

The Ark of the Covenant is Captured

1 Samuel 4

1 Samuel 4 – *“And the word of Samuel came to all Israel. Now Israel went out to battle against the Philistines, and encamped beside Ebenezer; and the Philistines encamped in Aphek. ² Then the Philistines put themselves in battle array against Israel. And when they joined battle, Israel was defeated by the Philistines, who killed about four thousand men of the army in the field. ³ And when the people had come into the camp, the elders of Israel said, “Why has the LORD defeated us today before the Philistines? Let us bring the ark of the covenant of the LORD from Shiloh to us, that when it comes among us it may save us from the hand of our enemies.” ⁴ So the people sent to Shiloh, that they might bring from there the ark of the covenant of the LORD of hosts, who dwells between the cherubim. And the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were there with the ark of the covenant of God.*

⁵ And when the ark of the covenant of the LORD came into the camp, all Israel shouted so loudly that the earth shook. ⁶ Now when the Philistines heard the noise of the shout, they said, “What does the sound of this great shout in the camp of the Hebrews mean?” Then they understood that the ark of the LORD had come into the camp. ⁷ So the Philistines were afraid, for they said, “God has come into the camp!” And they said, “Woe to us! For such a thing has never happened before. ⁸ Woe to us! Who will deliver us from the hand of these mighty gods? These are the gods who struck the Egyptians with all the plagues in the wilderness. ⁹ Be strong and conduct yourselves like men, you Philistines, that you do not become servants of the Hebrews, as they have been to you. Conduct yourselves like men, and fight!”

¹⁰ So the Philistines fought, and Israel was defeated, and every man fled to his tent. There was a very great slaughter, and there fell of Israel thirty thousand foot soldiers. ¹¹ Also the ark of God was captured; and the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, died. ¹² Then a man of Benjamin ran from the battle line the same day, and came to Shiloh with his clothes torn and dirt on his head. ¹³ Now when he came, there was Eli, sitting on a seat by the wayside watching, for his heart trembled for the ark of God. And when the man came into the city and told it, all the city cried out. ¹⁴ When Eli heard the noise of the outcry, he said, “What does the sound of this tumult mean?” And the man came quickly and told Eli. ¹⁵ Eli was ninety-eight years old, and his eyes were so dim that he could not see.

¹⁶ Then the man said to Eli, “I am he who came from the battle. And I fled today from the battle line.” And he said, “What happened, my son?” ¹⁷ So the messenger answered and said, “Israel has fled before the Philistines, and there has been a great slaughter among the people. Also your two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, are dead; and the ark of God has been captured.”

¹⁸ Then it happened, when he made mention of the ark of God, that Eli fell off the seat backward by the side of the gate; and his neck was broken and he died, for the man was old and heavy. And he had judged Israel forty years. ¹⁹ Now his daughter-in-law, Phinehas' wife, was with child, due to be delivered; and when she heard the news that the ark of God was captured, and that her father-in-law and her husband were dead, she bowed herself and gave birth, for her labor pains came upon her. ²⁰ And about the time of her death the women who stood by her said to her, “Do not fear, for you

have borne a son.” But she did not answer, nor did she regard it. ²¹ Then she named the child Ichabod, saying, “The glory has departed from Israel!” because the ark of God had been captured and because of her father-in-law and her husband. ²² And she said, “The glory has departed from Israel, for the ark of God has been captured.”

Background Notes

The Philistines are mentioned frequently throughout the books of 1 and 2 Samuel. We will read a lot about the Philistines, because they were Israel’s perennial enemy during the days of Samuel, Saul, and David. The Philistines were people who had migrated to the land of Canaan from Crete and other islands, and settled along the Mediterranean coast in the area that is called the Gaza Strip today. We read of the Philistines as early as the time of Abraham in Genesis, but they gained significant military strength near the end of the time of the Judges. Do you remember Samson and his problems with the Philistines? And David, who fought Goliath, the Philistine giant? And King Saul, who was killed in a battle with the Philistines?

In 1 Samuel 4:1, Israel went out to battle against the Philistines. The Philistines, who were camped in Aphek, came out to fight the Israelites, who were camped at Ebenezer, within ten miles of where Tel Aviv is today. Israel was defeated and lost about 4000 men in the fighting. Israel regrouped, and sent to Shiloh to have the Ark of the Covenant brought to their camp of Israel before the second battle. The priests, Hophni and Phinehas, brought the Ark of the Covenant to the battlefield, but Israel was defeated again, and the Philistines captured the Ark of God! Israel lost 30,000 more men, and Hophni and Phinehas were killed in the battle, just the man of God predicted in 1 Samuel 2. When Eli, the high priest, heard that the Ark had been taken, he fell backwards off his seat and died of a broken neck. “*Then it happened, when he made mention of the ark of God, that Eli fell off the seat backward by the side of the gate; and his neck was broken and he died, for the man was old and heavy. And he had judged Israel forty years*” (v18). Notice that Eli “*had judged Israel forty years.*” Eli was not only the high priest in those days, but he also functioned as a Judge in Israel before Samuel’s time.

