

## **No Thrill of Victory – Only Agony in Defeat**

### **1 Samuel 4**

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Turn to 1 Samuel Chapter 4 this evening

Tonight we are going to look at two exits. The first exit will be in verses one through 11, and the second in 12 through 22.

So far in the book of first Samuel we have seen the focus on this young man Samuel. In fact the beginning of our text tonight starts with the words, “And the word of Samuel came to all Israel.” That will be the last time we hear of Samuel for the next three chapters. So what is God trying to teach us in this chapter?

Let’s read the first 11 verses together.

The word of Samuel came to all Israel. Chapters one through three climax with the establishment of Samuel as God’s spokesman. It is interesting here that the word of Samuel, is equivalent to the Word of the Lord. And so the inference here is that the Word of the Lord came to Samuel which he spoke to all of Israel and based on that word, Israel went out to battle against the Philistines.

A fascinating story ensues, as Israel appears to obey God, yet God brings defeat to their obedience.

- How can this be?
- Shouldn’t God reward us for our obedience?

Israel was out of sync with God. The people had forgotten their deliverer, and had gone their own way to worship other gods. They had neglected the things of God; therefore they were given up to their enemies.

When God had brought them out of Egypt, he instructed them how they were to live in the land to which he would bring them, and warned them that if they forsook him they would be chastened. His words were very plain, “If you walk in my statutes and observe my commandments and do them... I will make my dwelling among you, and my soul shall not abhor you. And I will walk among you and will be your God, and you shall be my people. I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, that you should not be their slaves. And I have broken the bars of your yoke and made you walk erect. But if you will not listen to me and will not do all these commandments, if you spurn my statutes, and if your soul abhors my rules, so that you will not do all my commandments, but break my covenant, then I will do this to you... And if by this discipline you are not turned to me but walk contrary to me, then I also will walk contrary to you, and I myself will strike you

sevenfold for your sins. And I will bring a sword upon you, that shall execute vengeance for the covenant.”

In verses one and two we see Israel engaged in battle against the Philistines. But it was far from a battle. Israel was routed and lost 4000 men to death that day.

In verse 3 the elders respond, “Why has the Lord defeated us today before the Philistines?”

Paul Harvey tells a story about an attractive flight attendant who was being hounded by two flirts – one at the front of the plane, the other at the back. She was obviously very put-off by the very forward advances being made by the two men, but she kept right on doing her job. Near the end of the flight one of the men became particularly bold and as the plane was about to land he handed her a key to his apartment and the address and said, "See you tonight." So she took them, then she walked to the back of the plane, handed them to the other flirt, winked and said, "Don't be late." Later on that evening I bet there were two very disappointed men in some apartment somewhere.

Have you ever been disappointed when someone you were looking for didn't show up?

The question of the elders reflected their knowledge that the Lord both fought their battles and allowed their defeat. To be defeated clearly meant that God was not “with” them.

God had not shown up as they expected.

Instead of inquiring of the Lord for direction, they proceeded to take the matter into their own hands. Let us bring the ark. The ark symbolized the presence and power of the Lord. Why wouldn't they go bring the ark?

When the Ark was carried by the Levites into the river bed of the Jordan, the waters parted as God had parted the waters of the Red Sea, opening a pathway for the people to pass through (Josh. 3:15–16; 4:7–18). The walls of the city of Jericho were shaken to the ground with no more than a shout from the army after the Ark of the Covenant was paraded round them for seven days by the Levites accompanied by seven priests sounding seven trumpets of rams' horns (Josh. 6:4–20).

So, doesn't it seem natural that the first thing the elders would want to do would be retrieve the ark?

But Israel had the wrong idea about the ark. Look at verse three. “Let us bring the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord hear from Shiloh, that **it** may come among us and save us from the power of our enemies.”

The problem was that Israel treated it as if it had power in and of itself. The Ark would ensure them victory over the Philistines. Knowing that victory or defeat depended upon the Lord's presence, they confused the symbol of his presence with his actual presence. In this way, their understanding of God resembled that of the Philistines (4:8).

This should make us stop up and take notice.

We also want to put God in a box. In fact we want our box wrapped up in pretty paper with a nice bow on top.

Sometimes we use our theology as a good luck charm.

- By becoming theologians instead of disciples
- By loving God's sovereignty more than God himself
- By counting on Proverbs, methods, and techniques to assure victory in our lives.

The people were oblivious to the fact that possessing the presence and power of God in symbolism (the Ark) was not the same as possessing the presence and power of God in substance.

- The Ark had become a good luck charm, a rabbits foot, a genie in a bottle.
- A good luck charm is a lot easier to use than to encounter the Living God.
- You see, a good luck charm won't challenge you to examine the way you are living.
- A good luck charm won't hold you accountable.

And look at the people's response in verse five when the ark came into the camp. Spirits were lifted, joy entered the hearts of the people, and the shouting was so great that the earth shook. And even the Philistines believed. Look at verses 6-8.

The idol, to the Philistine, was thought to be the actual dwelling place of his deity. Hence, when Israel brought the ark into the camp, the Philistines concluded that God was present, an exclamation that reflected a knowledge of God's power.

