



Part 7 – Lucky Charm Religion

1 Samuel 4:1-22

Chapters four through six are often referred to as “the ark narrative.” The writer shifts the view from Samuel to Israel’s conflict with the Philistines, with the ark of the covenant playing a central role. The passage begins with Israel being routed in combat by their nemesis, the Philistines. The elders of Israel rightly concluded that the Lord had caused their defeat, but their response was disastrously misguided. They commanded that the ark of the covenant be taken from Shiloh to the encampment of

Israel’s army. Rather than gaining them victory, the Philistines were victorious once again. To make matters worse, the Philistines captured the ark of the covenant.

Israel’s presumptuousness reveals just how much their religious thinking had become superstitious. They believed they had domesticated God, which resulted in their greatest national tragedy up to that point. This problem would surface time and time again in Israel’s history; the prophets would protest against attempts to domesticate God through faithless ritualism. But the Lord had not forgotten his gracious covenant, as the mention of *Ebenezer* suggests (vs. 1). Indeed, Israel’s catastrophic loss to the Philistines would serve as a sort of prelude to the Lord’s gracious renewal of his people, which would come to full flower with the reign of King David, whose greater Son reigns forever and ever.

Scene One: The Capture of the Ark of the Covenant

Vs. 1b – The history of Israel may be bracketed by way of her enemies: the Egyptians (in her earliest days), the Philistines (in the middle portion of her years), and the Assyrians and Babylonians (in her final days as a divided kingdom). The Philistines – also known as the Sea People – were, like Israel, relative newcomers to the region. They had settled mainly on the coastal plain in what is known today as Gaza. They were, like most kingdoms, expansionist in their vision, and they set their sights on the land that God had given to his own people, the Israelites.

- The mention of *Ebenezer* is significant. The location would actually be named *Ebenezer* some 20 years later (Chapter 7). But the narrator gives us a glimpse ahead to that moment when the people memorialized the faithfulness of God.

Vs. 2 – Though it is not stated explicitly, the aggressors in this battle were likely the Philistines. The results were disastrous for Israel. There, in the land that God had given them, the Israelites were defeated in battle by pagan invaders.

Vs. 3 – The elders of Israel asked the right question: “Why has the Lord defeated us today before the Philistines?” They rightly concluded that it was the Lord who had defeated them. The Philistines were mere pawns in his hand. This had, after all, been a pattern for some 200 years during the era of the Judges. They knew that God was sovereign and that any defeat they suffered, just like every blessing they received, was from the hand of the Lord. What they did not understand was why, which, given their history and the state of the priests at Shiloh, is indicative of their spiritual dimness. Thus, their defeat did not lead them to repent, which should have been their first response.

Instead, the narrator tells us that they determined to take the “ark of the covenant of the Lord” from the holy place in the sanctuary and transport it to the army’s encampment. While it is true that the Lord had chosen to dwell among his people through the means of the ark, this in no way meant that he was contained within that box or that the people could then use it like a talisman or weapon. They presumed that the Lord was obligated to yield to their demands if they wielded the right object or performed the right ritual.

Vs. 4 – The language here is pregnant with meaning. First, notice the full name and description given to the ark – “The ark of the covenant of the Lord of hosts, who is enthroned on the cherubim.” Here we are drawn to consider the profound significance of the ark as the object which the Lord had determined to use as symbolic of his holy and gracious presence with his people. The ark was a wooden box plated with gold. On its lid were two golden cherubim. The ark contained the national charter of Israel, the actual tablets upon which were inscribed the Ten Commandments. It contained the rod of Aaron, symbolizing God’s promise to lead the people. It also contained a golden jar filled with manna, which was symbolic of his promise to provide for them. The ark’s “lid” was called “the mercy seat,” and was where the blood of the

annual sacrifice of atonement was sprinkled. So, the ark of the covenant was symbolic of the Lord's gracious salvation which would ultimately be purchased by the blood of Christ.

The final clause is ominous: "And the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were there with the ark of the covenant of God." – As though to underscore the spiritual corruption of the people, we are told that the wicked priests Hophni and Phinehas had taken charge of the ark. Faithful priests would not have allowed the ark to be moved from the sanctuary without a direct command of the Lord, which could only be transported under strictly prescribed procedures. These irreverent and ungodly men presumed themselves fit to direct the transportation of the ark of the covenant of the Lord.

Vv. 5-9 – When the ark was carried into the camp, a great shout went up from the Israelites. Indeed, they made such a noise that the Philistines heard them and trembled in fear. Despite their pagan worldview – they refer to Israel's "gods" – the Philistines knew about the mighty way that the Israelites had been delivered out of captivity in Egypt. They feared facing the "gods" who had defeated mighty Egypt, but the Philistines decided to charge ahead anyway with the cry of "be men and fight." Courage is a virtue, but we should also heed the words of Hannah's prayer: "Not by might shall man prevail" (2:9).

