

1 SAMUEL 4 - Raiders of the Ark... That was Lost

Study 5

THE ARK OF THE COVENANT

The Ark of the Covenant, for many holds a place of fascination. In 1981, the film ‘Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark was released.’ The adventure centered on the attempt of the Nazi Party to secure the Ark, and thus gaining the victorious power of God.

Marcus Brody, the companion of Indiana Jones makes a comment in the movie that echoes the reason for the Israelites in 1 Samuel 4 wanting to bring the Ark to the camp,

“An army which carries the ark before it is invincible.”

Chapter 4 through to 7 is often referred to as the “Ark Narrative,” as the focus of these verses is the Ark of the Covenant.

The previous chapters detailed the rise of Samuel to serve the Lord as his prophet. In this chapter there is a distinct break in the story, as we now see God eliminating the old regime, of Everyone doing what is right in their own eyes (Jdg. 21:25).



Details of the Ark can be found in Exodus 25:10-22

READ - 1 SAMUEL 4:1-9

TWISTING GOD'S ARM

Israel was “struck down” in the first engagement with the Philistines. Not that God had not been active; he had been, but in a “wrong” way. He had “struck down” Israel (v. 3a). The elders asked the right question: “Why did God strike us down today before the Philistines?” (v. 3). They answered too quickly. They should have allowed the question to hang and bother them for a while.

God gave Moses the command to build the Ark as they communed atop of Mount Sinai. The Ark was to remind the people of God’s presence, ruling them, speaking to them, forgiving them.

The ark was also the sign of God leading his people, not least against their enemies in battle (Num. 10:35). Perhaps this came to mind as the elders pondered Israel’s defeat that dark day near Aphek. Perhaps they remembered how central the ark had been at the Jordan river-stopping (Josh. 3–4) and at the destruction of Jericho (Josh. 6).

Their assumption is: if we bring the ark to battle, God will be forced to deliver us to protect his honor. Should something happen to the ark, it would make God the loser—and, naturally, he would not allow that to happen. He’ll have to save us now—his honor’s at stake. They now have God under pressure because they have the sign of his presence; hence he dare not allow them to lose. To have God’s furniture is to have God’s power.

When we, whether Israelites or Christians, operate this way, our concern is not to seek God but to control him, not to submit to God but to use him. So we prefer religious magic to spiritual holiness; we are interested in success, not repentance.

The text forces two important implications upon us: God will suffer shame rather than allow you to carry on a false relationship with him; and God will allow you to be disappointed with him if it will awaken you to the sort of God he really is.

QUESTIONS

1. What stands out to you in this passage?
2. How should have the Israelites acted in response to defeat?
3. God does not exist for us, we exist for him. Can you think of other examples of attempts to put pressure on God beside the example in 1 Samuel 4?

READ - 1 SAMUEL 4:10-11

IN THE MIDST OF ISRAEL'S DEFEAT... GOD IS AT WORK

They sent to Shiloh to requisition the ark, and the writer matter-of-factly notes that the ark was in the care of Eli's sons, Hophni and Phinehas (v. 4). This fact is important to the writer. Naturally, Eli's sons accompanied the ark into battle. When the writer summarizes the results of the battle in verse 11, he places the deaths of Hophni and Phinehas in the last and perhaps climactic position.

we immediately realise that here is the fulfillment of God's word, of his decision (2:25) and his threat (2:34). Here then is the irony in verses 1–11: Israel plans the bringing of the ark as the key to victory, but God uses it to carry out his purpose to put Hophni and Phinehas to death.

Here we see a type of reversal of Genesis 50:20, what the Israelites meant victory, God meant for destruction.

On this day that seemed to dishonor God, God was in fact beginning to protect his honor and to restore it. God may be despised in Philistia (for a while) but he will no longer be despised in Shiloh.

We must be careful not to miss the way God is working here. It is so easy to be wrapped up in the bloodiness of Israel's defeat, in the tragedy of the ark's capture, in the loss of God's reputation, that one becomes blind to the fact that in the middle of all this God is clearly but quietly fulfilling a word he had spoken. Indeed, though in fulfilling this word he acts in judgment, he nevertheless acts in grace, for in his judgment he is removing false shepherds who caused his people to go astray.

With the death of Eli (v. 18) a whole era will pass away; the slate of the old leadership will be cleared for Samuel, the man God has called.

QUESTIONS

1. What stands out to you in this passage?
2. Can you think of examples in your own experience or that of others where God has acted both in judgement and in grace at the very same time?

READ - 1 SAMUEL 4:12-22

ICHABOD

My science teacher had a skeletal model in her classroom who she named Ichabod. It was a lifeless body. That is the message here.

Eli was now an old, heavy man. He is agitated because the Ark has been taken, he seems to know disaster has come.

When he asked about the commotion in town, the answer came: Israel fled ... a great slaughter ... both your sons died ... the ark of God captured (v. 17). The fatal blow was not the death of his sons, but the capture of the Ark. His heart was already trembling over the ark, but this was too much. Eli fell backward, his neck snapped, death (v. 18).

And the news was too much for Phinehas's wife. She was pregnant and soon to deliver. When she heard the report about the capture of the ark of God, and that her father-in-law and her husband had died, she gave birth, for her labor pains had begun (v. 19).

Her last act and words sum up that dark day, "Ichabod" (vv. 21–22). She taught more theology in her death than Phinehas had done in his whole life.

H. L. Ellison writes

The glory of God had indeed departed, but not because the ark of God had been captured; the ark had been captured because the glory had already departed.¹

QUESTIONS

1. What stands out to you in this passage?
2. Think about the quotation from H.L.Ellison. Why is it of crucial importance that we rightly understand 1 Samuel 4:22?
3. Read Hebrews 9:1-14, How did the Ark point us to Jesus?
4. Would it matter if we were to find the ark of the covenant today? Why or why not? Would it have supernatural power?

¹ H. L. Ellison, Scripture Union Bible Study Books: Joshua–2 Samuel (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966), 51.

