

Lesson 11 8 April 2012

The Philistines Capture the Ark

Lesson Scope: 1 Samuel 4 to 6

Lesson Focus

Samuel's answer to God's call in chapter 3 and his subsequent seeking of God's will brought him God's blessing. He was then established as a prophet in Israel (1 Samuel 3:20), and he brought God's word to Israel (1 Samuel 4:1). He was God's bright light in a day of spiritual and moral decay.

Perverted practices had reached even into the priesthood. The very sons of Eli the priest were called "sons of Belial." Israel was made to abhor the offering of the Lord through their treachery and disobedience.

God had foretold a judgment on the house of Eli for their failures. Fleeing before the Philistines in battle was a direct consequence for Israel's forsaking the Lord.

God is jealous for His holy Name. When men who profess to worship and serve God turn from His ways, no mere symbol of His presence can provide the power for victory.

In these days of identity theft, we can understand God's displeasure when people become confused about who is the true God. People who always knew and loved Him but start veering off in their concepts of Him can be nudged back on track by a sermon, a sorrow, or a song. In today's lesson, however, people's concept of God had gone so badly wrong that there was nothing for God to do but take drastic measures to clarify the facts.

In the end of this story, there were fewer people. But no doubt they were experiencing better living, as people always do when they reverence God.

Lesson Aim: To portray the consequences of failing to give God His rightful place.

Theme Verse: [Isaiah 42:8](#). I am the LORD: that is my name: and my glory will I not give to another, neither my praise to graven images.

Lesson Text:

A Misplaced Trust

1 Samuel 4:2-5, 10-11, 14, 19-22 ² And the Philistines put themselves in array against Israel: and when they joined battle, Israel was smitten before the Philistines: and they slew of the army in the field about four thousand men. ³ And when the people were come into the camp, the elders of Israel said, Wherefore hath the LORD smitten us to day before the Philistines? Let us fetch the ark of the covenant of the LORD out of Shiloh unto us, that, when it cometh among us, it may save us out of the hand of our enemies. ⁴ So the people sent to Shiloh, that they might bring from thence the ark of the covenant of the LORD of hosts, which dwelleth *between* the cherubims: and the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, *were* there with the ark of the covenant of God. ⁵ And when the ark of the covenant of the LORD came into the camp, all Israel shouted with a great shout, so that the earth rang again.....¹⁰ And the Philistines fought, and Israel was smitten, and they fled every man into his tent: and there was a very great slaughter; for there fell of Israel thirty thousand footmen. ¹¹ And the ark of God was taken; and the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were slain.....¹⁴ And when Eli heard the noise of the crying, he said, What *meaneth* the noise of this tumult? And the man came in hastily, and told Eli.....¹⁹ And his daughter in law, Phinehas' wife, was with child, *near* to be delivered: and when she heard the tidings that the ark of God was taken, and that her father in law and her husband were dead, she bowed herself and travailed; for her pains came upon her. ²⁰ And about the time of her death the women that stood by her said unto her, Fear not; for thou hast born a son. But she answered not, neither did she regard *it*. ²¹ And they sent messengers to the inhabitants of Kirjathjearim, saying, The Philistines have brought again the ark of the LORD; come ye down, *and* fetch it up to you.

A Wrong Comparison

1 Samuel 5:1-6 ¹ And the Philistines took the ark of God, and brought it from Ebenezer unto Ashdod. ² When the Philistines took the ark of God, they brought it into the house of Dagon, and set it by Dagon. ³ And when they of Ashdod arose early on the morrow, behold, Dagon *was* fallen upon his face to the earth before the ark of the LORD. And they took Dagon, and

set him in his place again. ⁴ And when they arose early on the morrow morning, behold, Dagon *was* fallen upon his face to the ground before the ark of the LORD; and the head of Dagon and both the palms of his hands *were* cut off upon the threshold; only *the stump of* Dagon was left to him. ⁵ Therefore neither the priests of Dagon, nor any that come into Dagon's house, tread on the threshold of Dagon in Ashdod unto this day. ⁶ But the hand of the LORD was heavy upon them of Ashdod, and he destroyed them, and smote them with emerods, *even* Ashdod and the coasts thereof.

A Presumptuous Act

1 Samuel 6:1,4,10-13,19-20 ¹ And the ark of the LORD was in the country of the Philistines seven months.....⁴ Then said they, What *shall be* the trespass offering which we shall return to him? They answered, Five golden emerods, and five golden mice, *according to* the number of the lords of the Philistines: for one plague *was* on you all, and on your lords. ¹⁰ And the men did so; and took two milch kine, and tied them to the cart, and shut up their calves at home: ¹¹ And they laid the ark of the LORD upon the cart, and the coffer with the mice of gold and the images of their emerods. ¹² And the kine took the straight way to the way of Bethshemesh, *and* went along the highway, lowing as they went, and turned not aside *to* the right hand or *to* the left; and the lords of the Philistines went after them unto the border of Bethshemesh. ¹³ And *they of* Bethshemesh *were* reaping their wheat harvest in the valley; and they lifted up their eyes, and saw the ark, and rejoiced to see *it*.....¹⁹ And he smote the men of Bethshemesh, because they had looked into the ark of the LORD, even he smote of the people fifty thousand and threescore and ten men: and the people lamented, because the LORD had smitten *many* of the people with a great slaughter. ²⁰ And the men of Bethshemesh said, Who is able to stand before this holy LORD God? and to whom shall he go up from us?

