

ICHABOD!

1 Samuel 4:12-22

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The prophet Isaiah exclaimed, "How beautiful upon the mountain are the feet of those who bring good news" (Isa. 52:7). The most famous example is that of Philippides, who sped the 26.2 miles from Marathon to Athens with news of the Greek victory over the Persians (490 B.C.). Arriving in Athens, Philippides cried out "*Nenike'kamen!*" which means "we have won!" and then he immediately fell over dead. Athletes remember his feat by running races of the same length, known as the marathon.

No doubt Eli, Israel's high priest, would have rejoiced for similar good news as he waited in Shiloh for a report from the battle with the Philistines. It is said that anxious watchers could guess the news simply by watching the posture of the running messenger, in which case Eli and his fellow Israelites would likely have been uneasy. 1 Samuel 4:12 tells us, "A man of Benjamin ran from the battle line and came to Shiloh the same day, with his clothes torn and with dirt on his head." To race twenty miles over rough terrain was a remarkable athletic feat, though perhaps not as epic as that of Philippides. But however great his strength and valor, the Benjamite's arrival would never be remembered with joy, since his very appearance bore testimony of bad news.

THE END OF A DARK ERA

As Eli waited, the high priest "was sitting on his seat by the road watching, for his heart trembled for the ark of God" (1 Sam.

4:13). This is a telling remark. We might expect Eli to be waiting optimistically, sure of good news. After all the Ark of the Covenant had gone into battle with Israel. When the Ark arrived in the camp, Israel's soldiers "gave a mighty shout" (1 Sam. 4:5), and when the Philistines learned that the Ark had appeared they "were afraid" (1 Sam. 4:7). So what did Eli know that the army and the Philistines did not know? Why was he trembling with anxiety as he waited for news?

There are two answers to this question. The first is that Eli had received a prophecy from an unnamed "man of God." Because Eli had allowed his sons to sin in the tabernacle, he was told that "all the descendants of your house shall die by the sword of men... And this that shall come upon your two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, shall be a sign to you: both of them shall die on the same day" (1 Sam. 2:33-34). This prophecy was confirmed later in God's first message through young Samuel: "I am about to punish his house forever, for the iniquity that he knew, because his sons were blaspheming God, and he did not restrain them" (1 Sam. 3:13).

With these prophecies ringing in his ears, we understand why Eli trembled on the day that his two sons had taken the Ark into battle. Could this be the day when God's judgment would fall? The hearts of sinful men are always uneasy in times of danger because their consciences testify to their guilt before God. John Calvin sagely commented, "He who is the boldest despiser of God is of all men the most startled at the rustle of a falling leaf."¹ Because of God's threatened judgment on all sin, only those whose sins have been cleansed by the blood of Christ can face the storms of life with peace in their hearts.

There is a second reason why Eli trembled with anxiety. He surely was aware that the Ark was to go forth only at God's command (Dt.). God who was to send his people into battle, promising his mighty help, rather than his people rushing into battle, commanding God to bring his mighty power. So it is that even godly men and women lose their peace when they act in ways contrary to God's Word. The only way for us to face the troubles of life is, first, to be justified with God

¹ *Institutes*, 1.3.2.

through faith in Christ, and, second, to act in obedience to God's Word.

The messenger arrived, racing past Eli: "When the man came into the city and told the news, all the city cried out. When Eli heard the sound of the outcry, he said, 'What is this uproar?' Then the man hurried and came and told Eli" (1 Sam. 4:13-14). "I am he who has come from the battle," he reported; "I fled from the battle today." Eli replied, "How did it go, my son?" The messenger reported his news, which grew worse with every new item: "Israel has fled before the Philistines, and there has also been a great defeat among the people. Your two sons also, Hophni and Phinehas, are dead" (1 Sam. 4:16-17). This was terrible but not unexpected news: the Philistines had won, a great number of Israelites were slain, and among them were both his sons. But Eli was not prepared for the last piece of news: "and the ark of God has been captured" (1 Sam. 4:17).

