

Lesson Three I Samuel 4-7 Israel's Need for a Prophet, Priest and Judge

Chapter 4 The Ark is lost to the Philistines

As Israel grew to accept young Samuel as its new voice of leadership, they became increasingly oppressed by the Philistines. One of the hallmarks of the judges was that in the time of enemy oppression God called a judge to lead Israel out of the oppression. Here we see the uniqueness of Samuel - judge, prophet and priest. The people naturally looked to Samuel to lead them against this oppression.

Israel went out to meet the Philistines in battle and camped beside the town Ebenezer while the Philistines camped beside Aphek located 2-3 miles to the north-west. The Philistines defeated Israel and killed about 4,000 men on the battlefield. Following the defeat, the people questioned why God had allowed the Philistines to prevail so under the influence of Eli's two evil sons, Hophni and Phinehas, they took the Ark of the Covenant from the Tabernacle in Shiloh and carried it to the battlefield.

When the Ark arrived in the Israel army camp, there was a mighty shout of victory within the camp that caused great concern on the Philistine camp. The soldiers of Israel were bolstered in this, but the Philistines, who initially were intimidated, steeled themselves and decided the victory could still be theirs. The next day the Philistines killed thirty thousand foot soldiers of Israel and captured the Ark. Hophni and Phinehas both died that day as God had prophesied to Samuel.

A Benjaminite escaped the aggression of the Philistines and ran to Shiloh, 20-30 miles away and reported to Eli the deaths of his sons and the capture of the Ark. Eli is recorded as being very old, 98 years old, and very heavy. When he heard the news of the deaths of his sons and especially the capture of the Ark, he fell over in his chair, his neck was broken and he died. Eli had served as High Priest and judged Israel for 40 years (vs. 18). Thus, as prophesied by God to Samuel, the rule and reign of Eli and his sons ended tragically and on one day.

How gloomy did things look for Israel? The idea is captured in the ensuing birth of Phinehas' son. Upon learning of the deaths of Phinehas, his brother Hophni and their father Eli, and especially upon learning of the capture of the Ark, Phinehas' wife went into labor and died. Before dying, however, she named her son Ichabod, which means, *"The glory has departed from Israel"*. *"The glory of the LORD has departed from Israel, for the ark of God has been taken"*. (vs. 22)

Writers note: I am reminded of a story a friend of mine shared in confidence a number of years ago. My friend had been an elder in a church for several years and the church had lost

its spiritual and moral compass. As elders they were dealing with some hugely carnal issues in their congregational leadership and chosen as a group the path of covering up and hiding the truth. My friend said he looked at the door exiting the room and it appeared as if God had painted the letters Himself over the door of the room the elders were meeting in, the word, "Ichabod", God had departed from this place. My friend tendered his resignation from that eldership immediately and never returned to that congregation. We must always be concerned about the possibility that we too may walk in the path of Ichabod, a path where God has departed.

Chapter 5 God's displeasure in having the Ark stolen

Remember the first Indiana Jones movie, "Raiders of the Lost Ark"? The power that emanated from the Ark was indescribable. The Philistines saw firsthand the power of God coming from the captured Ark.

Vs. 1-5 The Philistines captured the Ark in the battle and they took it from the town Ebenezer to one of their central cities, Ashdod and set it in the Temple of Dagon, next to the carved image of Dagon. Dagon was the chief deity of the Philistines and had two interesting characteristics.

1. Dagon was depicted as half man and half fish. Dag in Hebrew means fish. There is a whole line of thought on the evolution of man and fish and how their development or creation was linked in some way. Ashdod is a coastal city so this makes great sense.
2. Dagon is associated with wheat or grain as well. Today, just south of modern Haifa, there is a large grain elevator with the name "Dagon" painted in very large letters near the top. Perhaps Dagon exists today in subtle, or not so subtle ways.

As the Ark is placed next to the carved image of Dagon, during the night the idol is toppled and is found the next day face down on the floor. The temple priests set the idol up again into its proper place. The next morning the carved image of Dagon is fallen on its face again, lying prostrate before the Ark of God, the head and hands have been decapitated, and only the trunk of the body remained intact.

To this day (the writing of the Book of Samuel), neither the priests of Dagon, nor any who might enter the temple of Dagon, would step on the threshold of the temple.

