

'The Rise of the Kings Series'

Sermons in the Book of 1 Samuel



Message 7 - 'Superstition, Sadness, and Sovereignty' 1 Samuel 4:1-11

In this passage we leave Samuel and focus on the workings of God's judgement on Israel, and the consequences of the sin that had been building up for years. We can see superstition as the desperation of the Israelites sees them use the Ark of the Covenant as some sort of talisman. We can see sadness as Israel is defeated, the Ark is captured, and there is much death, including the deaths of Hophni and Phineas. Then, we can see sovereignty, that being the sovereignty of God, as His judgements come to pass, yet His hand is continuing to move, and even in the darkest moment He is preparing a brighter future for His people. A number of things we can note:

1. Defeat - When God begins to move, the enemy will always seek to oppose, to disrupt, to divide, to harm, to hurt. The Philistines were not a new enemy, they had been around since the time of Abraham. Again, the enemy will not always appear in new guises, but will use the same tactics and opposition to hamstring a work time and time again. The Philistines are mentioned in the books of Samuel according to one commentator over 150 times. They are a familiar foe, but they keep appearing to attack and to hinder. So often this can be the case in the life of the church, and the believer, very often it can be the same sin, the same temptations that are used to challenge us time and time again. The Israelites and Philistines battled, the first conflict saw Israel defeated badly. 4000 men were killed. Why had they been defeated? They could not understand why this had happened. Our thoughts turn to the terms of God's covenant, and that the defeat was a reflection of their own disobedience. They should have examined themselves and confessed their sin. Yet, they decided that the answer to the problem was the Ark. They were trying to use this to accomplish their own purposes, God wouldn't allow the Ark to be captured, surely? One commentator calls it 'rabbit-foot theology'. Religious superstition rather than spiritual holiness. The fact that Hophni and Phineas, the two wicked priests, would be carrying the holy Ark of God underlined all that was wrong with this approach. The Ark may well have been present, but the Lord was certainly not for them. So the presence of the Ark had become bound in superstition. For sure the men were encouraged, but their confidence was misplaced. In fact the Ark did have a major impact on the battle, it galvanised the Philistines. When they heard of the presence of the Ark they determined to fight hard, battle well, and secure the victory. It was a terrible day for the Israelites, they would lose 30,000 men, and the defeat was far-reaching even beyond the blood-stained battle-field.

2. Devastation - The defeat was appalling, suffering was immense, and the consequences would be devastating. Not only had there been a massive loss of life but now, the Holy Ark of the Covenant had been captured. Never before had the Ark of God fallen into enemy hands. One thing is certain, that the loss of the Ark whilst devastating for the people was part of God's sovereign plan, and the Lord would use this devastating occurrence to teach His people some important lessons, and also to teach the Philistines of His greatness too.

3. Death - In the second part of v11, we see that God's judgement upon Hophni and Phineas is complete, God's Word is fulfilled. What a terrible defeat that had devastating consequences! Let us see the reality of the sovereignty of God, and how that even in defeat, devastation and bloodshed, God was working His purposes out. The Lord was beginning to protect His honour, and indeed restore it. Whilst despised in Philistine, He would once again show His power to them as they possessed the Ark, they would not doubt His power. The Lord was also no more disregarded in Shiloh. He continued to quietly and powerfully work His purposes out and fulfil the Word that He had spoken. Even in fulfilling His judgements, He also acts in grace, as the shepherds who had caused His people so much harm and caused them to stray are removed. A sinful era under their hand was about to end, and God already had His man, Samuel in place.



Penzance Baptist Church

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Pastor Jonathan Stobbs