The news of the lost Ark stunned the high priest. Eli had been resolved to accept his own fall from office and even the death of his sons – they deserved it, after all – but he never imagined how his sins could imperil the whole nation. The shock of the news literally killed him: "As soon as he mentioned the ark of God, Eli fell over backward from his seat by the side of the gate, and his neck was broken and he died" (1 Sam. 4:18). Thus ended Eli's life and ministry; the end, in fact, of a dark era going back through the entire period of the judges. It was an era that began with children of Israel who forgot the Lord and pursued other gods (Judg. 2:0-12). It ended with the forfeiture of God's very presence, his glory having departed from the people with the lost Ark of the Covenant. It was, says one commentator, "a point in Israelite history lower than any since the captivity in Egypt."²

The commentary of this passage regarding Eli is depressing. We are told that his heart was uneasy, his eyes were blind, he was old and obese (probably having benefited from his sons' theft of dedicated meats), and he died by the breaking of his neck, the very judgment that God would inflict in the next chapter on the Philistine fish-god,

² Hertzberg, cited in Bill T. Arnold, *1 & 2 Samuel*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 108.

Dagon. This is the man who “had judged Israel forty years,” (1 Sam. 4:18); his legacy was one of utter failure and despair.

How did this happen? One answer is that we don’t really know. We do not read of Eli’s early years as high priest and judge, nor of any of his accomplishments. We do not know if he started poorly or well, or how he went astray. Perhaps it resulted from his grief over the death of his wife, who is gone before the events recorded in 1 Samuel take place. Perhaps Eli was like many other men whose devotion to work causes them to neglect the raising of their children, which in Eli’s case led to his utter ruin. Ultimately, we do not know.

Another answer is that Eli’s disgrace and fall would have happened the way it always does: one step, one decision, one compromise at a time. Paul expressed this as a proverb: “Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life” (Gal. 6:7-8). First, we sow, then we reap. I have heard this principle expressed in these terms: “Sow a thought and reap an action; sow an action and reap a habit; sow a habit and reap a lifestyle; sow a lifestyle and reap a character; sow a character and reap a destiny.”

If this accurately explains the fall of Eli and his house, then the key to avoiding his fate is to realize that our actions and habits, our character and destiny, ultimately flow from our thoughts and beliefs. The way to be a godly people is to renew our minds with God’s Word. This is the counsel given by the apostle Paul as the key to the Christian life: “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect” (Rom. 12:2).

THE DARK BEGINNING OF A NEW ERA

The passage concludes with a moving and disturbing anecdote from Eli’s family. The wife of his son, Phinehas, was near to giving birth. “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 and gave birth, for her pains came upon her” (1 Sam. 4:19). This sudden delivery proved fatal to her, and realizing what was happening, some women tried to console her: “Do not be afraid, for

you have borne a son” (1 Sam. 4:19). The bearing of a son was the high-point of any Israelite woman’s life, but she was not consoled. “She did not answer or pay attention. And 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. And she said, ‘The glory has departed from Israel, for the ark of God has been captured’” (1 Sam. 4:20-22).

This passage, like the chapter as a whole, is laden with symbolism and irony. Phinehas’ wife is pregnant with a son, normally a cause for great rejoicing and a sign that a new era is beginning. But she is beset with the pains of birth, a detail seldom cited in biblical birth narratives, and a reminder here of God’s curse on sin (Gen. 3:16). Because of sin, a scene of joy is turned to grief.

