

## Grace in Transition | The Book of Samuel

### War

First Samuel 4

9.20.20

Now Israel went out to meet the Philistines in battle and camped beside Ebenezer while the Philistines camped in Aphek. <sup>2</sup> The Philistines drew up in battle array to meet Israel. When the battle spread, Israel was defeated before the Philistines who killed about four thousand men on the battlefield. <sup>3</sup> When the people came into the camp, the elders of Israel said, "Why has the LORD defeated us today before the Philistines? Let us take to ourselves from Shiloh the ark of the covenant of the LORD, that it may come among us and deliver us from the power of our enemies." <sup>4</sup> So the people sent to Shiloh, and from there they carried the ark of the covenant of the LORD of hosts who sits above the cherubim; and the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were there with the ark of the covenant of God.

<sup>5</sup> As the ark of the covenant of the LORD came into the camp, all Israel shouted with a great shout, so that the earth resounded. <sup>6</sup> When the Philistines heard the noise of the shout, they said, "What does the noise of this great shout in the camp of the Hebrews mean?" Then they understood that the ark of the LORD had come into the camp. <sup>7</sup> The Philistines were afraid, for they said, "God has come into the camp." And they said, "Woe to us! For nothing like this has happened before." <sup>8</sup> "Woe to us! Who shall deliver us from the hand of these mighty gods? These are the gods who smote the Egyptians with all kinds of plagues in the wilderness." <sup>9</sup> "Take courage and be men, O Philistines, or you will become slaves to the Hebrews, as they have been slaves to you; therefore, be men and fight."

<sup>10</sup> So the Philistines fought and Israel was defeated, and every man fled to his tent; and the slaughter was very great, for there fell of Israel thirty thousand foot soldiers. <sup>11</sup> And the ark of God was taken; and the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, died.

<sup>12</sup> Now a man of Benjamin ran from the battle line and came to Shiloh the same day with his clothes torn and dust on his head. <sup>13</sup> When he came, behold, Eli was sitting on his seat by the road eagerly watching, because his heart was trembling for the ark of God. So the man came to tell it in the city, and all the city cried out. <sup>14</sup> When Eli heard the noise of the outcry, he said, "What does the noise of this commotion mean?" Then the man came hurriedly and told Eli. <sup>15</sup> Now Eli was ninety-eight years old, and his eyes were set so that he could not see. <sup>16</sup> The man said to Eli, "I am the one who came from the battle line. Indeed, I escaped from the battle line today." And he said, "How did things go, my son?" <sup>17</sup> Then the one who brought the news replied, "Israel has fled before the Philistines and there has also been a great slaughter among the people, and your two sons also, Hophni and Phinehas, are dead, and the ark of God has been taken." <sup>18</sup> When he mentioned the ark of God, Eli fell off the seat backward beside the gate, and his neck was broken and he died, for he was old and heavy. Thus he judged Israel forty years.

<sup>19</sup> Now his daughter-in-law, Phinehas's wife, was pregnant and about to give birth; and when she heard the news that the ark of God was taken and that her father-in-law and her husband had died, she knelt down and gave birth, for her pains came upon her. <sup>20</sup> And about the time of her death the women who stood by her said to her, "Do not be afraid, for you have given birth to a son." But she did not answer or pay attention. <sup>21</sup> And she called the boy Ichabod, saying, "The glory has departed from Israel," because the ark of God was taken and because of her father-in-law and her husband. <sup>22</sup> She said, "The glory has departed from Israel, for the ark of God was taken."

We're looking at a time in ancient Israel marked by a lot change...transition in all the categories (c.1000 BC).

But one thing seems to be the same and that is that Israel has been at war with the Philistines, for many decades. They're one of the "Big Three", together with Egypt and Babylon – the Philistines are virtually synonymous with "enemy". And once again the Israelites are facing WAR.

War – what is it good for?

But like it or not – life is a battle. We come into the world through struggle, a woman's "labor". We're at war with this global pandemic. If it's not one thing, it's another – we seem to be always fighting something. "I'm fighting a sore throat..." "My work has been a real challenge lately..." "I can't seem to get along with my roommate anymore... we seem to be always at each other's throats..." "My kids are driving me crazy – they're constantly fighting..."

We talk about "Culture wars"... "Trade Wars"... "legal battles." We're in "campaign season" – that's a military term. And then there are plain, old, literal WARS – actual military conflicts.

And there's a lot of combat in the Bible. In fact, we could say that while the Bible is a love-story (the Cinderella Story writ large) it's also a war-story. There's a lot of warfare in the Hebrew Bible... the Psalms are so often about enemies and conflict.

When we get to the New Testament, we're NOT told that this is over (John 16.33) but only that the real foe is NOT visible people but powers – we wrestle with principalities and powers (Eph 6.12ff) – the world, the flesh and the devil (the classic triad of evil replacing Egypt, Babylon and the Philistines from the time before Christ). The Book of Revelation is about WAR and a WEDDING!

