

Because the Lord Would Slay Them (Part 2)

Troy J. Edwards

*If one man sin against another, the judge shall judge him: but if a man sin against the LORD, who shall intreat for him? Notwithstanding they hearkened not unto the voice of their father, **because the LORD would slay them.** (1 Samuel 2:25)*

We learned in Part 1 that the Hebrew word for “because” should have been translated as “therefore.” The substitution of the former term dispels the incorrect notion that God ensured Eli’s sons’ sinfulness through an unstoppable edict for the latter.

Furthermore, God despises the death and devastation of wicked people (Ezek. 18:23; 33:11; 2 Pet. 3:9). This leaves us with one more puzzle to solve: the belief that God *personally* punishes sinners. While most Evangelicals have no objection to God personally destroying rebels through the exercise of His supernatural might, this viewpoint contradicts Christ’s teachings on God’s character.

Our Lord taught us that the Father did not send Him to destroy lives, but rather to save them (John 3:16-17; Luke 9:51-56). In fact, Jesus taught that disaster arose as a result of pushing God away, so separating oneself from the One who wished to save them from destruction (John 3:18-21; Matt. 23:37-39; Luke 13:34-35). After all, the process of sowing and reaping produces destruction and death (Gal. 6:7-8; James 1:15; Rom. 6:23).

So how do we interpret phrases like “because the LORD would slay them”? According to some analysts, there is nothing in the Hebrew language that indicates who or what is responsible for Eli’s sons’ destruction:

Because the Lord would slay them. The Hebrew particle *vau*, neither designates the cause of their destruction, nor the direct and absolute intention of God to cut them off in their sins; it is used to declare the conditional intention of God, in case of their final impenitency The gloss therefore of Calvin, which imputes their destruction to the decree of God, is unsupported by ancient authority.¹

If this is true, God is vindicated, and the stigma of directly causing Hophni and Phinehas’ destruction is lifted off His shoulders. Another simple solution is to remember that God, in Scripture phraseology, is frequently said to do what He merely permitted. Joe Blair, using 2 Kings 24:3 as an example, writes:

¹ Sutcliffe, Joseph **A Commentary on the Old and New Testament, Volume 1** (London: Holdsworth and Ball, 1834), pp. 238, 239

To read that the Lord did such judgment and destruction Was characteristic of the Jewish way of thinking. As Sovereign, everything came under the dictates of God. They did not bother sometimes to differentiate between God's causing and God's allowing. It was not God's wish that destruction even come upon Israel, or anyone else, but His will to make people truly free means that He had to allow people the consequences of their choices. We know that God does not cause everything. He does not cause us to sin, for example. God does however permit things to happen, even the bad things.²

By comparing Scripture with Scripture, we arrive at this same conclusion. Compare Eli's sons' deaths to the psalmist's commentary on the subject. We read in 1 Samuel 4:

And the Philistines fought, and Israel was smitten, and they fled every man into his tent: and there was a very great slaughter; for there fell of Israel thirty thousand footmen. And the ark of God was taken; and the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were slain. (1 Samuel 4:10-11)

When Hophni and Phinehas fought the Philistines, they were both killed. According to some scholars, they died while defending the ark, which the Israelites of Hophni and Phinehas' day referred to as God's "glory" (1 Sam. 4:21-22). It's also known as God's "strength" in other places (2 Chron. 6:41; Psalm 132:8).

According to Psalm 78, God permitted the Philistines to take His ark (His "glory" and "strength") and the deaths of those who relied on it. This was not accomplished by empowering or directly driving the Philistines to commit their atrocities against Israel, but by *forsaking* Israel:

So that he forsook the tabernacle of Shiloh, the tent which he placed among men; And delivered his strength into captivity, and his glory into the enemy's hand. He gave his people over also unto the sword; and was wroth with his inheritance. (Psalm 78:60-62)

When we compare the statement in 1 Samuel 2:25 that "*the LORD will slay [or "destroy"] them*" with the statement in Psalm 78:60 that "*he forsook the tabernacle of Shiloh,*" we can see how God is said to have "slain" or "destroyed" Eli's wicked sons. It wasn't via the use of destructive power on His part, but through the loss of God's protective presence:

Then my anger shall be kindled against them in that day, and I will forsake them, and I will hide my face from them, and they shall be devoured, and many evils and troubles shall befall them; so that they will say in that day, Are not these evils come upon us, because our God is not among us? (Deut. 31:17)

The Easy-to-Read Version says, "*I will leave them. I will refuse to help them, and they will be destroyed.*" God "destroys" individuals by respecting their request to leave them, not by directly

² Blair, Joe **When Bad Things Happen, God Still Loves** (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1986), p. 98

harming them with supernatural power (Job 21:14-15; 22:16-17). God is believed to ruin them by abandoning them, refusing to help them, and allowing their foes to have their way (Deut. 4:31; 2 Chron. 12:7, 12; Isa. 34:2; Hos. 11:8-9). Other Bible students believe that this is the exact manner in which God said to “slay” Hophni and Phinehas:

I DOUBT if we are permitted, and I am sure we are not obliged, to take the fatalist view of this verse. When it says of the sons of Eli, that “they hearkened not to their father,” it simply means what it says, viz., that of their own deliberate and wicked free-will, they refused his advice. And when it implies that this came to pass, “because the Lord would slay them,” what more does it teach of necessity, than that God was so displeased with their wilful and obstinate wickedness, that He did not rescue them from it by his grace? **He fulfilled his purpose of slaying them by leaving them to themselves.** It is in the same way we read in the Book of Exodus, sometimes that God hardened Pharaoh’s heart, sometimes that Pharaoh hardened his own—the interpretation and reconciliation of the two statements lying in this truth, that men’s hearts naturally become hardened when they are left to themselves. God, in short, is said to destroy a man when he does not save him from himself.³ (Emphasis added)

It would have been well for Eli’s sons if, when they did wickedly, they had minded the reproof of their father, and repented of their sins; instead of which they were deaf to his warnings and entreaties, and the most dreadful ruin was the consequence. “Why do ye such things?” said the good old man, “for I hear of your evil dealings by all this people. Nay, my sons; for it is no good report that I hear: ye make the Lord’s people to transgress.” These young men were priests, and were guilty of the most wicked doings; but though their kind old father so affectionately reproved them, “they hearkened not unto the voice of their father, because the Lord would slay them.” God let them harden their hearts, because of their obstinacy, and so **left them to suffer the most severe punishment.** You must have read of the way in which they came to their end.⁴ (Emphasis added)

Moreover, the words “delivered” and “gave over” in Psalms 78:61-62 are verbs signifying *permission*. Another rendering of the psalm is as follows:

He allowed their enemies to capture the sacred chest, which was the symbol of his power and his glory. Because he was angry with his people, he allowed their enemies to kill them. (Psalm 78:61-62; Unlocked Dynamic Bible)

All of this could have been avoided. God would have subdued their enemies if Eli and his two sons had heeded to God's voice rather than their own counsel (Psalm 81:10-15). They lost God’s protection because they refused to walk in God’s ways.

According to this evidence, the latter part of 1 Samuel 2:25 should be read in a permissive rather than a causative sense: “*Notwithstanding they hearkened not unto the voice of their father, **therefore the LORD would permit their enemies to slay them.***” This is consistent with the full tenor of Scripture as well as with the truth about God’s loving character in which He does no harm.

³ Mathematicus, M. A. “Germes of Thought” in **The Homilist, Vol. II** (London: Richard D. Dickinson, 1868), p. 155

⁴ Cobbin, Ingram **Scripture Proverbs for the Young** (London: William Ball, 1838), p. 100