Here we see one more result of the sins of Eli and his sons: this evidently godly woman dies in sudden distress, leaving Eli’s grandson an orphan, without mother or father, grandfather or grandmother, or even his uncle. Even had the woman lived, hers was still a scene of woe, for a mother without a family to protect and provide for her was in dire straits. Yet far more significant, she saw, was the loss of God’s holy Ark. Thus, with her dying breath she names her newborn son “Ichabod”. The name means either “no glory” or “where is the glory?” The child is thus an image of the fate of Israel – orphaned amidst a dark and dangerous world, without the benefits of God’s covenant care – so his mother grants him a fitting, if terrible, name. “She named the child Ichabod, saying, ‘The glory has departed from Israel!’” (1 Sam. 4:21).

For Phinehas’s widow, the loss of the Ark raised disturbing thoughts. She may have reasoned that Israel’s link with their God had been lost, or even that the Philistines now controlled the power of God. The Ark was the manifestation, the “glory”, of God’s presence. Her statement that “the glory has departed from Israel” indicates that she realized that God had removed his presence and blessing from Israel; the captured of the ark was the symbol, not the cause of God’s self-imposed exile from his people. None of the other losses – the loss of a battle, the loss of soldiers, the loss of her husband and father-in-law, even the loss of her own life – compared with this loss: “the glory has departed from Israel” (1 Sam. 4:22).

Christians sometimes respond to tragic events with conclusions similar to that of Phinehas's widow. God's glory seems to have evaporated, God seems less powerful than they had thought, or his presence seems less accessible than they had hoped. The question for them, when sorrows draw near, is whether the name "Ichabod" applies to them.

The apostle Paul addresses Christians who feel that God's presence has abandoned them in times of trouble. Paul says, citing Moses, "Do not say in your heart, 'Who will ascend into heaven?' (that is, to bring Christ down) or 'Who will descend into the abyss?' (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead)" (Rom. 10:6-7). His meaning is that our confidence of the Lord's gracious presence does not require some manifestation from heaven or some reversal from the realm of death. Instead, Paul reasons, "But what does it say? The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim)" (Rom. 10:8). How is God present amidst what seems to us to be the greatest darkness? He is present by his Word. God is as near to us as his Word that we speak by our mouths and believe in our hearts.

In an important sense, Phinehas's widow was right, for the Ark was gone and God's chastisement was falling heavy on the people. But in a greater sense, the glory of God was not truly departed. God had given great promises to Israel which could never be broken: "I will take you to be my people, and I will be your God" (Ex. 6:7). Likewise, the Word of Christ declares to us: "I will never leave you nor forsake you" (Heb. 13:5); it declares that nothing in all creation "will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 8:39); Jesus says, "I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand" (Jn. 10:28). Therefore, just as subsequent events would reveal that God had not abandoned his people, we too can always possess the glory of God, even in the darkest night, by holding fast to his Word on our lips and in our hearts. For, Paul concludes, "if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved" (Rom. 10:9).

WHEN THE GLORY DEPARTS

Still, the loss of the Ark to Israel's enemies did signal a time of divine chastisement. The dying woman spoke the truth when she wrote "Ichabod!" over the scene she was leaving. For God was temporarily removing his blessing and protection from the people. Shiloh would soon be destroyed and the Philistines would once again place Israel under their pagan yoke.

The Old Testament shows that when God's people persist in rebellion, walking in ways of wickedness and bowing down to the idols of the world, God will inevitably withdraw his glory – that is, the power and blessing of his presence – from his people. The greatest Old Testament instance of God's glory departing was not the loss of the Ark in Eli's time, but rather the removal of God's Holy Spirit prior to the fall of Jerusalem over four hundred years later. The prophet Ezekiel saw a vision not merely of the Ark of the Covenant departing the temple, but the actual glory throne of God rising up and leaving. "The glory of the LORD went out from the threshold of the house and stood over the cherubim," Ezekiel reports. "And the cherubim lifted up their wings and mounted up from the earth before my eyes as they went out... And they stood at the entrance of the east gate of the house of the LORD, and the glory of the God of Israel was over them" (Eze. 10:18-19). With this, the glory of the Lord departed from Jerusalem, and the word Ichabod was written over its doomed walls. Now there was nothing to protect God's people from the Babylonian army, and shortly afterwards the city and temple were destroyed and those of the people who were not slaughtered were sent off in chains.