Doctrinal Points

1. The Lord’s people are defeated when they turn away from God.

The Philistines defeated Israel in the first battle, and the Israelites wondered why! “*Why has the Lord defeated us today before the Philistines?*” (v3). The answer to their own question should have been obvious to them -- it is certainly obvious to us as we read the record. There’s no mention that Israel prayed or sought God’s guidance in any way before these battles. They trusted in their own strength, rather than turning to the Lord. They were self-confident.

Although the people of Israel now recognized Samuel as a prophet, and they knew that Samuel spoke the word of the Lord (3:21 & 4:1), they apparently didn’t consult Samuel for counsel before this battle. In fact, Samuel is not mentioned again until the beginning of 1 Samuel 7, about twenty years later.

2. The Lord's people are defeated when they play games with God.

After Israel was defeated in the first battle, they came up with the bright idea to bring the Ark of the Covenant with them into battle. They thought that with the Ark in their midst, they would be victorious. They probably remembered that Israel had conquered Jericho because the Ark of the Lord was with them when they marched around the walled city of Jericho. So, when the Ark of the Covenant was brought into the camp, Israel shouted with a great shout! *“And when the ark of the covenant of the LORD came into the camp, all Israel shouted so loudly that the earth shook”* (v5). Even the Philistines trembled at the shout, because they remembered the miracles and the power of the God of Israel over Egypt. (This, by the way, is another indication that all of those miracles in Egypt were not just “later Jewish legends and traditions” -- as the liberal critic of the Bible likes to say!)

But God let His people be defeated a second time. Why? Well, why not? There was no self-judgment on the part of the people after the first defeat. There was no repentance and turning back to the Lord. There was no looking to the Lord to help them. Instead the Israelites tried to use the Ark of the Covenant of God, Israel's most sacred object, in a superstitious way, like a kind of lucky charm!

Hebrews 11:30 says, *“By faith the walls of Jericho fell down after they were encircled for seven days.”* But when Israel took the Ark of the Covenant into battle against the Philistines, there was no true faith in the Lord God of Israel. They were just playing games with God, thinking they could “use God” by bringing the symbol of His presence to the battle. They were using the Ark of the Covenant to bring them good luck! No wonder God allowed His people to be defeated again!

The Lord's people are defeated when they play games with God. Do we play games with God? Are we superstitious? Do we try to placate God? Of course we would all say, no, of course not! But what about thinking that you're more protected if you wear a religious symbol – like a cross or other “religious” symbol? What about making sure that we go to church on the Sunday before an important job interview? What about giving money to the Lord when we just want to manipulate God, or put the pressure on God to make things “go our way”?

Let's be careful that we don't make the mistake of thinking we're pleasing God when we're actually just playing games. We will not be victorious in spiritual battle and we will not enjoy God's blessing if we are just trying to placate or “use” God for good luck. The Lord's people are defeated when they play games with God.

Practical Application

Let's not give the name “Ichabod” to any of our churches or our children!

Verses 19-22: *“Now his daughter-in-law, Phinehas' wife, was with child, due to be delivered; and when she heard the news that the ark of God was captured, and that her father-in-law and her husband were dead, she bowed herself and gave birth, for her labor pains came upon her. ²⁰ And about the time of her death the women who stood by her said to her,*

“Do not fear, for you have borne a son.” But she did not answer, nor did she regard it. ²¹ Then she named the child Ichabod, saying, “The glory has departed from Israel!” because the ark of God had been captured and because of her father-in-law and her husband. ²² And she said, “The glory has departed from Israel, for the ark of God has been captured.”

Ichabod, in Hebrew, means “no glory.” Phinehas’ widow named her son Ichabod as she died in childbirth -- not because she was about to die, and not just because her husband had been killed in battle, and not just because Eli had died, but because the Ark of God was taken from Israel. The glory had departed from Israel!

Can the glory depart from our churches and our families today? Yes, it can! How sad, when the glory of the Lord departs. Once-vibrant churches have had to close their doors because the people no longer attend or give the Lord any time, worship or devotion. Once-godly families, no longer have a heart for God in the second and third generation, because the “things” of this world and the successes of this world are more important to them.

Of course we would never actually name any of our churches or children “Ichabod” (at least I hope we wouldn’t!). But, spiritually speaking, we certainly label our churches and our families with the name Ichabod we no longer walk with the Lord, and the glory and blessing of the Lord depart from our fellowships and families as a result. Let’s not give the name “Ichabod” to any of our churches or children.