Questions for Study

A Misplaced Trust

1. What did the Israelites misunderstand?
2. What does the general public misunderstand about God today?
3. What misunderstandings should we as conservative Christians beware of?

A Wrong Comparison

4. How was the Philistines' reaction to Dagon's fall typical of human nature?
5. How did God win respect for His Name among the Philistines?
6. How does God turn people's attention away from the gods of this world today?

A Presumptuous Act

7. What was wrong with looking into the ark?
8. In what practical ways should we teach our children reverence for God?
9. What connection does God's intolerance for sacrilege have with His loving interest in people?

Analyzing the Passage

The Philistines (1 Samuel 4:1) were an enemy people situated to the southwest of Israel. They were God's instrument of judgment on Israel's sin.

Taking the ark to the battlefield (4:3) was not Israel's usual practice. They may have gotten the idea from other nations, who customarily took tokens of their gods into battle and invoked their power for victory.

"The earth rang again" (1 Samuel 4:5) no doubt refers to the echo of the people's cheers.

Ichabod (1 Samuel 4:21) means "Where is the glory?"

Dagon (1 Samuel 5:2) was the chief god of the Philistines, represented as having the trunk of a fish but the head and hands of a man.

Emerods (1 Samuel 5:6) may have been painful, bleeding hemorrhoids. Another possibility is that they were swellings associated with bubonic plague. This would fit well with an epidemic of germ-carrying mice (1 Samuel 6:4) and the rapid, deadly nature of the disease. This plague, of course, was more than just a natural phenomenon, as the Philistines well understood (1 Samuel 5:10-12).

"Milch kine" (1 Samuel 6:10) were milk cows. Contrary to nature, these cows left their calves behind and headed toward Israel without guidance from the Philistines.

The Philistines ignorantly violated the rule that only the Levites were allowed to carry the ark, using staves on their shoulders (compare 1 Samuel 6:8 with Exodus 25:14 and Deuteronomy 10:8). Evidently God

tolerated this treatment from the Philistines, but He did not tolerate sacrilege on the part of the Israelites (1 Samuel 6:19).

Principles and Applications

A Misplaced Trust

1. Facing the enemy without God brings defeat (1 Samuel 4:2-3). The Philistines, of course, were at least as godless as the Israelites. But God had a special rebuke for the Israelites, who should have sought Him before the battle. Where God's man Samuel was at this time, we do not know. Was he rejected, or was he merely neglected? Either way, the result was the same.

Today, many godless people move through life hardly aware of what they are missing except for a dull ache of emptiness. But when God's own people neglect Him, He rebukes them sharply. Hopefully, they learn from small troubles before large calamities strike.

2. Those who do not give God His rightful place question His goodness (1 Samuel 4:3). "Wherefore hash the LORD smitten us to day?" implied that He had no good reason for this. There is a right way to ask this question if we are open to learn what God has in mind to teach us.

So-called acts of God arouse much resentment in people who otherwise have no time for Him. But godly people treat anything from earthquakes to crumpled fenders as a learning experience.

3. Those who desire God's help, yet take their own way, often have a false sense of His presence (1 Samuel 4:5, 10-11). In the wake of disaster, the Israelite army was having a "religious spike," with plenty of enthusiasm to show for it. "God bless our troops!" But an even greater disaster lay just ahead.

What were they doing wrong? Instead of turning to God (Isaiah 9:13) and searching their own souls (Judges 20:26-28), they assumed that they could bend God their way by commandeering His ark. In actual fact, Israel did not have God with them; they merely had a box.

Oh, for absolute honesty with ourselves and with God! Without it, we can far too easily fabricate a sense of God's blessing on a disobedient life. And to what purpose? A sense of God's presence is wonderful, but it is not an end in itself. Many of us recall times we simply obeyed, without a special sense of God's presence and blessing, only to realize afterward that we had done the right thing.

4. God's glory and blessing depart from those who do not give Him His rightful place (1 Samuel 4:19-22). Like a street light that suddenly turns off, reminding us that it had been shining all night, God's glory, unconsidered until now, was suddenly gone. And the people missed it keenly. Whether or not Phinehas's wife had a clear concept of all that Israel had lost, she knew that something was terribly wrong.

When God departs from an individual, a congregation, or a denomination, His absence may not be obvious at first. The symbols of His presence might remain. But sooner or later, sensible onlookers will see that God's glory and blessing are gone.