You may be feeling the battle of late. It may be your own inward drive to do wrong (Rom 7) OR someone who seems to inexplicably have it in for you. It may be something you sense is spiritual (i.e. involving some sort of spiritual opposition) OR you may NOT feel it THIS week...but...you know: there's always next week!

Today we talk about LIFE AS WAR – we learn from a bad example and between the lines we see a better Way. Let's look at :

- 1) War WITHOUT Wait (W-A-I-T)
- 2) War and Weight Loss (W-E-I-G-H-T)
- 3) War WITH Wait and Weight (W-A-I-T & W-E-I-G-H-T)

This ACT takes place in three scenes. Israel loses the ark; Eli (the Priest) dies and Ichabod is born.

the Israelites are AGAIN facing their perennial enemy the Philistines. It's so common... it happens again and again over what will eventually be about 500 years. The Philistines have iron weapons. They seem to be the aggressor – "drawing up in battle array" (2). The Israelites have a problem.

A N D... you know what normal people do when they're facing a problem – they FIX IT.

Seems logical...except this isn't a normal people facing a normal problem. THIS is God's people, the people of Abraham, who are God's CHOSEN people and in a Marriage Covenant with YHWH.

AND God has recently broken through to His people...has "appeared" to them by giving them His prophet Samuel and His word (last week). But Samuel isn't mentioned AT ALL for three long chapters (4, 5 and 6). It's God's way of saying, "I opened the door (3.15) to a new relationship – I took the initiative – I spoke the Word and I revealed My Mind... but they continued with 'business as usual'" And as usual, when the Philistine problem shows up, they fix it!

This is war without the wait! "Fools rush in where angels fear to tread" (Alexander Pope) and rather than consult God's Prophet Samuel, and GET God's word or even praying and asking God's help...they do what they always do – they FIX the problem. God helps those who help themselves! (Right? WRONG!)

I'll pause here just to add – how typically American this is. I mean it's apparently one of our greatest strengths as a nation but spiritually speaking it can be one of our biggest flaws – we're PRAGMATISTS. The philosophy of Pragmatism was founded on our shores (Boston MA, turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> & 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries). And we know how to do what works. We're trouble-shooters and problem-fixers. And spiritually that's often our biggest problem (Ps 127) I mean IN the church.

And God does NOT take the disregard of His love and His prophet and His word lightly. It's war without waiting on God. They're squarely relying on themselves and God opposes them. The iron weapons of the Philistines prevail and a lot of people die (Hebrew numbers are notoriously hard to translate – probably 160 people!)

So, defeated, they re-group and someone asks the right question: (v.3) "When the people came into the camp, the elders of Israel said, 'Why has the LORD defeated us today before the Philistines?'"

But again, they don't wait for God or His prophet to answer the question. Do you have a person in your life who answers his own questions, "Hey! How you doing... WELL? Good...great...so glad!"

The elders of Israel pose the question, then they immediately answer it: "Let us take to ourselves from Shiloh the ark of the covenant of the LORD, that it may come among us and deliver us from the power of our enemies."

They ask the right question and then they solve their own problem with a scheme... a superstitious scheme. They'll take "the ark of the covenant of YHWH" (they use the whole name indicating that they know what this is – it's like their wedding band – covenant!) – they'll use it like a magic charm.

They'll use it like a genie-lamp... "God will have to protect us because HE CAN'T LET ANYTHING BAD HAPPEN TO THE SYMBOL OF HIS PRESENCE OR THE PEOPLE WHO CARRY IT! Remember Jericho (marching the ark around the city and the walls came down!)"

And then this ominous note, "and the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were there with the ark of the covenant of God." These are the unrepentant abusers who are marked for death (2.25 and 34).

When the ark enters the camp (before the battle), the soldiers go crazy and their patriotic hearts are pounding. They ROAR and APPLAUD and SCREAM and YELL and CHEER SO LOUDLY... the ground shakes and the Philistines get terrified and they recount (imperfectly!) Israel's history with Egypt and the plagues and Exodus and then... they double-down! "We have to really fight hard or their god might defeat us!"

So Israel struts out and THIS time they win! NOPE... they're defeated and there are three big losses: they suffer like ten times as many casualties as they first did. #2: the wicked sons of Eli, (Hophni and Phineas) die. #3 – The ark of God was taken by the Philistines.

Eli is sitting on a special seat... could be translated "throne" at the gate, where trials were held and verdicts rendered and justice executed. And when Eli hears about his sons dying, he's like, "Oh, bummer!" (He knew it was coming). But when he hears that, "the ark of God has been taken" he fell backward and died of a broken neck "because he was old and heavy".