Vv. 10-11 – The terror of the Philistines and the confident shouts of the Israelites heighten the shock of the outcome. Israel's defeat described in verse 2 pales in comparison to the utter rout they suffered in this second battle, which was made even worse by the capture of the ark of the covenant. This was an unmitigated disaster for Israel. The location of the ark of the covenant will be of central concern from here through Chapter 6. The deaths of Hophni and Phinehas confirm the Lord's earlier words to Eli that their deaths will be a sign that the judgment he pronounced upon his line will be accomplished to the bitter end.

- In this scene, we learn *first* that God's power cannot be manipulated to serve human ends. God's power belongs to God alone, and he cannot be treated as a lucky charm to guarantee the success of our desires. Indeed, the Israelites who thought themselves able to use the power of God for their benefit found themselves on the wrong end of God's power.
- *Second*, we learn that empty ritualism is hopeless. Certainly, the Lord prescribed various rituals for his people, which were meant to teach them about himself and point toward the coming Christ, but those rituals were never meant to be exercised apart from genuine faith in and love for God. There are various rituals prescribed in the New Testament, such as baptism and the Lord's Supper. Both are vital elements in the maturing of disciples, but they are not intended to be exercised apart from faith. The same can be said of our sung praise, prayers, and preaching.
- *Third*, ultimately, the greatest display of God's power is not in the defeat of enemies but in the salvation of sinners. It is in our rescue from sin and birth into new life that we experience the greatest expression of God's power. It is through Jesus Christ that is displayed "the immeasurable greatness of God's power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come..." (Ephesians 1:18-2:10).

Scene Two: The Death of Eli

Vs. 12 – The Benjaminite messenger carrying the terrible news of defeat to Shiloh had torn his robes and covered himself in dirt, which were the common expressions of grief.

Vs. 13 – The portrait of Eli is rather pathetic. He is now blind, old, and heavy (vs. 18), but even now there is a spark of rightly ordered priorities. His chief concern is the ark of the covenant. However great his flaws and failures, Eli still retains a proper reverence for the ark of the covenant. Indeed, he "trembled for the ark of God." He was seated on the road, burdened with anxiety over the ark. It is clear that he had not approved of the plan devised by Israel's elders to move the ark to the army's encampment, but being too passive and perhaps too physically weak, his influence seems to have been all but lost.

Vv. 13b-16 – Unable to hear what the messenger announced to the people in Shiloh, but hearing their loud laments, blind Eli demands that the messenger tell him what had happened: "How did it go, my son?"

Vs. 17 – The messenger tells Eli of Israel's defeat in battle, the deaths of his sons, and the capture of the ark of the covenant.

Vs. 18 – The news so shocked and grieved Eli that he fell from his chair, broke his neck, and died. Take note of how the narrator attributes the capture of the ark as the chief shock to Eli. "The God of the covenant,

whose ark it was, had dealt with Eli's sons. And Eli knew that this was the beginning of the judgment. It was the mention of the ark that killed him."¹

Scene Three: The Birth of Ichabod

Vv. 19-20 – The pregnant unnamed wife of Phinehas was so overcome with shock at the news of Israel's defeat, the death of her husband, and the loss of the ark, that she went into labor and gave birth to a son.

Vv. 21-22 – Before dying, the wife of Phinehas named her son "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 then to drive the point home, she says once again, "The glory has departed from Israel, the ark of God has been captured." These are words of hopeless despair, which certainly fit her experience. There would be nothing quite like this until Ezekiel 10, where the glory of the Lord leaves the temple. But is it true that God's glory had departed? The answer is that the words of Phinehas' wife are both true and false.

If we think of God's glory as his merciful presence, his favorable shining upon his people, then, yes, the glory had departed. They had despised the Lord's word and presumed upon his power. God would not overlook their disobedience, and so, in that sense, the glory of God had departed.

And yet, man, no matter how sinful, cannot banish or even suppress the glory of God. In fact, God had shown himself to be glorious in the judging of Eli, his sons, and Israel. God demonstrated his glory when he dealt sinful Israel her grievous losses on the battlefield, and God's glory will be supremely manifested in Chapter 5 among the Philistine captors. The Israelites feared that the loss of the ark meant that God was no longer in control. In their minds, the loss of the ark meant that the Philistines had stolen God from them, but it will be shown that the exact opposite is the case. Like his power, God's glory cannot be summoned and wielded by any person or nation. Wherever God is present – which is everywhere – so too is his glory in whatever way he determines.

- As the Scriptures unfold, greater light is shed upon the value and meaning of God's glory. The Bible has an answer to the question of where the glory of God is in the world today. In a sense, the glory of God shines in the world through his church in ways less spectacular than were seen in Israel, but those less spectacular ways in which the glory of God shines are greater in substance. From the church's worship to her fellowship to her perseverance to her witness, the glory of God shines forth in the church. And this shining forth of God's glory from the church is most directly attributable to the reigning Christ who tabernacles among his people.
- "Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen." (Ephesians 3:20-21)

¹ John Woodhouse, *1 Samuel* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008) p. 99