If we think this withdrawal of God's presence is only an Old Testament phenomenon, then we should consider the seven letters of Jesus to the churches of Asia, which we considered in our last study, in which the exalted Lord threatened to remove the lampstands of wayward churches (Rev. 2-3). Individual believers are likewise warned not to "grieve the Holy Spirit of God" (Eph. 4:30) through ungodly living, suggesting that Christians may experience God's absence as a form of discipline. The Westminster Confession of Faith asserts, "True believers may have the assurance of their salvation divers ways shaken, diminished, and intermitted; as, by negligence in

preserving of it; by falling into some special sin, which woundeth the conscience, and grieveth the Spirit” (WCF XVIII.4). In David’s prayer of repentance he begged God: “Cast me not away from your presence, and take not your Holy Spirit from me” (Ps. 51:11).

What causes God to remove the manifestation of his glory? The instance of Eli and his sons shows that God is angered by the sacrilege committed in the worship of his people, as the wicked priests stole from the offerings brought to God and committed sexual sins at the tabernacle (1 Sam. 2:12-17, 22). Isaiah would later level a similar charge against the worship in Jerusalem: “This people draw near with their mouth and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me” (Isa. 29:13). Rather than allow his own people to despise his holy presence in corrupt worship, God send the Ark into the hands of the Philistines to be despised by pagans instead. So false worship that despises God’s holiness is a cause for the removal of God’s glory.

At the time of Ezekiel’s vision, when God gave over Jerusalem to Babylon’s army, Jeremiah cited their idolatry in forsaking God for the false gods of the nations: “You defiled my land and made my heritage an abomination... My people have changed their glory for that which does not profit” (Jer. 2:7, 11). Jerusalem having rejected God’s glory for the false glory of worldly idols, God removed his glory altogether.

In his letters to the churches, Jesus focuses on the issues of false teaching and immorality. The church in Pergamum was accosted for tolerating the heresies of Balaam and the Nicolaitans (Rev. 2:14-15). Thyatira was summoned for tolerating sexual immorality (Rev. 2:20). Meanwhile, the church in Ephesus was commended for testing and rejecting false apostles (Rev. 2:2), and those in Thyatira who had not entered into false teaching and sensual sins were praised (Rev. 2:252)

We are meant to be warned by the naming of Ichabod at Shiloh, just as Jeremiah warned his generation: “Go now to my place that was in Shiloh, where I made my name dwell at first, and see what I did to it because of the evil of my people Israel.” Jeremiah warned that if Jerusalem did not repent, “I will do to the house that is called by my name, and in which you trust, and to the place that I gave to you and to your fathers, as I did to Shiloh” (Jer. 7:12-14).

The validity of this warning for us was vividly displayed to me when I ministered in downtown Philadelphia, which is practically filled with Shilohs. All around are cathedrals and preaching palaces built in days of yore, now immaculately maintained by financial endowments but largely empty on Sundays. I was regularly confronted by one Shiloh, because I bought gas for my car at the service station that now rests at its location. The wall next door bore a mural of the old church that used to be there, upon which at some point God wrote his Ichabod, because it is now no more than “a shadow in the city.”³

Around a hundred years ago, mainline churches concluded that the Bible is not really God’s Word and began teaching the heresies of evolution and secular humanism in place of the gospel. As a result, God wrote “Ichabod” across the liberal churches, so that their spiritual power evaporated. Today, we may wonder if the same is happening to the evangelical movement, which once spoke and acted with such power from God. We witness great spiritual vigor elsewhere in the globe, with masses of converts and a holy boldness in withstanding persecution. Meanwhile, in the West, not only is our cultural influence waning, but evangelical Christians are not even persuading their own children to remain in the faith: a 2002 study by the Southern Baptist Convention showed that 88% of evangelical children abandon the church after age 18.⁴ It is hard to account for such a figure without a removal of God’s presence because of worldliness, heresy, idolatry, and sin. How urgent is the need of the Christian church in the West to repent of sin, to return to the truths of the Bible and to regain a burning passion for Christ and his gospel.

