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## **Does God Delight in the Death of Eli's Sons?**

*His sons, however, did not listen to their father's rebuke, for it was the LORD's will (lit. "for the Lord delighted") to put them to death.- 1 Samuel 2:25*

*"Do I take any pleasure in the death of the wicked?" declares the Sovereign LORD. "Rather, am I not pleased when they turn from their ways and live?"- Ezekiel 18:23*

How can these two verses be reconciled? Does the Lord take pleasure in killing Eli's wicked sons, for that seems the clear indication of 1 Samuel 2:25. Eli's two sons were abusing their position concerning the meat offered in sacrifice to God, and were living openly sinful and rebellious lives before all Israel. As a result, Eli was put to shame by their reputation, having heard the bad reports about his sons from his neighbors. Furthermore, above and beyond his own shame, he was deeply concerned about his sons destiny spiritually (and physically) before the Lord. He knew that God would not be mocked, and that sooner or later God's wrath would come upon them. So, Eli called his wicked sons aside and rebuked them vigorously. Warning them as follows: "If a man sins against another man, God may mediate for him; but if a man sins against the LORD, who will intercede for him" (1 Sam. 2:25)? What is so crushing to our faulty and weak views of God is the very next phrase, cited above: "His sons, however, did not listen to their father's rebuke, **for** it was the LORD's will to put them to death." The tiny word "for" is the crusher. The word means "because," "for," or "since", and it is a crucial logical word. It gives the reason why something happened. For example: "The car coasted to a stop **for** it had

run out of gas.” The reason why the car behaved this way was that it had no more gas in the tank. “The cat ran inside, **for** the rainstorm had begun.” The reason why the cat behaved this way was that it hated getting wet in a rainstorm, and now the rain had come. “His sons took extra meat **for** they were extremely hungry.” The reason why they behave this way was they were unusually famished. What then of 1 Samuel 2:25? “His sons, however, did not listen to their father's rebuke, **for** it was the LORD's will to put them to death.” The reason why they did not listen was that God wanted to kill them! It seems that, just as God had done earlier with Pharaoh in Exodus 10:27 when he hardened Pharaoh’s heart resulting in Pharaoh’s refusal to let Israel go and in the subsequent slaughter of the firstborn of Egypt, so in the case of Eli’s sons God specifically intervened to ensure that they would not listen to their father’s rebuke since he “delighted to put them to death.”

This is the logic of 1 Samuel 2:25, and it crushes our human self-deterministic pride. They didn’t listen because of something God wanted to do! “I thought we control what we listen to, what we decide to do!” Apparently Eli’s sons’ refusal to listen was attributed to God rather than to Eli’s sons themselves. And yet, Scripture clearly teaches that God does not compel or even entice anyone to do evil. According to James 1:13-15 “When tempted, no one should say, "God is tempting me." For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.” Evil actions come from evil desires within the human heart, not from God. So how do we explain God’s activities in “hardening the heart” for someone to do evil and rebel against God? Perhaps it’s a matter of God “handing them over in the sinful desires of their hearts” (Rom. 1:24) to things which are totally in concert with their nature but which enlightened self-interest might have forbidden. Doesn’t it seem insane for Pharaoh to have resisted Moses’ request “Let my people go!” after NINE SUPERNATURAL PLAGUES?? Even though Pharaoh will never love or obey God from his

heart, wouldn't he out of enlightened self-interest give Moses what he asked for. Pharaoh's counselors were counting on this when they implored him, "Let the people go, so that they may worship the Lord their God. Do you not yet realize that Egypt is ruined" (Ex. 10:7)? But God hardened his heart in order that he would continue to do the very things he's been choosing all along. It was totally consonant with Pharaoh's nature to resist and rebel, but selfish love of earthly comfort may have compelled him to let Israel go before the full ten plagues were done. God hardened his heart to show the full might of his power.

In the same way, Eli's sons might have, out of love of human approval or some other selfish motive listened to their father's rebuke and desisted from their pattern of open immorality. But God merely confirmed in their lives the very things they had been choosing all along. God does not take a person whose heart is yearning to serve and please God and say, "No, you must do the very opposite thing, the very thing you hate with all your being... you must now disobey me!" What God does instead is channel the specific nature and course of actions that come from a clearly established predisposition toward rebellion. This is what "God gave them over" and "He hardened Pharaoh's heart" means. God "gave them over" to their natural tendencies, and in so doing He channeled their specific expressions of those evil desires for His master plan. [Note: I believe this is exactly what Joseph meant when he said to his brothers concerning their wicked hatred of him and their actions in selling him as a slave into Egypt: "You meant it for evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about the present result, to preserve many people alive." In Genesis 50:20, Joseph's brothers' predisposition to jealousy and selfishness was their own... God did not give that to them. However, He channeled their specific expressions of that evil for His own master plan: they would sell Joseph, not kill him. In fact, their own predisposition to evil itself was part of God's master plan, though He did not create them that way.]

