

1 Samuel 4
March 20, 2022

Open with Prayer

HOOK:

Q: Have you ever made a decision that you *believed* God would bless, but discovered He wasn't in it? If yes, what did you rely on that convinced you that He would give you success? [Let people engage, e.g. relied on thought process, relied on His favor (not necessarily His will), relied on past experience, misinterpreted "signs"]

Transition: We are no different than the Israelites. They were losing a fight with the Philistines and looked for something to guarantee success against them. They decided that their "rabbit's foot" would be the Ark of the Covenant, which was the representation of the throne of God for the Israelites. It was kept in the Holy of Holies. The people never saw it. Only the high priest entered and saw the ark, and only once a year. But as you will soon see, when the Philistines killed 4,000 Israelites in battle, the elders decided they needed God to win the battle with the Philistines. So, they took the Ark of the Covenant out of the Holy of Holies, covered it, and brought it into battle with them. They hoped the presence of the ark would guarantee victory. Let's read to see if this was a good assumption.

BOOK:

The Philistines Capture the Ark

4 And Samuel's word came to all Israel. Now the Israelites went out to fight against the Philistines. The Israelites camped at Ebenezer, and the Philistines at Aphek. ² The Philistines deployed their forces to meet Israel, and as the battle spread, Israel was defeated by the Philistines, who killed about 4,000 of them on the battlefield. ³ When the soldiers returned to camp, the elders of Israel asked, "Why did the LORD bring defeat upon us today before the Philistines? Let us bring the ark of the LORD's covenant from Shiloh, so that it (or he) may go with us and save us from the hand of our enemies."

⁴ So the people sent men to Shiloh, and they brought back the ark of the covenant of the LORD Almighty, who is enthroned between the cherubim. And Eli's two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, were there with the ark of the covenant of God.

⁵ When the ark of the LORD's covenant came into the camp, all Israel raised such a great shout that the ground shook. ⁶ Hearing the uproar, the Philistines asked, "What's all this shouting in the Hebrew camp?"

When they learned that the ark of the LORD had come into the camp, ⁷ the Philistines were afraid. "A god has come into the camp," they said. "We're in trouble! Nothing like this has happened before. ⁸ Woe to us! Who will deliver us from the hand of these mighty gods? They are the gods who struck the Egyptians with all kinds of plagues in the desert. ⁹ Be strong, Philistines! Be men, or you will be subject to the Hebrews, as they have been to you. Be men, and fight!"

¹⁰ So the Philistines fought, and the Israelites were defeated, and every man fled to his tent. The slaughter was very great; Israel lost 30,000 foot soldiers. ¹¹ The ark of God was captured, and Eli's two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, died.

Death of Eli

¹² That same day a Benjamite ran from the battle line and went to Shiloh, his clothes torn and dust on his head. ¹³ When he arrived, there was Eli sitting on his chair by the side of the road, watching, because his heart feared for the ark of God. When the man entered the town and told what had happened, the whole town sent up a cry.

¹⁴ Eli heard the outcry and asked, “What is the meaning of this uproar?”

The man hurried over to Eli, ¹⁵ who was ninety-eight years old and whose eyes were set so that he could not see. ¹⁶ He told Eli, “I have just come from the battle line; I fled from it this very day.”

Eli asked, “What happened, my son?”

¹⁷ The man who brought the news replied, “Israel fled before the Philistines, and the army has suffered heavy losses. Also, your two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, are dead, and the ark of God has been captured.”

¹⁸ When he mentioned the ark of God, Eli fell backward off his chair by the side of the gate. His neck was broken, and he died, for he was an old man and heavy. He had led (traditionally “judged”) Israel forty years.

¹⁹ His daughter-in-law, the wife of Phinehas, was pregnant and near the time of delivery. When she heard the news that the ark of God had been captured and that her father-in-law and her husband were dead, she went into labor and gave birth, but was overcome by her labor pains. ²⁰ As she was dying, the women attending her said, “Don’t despair; you have given birth to a son.” But she did not respond or pay any attention.

²¹ She named the boy Ichabod (means “no glory”), saying, “The glory has departed from Israel”—because of the capture of the ark of God and the deaths of her father-in-law and her husband. ²² She said, “The glory has departed from Israel, for the ark of God has been captured.”

