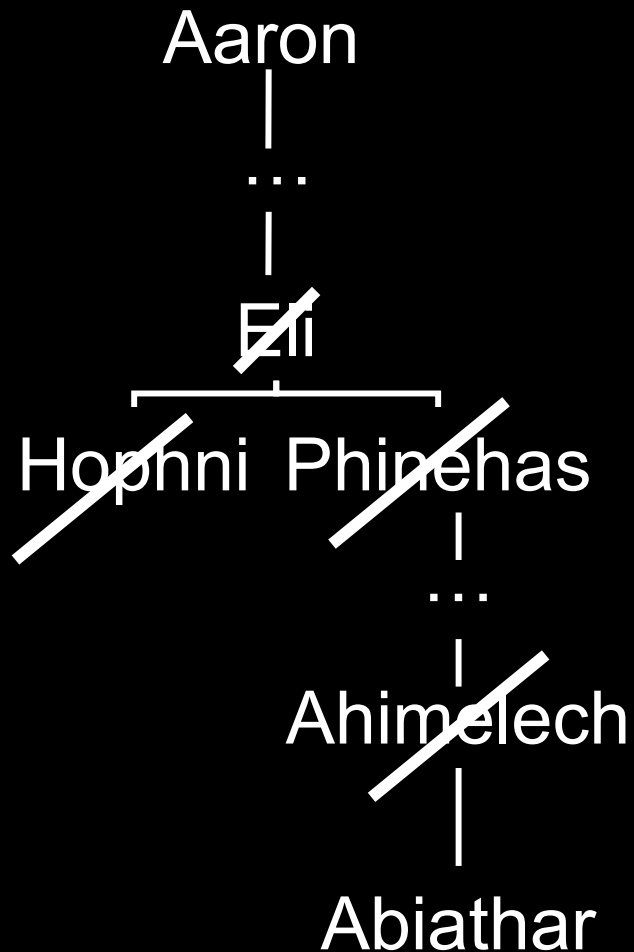


Priest's actions:  
*despised* the LORD

# Fulfillment of Punishment



# Fulfillment of Punishment



Punishment 1:  
Die in prime of life

1 Sam 4

1 Sam 22

# Fulfillment of Punishment