Vs. 6-12 Beyond the issues taking place within Dagon's temple, God began to take His wrath out on the people of Ashdod. God smote the Ashdodites with tumors, Ashdod and all the people in the territories around Ashdod. The good people of Ashdod decided to send the Ark to their good friends down at Gath, the hometown of Goliath and his family. God brought great confusion prior to slaying the young and old men of the city and giving all others a breakout of tumors.

Out of desperation the people of Gath sent the Ark north to Ekron. The Ekronites knew immediately the danger associated with hosting the Ark and demanded to have the Ark sent back to the Israelites. Unfortunately, God created confusion and a break out of deadly tumors on the people of Ekron before the Ark could be moved on.

In almost every example of Jesus casting out demons from people in the gospels, the demons are fully aware of who Jesus is, and freely admit that He is the son of the Living God. James 2:19 tells us that even the demons believe and shudder. This has been true since the beginning of time. The evil spirits associated with Dagon are well aware of who God is, Creator and King of the universe.

Chapter 6 Five golden Tumors and Five Golden Mice (rats)

So what do you think a golden tumor might look like? The Philistines decide the Ark must be returned to Israel but they cannot send the Ark without goodwill gifts. They decide to send along five golden tumors representing the outbreak of tumors associated with “hosting” the Ark, and they include five golden mice (rats) as well. Apparently there was an outbreak of mice and /or rats as well. Five leaders of the Philistines were affected by the tumors and mice so it was decided five would be the number of the representative tumors and mice sent to the Israelites.

Vs. 6-9 It is interesting to note that the leaders of the Philistines learned from Pharaoh’s stubbornness some 400 years earlier and made sure to not be stubborn in returning the Ark to Israel. They knew they needed to return the Ark, placed it on a cart drawn by two milk cows not broken to a yoke, and sent it with the guilt offering of the golden tumors and golden mice. However, they still reserve complete understanding because they determine that if the cows pull the cart with the Ark in the right direction, then it is God who is plaguing them. However, if the cow goes a different direction, then all their problems are just related to chance.

Vs. 10-13 The Ark was loaded to the cart pulled by the two milk cows, a box containing the golden tumors and mice were loaded next to the Ark, and the cows were sent down the path. As the cows pulled the wagon they lowed as they walked and they headed straight for Beth-Shemesh, toward the direction of Shiloh.

Vs. 14-18 Beth-Shemesh was within the borders of Israel, on the western side of the tribe of Judah and the people were actively engaged in harvesting wheat when the cart carrying the Ark came into their area. The cattle pulled the cart to a field of a man named Joshua and came to stop in his field at a place where a large stone existed. The people rejoiced to receive the Ark and stopped their harvesting and began to worship. The Levites led the

process, taking the Ark from the cart, using the wood from the cart to build a fire and offered the two cows as burnt offerings. People worshipped by bringing more burnt offerings and sacrifices to God on that day. The golden tumors and the mice were placed on display for all to see next to the Ark on the large stone in Joshua's field.

Vs. 19-21 AS the people rejoiced at receiving the Ark back on Israel's soil, God's righteousness struck out and cursed the people of Beth-Shemesh. Some of the people touched the Ark, some looked inside the Ark, and all of the people profaned the Ark by making it an object of commonness. In all, God struck down 50,070 men, Hebrew men, and the people mourned greatly. They sent word to the men of Kiriath-jearim asking for help in removing the Ark from Beth-Shemesh. The Ark was taken to Kiriath-jearim, near Jerusalem, and remained there for about twenty years.

Why would God kill so many of His people for the sake of the Ark of the Covenant?

What can we learn about the nature of God through these events?

What can we learn about how God wants His people to live through these events?

The Ark of the Covenant is perhaps the single most sacred item ever created. It alone represents the physical presence of the Living God more than any other thing in the world. God commissioned the construction of the Ark in Exodus 25:10-22 as a part of the entire construction of the Tabernacle. This occurred at Mount Sinai just months after the Israelites were redeemed from Egypt. The Ark is a tangible representation of the covenant between God and His betrothed. It is a box which holds the written covenants of the betrothal between Israel and God, and was so sacred that only the High Priest was allowed to lay eyes on the Ark one time each year, The Day of Atonement. The Ark represented the presence of God among His people as they wandered for the forty years in the wilderness prior to taking possession of the Promised Land. The essence of His presence within Israel resided between the two cherubim on top of the Ark.

