

# Bad Boys

1 Samuel 2:22-36 June 7, 2026

In the early 1800s, a man named William Jackson made himself a fortune in India. He returned to England, able to afford the good life among high society. Flush with cash, his teenage son, Will Jr. indulged in many vices. Indulgence turned to immorality. He didn't look like a criminal - he wore elegant clothing and carried himself as a member of the elite.<sup>1</sup> But he ran up debts. He stole gold watches and diamond rings. He forged checks. His personal life was extremely scandalous.

William Sr. was embarrassed. *Privately* he wrote to Will telling him to stop his wickedness. He even wrote a *three volume* book about how *bad* his son was and how *good* he was as a father. It was never published. Maybe even *he* didn't believe it. He may have complained to Will in private, but in *public* he used his influence to shield his son from his creditors.<sup>2</sup> He gave Will an allowance, which Will used to get comfortable rooms and a non-stop flow of alcohol. When Jr. was on trial, his father paid for top barristers to get him off on technicalities. But Will Jr. *would not* correct course.

We feel badly for the father, but then realize that Will Jr. was just 15, 16, and 17 when these things were happening. He was financially, legally, and morally under his father's authority. But William Sr. was almost totally absent in his parenting. He thought he had done his duty by making a fortune. His complaints to his son fell flat since they were followed by more money, more favors, more work to cover his son's crimes. And, as a result, the story ended tragically for both father and son.

In this text, Eli is confronted about the wickedness he allows his sons to commit. But Hophni and Phinehas aren't teenagers. They're fully grown and *fully* wayward. And because Eli was unwilling to choose God over his boys, he, too, is complicit in their sin and will share in the consequences.

**1 Samuel 2:22 - 22 Now Eli was very old. He heard about everything his sons were doing to all Israel and how they were sleeping with the women who served at the entrance to the tent of meeting.**

Last week we saw that Hophni and Phinehas were messing with the sacrifices. But that was only part of it. These ladies may have been volunteers who took short term Nazarite vows.<sup>3</sup> So not only were *offerings* being polluted by Eli's family, but the offerers themselves.

This was a longtime pattern of behavior. It says this is what they were doing to *all* Israel. Verse 13 said, whenever anyone came to the Tabernacle this was happening.

We wonder why the text focuses so much on Eli since he's not the one really doing *all* these things. We'll see he not only looked the other way, but he also ate the stolen food. More importantly, at

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<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Yardley *The Profligate Son: Or, A True Story Of Family Conflict, Fashionable Vice, And Financial Ruin In Regency Britain (WaPo)*

<sup>2</sup> Nicola Philips *Parenting The Profligate Son: Masculinity, Gentility And Juvenile Delinquency In England, 1791-1814*

<sup>3</sup> Robert Bergen *The New American Commentary, Volume 7: 1, 2 Samuel*

this time, Eli is the ruler of Israel.<sup>4</sup> At least as far as Israel had a ruler. He was *certainly* the ruler of his family and the Tabernacle. He heard about all that was happening and did nothing to stop it.

**1 Samuel 2:23-26** - <sup>23</sup> He said to them, “Why are you doing these things? I have heard about your evil actions from all these people. <sup>24</sup> No, my sons, the news I hear the LORD’s people spreading is not good. <sup>25</sup> If one person sins against another, God can intercede for him, but if a person sins against the LORD, who can intercede for him?” But they would not listen to their father, since the LORD intended to kill them. <sup>26</sup> By contrast, the boy Samuel grew in stature and in favor with the LORD and with people.

The way Eli confronts his sons reminds me of William Jackson Sr., who would write a letter to his son saying things like, “You might regret what you’re doing.” But then wrote the check to keep financing his son’s waywardness. William warned his son that forgery was a capital offense, but then provided the lawyers to save his skin.

The sins of Eli’s sons were *capital* offenses.<sup>5</sup> But Eli speaks *philosophically* to his sons. Rather than say, “What you’re doing is evil,” he softens it to, “What I hear *other* people *spreading* isn’t good.”

The best thing we can do is be honest with ourselves and with the Lord. Sometimes we have an area of waywardness in how we’re thinking or living - and we want to debate a technicality or some what-about interpretation. What we need to do is humble ourselves and confess and turn to God.

As Christians, we are commanded to call out sin and wrongdoing among ourselves.<sup>6</sup> We’re to do so with a spirit of gentleness, but that doesn’t mean helping the wrongdoer rationalize their sin. It doesn’t mean downplaying things or making things purposefully vague so we don’t hurt the wrongdoer’s feelings. Because sin overtakes and destroys lives. And we want to help rescue people *out* of that destruction, while also being careful to avoid the temptation ourselves.

As priest and ruler, Eli should’ve removed his sons. As father, he should told them *directly*, “You’re in sin, I will not allow it and I will not overlook it.” Instead, he acted as if their offenses were trifling.

Of course the big, eyebrow-raising headline in these verses is: “They would not listen...since the Lord intended to kill them.” Your Bible may say, “the Lord *desired* to kill them.” What’s that about?