Israel's failure to uproot all the inhabitants of Canaan caused them to fall under the judgment of God. As a consequence of this judgment, Israel was enslaved to Philistine oppression. Now the Philistines feared was that they would become servants of the Hebrews.

But while the Philistines were afraid, they did not give up. Possibly because they had their own gods who had let them down in the past. And so they harden themselves and settle down, pull themselves up by their bootstraps and go to war against the God of Israel.

And the result is victory. Now 30,000 additional soldiers are killed, the ark of God is captured, and Eli's two sons are killed. To put this number into perspective, 34,000 deaths is nearly equivalent to the number of Americans killed in the entire Korean war.

Why did God allow this?

- Possibly to show that his presence had left Israel, because they had forsaken him.
- Possibly in order to show that visible signs of being God's people only benefit those who have the spirit of God within them.
- Possibly in order to show that though men use the means of grace which God has instituted for the delivery of his blessings to them, God's presence and working are not tied to those means. He can act without them.

Instead of weeping over their nation's sins, and preaching public repentance and interceding for mercy from a forgiving God, Hophni and Phinehas had joined in the superstitious desire to take the ark into the field of battle. And the word of the Lord prophesied in chapter two is being fulfilled. God is destroying the further lineage of Eli's house. And now the Ark is gone. Israel as a nation lies defeated.

But there is another exit about to take place in verses 12-22. Read them with me.

And so here we have the old priest sitting by the road waiting for news about the Ark. And this man from the battle comes, reports to the city, and the city cries aloud together.

And then Eli asks for status. And in verse 17 there are three tragedies described to Eli:

1. First Israel has fled the battle. What a disastrous military defeat.
2. Next, Hophni and Phineas are dead. These two sons would have presumably succeeded Eli in the priesthood.
3. And finally, the worst news of all, the Ark of God has been captured.

And it is at this point that Eli falls back off his chair and breaks his neck. But certainly before his neck was broken, his heart was broken.

And so in the first half of the chapter we see the exit of the Ark, we now see the exit of the priest.

- The Ark was a symbol of the presence of God, with no power of its own.
- Eli was a mere symbol of the priesthood, with no spiritual power to lead the people.

As was the case with Hophni and Phineas, Eli died. Thus, in fulfillment of the word of the Lord, all of the priestly line through Eli had been wiped out.

The priest and judge Eli is now gone as well. What a horrible time for Israel!

Due primarily to the loss of the ark, the symbol of God's presence, Phineas' wife names her child Ichabod, meaning either "Where is the glory?" or "no glory."

And as we read and study these narratives in the Old Testament we find that a point is often made not by underlining or highlighting a word but by its repetition. In this case the phrase “the ark of God was captured” is repeated in verses 17, 19, 21, and 22.

This is a terrible tragedy that has brought deep despair over all of Israel, so bad that the nation of Israel may not continue. The only other time, I believe, there was this much despair, was when Jerusalem fell at the beginning of the exile.

In the minds of Israel, the word Ichabod **does** sum up the feeling of the nation. For who is Israel without their God. He has abandoned them, and the Ark is in enemy hands. To the Hebrew, “glory” was often used to refer to God’s presence. The word “departed” carries the idea of having gone into exile. Thus, to the people of Israel, the capturing of the ark was a symbol that God had gone into exile.

We must stop at the end of verse 22 tonight, but as we often see there is an unnatural chapter break here because the story doesn’t end in verse 22. The structure of this text is a story that begins in chapter 4 verse one and ends in chapter 5 verse 12.

The focus of that structure is in chapter 4 verses 19 to 22 that we have just read. The focus of that structure is the phrase, “the glory has departed from Israel...” And because the story does not end with chapter 4 but goes into chapter 5, we see a completely different future than that of Phineas’ wife. Although it seems that the glory has departed Israel, we will see in chapter 5 that God is very much still alive.

So, in what sense has the glory departed? In what sense has God abandoned his people? It isn’t so much that God has abandoned his people. It is the state of his people.

In fact, not only do we see God’s judgment, but we see his faithfulness to keep the promises of his word.

- The word of God to young Samuel that he would take the priestly line from Eli’s house has been accomplished.
- The covenantal word of God with Israel regarding their obedience, and their disobedience, continued to be fulfilled just as God promised it would.

Sometimes we may feel that God has departed us. Through times of loneliness, deep despair, and sadness, it may appear that God has abandoned us as well. But with God there is no variation or shadow of turning. In the darkness of our sorrow God’s glory shines most brightly.

There is no Ichabod to God.

His power and goodness are at work more gloriously and graciously when we are in despair. Not because of our goodness but because of his great love for us.

The following notice was spotted in the lost and found section of the local newspaper:

Lost dog-\$50 reward. Black and tan dog of poodle and German Shepard dissent. Flea bitten, left hind leg missing, no hair on rump, blind, and recently neutered. Answers to the name of," Blessed"

Israel was a lot like Blessed. We are a lot like Blessed. Not much to look at, and in pretty bad shape, we still answer to the name of Blessed.

We are indeed fortunate, for like the dog, we have someone who cares enough about us to look for us, to pursue us, too desirous, and to pay to get us back. And God did pay to get us back. That dog is blessed, and so are we, that our Master would love us so much.