

## **The Disintegrating Family**

### **1 Samuel 2**

The American family is in trouble. Day after day we are bombarded with horrifying reports. Since 1960, divorce has doubled, teen suicide has tripled, illegitimate births have quadrupled. One out of every four females is sexually abused before the age of sixteen. One and a half million babies are being aborted every year. Child abuse and neglect cases are log-jamming the social and legal system. Wife battering reports continue to increase. Drug and alcohol addiction are now epidemic. The domestic scene is somewhere between somber and tragic.

If you're like most it is easy to easy to cluck your tongue and say, "What a shame" when we hear these reports. But when it happens to us, our children and grandchildren, then the reality of domestic disintegration becomes very personal and very real. If it hasn't already touched your family in some way then you're the exception. The American family is under assault and it's very likely that this scourge may affect you and your loved ones.

As a counselor, I have personally witnessed the disintegration of many families—up close. Strangely, many of the homes could have, at one time, been characterized as happy and stable. Some even strong. Both parents appeared to love one another and the children were loved and wanted.

From all outward appearance relationships among family members were healthy. There was no sign of alcohol or drug abuse; no physical or verbal abuse; no physical or mental disorders. These homes seemed like a happy place. But eventually each eroded so drastically over time that the hope of recovery and restoration seemed to fade entirely from view.

Perhaps you have witnessed similar scenes. Perhaps you identify personally with all of this. It may have happened in your home—it may be happening in your home now.

If your home is still intact, if you're still in love with your mate, if you're still communicating, still supportive, still able to laugh and have fun, you're the exception rather than the rule. You should thank God daily for His grace.

Perhaps you have come close to the brink of disaster but have hung in there and worked through your problems. God bless you! Keep it up! Our tired, tragic society needs your example.

I would like to take a few moments and visit a troubled family that existed centuries ago in Israel. I want us to do more than shake our heads in disapproval. I want to locate and linger over some of the danger signals that ultimately spelled the disintegration of this family. The Bible graphically records this story for us in the ancient book of First Samuel.

First, let's meet the family. The father's name was Eli. Eli held a very responsible position in Israel at that time. In fact, he wore two hats. He was both a priest (I Sam. 2:11) and a judge (I Sam. 4:18). He was a household name. Not only was he a respected man, he was also a very busy man.

Eli was a believer—a man of faith. To represent God to the people he had to be a man of God in the truest sense. When God spoke to Samuel, Eli sensed it was the Lord and he listened. He knew God—His presence and His might. Eli was not some egocentric man pursuing a name for himself. He took his role as a priest and a judge very seriously. He was not a fly-by-night preacher who was here and gone. He faithfully remained at his ministry for over forty years.

Our text points out other interesting facts about Eli. In I Samuel 4:18 we discover that he was “heavy”. You will appreciate the significance of that a little later as we move on in our story. Not only was he obese, he was very old (2:22).

Eli was also the father of two boys—Hophni and Phinehas. At the time of this story, Eli's sons were grown men. They were not children. I Samuel 1:3 tells us that they were also priests like their father. In that day it was not uncommon for a young man to follow in his father's professional footsteps. In this case, like father, like sons. But how different in character! I Samuel 2:12 states that Eli's sons were worthless and profane men. They did not know the Lord. They were unbelieving and rebellious. They were priests by profession but their heart was far from God. They lived scandalous lives although they wore the priestly garb and performed priestly functions daily. They were simply going through the motions and had no reverence for God or for the offering (2:13-17). They were simply carrying out ritualistic tasks to put food in their bellies.

I Samuel 2:22 tells us that both men were sexually immoral. With a father who was a priest and a judge, a man who had given his whole life to the things of the Lord, they were so unlike him. They had no interest in spiritual things. They had become calloused and cynical. I Samuel 2:25 and 3:13 indicate that this continual ungodly behavior brought God's curse upon them. They had become so depraved, so godless that God determined to put them to death.

Eli had received at least three separate warnings about his son's evil behavior: 1) **The public in general** (2:22-24). Their reputation was notorious. News of their immorality had spread throughout the land and they didn't try to hide it. I Samuel 2:22-24 states that their wicked behavior was common knowledge and the people did not keep the news from the judge they respected and loved—“What your sons are doing is wrong. It is a scandalous thing.”

2) **A unnamed prophet** (2:27-34); 3) **God Himself** (3:17).

How did Eli respond to these warnings? In I Samuel 2:23-24 we discover that there was **1) Incomplete reproof**. His response sounds wimpy. “What you're doing is not good.” Sadly, they did not listen to him because he had long since lost his authority in their lives. They no longer respected him as their father or a priest and judge of Israel. In reading

Eli's response it's almost as if he merely stood back with his arms crossed and gave his son's a disappointed frown. **2) Indulged his sons.** I Samuel 2:27-29 states that he honored his sons above the Lord by allowing them to take the liberties they did with their priestly responsibilities. In doing so he gave tacit approval to their sinful behavior. **3) Fatalistic attitude.** (I Samuel 3:18) You may ask, "What could Eli have done?" If you go back to the law of Moses you'll find the answer, but be ready for a shocker. Deuteronomy 21:18-21 commanded that he bring his sons before the elders and ask that they deal with them according to the law. Most likely, they would have been stoned by the people.

Enough of that ancient account. I find no less than four key signs of family disintegration in this tragic story.