Now we are ready to deal with the apparent contradiction between 1 Samuel 2:25 and Ezekiel 18:23, both of which use the Hebrew word

*“haphetz”* which means “to take delight in something.” How does God “take delight in” the killing of Eli’s sons, yet “not take delight” in the death of the wicked? I believe that God takes delight in the death of these villainous wretches because of the good it would do in the long run for His chosen people. God’s holy actions throughout history in bringing His wrath and judgment on evildoers display His nature so clearly in a way that is compelling to His chosen people. Only God’s chosen people take these examples to heart, and they do take them to heart. From them we learn the fear of the Lord and are incited to do what is holy and right. The examples from Israel’s history were given to warn God’s elect (see 1 Cor. 10:1-13) lest they fall into similar sin. The warnings are effective to enable the elect to finish their journey of faith through this temptation-filled world. God’s delight therefore is that the sacrifice of Eli’s sons aids toward producing the effect of godliness and salvation for God’s elect. And this brings God tremendous joy. But God takes no direct pleasure in the death of Eli’s sons as a thing in itself. God is not a masochistic God, delighting in death and pain in themselves, but He does delight in them as means to a delightful end: the salvation of God’s elect.

Amazingly, this same Hebrew word enters the picture in the discussion of the ultimate sacrifice and death for a delightful end. This is found in Isaiah 53:10, the amazing prophecy of the suffering of Jesus Christ for our sins: “But the Lord was delighted to crush Him and cause Him to suffer...” The verse clearly teaches that God took great delight in making His Son suffer, but not as a thing in itself, but rather that “He would render Himself and guilt offering” and that “He would see His offspring.” In that same verse, the word “delight” appears one final time: “And the delight of the Lord will prosper in His hand.” God’s pleasure was not in the actual suffering of the Son, but in the magnificent “prospering” that would come from it: the full display of God’s glorious attributes—love, holiness, justice, wrath, mercy, etc.—and the salvation of God’s elect. This same idea comes out in Hebrews 12:2: “...fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at

the right hand of the throne of God.” The joy (delight) of salvation makes the despised and shameful cross worthwhile. So also, the joy (delight) of the salvation of God’s elect makes the bitterness of the death of the wicked worthwhile.

Thus, it seems that Eli’s sons died at least in part that God’s elect might know God better, and through that knowledge come to a full salvation. One might argue, “That hardly seems fair, that they sacrifice their lives so that others might live.” There are two answers to this: 1) The issue of “fairness” is one of justice, and how is God unjust in putting Eli’s sons to death as a just reward for their wickedness? They got what they truly deserved, and can not murmur in any way against what God had done. 2) The idea of God using their death to help save us is clearly Biblical:

*Isaiah 43:3-4 For I am the LORD, your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior; I give Egypt for your ransom, Cush and Seba in your stead. 4 Since you are precious and honored in my sight, and because I love you, I will give men in exchange for you, and people in exchange for your life.*

In this passage, God says He is willing to exchange pagan nations like Egypt to accomplish the redemption of His chosen people Israel. Egypt, Cush, Seba are exchanged in order that Israel might not die, but rather live. Since Egypt, Cush, and Seba have all sinned in God’s sight, this is not unjust, but rather part of God’s redemptive plan.

And far more clearly, Paul says this very thing in Romans 9:21-24:

*Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use? What if God, choosing to show his wrath and make his power known, bore with great patience the objects of his wrath—prepared for destruction? What if he did this to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy, whom he prepared in advance for glory—even us, whom he also called, not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles?*

In this complex passage, it seems that God is saying that the “objects of His wrath” suffer what they deserve at least in part to make the riches of God’s glory known to the “objects of His mercy.” God is also merciful to the “objects of His wrath” since He bears them “with great patience.” But their eventual and totally just destruction under God’s righteous judgment has an effect on the “objects of His mercy.” They see God for who He really is and they are drawn to salvation, and to understand the “riches of His glory” more clearly as a result.