First, let’s tackle the desire issue. Here’s what we know is true about God’s character and nature: “The Lord is not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance.”<sup>7</sup> That’s not just a New Testament idea. God is the same yesterday, today, and forever. Listen to Ezekiel 18:32: “I take no pleasure in anyone’s death...So repent and live!” In Ezekiel 33 God says, “I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that the wicked person should turn from his way and live.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> P. Kyle McCarter *1 Samuel: A New Translation With Introduction And Commentary*

<sup>5</sup> Bergen

<sup>6</sup> Galatians 6:1

<sup>7</sup> 2 Peter 3:9

<sup>8</sup> Ezekiel 33:11

Eli's sons have rejected God for so long, they have willfully sinned for so long, they have hardened their hearts for so long that God is now resolved to judge them for it. They were past a point of no return. As John Wesley said, "They had sinned away their day of grace."<sup>9</sup>

Now listen, *especially* if you're not a Christian here today: God is a God of mercy. He is a God Who forgives. He is a greater Savior than you are a sinner. He *wants* to save you from your sin. *But* He will not force you. And if you continually reject His grace, His mercy, His truth, His commands, then *He will give you what you want*. He will give you over to your desire to stay in sin.<sup>10</sup> And eventually your heart may be *too* hard to cry out to God. Your mind may be too dark to see the Light. Now, I can't tell you when that might happen. It's not that if you sin a certain number of times, then it's over. But it happened to Pharaoh. It happened to Eli's sons, to Lot's wife, to Nineveh,<sup>11</sup> to the Canaanites.

If you think you'll just convert on your deathbed, understand it can happen to you. Some people *do* convert on their deathbeds, and praise the Lord for His unfailing mercy. But the Bible pleads with you: Today, if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts so that He doesn't have to keep you out of eternal rest.<sup>12</sup>

**1 Samuel 2:27-29 - <sup>27</sup> A man of God came to Eli and said to him, "This is what the LORD says: 'Didn't I reveal myself to your forefather's family when they were in Egypt and belonged to Pharaoh's palace? <sup>28</sup> Out of all the tribes of Israel, I chose your house to be my priests, to offer sacrifices on my altar, to burn incense, and to wear an ephod in my presence. I also gave your forefather's family all the Israelite food offerings. <sup>29</sup> Why, then, do all of you despise my sacrifices and offerings that I require at the place of worship? You have honored your sons more than me, by making yourselves fat with the best part of all of the offerings of my people Israel.'**

William Jackson knew his son was a scoundrel. Yet he "rushed to defend his son's reputation from any slur."<sup>13</sup> Rather than really get a hold of the problem, he once tried to arrange a situation where Will Jr. would be arrested for his debts, but then his father would anonymously pay the fees so Will could walk free. Sort of a 19th century *Scared Straight* without the scared part.

This prophet came to Eli and said, "You're part of these sins. *You're* fat from the food they took from the Lord and the people. But more than that, you've honored your sons instead of God." And in doing so, Eli was actually *despising* the Lord. It's a word that means he *kicked* against the Lord.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> John Wesley *Wesley's Notes On The Bible*

<sup>10</sup> Romans 1:21

<sup>11</sup> Nahum 1-3

<sup>12</sup> Psalm 95:8, Hebrews 3:8, 15, Hebrews 4:7

<sup>13</sup> Phillips

<sup>14</sup> Ronald Youngblood *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Volume 3: Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1&2 Samuel*

We understand the emotional part. "Lord, it's my kids. It's my family." But God is not willing to be second place in your life. When God is second place, that means we're worshiping something else. Some other pursuit, some other relationship, some other god that is more important to us.

Jesus Himself said in Matthew 10:

**Matthew 10:37-38 - <sup>37</sup> The one who loves a father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me; the one who loves a son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me. <sup>38</sup> And whoever doesn't take up his cross and follow Me is not worthy of Me.**

Now, God does not want to ruin your family relationships. He wants them to thrive in a way that would never be possible without Him. But this is His demand. We must honor Him above all others.

When we do that, He does all sorts of amazing, generous things for us. Look at the list given by the prophet. He set them free from slavery in Egypt. He gave them promises and purpose. He gave them generous provision. He did so much for them, yet Eli and his sons trampled on it.

Eli *knew* better. The prophet gives him this quick history lesson. "Eli, do you remember *why* it's *your* tribe serving there and not the Danites or the Ephraimites?" Because centuries before there was *another* priest's son whose name *also* happened to be Phinehas. But *this* Phinehas chose holiness over wickedness. When he saw immorality in the camp of Israel, he took a spear in his hand and honored the Lord. And God said, "Phinehas has turned back my wrath against the children of Israel because he had a zeal for Me. So his descendants are going to be priests from here on out."<sup>15</sup> Now, *Eli's* son Phinehas, with his brother, was doing the opposite. *Bringing* wrath and judgment.

