

The Perils of Treating God Like a Good Luck Charm

From the Theology of Work Project

From the closing words of the book of Judges and the opening chapters of 1 Samuel, we know that the Israelites are both leaderless and disconnected from God. The closest thing that they have to a national leader is the priest Eli, who with his sons runs the shrine at Shiloh. The Israelites' political, military, and economic prosperity depends on their faithfulness to God. So the people bring

their offerings and sacrifices to God at the shrine, but the priests make a mockery of their interaction with God.

"Now the sons of Eli were scoundrels...for they treated the offerings of the Lord with contempt" (1 Samuel 2:12, 17).

They are untrustworthy as human leaders, and they do not honor God in their hearts. Worshipers find that those who should direct them toward an experience of worship are instead stealing from them.

Eli performs his work as a sacred charge from God, but his sons see it as a personal possession. Growing up in an atmosphere somewhat analogous to a family business, they expect from a young age to inherit their father's privileges. Because this "family business" is God's own shrine—giving the family a claim to divine authority over the populace—his sons' malfeasance is all the more injurious.

It's not clear whether the corruption of their leaders causes the corruption of the people or vice versa, but chapters 4-6

depict the disaster than befalls those who are poorly governed. Israel has been engaged in a centuries-long struggle against the neighboring country of the Philistines. A new attack is made by the Philistines, which routs the Israelites, resulting in 4,000 casualties. The Israelites recognize the defeat as a sign of God's disfavor. But instead of examining their fault, repenting, and coming to the Lord for guidance, they try to manipulate God into serving their purposes. They fetch the ark of the covenant of God and charge into battle against the Philistines, assuming that the

ark will make them invincible. Eli's sons lend an aura of authority to the plan. But the Philistines slaughter Israel in battle, killing 30,000 Israelite soldiers, capturing the ark, slaying Eli's sons and causing Eli's own death.

Eli's sons, alongside the leaders of the army, made the mistake of thinking that because they bore the name of God's people and possessed the symbols of God's presence, they were in command of God's power. Perhaps those in charge believed they could actually control God's

power by carrying around the ark. Or maybe they had deceived themselves into thinking that because they were God's people, whatever they wanted for themselves would be what God wanted for them. In any case, they discovered that God's presence is not a warrant to project God's power, but an invitation to receive God's guidance. Ironically, the ark contained the greatest means of God's guidance—the Ten Commandments—but Eli's sons did not bother to seek any kind of guidance from God before attacking the Philistines.

Can it be that we fall into the same bad habit in our work?
When we are faced with opposition or difficulty in our work, do we seek God's guidance in prayer or do we just throw up a quick prayer asking God to do what we want?
Do we consider the possible courses of action in the light of scripture, or do we just keep a Bible on our desk? Do we examine our motivations and assess our actions with openness to transformation by God or do we simply

decorate ourselves with Christian symbols? If our work seems unfulfilling or our careers are not progressing as we hope, is it possible that we are using God as a good luck charm, rather than following him as the master of our work?