And then finally, Eli's daughter-in-law hears the news. She's great with child and it's such a shock to her that she goes into labor... She suffers some sort of hemorrhage/complication and she dies in labor but not before she names the little boy..."Sue"

No, she names him "Ichabod" (Ē-kabōd) meaning, "Where is the glory?" or "the glory has left" because "the ark of God is taken."

My first point was "War Without W-A-I-T" – they acted like atheists, didn't wait on the Lord (Isa 40.28ff) – just rushed in and solved the problem... and labored in vain...and were defeated.

My second point was War Without W-E-I-G-H-T – they lost their glory (their wedding ring) the symbol of the Covenant relationship... the sign of God's presence, the truth/privilege that made them special and different from the other nations.

That word "glory" is the Hebrew word "KABOD" – it's the Hebrew root, "K-B-D" and it means weight. We use it the same way: we say, "that was a weighty discussion." Or "that was a "heavy song" or "do you know her? She's a heavy-hitter!" And all these are ways of saying that these are glorious and significant things and people and situations.

“K-B-D” - Glory in Hebrew is basically the same as our word “significant” or “weighty”... and in a sad irony, the old priest, Eli, is described as K-B-D – heavy – “he was old and K-B-D.” (not glorious just heavy.)

And here, he’s dethroned. The old regime with its heavy but not glorious priest is out... dethroned. But the new priest and prophet, Samuel, is NOT being treated as the significant or weighty gift that he is.

AND the real glory of Israel, the sign of the covenant, the symbol of their marriage (wedding band) and symbol of God’s presence is sent away into exile with the idol worshipers. God has been kidnapped.

See, EXILE is like the worst thing that can happen to the Israelites. God will patiently warn them for years, for decades, for CENTURIES. The threat of exile hangs over them. The plight of being taken away from the land of promise – that peril is considered so horrific that the Israelites NEVER thought God would actually do it (“the nuclear option”).

And when, some 400 years after this scene, God brought Babylon to take Judah/Israelites away, they were in total disbelief. “EXILE among the godless nations is so ghastly...so appalling...so terrible, we NEVER thought God would really do it!”

And here... in today’s passage... God Himself... goes into exile. The ark, the glory of Israel is gone! Ichabod – where has the glory gone? God is kidnapped... and yet WE are still in the Land! We did the crime – He did the time.”

AND in the fullness of time... God would again come among His people... And once again, in an ultimate and final sense, God, in Jesus Christ would be exiled. He would be sent outside the City. He would be charged with our crimes. He would be like one from whom people turn away... stripped of His clothes...naked and covered with shame and human spit... Jesus Christ, the Heaviest Man who ever lived. The most significant, good, true and beautiful Person, the essence of weightiness, the embodiment of K-B-D was kidnapped, exiled by godless men (Acts 2.23) and hanged, “cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree.”

And finally exiled from the living...exiled in the earth.

When Mary Magdalene et al looked into the tomb... they found two angels sitting there, “and she saw two angels in white sitting, one at the head and one at the feet, where the body of Jesus had been lying.” (John 20.12)

She was looking at the True Ark of the Covenant and the GLORY. The Very Presence of God enthroned above the cherubim was standing right behind her. The glory of God was standing right behind her... The invisible Presence of God had become visible and was standing right behind her.

Ichabod – i.e. where is the glory? But now we know. The glory of Israel was exiled for His people but now He's raised. Our sins have been buried and the image of the invisible God has come through death, come through exile... and will indeed make everyone who believes in Him to be glorious.

He will make our lives weighty. He will make us truly significant in the midst of the battle.

We find ourselves fighting a war against spiritual forces – the world the flesh and the devil. We are looking at the enemy and asking, "Can we defeat them? – Can we master our own impulses and love God and love people? Can we resist the world-system and its rabid quest for independence from God that's so seductive (like the Sirens – who can resist?!)"

And are we able to defeat "our ancient foe, who seeks to work us woe. His craft and power are great and armed with cruel hate on earth is not his equal"?

Well, if we "in our own strength confide – our striving will be losing". If we rely on our own abilities and will-power and determination... we're toast.

If we try to be better so that God will have to protect us; if we DO so in an effort to control Him; if we use good things to force God's hand – turn grace into superstition/karma... our fall will be great.

Running away is not an answer. The enemy is drawn up in battle array to meet us. Life is war.

Instead... we come to Him who was exiled for us. We call upon Him who IS the Word of the Lord and the Image of the Invisible God. We wait for Him.

We live each and every day saying... "Lord Jesus Christ, You must save me today. Your very name means salvation and I see it now – apart from YOU I can do nothing! (John 15.5) Only You can rescue me from the world, the flesh and the devil. There is no "DIY" plan for me – there's only YOU!"

This is why we continue to wait on the Lord.

He makes us weighty as we wait on Him.

We must not be fools rushing in... instead, we're praying with Moses, (Ex 33.15) "Lord, if You don't go with us – WE CAN'T GO! We need You and if YOU are with us... who can stand against us?"