A Wrong Comparison

5. Wicked men do not give God the honor He deserves (1 Samuel 5:1-2).

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Philistines did not honor God because they thought their own god had defeated the true God. To them, the ark was a trophy of conquest won by the power of their idol, Dagon. Wicked men are no different today. For their accomplishments, they give credit to brain, muscle, determination, the right connections, and good luck.

6. The gods of this world fall before the God of heaven (1 Samuel 5:4). Dagon fell once and then again. So do stock prices, economic indexes, popularity ratings, and public opinion polls. This despite their being levered up, propped up, pumped up, and bailed out! For despairing souls looking for a better God than these, we can offer Jehovah Himself, and that without apology.

7. Punishment and sorrow await those who do not give God His rightful place (5:6). God was making a point, not only among Israel, but among the Philistines. He used a plague then; He uses plagues today. He also allows natural disasters, wars, terrorism, and suchlike to waken people to the fact that they should repent. Few people do wake up and make a permanent change for the better. Regrettably, the rest stumble on to eternal perdition.

A Presumptuous Act

8. Disrespecting holy things brings God's displeasure and judgment (6:19, 20). Nothing brings God's judgment faster than sacrilege, especially on the part of people who should know better. (Think of Nadab and Abihu in Leviticus 10:1-2; Uzzah in 2 Samuel 6:6-7; and King Uzziah in 2 Chronicles 26:16-21). The ark had been insulted long enough, and God

was ready for a change in people's attitude. He spared nothing to make this clear.

The church building, strictly speaking, is not "the house of God." Yet we treat it with respect, along with our ordinances and forms of worship. We require our children to do the same, whether in church, in family devotions, or in play.

9. God moves man to a proper understanding of His rightful place (6:20). God wants everyone to know exactly who He is. We must accept Him as such rather than try to make Him into the kind of god we would like Him to be. Once we worship and obey God as He is rather than as we perceive Him, we may find Him to be much more gracious than we expected Him to be (2 Samuel 6:9-12).

Important Teachings

1. Facing the enemy without God brings defeat (1 Samuel 4:2-3).
2. Those who do not give God His rightful place question His goodness (1 Samuel 4:3).
3. Those who desire God's help, yet take their own way, often have a false sense of His presence (1 Samuel 4:5, 10-11).
4. God's glory and blessing depart from those who do not give Him His rightful place (1 Samuel 4:19-22).
5. Wicked men do not give God the honor He deserves (1 Samuel 5:1-2).
6. The gods of this world fall before the God of heaven (1 Samuel 5:4).
7. Punishment and sorrow await those who do not give God His rightful place (1 Samuel 5:6).
8. Disrespecting holy things brings God's displeasure and judgment (1 Samuel 6:19-20).
9. God moves man to a proper understanding of His rightful place (1 Samuel 6:20).

Answers to Questions

1. What did the Israelites misunderstand?

They thought that having the symbol of God's presence amounted to having the presence of God Himself. They seem to have thought they could control God by appropriating the ark. Maybe they even thought they had God in the box.

2. What does the general public misunderstand about God today? People value religious symbols such as the cross, manger scenes, and displays of the Ten Commandments more than they value godliness itself.

3. What misunderstandings should we as conservative Christians beware of?

We might begin to think of our conservative practices and forms of worship as ends in themselves and consequently neglect our personal relationship with the Lord.

4. How was the Philistines' reaction to Dagon's fall typical of human nature?

Not knowing what else to do, they turned to the only security they knew and tried to restore it.

5. How did God win respect for His Name among the Philistines? He sent destruction wherever the ark went until they realized He was not to be trifled with.

6. How does God turn people's attention away from the gods of this world today?

He shows us that we cannot trust anything or anyone completely except Him. He allows what we trusted to die, become ill, move away, get lost, or fail in some other way.

7. What was wrong with looking into the ark?

Looking into the ark was an act of gross disrespect. The ark was seldom to be seen, let alone handled (Exodus 40:3; Numbers 4:5).

8. In what practical ways should we teach our children reverence for God? Require them to show proper respect during church services (as well as before and after them), to be reverent during family devotions, and not to cheapen church practices in their play (for example, they should not sing foolishly).

9. What connection does God's intolerance for sacrilege have with His loving interest in people?

God knows that people who abhor sacrilege also abhor sin in general and are better off for it. People who have a clear concept and fear of God are putting themselves in line for His blessing.

Summarizing the Lesson

This lesson illustrates the Scripture, "Thou hast magnified thy word above all thy name" (Psalm 138:2). God allowed His Name, in the form of the ark, to be dragged off to the land of the Philistines because He had bigger issues in mind—issues of obedience, holiness, and godliness. Once He made these issues clear, He paid attention to His Name as well and vindicated it.

Research Guide

1. Looking up "Dagon" in a Bible dictionary may give you an idea of the unequal contest between Dagon and Jehovah.
2. Beth-shemesh alone did not have 50,070 men. A Bible dictionary may help to clarify this.