The Kohathites, sons of Aaron, were given the responsibility for transporting the Ark when God gave the signal the Children of Israel were to break camp and move. Numbers 4 gives great detail on how the Kohathites were to approach the Ark, never laying eyes on it, cover it with certain coverings, and carry the Ark by its inserted poles. It was never to be seen by the people and never to be carried on an ox cart.

Exodus 25:10-22 tells us the construction and contents of the Ark. The Ark was a box made of acacia wood, covered inside and out with gold, and its lid had two cherubim facing each other on the top. This represented the Mercy Seat, the very place the essence of the Living God resided amongst His people. It contained the Ten Commands. Other verses such as I Kings 8:9 support this while Hebrews 9:4 also connects a bowl of manna and Aaron's rod,

both of which were most likely kept in the Most Holy Place of the Tabernacle and later the Temple.

While God calls His people into a very intimate relationship, He also establishes boundaries within that relationship. The third command of the Ten Commands (Exodus 20:7) states,

“You shall not take the Name of the LORD in vain, for the LORD will not leave him unpunished who takes His name in vain”.

Another way of stating this is that God does not want us to say or do anything that makes Him or His name common. We serve no common God! To make God or His name common is to commit blasphemy. He states clearly those who blaspheme His name will not be left unpunished. 1 Samuel 6 paints the vivid picture of what this punishment might look like when man reduces our God to commonness - 50,070 Hebrew men died, many not realizing they were profaning God by treating His Ark so casually.

Chapter 7 Samuel Intercedes for the People and Judges for Them

The men of Kiriath-jearim were wiser than those of Beth-Shemesh and inquired the proper manner to respond to the care of the Ark. The Ark is taken to the house of Abinadab of the Levitical priestly order who lived on a hill. They consecrated his son, Eleazar, to keep the Ark and the Ark remained in Kiriath-jearim for twenty years. During this time all the Israelites lamented after the LORD.

A lost people need a redeemer and Israel needed Samuel at this time. Samuel was prophet, priest and judge for the people. A prophet speaks the words of God in order to call the people back to the God they have left. A priest serves the people before God, offering atonement through the sacrifices and repentance expressed. A judge leads the people from times of chaos to times of shalom – order, structure and peace. Samuel fulfilled all three roles for the people of Israel.

Vs. 3-4 **Prophet** - Samuel speaks to the people, *“If you return to the LORD with all your heart, remove the foreign gods and the Ashtaroath from among you and direct your hearts to the LORD and serve Him alone; and He will deliver you from the hands of the Philistines”.* The people responded by removing the elements of pagan worship, the Baals and the Ashtaroath, and served God alone.

Vs. 5-6 **Priest** – Samuel said, *“Gather all the people of Israel to Mizpah and I will pray to the LORD for you”.* The people responded by gathering at Mizpah, drawing water and pouring it out before God, fasted that day and confessed their sins.

Vs. 6b-11 **Judge** – “*And Samuel judged the sons of Israel at Mizpah*”. While all the people were gathered at Mizpah the Philistines determined this a good time to attack them. As a judge who leads his people in war, Samuel persisted in his service before God on behalf of the people and God responded by routing the Philistines with a mighty thunder. Israel was victorious over the Philistines that day.

Vs. 12-17 Samuel erected a stone between Mizpah and Shen and named it Ebenezer (not to be confused with the city Ebenezer) saying, “*Thus far the LORD has helped us*”. The importance of an “Ebenezer Stone” is to establish a tangible reminder of how God has helped us. We often sing the song, “O Thou fount of Every Blessing” with the second verse beginning, “*Here I raise my Ebenezer*”, a personal statement of raising our own Ebenezer Stones, reminders of God’s gracious help for each of us on a personal level.

From this time forward Samuel traveled a circuit judging the people of Israel in the form of the previous judges as recorded in the Book of the Judges. His home was in Ramah and there he built an altar and continued serving as a priest for the people, offering sacrifices for many years.