Process Observations/Questions:

Q: What did you most like about this passage? What resonated with you? [Let people engage]

Q: What did you least like about this passage? [Let people engage]

- They regarded the ark as the ultimate “good luck charm” and believed they could not lose with it there. They looked to the ark to save them, not to the Lord.

Q: What did you find in this passage that you didn’t understand? [Let people engage]

Q: What do we learn about Jesus in this passage? [Let people engage]

LOOK:

The elders rightly sensed they needed God’s help to win the battle. But they were wrong in the way they sought help. Instead of humbly repenting and seeking God, they decided to bring the Ark of the Covenant to the battle, *without God’s divine leading*, in hopes of guaranteeing their victory. But God never told them to do that. They only cared if it worked. We can be like the Israelites. We can create a false sense of assurance that God will bring us success when we have never invited Him to lead us. Let’s seek to do His will by faith in Christ Jesus and trust the outcome to Him.

Close in Prayer

Commentaries for Today's Lesson:

Wiersbe, W. W. (1993). Wiersbe's Expository Outlines on the Old Testament (1 Sa 4). Victor Books.

I. God's Glory Is Departed (4)

A. A great sin (vv. 1–5).

Israel lost 4,000 men in the first battle, and this should have been evidence to them that God was displeased. Did they repent and turn to God in prayer and confession? No! Instead, they resorted to superstition and took the ark of the covenant to the battlefield. They could not take the ark out in faith because God had not commanded them by His Word. They were acting by chance and not by faith. Because the ark had gone before the nation in the wilderness and had marched in victory around Jericho, they thought its presence would assure them victory over the Philistines. Instead of revering the ark as the symbol of God's presence, they turned it into a religious relic! (See Num. 10:35ff).

B. A great slaughter (vv. 6–10).

The Philistines were first afraid, then determined; even if the God of Israel were in the camp, they were going to behave like brave soldiers! Since God had forsaken His people, the Philistines had an easy victory. Psalm 78:56ff is a vivid description of this tragedy. Israel should have known that God's presence with them depended upon their obedience to His Word. Hophni and Phinehas were ungodly priests; their presence brought judgment, not blessing.

C. A great sorrow (vv. 11–22).

Eli, the ninety-eight-year-old blind priest, was sitting by the wayside when the messenger arrived at Shiloh with the sad news; but the messenger ran right past him and announced his message to the city. The uproar in the city aroused Eli's curiosity, for no doubt he was expecting the fulfillment of Samuel's prophecy (3:11–14; 2:34–35). Note how the messenger gives the four pieces of bad news in order of their importance: Israel is fled; many have been slaughtered; Eli's two sons are dead; and the ark has been captured by the enemy. Verse 13 tells us that the safety of the ark had been Eli's greatest concern. Now we see sorrow upon sorrow: Eli falls down in a state of shock, breaks his neck, and dies; and his daughter-in-law likewise loses her life as she delivers a son. The name "Ichabod" means "no glory" or "Where is the glory?" See Ex. 40:34ff. The word "departed" may be translated "gone into exile." Israel's history is a story of receiving and then losing the glory of God.

Merrill, E. H. (1985). 1 Samuel. In J. F. Walvoord & R. B. Zuck (Eds.), The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures (Vol. 1, p. 436) Wheaton, IL: Victor Books

The Philistines, Israel's principal enemy during the period of the last of the Judges (Jud. 10:6–8; 13–16), were a non-Semitic people whose origins were most likely in Crete or in some other part of the Aegean Sea area (Gen. 10:14; see Jer. 47:4; Deut. 2:23; Amos 9:7). They came to Canaan in two different migrations, one as early as Abraham's time (2000 B.C.) and the other about 1200 B.C. They lived in five main towns on the southern Canaan coast—Gaza, Ashkelon,

Ekron, Gath, and Ashdod. They were technologically advanced, pioneering in the use of iron and in other skills (1 Sam. 13:19–20). The primary god of their pantheon was Dagon, a deity worshiped also in upper Mesopotamia as a grain god. Some scholars suggest that the Philistine Dagon was represented as having a human torso and upper body and a fish's tail. It may well be that the originally seafaring Philistines brought their fish god with them to Canaan and then adapted him to the Semitic god Dagon (or Dagan, as it is known outside the Bible), because of their need to become a grain-producing people (Jud. 15:3–5).