- 1) **A failure to lead.** Eli was a respected but busy priest and judge. As a result, he became preoccupied with his public profession and failed to focus on his family's needs and his responsibilities. We must ask, "Where was Eli during his son's formative years?" Where was he when their spiritual indifference and cynicism began to emerge? A child reveals his character early on by his actions and words. Where was Eli to deal with this? It takes an on-site parent to spot and deal with the danger signals. If these symptoms are not dealt with early they become habit patterns and character flaws.

Like it or not fathers, Christ's authority in the home is centered in you. It is not in the mother but in you. It is your responsibility to see to it that authority is properly exercised. When we fail to do so we grievously misrepresent Christ. The father is to head up the home—to be its' leader. If he is preoccupied with his work or profession it becomes virtually impossible for him to carry out his God-given role. If he abdicates his role to his wife it will lead to serious problems in the home. Fathers, you are responsible for everything that goes on in your home. Nothing should go on in your home that you are not aware of. I Timothy 2:11-13 states that you "must manage your household well, keeping your children under control with all dignity." This does not mean that your wife is pushed into the background and her talents and gifts are crushed. It does not mean that you do everything.

Quite honestly, it's getting more difficult for fathers. There was a day when people worked their farms and were home much more. With the advent of the car and the plane the father is able to be further away from home with his work. Consequently, he is not on-site as much as his father and grandfather. Obviously, this means that he needs to work even harder to keep in touch with what is going on in the home through his wife. He must confer with her regularly. He is in no way relieved of his responsibilities to manage his home just because he is away.

Leadership must be the strongest in the area of spiritual things. Sadly, it is all too often the wife that assumes the lead in these matters. This is to our shame because it is not her primary responsibility.

- 2) **Failure to heed warnings.** God has the unique ability to get our attention. He often uses people. Sometimes a schoolteacher, a Sunday School teacher, an elder, a pastor, a friend, a relative, and others. Too often we refuse to listen to their warnings about our child. Perhaps the key reason for not heeding a warning is denial. The dictionary states that denial is a “refusal to admit the truth—a refusal to accept or acknowledge reality.” Denial is to the mind what shock does for your body--it protects you from pain. When your body is traumatized your nervous system produces a natural painkiller. By the same token, denial lets parents put on blinders that protect their minds from emotional pain. Parent denial keeps us from having to face the pain and the problem. It keeps the family intact and allows us to continue being the world’s best parent. It means not having to admit that your family is out of control. No one likes feeling out of control especially parents and no parent wants to think of himself as having failed. However, we must remember that Proverbs makes it clear that “he who hates reproof is a fool” (Prov. 12:1). We show ourselves wise when we are willing to listen to the warnings of others. When someone warns you about a member of your family do you listen or do you automatically get angry and defensive? Do you heed their counsel? Do you thank them for their candid remarks? Do you respect them for their courage and concern?
- 3) **Failure to restrain his children** Eli had heard the bad reports from many but he refused to act; he refused to restrain his children. He was unwilling to face the the severity of their behavior or its consequences. In 1 Samuel 3:12-13 we read that “he did not restrain them”. What an indictment! He knew but he did not act. Proverbs 19:18 instructs us to “Discipline your son in his early years while there is hope. If you don’t you’ll ruin his life”.

Typically, the parent who does not restrain his children is permissive, lenient and indulgent. I have found that there are a variety of reasons why a parent chooses to be permissive.

- Substitute for emotional involvement and quality time. A parent may be tired from being overextended at work or he may self-centered, lazy or incapable of meeting their child’s emotional needs.
- Emotional anesthetic. This occurs when there is marital conflict or problems in the home.
- Own childhood deprivations or personal unhappiness.
- Compensate for guilt. Perhaps too harsh in punishment.
- Social pressure. “Keep up with the Joneses”.
- Generosity. No bad motives but bad effect.

#### Result in the Child:

- 1) Cannot delay gratification.
- 2) Insensitive and lacks self-control.
- 3) Lacks respect for authority figures and their possessions.

- 4) Impulsive; poor judgment.
- 5) Deceitful and manipulative.

Children need rules, limits and firmness. It gives them a sense of security and love.

- 3) **Failure to put God first in the home.** I Samuel 2:29 relates that Eli honored his sons above God by “fattening themselves (plural!) on the choice parts of every offering made by my people Israel”. Because Eli did not restrain them he rationalized their behavior even to the point where he joined in their sin. He bought into their lifestyle. He served himself from the meat his sons had taken immorally from the people. This is why Eli died and obese man.

Conclusion:

Domestic disintegration is happening around us.

- 1) **It can happen to your home.** Christians are not exempt.
- 2) **The way back starts with the father.** Remember fathers, you are God’s representative in the home. You must properly exercise your leadership role if your family is going to survive. Without strong, biblical leadership the culture will capture your children’s hearts and minds and take them to hell. Now is the time to get involved, not later. To relentlessly, pursue more professionally and materially is a dead-end. The bottom-line is that the only thing you can carry to heaven with you is your children. Without your leadership your family will drift and it may drift onto the shoals and disintegrate.
- 3) **Fathers make Christ first in your heart and home.** Children are astute. They can spot a phony. You may fool everyone else, but you cannot fool them. Unless you backup what you teach with your example it will be worthless.
- 4) **Listen to those who warn you about your children.** Listen. Don’t get defensive and lash back. Take it before the Lord and if it’s valid act on it. Whatever you do, don’t rationalize sinful behavior.
- 5) **Discipline you child while they are young.** Don’t wait. Be unified in your approach. Be firm. Be consistent. Do it while they’re willing to learn; while they are still tender and impressionable.

Adapted from Chapter 1 in “Growing Wise in Family Life” by Charles R. Swindoll