FROM ICHABOD TO IMMANUEL

This leaves a final question about God’s departed glory. Once the Lord has written “Ichabod” over a nation or church, or even an individual’s experience, is there anything we can do to see a return of God’s glory and power? The answer is given through the prophet Zechariah: “Return to me, says the Lord of hosts, and I will return to you” (Zech. 1:3). God’s purpose in withdrawing himself, causing his glory to depart, is to cause his people to seek his glory

³ Ryken, *Jeremiah & Lamentations*, 126.

⁴ Reported on Baptist Press on www.bpnews.net, Jun 12, 2002.

once again. This is what subsequent events will reveal in 1 Samuel. Jeremiah wrote in a similar vein to the Jews who had gone to Babylon in captivity, assuring them of God's returning grace if only they sought him in true faith: "Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you. You will seek me and find me. When you seek me with all your heart, I will be found by you, declares the LORD, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and places where I have driven you, declares the LORD" (Jer. 29:12-14).

The Israelites of Samuel's time would suffer under the Philistines for twenty years, lamenting the glory of God that had departed (cf. 1 Sam. 7:2). If God has withdrawn from you, there is no reason for so much time to pass before you seek him with all your heart. Christians will sometimes find that they lack the power and zeal of former days, and that their faith lacks the peace and joy that it once possessed. God seems distant, they will say, as if the fault lay with him. If this describes your condition, then you should realize that God wants you to seek him with all your heart. When you seek him, you will find him, and God will restore his glory as of old.

I stated that the greatest instance in the Old Testament of God removing his glory was the fall of Jerusalem in the time of Jeremiah. But a later and yet greater instance when the dreadful name "Ichabod" might well have been spoken furnishes proof of God's saving grace for those who have fallen away: the death of Jesus Christ, God's own Son and glory, to pay for our sins upon the cross. The apostle John explains Jesus' coming in these words: "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth" (Jn. 1:14). If ever the glory of God dwelt among mankind, it was in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. Yet men despised him, because they loved their sins (Jn. 3:20), and they put God's glory to death on the cross.

If there was ever a time when "Ichabod" may have been named, it was when Jesus died, for then the true glory of God was removed from the earth. All that the Ark of the Covenant symbolized – God's glory and the only way of salvation through the atoning blood – had departed from this world. Yet God's resolve to save his people is proved by the fact that even when his Son was rejected and put to death, Jesus

was not ultimately taken away, but he rose from the grave on the third day in order to bring eternal life to those who would believe in him.

With this in mind, the words of Phinehas's widow provide us with the right place to start. She cried, "Ichabod!" and we should do the same. We should lament that God's glory is rightly removed from us because of our sins. But if we look up from our despair in sin and see Jesus as the Savior who died to put away our shame and reproach, and then who rose again, we see a new beginning in his forgiving grace. Our sin cries, "Ichabod!" "the glory is departed," but God's grace replies, "Immanuel," the name given to our Savior, meaning "God with us" in the grace of Jesus Christ. Though we would rightly be abandoned by God, the gospel assures us of forgiveness and acceptance in Christ. As Paul puts it, "For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Cor. 4:6).

Then there is one more thing. With the gospel message that answers Ichabod with Immanuel, God sends us as heralds of his victory over sin, with good news of salvation to spread to the world. Since Jesus has come, died for our sins, and risen with new life for salvation, there need be no more downcast messengers like the Benjamite who brought news of defeat to Shiloh. Instead, it will be said of us as we spread the joyful news of Jesus and his saving blood, "How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news" (Isa. 52:7).