4:1–11. When Samuel was yet a youth, Israel was attacked by **the Philistines at Aphek**, a site about 25 miles west of Shiloh. When it was clear that the Philistines would win, the Israelites **sent men to Shiloh** to bring **the ark of the covenant** to the battlefield, superstitiously supposing that its presence, like a good-luck charm, would turn the tide. The ark *did* represent the presence of **the LORD** in battle (Num. 10:35; Josh. 6:6) but only when the people carried it in faith and by divine leading. Even **the Philistines** were terrified when they knew **the ark** was in **the camp** of Israel, for they had heard about its association with Israel's **mighty gods** who had brought that people out of Egypt more than 300 years before (1 Sam. 4:6–8). Nonetheless, summoning their courage, they **fought** on and **defeated** Israel. In the process **the ark ... was captured** and the **sons** of Eli, its keepers, were slain (v. 11).

4:12–22. When **Eli**, back at **Shiloh**, learned that **the ark** had been taken by **the pagan Philistines** and that his **sons** were **dead**, he **fell backward off his seat**, broke **his neck**, and **died**. Shortly thereafter **his daughter-in-law**, Phinehas' **wife**, died as she **gave birth ... to a son** whom **she named**, appropriately enough, **Ichabod**, “there is no **glory**” (*’î kâbôd*). Since the presence of **the ark** represented the presence of **God** in Israel, its capture suggested that not only was **the ark** gone but **God** Himself and all His **glory** were now in enemy hands. To the pagans it was conceivable that gods could be taken into exile (Isa. 46:1–2), but the Israelites should have known that their omnipresent God could not be taken away from them. How heathen Israel's perception of God had become!

Mathews, K. A. (1998). *The Historical Books. In D. S. Dockery (Ed.), Holman Concise Bible Commentary (p. 111). Broadman & Holman Publishers.*

Judgment of “Ichabod” (4:1b–22). As in the Book of Judges, God's judgment on sin came in the form of foreign oppression. Here God's judgment fell on the house of Eli through the Philistine's victory over Israel at Ebenezer (see 7:12). The battle had a major impact on the religious life of Israel because the ark of the covenant was captured. Israel's defeat and the deaths of Eli's sons showed that God would not tolerate their sin.

Hophni and Phinehas ordered the ark brought into the battlefield because they believed it would give them victory (see Josh. 6). The Lord rejected their superstitious actions, and they died in the battle. When Eli heard the news of the captured ark, he fell over backward and died. The deaths of his family brought the end to Eli's priesthood, fulfilling the prophecy of the man of God. Eli's daughter-in-law named her newborn son “Ichabod” (*no glory*) to remember this tragic day of the ark's loss.

Philbeck, B. F. (1972). *1 Samuel. In H. F. Paschall & H. H. Hobbs (Eds.), The Teacher's Bible Commentary (p. 166). Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers.*

Philistines Capture the Ark (1 Sam. 4:1–22)

The passage—Now that the major characters have been introduced, the author moves on to describe Israel’s dire plight at the end of the period of the judges. In a series of engagements between Aphek and Ebenezer, Israel’s army was completely routed, the ark of the Lord was lost in battle, the priests accompanying the ark were killed, and old Eli died upon learning of the disaster. Biblical records do not record it, but archaeological excavations indicate that Shiloh was also destroyed about this time. The heart of Israel’s religious and political life was destroyed, and the Philistines were the *de facto* rulers of most of the country. The burden of leading Israel now fell to Samuel.

Special points—The ark of the Lord appears to have been the focal point of Israel’s national existence at this time. It represented God’s presence among his people (v. 4) and called to mind his protection during Israel’s wilderness wanderings (Num. 10:33) and the wars of conquest (Josh. 6). The loss of the ark in battle, therefore, was especially serious. It appeared that the Lord was unable to protect his people or even his own personal throne among men. The larger context, however, indicates that God was working in history to purge his corrupt priesthood and to bring his people under his leadership.

The Holy Bible: New International Version. (1984). (1 Samuel 4). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

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