**1 Samuel 2:30 - <sup>30</sup> "Therefore, this is the declaration of the LORD, the God of Israel: 'I did say that your family and your forefather's family would walk before me forever. But now,' this is the LORD's declaration, 'no longer! For those who honor me I will honor, but those who despise me will be disgraced.**

It's not that Aaron's descendants wouldn't be priests and Levites wouldn't be Levites. The branch of Aaron's family that Eli was a part of had violated the priestly covenant. And so God was removing them. He had already done so with two of Aaron's four sons when the Tabernacle was first set up. Nadab and Abihu offered profane fire and the Lord killed them. The other two sons were Eleazar and Ithamar. Eli was a descendant of Ithamar. Now the line of Ithamar would be cut off and only the priestly line of Eleazar would continue. And we'll see that fulfilled as the book continues.

God sets out His dealings plainly. He says, "Those who honor Me, I will honor." It's interesting: The word used for honor literally means "make heavy."<sup>16</sup> So there's this vivid image: Eli and his sons made themselves *fat* with sin. At the end of his life, we're going to be told that Eli was a very *heavy*

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<sup>15</sup> Numbers 25:6-13

<sup>16</sup> Youngblood

man. But *not* heavy the way God wanted to make him. Not heavy with holiness or eternal reward, but with stolen goods. He considered those temporal spoils better than what God wanted to give.

God said, "I wanted your family to *walk* before Me forever." Walking with God. That's what the Lord wants. That's the image of a life lived in worship and faithfulness and growth, and not just in the New Testament. Enoch walked with God. Noah walked with God. Abraham walked with God. Do you know what we see Eli doing? *Sitting*. He was sitting in chapter 1. He'll be sitting in chapter 3.

Are you walking with God? Psalm 1 explains that *that* is the road to a happy life. *Not* standing in the path of sinners or *sitting* in the seat of mockers. But walking with God in righteousness, led by Him.

**1 Samuel 2:31-36 - <sup>31</sup> Look, the days are coming when I will cut off your strength and the strength of your forefather's family, so that none in your family will reach old age. <sup>32</sup> You will see distress in the place of worship, in spite of all that is good in Israel, and no one in your family will ever again reach old age. <sup>33</sup> Any man from your family I do not cut off from my altar will bring grief and sadness to you. All your descendants will die violently. <sup>34</sup> This will be the sign that will come to you concerning your two sons Hophni and Phinehas: both of them will die on the same day. <sup>35</sup> "Then I will raise up a faithful priest for myself. He will do whatever is in my heart and mind. I will establish a lasting dynasty for him, and he will walk before my anointed one for all time. <sup>36</sup> Anyone who is left in your family will come and bow down to him for a piece of silver or a loaf of bread. He will say: Please appoint me to some priestly office so I can have a piece of bread to eat."**

God was not overreacting. The judgment is serious because the *sin* was serious. How many people had Eli and his sons defrauded? Consider how they desecrated God's house. Consider what they did to those ladies who came to serve the Lord. This is not harsh, it's *mercy*. Mercy to every Israelite who had prayed for justice and relief. Mercy for a nation that needed *righteous* priests.

They had used their arms to snatch the meat, to snatch the women, to pile up wealth and power for themselves. And so they would reap what they sowed. Cut off your strength literally means their arms would be shattered.<sup>17</sup> No longer could they take what wasn't theirs and defile God's house.

As often is the case with Biblical prophecy, this would be fulfilled in stages.<sup>18</sup> And already we're seeing part of Hannah's prophecy from her song starting to be accomplished. Remember, she gave seven examples of God reversing the fortunes of the righteous and wicked. And this family that had more meat than they could possibly consume would eventually be begging for bread.

Will Jackson Jr's sins finally caught up with him. He was ultimately sent to Australia with other criminals on a ship named *Retribution*. There, sadly, he "died alone on the street [in Sydney] where he lay, a pathetic figure with no friends or family to comfort him or to mourn his passing."<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Bergen

<sup>18</sup> Bill Arnold *The NIV Application Commentary: 1 & 2 Samuel*

<sup>19</sup> Yardley

Meanwhile, the mental and emotional stress led to William Sr. dying from a paralysis “that slowly immobilized his limbs and finally stilled his heart.” A sad story with a sadder ending. Just like Eli.

But here’s the trouble, friends: Maybe you and I aren’t as bad as Hophni and Phinehas. Maybe we live better lives than Will Jr. But *all* of us are guilty sinners. *All* of us were born in sin and then commit many acts of sin against each other and against God Himself. And one thing Eli said was right: “If a person sins against the Lord, who can intercede for him?” The truth is, we’re *all* facing a journey on the *Retribution*. And the wages of our sin is death. All of us deserve judgment for the wrong we have done.

And that is why God sent His Son. *To be the One Who intercedes!* So that we can be saved from the *Retribution* by His *Redemption*. But He is the *only* Mediator between God and man. He gave Himself to ransom *you*. He is *your* Redeemer. He will pay your debt. He will forgive you. He will purify you. The process is clear: You must believe Him. You must repent of your sin. You must walk with Him. And when you do He will help you. He will bless you. He will honor you. He will cover you in love. But we have to choose to honor Him. Choose worship over waywardness. Turn to Him and *live* in the power of His grace. To be redeemed and not return to sin, return to worship ourselves or some earthly treasure or goal, but honoring God with all our heart, all our soul, all our mind, all our strength. We won’t do it *perfectly*, but we can do it *faithfully* as we receive God’s power and grace for this life.